

(Re)Creation Stories:
(Re)Claiming Indigenous Identity through Art, Story, and Place

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For my ancestors, and for those who will find their way back to the shoreline.

Abstract

This inquiry explores how Indigenous storytelling, art, and land-based knowledge support the (re)creation and (re)claiming of Indigenous identity through relational, arts-based research. Grounded in Unangax̂ and Alutiiq worldviews, it draws on Indigenous methodologies, including storywork, autoethnography, and arts-based inquiry, and is rooted in the understanding that research is relational and accountable to communities and knowledge holders. Drawing on relational conversations and shared practices with Indigenous artists, educators, and knowledge holders, this work follows the movement of Aalû, a great wave, as a living framework for how knowledge is gathered, carried, and returned. Through this framework, it traces how teachings move through Land, story, language, and the work of our hands, remaining connected to people and place. The inquiry reveals that Indigenous knowledge continues through everyday acts of making, teaching, and gathering. These practices show how language, story, and artistic practice support the (re)creation of identity and intergenerational continuity. They reflect resurgence as a lived and ongoing presence within Indigenous communities, sustained across generations. Relational responsibility remains central, emphasizing that knowledge is held collectively with care. Generative refusal honors relational boundaries, including moments where stories are intentionally held. Some knowledge remains within relationship, guided by those who carry it. This work returns to the question of what it means to carry these teachings forward and offers implications for K–12 educational spaces and community-based learning by calling for practices grounded in relationship, guided by knowledge holders, and connected to Land, language, and community. Indigenous knowledge systems continue to live through relationships, and the responsibility of research is to carry these teachings forward in a good way.

Keywords: Indigenous identity, Indigenous Storywork, arts-based research, Land-based knowledge, relational accountability, generative refusal

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Chapter I: Kadamañtilix - Introduction

Listening to the First Wave

Before there were books,
there were *stories*.

Before there was data and charts,
there was *breath*.

Our ancestors spoke in rhythm with the tides,
their words resting in tidepools,
holding *memory*.

Then came the scholars,
nets heavy with questions,
timing their casts to the low tide.

They hauled our stories ashore,
counted them, classified them,
named them *findings*,
left the tide behind.

But the water *remembers*.
It rises again to (re)claim its shape,

to (re)turn the stories to salt and motion,
where they *belong*.

— Hakaâ Sunaâ (Sonia Barry, 2026)

This poem functions as a methodological doorway into my inquiry (Leavy, 2020; Prendergast, 2009), signaling how knowledge is gathered, held, and returned. The wave, *Aalux*, of remembering moves through my (re)search, reminding me that (re)search moves beyond inquiry toward the power of return, bringing teachings back to the shoreline where they were first spoken, sung, and carried by breath.

This chapter traces the shoreline where memory, method, and responsibility come together. Through ceremony, self-location, positionality, and reflexivity, I show how this (re)search is shaped by relationship to land, to ancestors, to community, and to the institutions through which I move. As these locations are not fixed, they shift with the shoreline, shaped through movement, return, and ongoing negotiation. Here, creation story is understood as living knowledge that continues to guide how relationships, responsibilities, and ways of knowing are carried forward.

What I carry into this inquiry is shaped by lived experience, inherited teachings, and responsibility that continues beyond the page. Naming this does not bring closure; it asks me to remain attentive to how knowledge is gathered, shared, and carried forward.

In Indigenous contexts, before sharing knowledge, we introduce ourselves by saying who we are, where we come from, and who our families are, so that others can understand the relationships that shape what we know and how we come to know it (Smith, 2021). To locate oneself in this way is to enact respect and reciprocity. It allows readers and listeners to situate the knowledge transmission within its cultural, linguistic,

and territorial lineage. For me, this act of positioning is not only academic; it is ceremonial. It is how I enter the circle of (re)search with honesty, transparency, and care for all my relations.

I use the term (re)search to signal Indigenous understanding of inquiry as relational and ceremonial, while retaining *research* when referring to institutional or procedural aspects of this study (Absolon, 2022).

Arriving in Relation: Positionality, Reflexivity, and Indigenous Self-Location

The poem that opens this chapter is not separate from the methodological work that follows. It is an act of remembering, a way of arriving in my inquiry through story, land, and relationship. From this place of remembering, I turn now to self-location.

Aang, Aang and Cama'i. I am Sonia Barry. My birth name is Sonia Marie Lestenkof, and my traditional Unangan name is Haka' Suna', which means Took Feather, a name lovingly gifted to me by my auntie. My family roots are from two different villages in Alaxsxa (also known as Alaska). My ada', Michael Lestenkof Junior, is Unanga' from St. George, and my ama', Janet Pestrikoff, is Alutiiq from Ouzinkie. I was born during the early 1970s in the Alaskan Native Service Hospital that provided racially separate medical care for Native peoples of Alaska (Shelton, 2004). My positionality reflects both cultural heritage and socio-political location, as a federally recognized tribal member of the Native Village of Ouzinkie and an enrolled descendant of Cook Inlet Region, Inc. (CIRI).

I locate myself as Unanga' and Alutiiq, shaped by ancestral lands, waters, and kinship systems that continue to teach me how to live in relation, even across distance. My knowing has been carried through island geographies and coastal rhythms through intergenerational teachings shared by family, story, art, and land-based practices. Central to this self-location is *Tana'-Ami'*,

Land Mother's Brother, the place where my father was born and raised and where paternal relatives continue to live. Within the Unanga worldview, Tana-Ami carries teachings about kinship, responsibility, and care, reflecting a matriarchal system in which maternal uncles held responsibility for teaching and protection (Stepetin, 2023). Although I have not yet stood on this land myself, its teachings reach me through relationship, memory, and obligation, reminding me that knowledge is not owned or claimed, but carried with responsibility. To locate myself here acknowledges responsibility to the ancestors who passed down knowledge, to the lands and waters that continue to teach, and to the communities to whom this (re)search remains accountable (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

To locate myself also requires attending to the histories of naming that have shaped my people and my family. I am a daughter of the Aleutian and Kodiak Islands, places that have endured colonization, assimilation, and erasure, yet never lost their cultural heartbeat. My family's story is entwined with the histories of naming imposed through Russian and American colonization. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russian settlers used the term Aleut (from the Russian *Aleuty*), a Siberian word meaning *coastal dweller*, to broadly label Indigenous peoples across the Aleutian Islands, including the Unanga and Alutiiq communities (Leer, 2001; Steffian & Counciller, 2009). Over time, this imposed name became widespread and, in some families, including my own, was adopted as a self-identifier, even as it obscured distinct cultural and linguistic identities. This history of naming, schooling, and survival shapes not only who I am but how I understand education, knowledge, and responsibility.

Today, multiple federally recognized Aleut/Unangan/Alutiiq villages exist within one of the thirteen regional and numerous village corporations established by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA), with enrollment policies governed by the U.S. Bureau of

Indian Affairs. Federally imposed structures reconfigured relationships to ecology, geography, culture, and family, producing differential access to land, language, and cultural continuity among Alaskan Native peoples. This history forms the backdrop against which my family learned how to live in relation to land, language, and community. From within that lived terrain, my questions of identity first took shape for me through the names my family used to describe who we were.

Growing up, my family identified as Aleut, a word that carried both colonial weight and community pride. It was only later, through learning my history and (re)connecting, that I came to understand the deeper meanings carried in our ancestral names: Unangaġ, meaning *sea-sider* or *shore-dweller*, and Alutiiq, meaning the *real person*. (Re)Claiming these names has been part of (re)claiming myself. Being a *real person* is about being in right relation with family, land and waters, ancestors, and community teachings. Identity is carried through responsibility and relationships across many Alaskan Native worldviews (Battiste, 2000).

These teachings of land, naming, and survival shaped how learning and schooling were experienced in my family. My formative years were spent in Anchorage, surrounded by close familial relations with my grandparents, aunties, and cousins. From them, I learned the values of generosity, respect for elders, reciprocity, subsistence living, and faith. Prayer and gratitude were woven into daily life. Food was love— an act of communal sustenance that reached far beyond the plate. Preparing and sharing meals, or even a cup of tea, was an act of care that included prayer. Some of my most cherished memories are summer days fishing along the Kenai River, preparing salmon for winter, and gathering at tables or church potlucks during the colder months to share traditional foods and family recipes. In Indigenous ways of knowing, learning happens

through everyday lived practices like these, where values, responsibilities, and relationships are carried forward over time (Cajete, 1994).

It is from these inheritances that my professional life in education emerges. Education also carried deep significance in my family's stories. In many Alaskan Native communities, schooling beyond early adolescence was structurally prohibited, and young people were routed into subsistence and wage labor such as fishing, the fur trade, or vocational work (Torrey, 1983). My grandparents were unable to attend school after the age of thirteen and entered the workforce. Yet, they modeled faith, multilingualism, sustainable living, craftsmanship, and leadership within their village communities. They lived through Russian and American colonization and passed on stories, values, and ways of life that continue to shape me. My parents attended one-room, multigrade village schools until eighth grade before enrolling at Mount Edgecumbe Boarding School, where they met. Although they recall this experience with fondness, it also carried the impacts of assimilation and language loss (Brave Heart, 2003). They graduated in 1964, thereby situating me as a first-generation boarding-school descendant. My father later became the first in his family to attend college, enrolling at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in civil engineering—a choice he often jokes was encouraged so he could become *civilized*.

Formal education was instilled in me as both a survival strategy and a possibility. Like my parents, I left home in search of opportunities, carrying both the blessings and tensions of schooling. As Sabzalian (2019) reminds us, "Survivance is a legacy we inherit as Indigenous peoples" (p. 2), reflecting ongoing presence, resistance, and continuity. I am currently in my twenty-ninth year in public education. I have lived and worked in multiple states and internationally, serving in public and private schools in urban and rural contexts. I have taught

English and art at both the middle and high school levels. Often, I was the only Indigenous student, staff, and community member, a common experience, given that most American Indians and Alaskan Native students attend public schools and live in urban settings (NCES, 2012).

When I moved to Washington State in 2006, I was able, for the first time, to participate and later lead the Native American Education Program in my district. Through implementing Washington State's *John McCoy (lulilaš) Since Time Immemorial* curriculum, I was invited into district leadership and later served as director of a comprehensive Native American Education program. Since then, I have held various administrative roles managing state and federal programs. I am currently a middle school assistant principal, artist, poet, and doctoral candidate in the Ed.D. program at the University of Washington Tacoma, Muckleshoot cohort.

I write from Kitsap County, between the ancestral lands of the Suquamish (suqʷabš—People of the Clear Salt Water) and the Port Gamble S'Klallam (nəxʷsɫáyəm—the Strong People). Living between two Sovereign Nations reminds me that Indigenous peoples continue to exist, practice survivance, and exercise self-determination. As an Alaska Native who has lived here for over two decades, I acknowledge that I remain a visitor on these lands.

When I was called into the University of Washington Tacoma Ed. D. program as part of the Muckleshoot cohort, I picked up my brush and created *Grand Entry* (Barry, 2023). In this work, a single dancer in radiant gold regalia steps forward, her form illuminated against a blackened, obscured background. At first, I saw it as a personal celebration, but as I have walked this path, the medicine within the work has revealed itself.

The painting is a visual prayer for my arrival into a sacred circle of Indigenous knowledge holders and relatives, each of us committed to the heart-work of transforming education. Just like the protocol of a grand entry at a powwow calls us to move in rhythm like

those who came before us, the dancer in gold steps forward into the shadows of the unknown journey ahead. She moves with a deep sense of belonging, carrying the beautiful responsibility to the ancestors and future generations. I share it here as a bridge between my self-location and the relational agreements that breathe life into this work. This movement reflects (Re)Creation Storywork, where stories are brought forward again through art, memory, and relational practices, allowing them to live across time while remaining accountable to their original teachings.



Figure 1.1

Grand Entry.

Note. Acrylic on canvas, 2023. Artist's personal collection.

Relational Agreements and Responsibilities

Muckleshoot Cohort and Memorandum of Understanding

The Muckleshoot Ed.D. cohort emerged through a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the University of Washington Tacoma and the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe. This tribally placed doctoral partnership affirms Indigenous sovereignty in education by (re)centering tribal governance, place-based knowledge, and self-determination within doctoral studies, calling us to decolonize education by honoring ceremony and relational accountability. Through this work, learning also involves processes of reflection and healing; we are invited to “reclaim emotions, re-unlearn and re-learn” in ways that center community-defined healing (Minthorn et al., 2022, p. 44). The MOU stands as a living act of decolonization, affirming the Tribe’s authority to shape curriculum, outcomes, and educational futures.

Our cohort gathered monthly at the Muckleshoot Tribal College, on the ancestral territories of the Muckleshoot (bəqəlšul) and the Puyallup (spuyaləpabš) peoples, who continue to care for these lands and waters. There, our learning deepened through place-based teachings and shared community. We visited the Tomanamus Forest, listened to elders and tribal leaders, and participated in holistic learning practices that included creative expression, drum making, traditional ecological knowledge, attending the Canoe Journey, smudging, and sitting together in circle. Through these experiences, we built a community grounded in respect, reciprocity, reverence, and relationship. These teachings shaped how we understand and practice leadership, relational accountability, and Indigenous sovereignty in education.

As an Unangax̂ and Alutiiq scholar in this program, I can move between worldviews while centering Indigenous epistemologies. My genealogy of knowledge has unfolded along many shorelines: St. Paul, Ouzinkie, Anchorage, the Kenai, and now the lands of the suq̓wabš and

nəxˈsʌ́yəɪm. Each movement has felt like being carried by a different wave, sometimes gently, sometimes with force. Aaluː, the wave, remains both a guiding metaphor for my (re)search and a way of understanding my own journey. I move in and out of institutions, like the tide, carrying stories and returning them to community. My dissertation is one swell in a larger movement of Indigenous (re)search as return. It moves away from extraction and toward responsibility, relationship, and refusal.

Within the Muckleshoot cohort, this movement is shaped by explicit expectations of relational accountability, respect for tribal protocols, and responsibility to return knowledge in ways defined by the communities and the relationships involved, rather than the academy alone. This tribally placed doctoral learning informs the theoretical and methodological grounding of my inquiry by situating knowledge within relationships to Land, community, shared stories, and responsibilities to one another.

Colonial Conditions of Research

Historically, Western research traditions have silenced Indigenous voices by treating Indigenous peoples as subjects to be studied rather than as equal partners in the creation of knowledge. Such approaches often produced extractive outcomes and deepened existing systems of harm. Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) explains that (re)search, particularly in Indigenous contexts, has too frequently served the interests of imperial and colonial power. Decolonizing (re)search then calls for the return of authority over knowledge, its making, keeping, and sharing, to Indigenous peoples themselves. This includes challenging Western academic traditions that claim objectivity while sidelining Indigenous ways of knowing (Cordova, 2007). In settler-colonial spaces, Indigenous stories are too often treated as mere data

or brief illustrations rather than as respected, full, and meaningful knowledge systems in their own right (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

In response, scholars have increasingly turned to decolonizing approaches rooted in Indigenous methodologies, including autoethnography, arts-based research, and land-based inquiry, as valid and necessary alternatives to colonial research approaches (Archibald, 2008; Denzin et al., 2008; Kovach, 2010). These frameworks reflect fundamentally different understandings of how knowledge is generated, held, and shared. Indigenous methodologies are rooted in relationality and community accountability, and they recognize the Land as a living, knowing entity (Peltier, 2018; Simpson, 2014; Tuck et al., 2014).

Within Indigenous frameworks, knowledge expands through relationship and responsibility, and (re)search is understood as an ethical practice shaped by obligations to people, place, ancestors, and future generations (Wilson, 2008). Meaning is made through relationships among researchers, knowledge holders, communities, and Land, and is inseparable from care, reciprocity, and respect for community-grounded protocols. In this way, (re)search is understood as a process of return, renewal, and accountability.

Yet despite growth in Indigenous (re)search, many inquiries continue to be framed through Western epistemological lenses that limit possibilities for relational accountability and meaningful decolonization (Patel, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Institutional expectations around rigor, objectivity, and generalizability often pressure Indigenous knowledge to be translated into Western forms, limiting how responsibility, refusal, and return can be practiced within research itself.

As a doctoral candidate in the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) Muckleshoot cohort, I practice Etuaptmunk (Two-Eyed Seeing) as a way of holding Indigenous and Western

knowledge systems in deliberate relation, without collapsing one into the other (Bartlett et al., 2012). I engage Two-Eyed Seeing to remain accountable to Indigenous ways of knowing while navigating the institutional demands of the academy. This approach calls me to draw on Western research tools where they are useful, while centering Indigenous epistemologies, ethics, and responsibilities as the grounding force of my inquiry. In this way, Two-Eyed Seeing functions as a practice of discernment and care. These conditions require a response. In this work, my response emerges from how I take up voice, language, and representation.

Voice, Language, and Representation as Refusal

In Indigenous (re)search, relational positioning and accountability make the first-person voice essential. Younging (2018) emphasizes honoring Indigenous voice and presence instead of erasing oneself through detached academic conventions. As Anishinaabe scholar Absolon (2022) locates (re)search within lived experience and genealogy: cultural, spiritual, and relational. Writing in the first person aligns with research-as-ceremony (Wilson, 2008), in which the (re)searcher is both participant and knowledge carrier. Thus, using *I* resists colonial traditions of false neutrality and affirms Indigenous methodologies grounded in relational accountability, truth-telling, and self-determination.

Language is also generative, relational, and spiritual. (Re)search signals a political act of resistance that (re)claims Indigenous knowledge within the academy. Pewewardy (2019) asserts that colonized education systems have historically marginalized Indigenous languages and ways of knowing, compelling Indigenous scholars to speak in imposed academic registers. They urge us to speak in the language we know best to preserve the integrity of Indigenous thought. Absolon (2022) (re)writes and (re)rights research as re-search, grounding it in Indigenous worldview and practice. They model this as a process of *searching again* through ancestral,

land-based, and community-grounded practices. They exercised their right of refusal by refusing to conform to colonial grammar as a methodological intervention that resists epistemic violence and (re)asserts the Indigenous self within the academy. (Re)defining academic language is not only justified, it is also necessary for Indigenous (re)search to mean what we want it to mean. Following their example, I will also use (re)search, search, and gather throughout this journey. I will (re)frame study as inquiry and interview as Storywork and knowledge-gathering to exercise my refusal of extractive objectivity and to honor relational accountability and reciprocity.

Literature Gap and Integrated Approach

While a rich body of literature exists on Indigenous (re)search methodologies, comparatively little attention within educational research has been given to how Indigenous arts, Storywork, and place-based knowledge can be brought together as interconnected forms of inquiry and healing. This gap reflects the same fragmenting tendencies described earlier, where knowledge is often separated rather than held in relation. Methot (2019) and Houston (2007) illuminate the transformative power of storytelling and memory work in healing trauma, while Muhr (2020) and Leavy (2020) emphasize the decolonial potential of collaborative art practices. These strands of scholarship often move alongside one another like separate currents, rarely woven together. In my inquiry, I bring them into a relationship, like threads in a living weave, each maintaining its own integrity while interlacing to (re)create meaning and identity. Such an approach resists linear analysis and embraces a holistic, land-connected, and story-centered mode of inquiry in which theory, method, and self are inseparable (Dunlop, 2023). From within this gap and these relationships, the guiding question for this inquiry emerges.

Research Question

How can Indigenous autoethnography, storywork, and land- and art-based research serve as transformative practices for (re)claiming Indigenous identity, fostering healing from colonial trauma, and challenging settler-colonial academic structures?

Research Problem Statement

My work is rooted in a hard truth: academic systems have spent generations dismissing Indigenous worldviews, fracturing relationships to identity, land, and community, and contributing to ongoing experiences of colonial harm. Settler-colonial research and education systems have further distorted Indigenous identities, severing connections across generations and producing forms of epistemic erasure that manifest as intergenerational trauma (Methot, 2019; Smith, 2021).

In response, I turn toward Indigenous methodologies as a way of pushing back against these extractive ways of knowledge gathering. Approaches such as Indigenous autoethnography, storywork, arts-based research, and land-based methodologies have demonstrated powerful potential for (re)claiming Indigenous voices and disrupting colonial frameworks (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Cajete, 2015; Houston, 2007; Kovach, 2009; McNiff, 2008; RedCorn, 2017; Tuck et al., 2014; Woodhouse et al., 2023). Yet, these approaches are often taken up in isolation rather than as interconnected, relational practices.

By turning toward Indigenous storywork and arts-based research, I seek ways to (re)claim the voices that colonial frameworks have sought to silence. My search addresses the literature gap by deliberately braiding art, story, and land-based practices as relational and ceremonial methods of knowing. In doing so, it enters the moving water of colonial harm to

redirect the current away from erasure and toward Indigenous presence, continuity, and resurgence.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this inquiry is to develop and enact a braided Indigenous methodology, grounded in Aalu̓x, that integrates autoethnography, storywork, arts-based inquiry, and land-based practice to support the (re)claiming of Indigenous identity, foster healing from colonial trauma, and challenge settler-colonial academic norms.

My inquiry contributes to Indigenous scholarship by demonstrating (re)search as a living, relational practice that (re)centers art, story, and Land as sources of theory and method, and (re)imagines education as a relationship grounded in responsibility and renewal.

Significance and Rationale

This inquiry matters because it responds to ongoing colonial conditions in education by offering a relational, Indigenous approach to (re)search that supports identity (re)claiming, healing, and transformation. I understand the academy as a kind of shoreline, an unstable meeting place between Indigenous knowledge systems and settler institutions. For generations, this shoreline has been engineered and reinforced to hold back the Indigenous wave, to keep our stories as data points rather than living teachers. Decolonizing, in this context, is like a persistent tide: it returns again and again to erode colonial barriers, reshaping the shoreline so that Indigenous presence, language, and ceremony can land and remain. Aalu̓x helps me (re)imagine this work as a continual practice of reshaping, rather than a single moment of change.

Indigenous (re)search in the academy is both cultural and political. Critical Indigenous theory critiques the existing hierarchy of value to create space and validate Indigenous methodologies (Fitzner, 2020). Within this space, the *conscious Indigenous scholar* is one who

understands their colonial and cultural history and actively seeks healing for individuals and communities by confronting internalized oppression and (re)claiming Indigenous identity, responsibility, and self-location (Absolon, 2022; Smith, 2021). The act of reclamation is vital because the impact of colonial erasure extends far beyond the academy, threatening Tribal sovereignty, cultural continuity, and community well-being. Duran (2006) teaches the transformative power of storytelling and memory work in healing the *soul wound* of intergenerational trauma. Without these holistic interventions, systemic oppression continues to reinforce cycles of disconnection from cultural identity. By ignoring Indigenous knowledge, academia reinforces the idea that it's just anecdotal. This reinforces the loss by treating our deep-rooted scholarship as secondary to Western views (Grande, 2004).

In response to these omissions, Indigenous scholars call for approaches to (re)search that place Indigenous voices at the center, honor different ways of knowing, and support collective and personal healing (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2021). Turner (2005) reminds us that Indigenous knowledge is not simply a set of facts. It is a way of living, held in our relationships with the Land, community, and all our relations. Absolon (2022) further argues that (re)search is inseparable from the lived experiences of Indigenous scholars, encouraging us to step into our roles as agents of change. They emphasize that our cultural identity comes before any academic identity we hold. Within this understanding, Indigenous scholars continue to push against the academy's boundaries by insisting that our methods, stories, and worldviews remain central. Part of our work and our responsibility is to challenge the status quo and make space for (re)search grounded in Indigenous values and ways of being.

Little Bear (2000) describes this tension as *ambidextrous consciousness*, the continual straddling between Indigenous and Western worldviews. Thus, Indigenous scholars navigate the

expectations of academia while staying rooted in our Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. When we engage in methodologies such as autoethnography, land-based inquiry, and arts-based research, we move beyond critique; we begin to live the alternatives. These holistic practices (re)turn us to the sources of knowledge that have always guided our people since time immemorial: the Land, the story, and the creative processes that sustain our communities. Through this (re)turn, (re)search becomes a practice of survivance and renewal, reshaping knowledge systems into sanctuaries for Indigenous life and futurity.

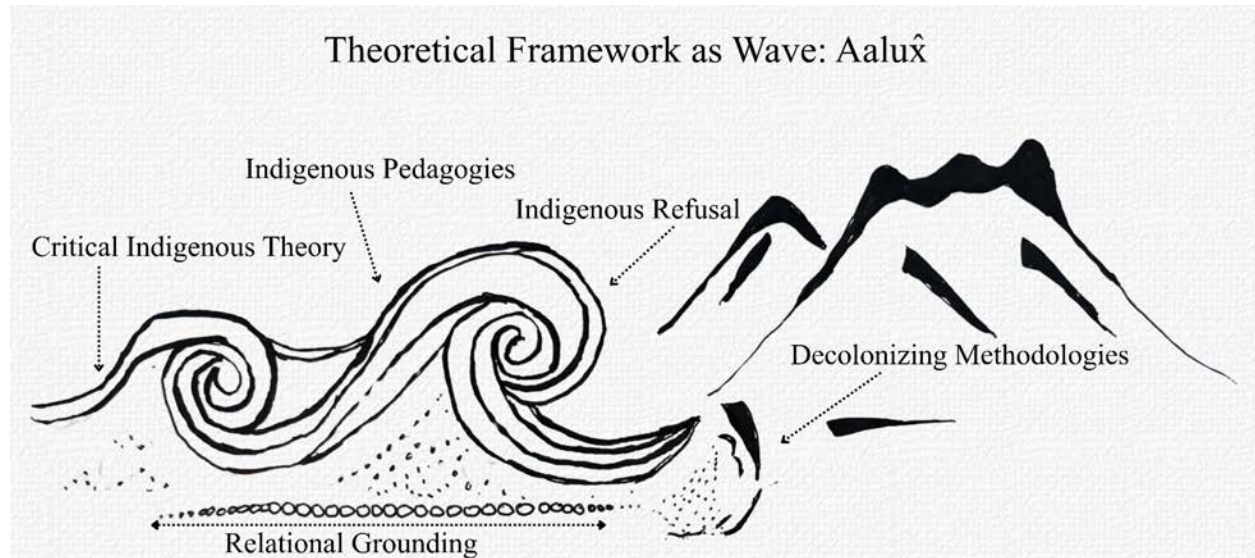
Theoretical Framing: Currents that Guide This Inquiry

I use Aaluê, the wave, as a living theoretical framework and methodology: fluid, cyclical, relational, transformative. Aaluê embodies rhythm, force, and ancestral memory. Each swell carries distinct layers of theory that coalesce into a single body of knowledge. Rooted in Indigenous worldviews and epistemologies, my (re)search draws from Decolonizing Methodologies, Indigenizing Pedagogies, Critical Indigenous Theory/TribalCrit, Indigenous Refusal, and Relational Grounding from an Indigenous Lens. Throughout the inquiry, I explicitly map practices to Aaluê elements: the shoreline (Decolonizing Methodologies) as the space where Indigenous knowledge comes ashore and (re)shapes the contours of the academy; currents (CIT/TribalCrit) that move beneath the surface and shape direction, break/backwash (Indigenous Refusal) that disrupt and pull away colonial expectations; sandbar (Relational Grounding) where knowledge bundles gather through Storywork, and relational accountability; and spray/swell (Indigenizing Pedagogies) that carry teachings outward across communities and generations. Figure 1.2 visually (re)presents this framework.

Figure 1.2

Theoretical Framework as a Wave: Aaluê.

Note. Aaluû is depicted as a wave holding multiple Indigenous and decolonial theories in relation. The spiral¹ form reflects movement, return, and relational knowledge. Illustration by S. Barry (2026).



Decolonizing Methodologies (Shoreline)

Decolonizing (re)search (re)shapes settler-colonial power structures embedded in academic inquiry and (re)centers Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and ethical protocols (Brayboy, 2005; Smith, 2021). In my inquiry, I shift from researching Indigenous peoples to (re)searching *with* and *for* Indigenous communities by foregrounding relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility (Wilson, 2008) and by rejecting false neutrality (Grande, 2004; Patel, 2016).

In the Aaluû framework, decolonizing methodologies are represented by the shoreline, where Indigenous knowledge comes ashore, unsettling colonial boundaries within academic spaces. Just as the tide reshapes the coast over generations, these ways of knowing gradually wear down institutional walls. In doing so, they make space for Indigenous epistemologies and

¹ The designs on the Chaguduû (bentwood visors) and the petroglyphs spirals representing waves are more than decoration; they are visual languages of ancestral connection and sea knowledge within Unangaû and Alutiiq visual traditions.

stories to come ashore and to breathe within institutions that once sought to contain them. In this way, decolonizing (re)search is both an act of remembrance and return.

Indigenizing Pedagogies (Spray/ Swell)

Indigenizing revitalizes and integrates Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing into educational contexts. Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete (2015) describes Indigenous education as a process of coming-to-know that (re)centers storytelling, land-based learning, spiritual interconnectedness, and community values. Therefore, I integrate art, story, and place as foundational to (re)search, recognizing learning as rooted in our environment, intellect, spirit, and emotion. Land as pedagogy (Simpson, 2014) emphasizes knowledge emerging from land-based practices, ceremonies, and reciprocal relations as pathways for decolonial renewal and cultural resurgence.

Within the Aalux framework, Indigenous pedagogies move like the swell and spray the wave, meeting the shoreline, droplets scattering outward, carrying knowledge bundles and teachings into new spaces. In this way, Indigenizing pedagogy brings Indigenous knowledge to life within educational spaces.

Indigenous Critical Theory and TribalCrit (Currents)

Indigenous Critical Theory (e.g., Grande, 2004; A. Smith, 2012) examines systemic colonial impacts through the lenses of power, knowledge, and culture while (re)centering sovereignty and resistance. Lumbee scholar Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (2005) introduced Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), which underscores several tenets: that colonization is endemic; U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism and White supremacy; Indigenous identities are political and racialized; sovereignty, autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification remain central; and story is theory and data. Listing the

nine tenets matters here because the sovereignty of theory is itself a refusal of erasure; it teaches readers to read story analytically.

In Figure 1.2, Indigenous Critical Theory and TribalCrit are the deep ocean currents. They are not always visible at the surface. Still, they continually move and direct the water, exposing how colonial narratives dismiss Indigenous knowledge and how Indigenous artists, educators, and youth enact sovereignty through cultural expression. These currents shape how the tide meets the shoreline and how each wave of story and art arrives.

My inquiry treats storytelling, both textual and visual, as a theoretical practice, leveraging TribalCrit like a current to expose how colonial narratives dismiss Indigenous knowledge and how Indigenous artists, educators, and youth enact sovereignty through cultural expression. The nine tenets of TribalCrit, as outlined by Brayboy (2005), are as follows:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.

7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.

8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.

9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change (p. 429-430).

Currents are the forces that guide our wayfinding, directing our *iqya*, our ancestral vessels, and sometimes carrying us to unexpected places. Together, Indigenous Critical Theory and TribalCrit offer more than a set of tools; they open a way of seeing the world that makes room for Indigenous presence, power, and possibility within and beyond academic spaces.

Rooting my work in these ancestral and critical lineages connects me to a long line of Indigenous knowledge holders and reminds me that theory can be a place of sovereignty. These values, like the current, shape how I sit with stories, how I pay attention to creative expression, and how I carry the responsibilities that come with my (re)search. They remind me that theory is inseparable from lived experience, moving alongside the relatives, territories, and coastal rhythms that hold us.

My commitment is to let these ancestral currents guide me with integrity, keeping me accountable to the community, to relationships, and to the healing purposes at the heart of Indigenous (re)search.

Indigenous Refusal (Break/Backwash)

Building upon Tuck and Yang's (2014) concept of refusal, my (re)search resists the impulse to make all Indigenous pain legible or accessible to settler audiences. Refusal embodies

the moment the wave refuses to be absorbed; it crashes, it reclaims, it pulls back what is sacred. This is not silence but a sovereign boundary-setting, a deliberate choice to remain illegible to the settler state. Refusal, in my inquiry, appears as both a methodological and artistic stance, representing a commitment to protect what cannot be commodified or extracted. It emerges in what is withheld, in what is symbolized but not fully explained, and in the safeguarding of specific knowledges as sacred and community-specific.

Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Audra Simpson (2007) describes *ethnographic refusal* as a political and intellectual act that disrupts the settler gaze and affirms Indigenous autonomy over what knowledge is shared and what remains held within the community. Following her teachings, I treat refusal as a form of care, song, ceremony, and protection. It is the process through which Aaluê pulls certain stories back from the shoreline, keeping them in motion with the people and places to whom they belong.

In practice, this means that not all stories shared with me are carried forward into my dissertation. Some moments of sharing were held in the sanctity of relationship, held only between the knowledge holder and me. In these instances, the act of listening, witnessing, and being entrusted with their story was itself the work; no further translation, analysis, or display was required.

Relational Grounding (Sandbar)

I draw on the inductive spirit of grounded theory primarily for its commitment to emergence: the idea that understanding grows from the soil of lived experience rather than being imposed in advance. Within Aaluê, relational grounding is represented by the sandbar. It is shaped by movement and stays responsive to the tide; it is never meant to be fixed. In this

inquiry, grounding comes from (re)turning again and again to story, land, memory, and relationship.

While Grounded Theory scholars (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006) emphasize the co-construction of meaning, my analytic commitments are guided first by Indigenous relational frameworks, specifically Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), which understands story as living knowledge carried through rel, relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), and conversational method and Indigenous analysis (Kovach, 2009). These approaches center story as living knowledge and responsibility as ongoing relational practice in how knowledge is carried and shared. Grounding, in this context, comes from noticing where stories start to gather, which images return, and where my responsibility to community surfaces. Rather than relying on formal coding procedures, patterns and currents emerged as I returned again and again to stories, artwork, and field reflections, guided by Indigenous relational accountability and careful listening.

I approach the knowledge shared through conversations and art as *bundles*, precious teachings held within Indigenous protocols. My analysis prioritizes relationship over extraction, allowing the work to remain responsive to lived experience while accountable to place, community, and future generations.

Aalux̂ remains a living Indigenous framework: Critical Indigenous Theory anchors movement; decolonizing and Indigenizing methodologies (re)shape academic space; relational grounding supports emergence; and Indigenous refusal protects spirit. This wave refuses settler-colonial linearity. It cycles. It returns. It remembers. Each time Aalux̂ meets the academy's shoreline, it leaves behind new sediment, carries away what no longer serves, and opens space for Indigenous knowledge to breathe.

Listening Before Return

This chapter has been a place of arrival, where I locate myself in relationship and responsibility. What is named here does not stop or conclude; it continues to shape how I listen, carry, and respond.

From here, the inquiry moves outward to the knowledge tidepools that shape my work. Chapter 2 steps further along the shoreline, where story, creation, place, healing, and kinship gather and move together. These tidepools are sustained by the same water and shaped by shared responsibilities. It is there that my (re)search continues, listening for what the waves bring in, and for what must be carried back.

Key terms and concepts are gathered in Appendix A, where their meanings are held in relation to this work.

Chapter 2: Relational Foundations (Literature Review)

Knowledge Tidepools Along the Indigenous Shoreline

Chapter Introduction: Entering the Shoreline of Knowledge

I organize this chapter as an Indigenous shoreline, a place where many forms of knowledge gather, overlap, and transform one another. Along this shoreline, knowledge appears in tidepools. It is held briefly, returned to, and connected through shared water. These tidepools reveal how Indigenous ways of knowing remain relational, living, and interdependent.

In this chapter, I engage with what is conventionally referred to as scholarship, which carries forward ancestral obligations to the people, the stories, and the Land that ground my inquiry. I approach these works as relational knowledge bundles, not as fixed containers but as teachings carried through writing and shaped by place, lived experience, and responsibility. Like tidepools shaped by a single sea, these bodies of scholarship overlap, inform one another, and move together, carrying teachings across story, land, healing, and kinship.

Indigenous inquiry unfolds through presence and accountability to all our relations (Kovach, 2010; San Pedro, 2019). Grounded in relational epistemologies, our ways of knowing situate knowledge within contexts and enduring connections (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009). This interconnectedness forms the water circulating among these tidepools, where art and memory move in tandem. Stó:lō scholar Jo-ann Archibald (2008) developed the principles of Indigenous Storywork—respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy—which offer shoreline ethics that guide my engagement with these bodies of knowledge. Together, these conceptual basins provide the grounding for my work, reflecting the vibrant systems of knowing that shape Indigenous identity and resurgence.

The following sections explore five major knowledge tidepools:

1. The Tidepool of Story: Indigenous Storywork and relational methodologies
2. The Tidepool of Creation: Indigenous art and arts-based inquiry
3. The Tidepool of Place: Land-based knowledge and self-location
4. The Tidepool of Healing: Indigenous well-being and holism
5. The Tidepool of Kinship: Identity, belonging, and diaspora

Organizing the chapter in this way reflects an Indigenous paradigm in which knowledge is understood through deep relationality and ancestral flow. Taken together, these tidepools suggest that Indigenous knowledge systems are living currents sustained through connection.

From this shoreline, the first tidepool that comes into view is Story. Before moving further along the coast, my inquiry lingers with story as a foundational vessel of insight, one that carries teachings, responsibilities, and relationships across time. Story acts as the headwaters; it shapes how knowledge is gathered, held, and shared throughout my journey.

2.1 Tidepool of Story: Indigenous Storywork and Relational Methodologies

This tidepool gathers Indigenous teachings and methodologies that understand story as a foundational, relational practice through which ethics and ancestral wisdom are carried across generations. As stories develop within relationships, they carry inherent obligations of care for those who receive them (Archibald, 2008; Allen, 1998; Cruikshank, 1998; Kovach, 2009). My engagement with story is further guided by Unangax̂ values, respect, humility, responsibility, and care, and informed by Alutiiq teachings on becoming a *real person* through ethical practice grounded in community, place, and intergenerational duty (Drabek, 2012).

Within Unangax̂ traditions, stories open with Tanang awaa, *work of my country*, which my Auntie taught me. This opening reminds us that our stories do not belong to the individual, but to the place itself (A. Lestenkova, personal communication, 2023). One of our creation

stories illustrates this beautifully, showing islands as relational beings shaped by strength and collective accountability (Jochelson et al., 1990). We see this in the story of “Tusk Breaker and Daylight Lifter,” which reminds us that knowledge and Land are not ours to own, but are held in trust so that “those that come after...should make a living of them.”

Tusk Breaker was very strong, it said. So, using just his own strength, he went out to St. Paul Island and St. George Island and placed them outside Tigalda Island, in order that they might hunt animals on them from not far off. But his cousin Daylight Lifter did not approve of what he did, because also those who came after him should make a living of them, and told his cousin to put the two back again in their former place. And so Tusk Breaker, having no more anywhere to go, shot up at the sun several times and then stayed the way he was—he said, it is said (p 195).

Approaches such as Drabek’s (2012) analysis of Kodiak Alutiiq literature show how stories like this continue to function as a living site of ethical teaching. Grounded in Kodiak Alutiiq core values, Drabek treats stories as relational vessels through which humility and responsibility are renewed. This orientation aligns with my inquiry: understanding Story as relational knowledge that carries the weight of accountability for how it is interpreted and lived.

In engaging these stories, I approach them with discernment and restraint. Stories are responsive to context and inseparable from the people, lands, and communities who carry them. While meanings may shift as stories are (re)visited, (re)told, and (re)lived, their teachings remain anchored in continuity. This approach requires a specific kind of care; while published collections have helped carry these stories across time, they are shaped by historical and ethnographic conditions that do not fully hold their relational depth.

Earlier collections, such as *Aleut Tales and Narratives* (Jochelson et al., 1990), offer recorded traces of Unanga's storytelling traditions that continue to circulate through community memory. Though these narratives pass through filters of translation, they still carry teachings grounded in place. In my (re)search, such stories are referenced as partial markers, traces of relational knowledge that affirm continuity without requiring complete retelling or interpretation. By practicing this form of intellectual restraint, I ensure these stories remain in motion with the people to whom they belong.

Indigenous Storywork as Ethical and Relational Ways of Knowing

Indigenous Storywork (ISW), as articulated by Archibald (2008), provides both the theoretical and methodological heartbeat for understanding story as an Indigenous pedagogy. Archibald's seven interrelated principles situate stories within an ethical grounding that (re)centers relational accountability over the traditional authority of the researcher.

Extending this understanding, Archibald (2008) emphasizes that stories are gifts that require care in how they are received, interpreted, and carried within their cultural and ancestral contexts. Archibald's use of Coyote as a pedagogical guide illustrates a holistic orientation: to be a *whole human being*, one must learn to shift perspectives, moving between different ways of seeing and knowing as part of living in relationship (Archibald, 2008, p.10). Here, holism is a practice: the work of holding multiple truths and responsibilities simultaneously. As Cruikshank (1998) teaches, stories carry their own memory and authority as they move through specific landscapes. This is echoed in the work of Georgeson and Hallenback (2018), who illustrate how Indigenous women's stories flow through generations like water, carrying memory and ethical obligation. Their work affirms story as a collective, relational practice, shaped by place and accountable to those who came before and after us.

The relational grounds directly guide how I sit with the narratives in my inquiry. Whether emerging through conversational interviews, visual art, and land-based practices, I treat these stories as offerings exchanged within a vast web of relations, including people, ancestors, land, and our more-than-human kin. From this perspective, (re)search is a sacred space one enters with the weight of responsibility; it demands a constant presence and a clear location within the relationships that make knowledge possible (Absolon, 2022; San Pedro, 2019).

In this regard, Wilson (2008) reframes academic rigor as a form of relational ethics, where accountability is measured by the care and maintenance of connection. This understanding is upheld by critical qualitative scholars who define rigor through reciprocity and decolonizing commitments (Denzin et al., 2008; Wilson, Breen, & DuPre', 2019). Within my inquiry, listening is itself methodological, an act shaped by humility and care. The stories shared here are part of a lifelong relationship that carries obligations beyond the duration of my dissertation.

Relational Storytelling and Indigenous Autoethnography

Grounded in this story-centered foundation, Indigenous autoethnography emerges as a continuation of relational Storywork. It locates the researcher as a thread within the vast web of relationships through which knowledge flows. This approach diverges from individualistic Western approaches by situating the *I* as eternally part of the larger *we*, an identity rooted in collective memory, land, and kinship (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2009; Simpson, 2007; Smith, 2021). This positioning challenges Western academic norms that seek to separate the seeker from the sought, insisting instead that truth is found in relationship and we must maintain transparency about the ground upon which we stand (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2010).

This relational depth resonates with Feghali's (2023) concept of a *plantcestral memoir*, a powerful example of how critical personal narrative can weave traditional ecological knowledge

and ancestral memory. Feghali demonstrates how story, land, and identity co-constitute one another, writing: “I am never just telling my story; I’m speaking with voices that live in my blood and soil” (p. 29). Their work illustrates that stories carry genealogies of place and kinship, much like tidepools carry sediment and life gifted from many tides.

In my own inquiry, autoethnographic reflection moves beyond mere anecdote; it becomes a relational testimony to lived experience, memory, and responsibility carried across generations. To speak from my own lived terrain is an act of responsibility to my ancestors, my community, and the lands that have nurtured my ways of knowing. It is a commitment to show up as a *whole person* in the (re)search, ensuring that the knowledge shared here is carried with the same integrity as the lives that made it possible.

Story as Method, Medicine, and Orientation

Throughout my inquiry, story functions simultaneously as a method, a medicine, and an orientation. Tuck and McKenzie (2015) describe Indigenous storywork as a *radical relational gesture*, a move that disrupts colonial traditions by refusing extraction. This approach (re)centers place-based accountability, demanding that we remain attentive to whom stories belong, the lands from which they emerge, and the relationships that carry them forward. This refusal is a political act of sovereignty, an assertion of Indigenous authority over knowledge, narrative, and territory (Simpson, 2020). As an everyday practice of resurgence, storywork becomes the way we assert our continuity and personhood in the face of ongoing disruption (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005).

From this shoreline, story is felt as affective and embodied knowledge, a vessel for the emotional, spiritual, and historical memory across generations (Million, 2009). In Driskell’s *Asegie Stories* (2016), storytelling is portrayed as medicine and survivance. They illustrate how

embodied, gendered narratives function as Indigenous theory and as a healing practice rooted in sovereignty and relational care. This grounding resists tidy resolutions; it holds space for grief, survival, humor, resistance, love, and hope to coexist without being forced into a single interpretation.

As King (2008) reminds us, the truth about stories is that that's all we are; they shape how we live within them and what responsibilities we inherit. The stories shared here through art, conversation, and land-based practices become relational teachings that are alive, accountable, and sustaining. They are the currents that move us toward healing.

Connections to Other Knowledge Tidepools

The Tidepool of Story is foundational, and its teachings move beyond narrative alone. Story moves outward through practice, shaping how knowledge is carried into making, land-based practices, healing, and kinship. From this tidepool, the inquiry turns toward Creation.

2.2 Tidepool of Creation: Indigenous Art and Arts-Based Inquiry

Creation takes up story through making, where knowledge is enacted, and transformed through material practice, movement, and relationship. Within Indigenous epistemologies, creative practices embody theory, memory, and pedagogy all at once; here, art is central to the heartbeat of education, healing, and resurgence. (McMaster & Trafzer, 2007; Smith, 2021).

Indigenous Art as Knowledge Transmission and Living Archive

Indigenous artists and scholars consistently describe creative practice as a way that knowledge and memory move intergenerationally. McMaster and Trafzer (2007) describe Indigenous art as “a living archive of cultural memory” (p. 18), emphasizing that creative practices such as beadwork, carving, painting, and performance are inseparable from spiritual cosmologies and ecological wisdom. From an Indigenous Storywork perspective, Archibald

(2008) illustrates that artistic practices are governed by the same ethical principles of storytelling, respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and reverence.

Within this ongoing conversation, King (2008) reminds us that Indigenous art and story are ways of being in the world that go beyond mere communication. They critique the marginalization of Indigenous artistic knowledge within Western academic institutions, calling for creative works to be treated with the same rigor as written texts. This critique underscores how art functions as theory, pedagogy, and critique in its own right.

Jackinsky-Horrell (2012) further examines this artistic revitalization as a community-based practice of cultural continuity, identity, and responsibility to ancestors, which is renewed. In my inquiry, art-making becomes the visible thread of my (re)search, a way of making the invisible layers of memory, place, and relationship tangible. Here, art and knowledge are inseparable. Creating is one way we carry our history and our teachings forward.

Creation as Pedagogy, Refusal, and Futurity

Critical Indigenous theorists expand this understanding by situating artistic practice as a profound form of refusal and resurgence. Simpson (2020) opens space to understand creation as generative refusal, a practice that actively shields what is sacred while affirming land-based knowledge and Indigenous sovereignty. Simpson points out, “We did not just tell stories. We enacted them. Stories themselves were performative, and it was a pedagogy” (p.177). In this way of holding, art teaches through the physicality of presence and the shared labor of participation (Bailey, 2024).

From a related perspective, Harjo (2019) describes Indigenous art as a *tool of futurity*. Creative practices emerge from ceremony and ancestral teachings to actively dream Indigenous futures beyond settler-colonial constraint. Art, in this sense, functions like a tidepool sustained

by constant motion, always drawing from the deep wells of culture and land to nourish what is to come.

Smith (2021) reinforces this wisdom by affirming that our creative expressions function as research methodologies in their own right. “Story, song, and art are methods of remembering, theorizing, resisting. They are sovereign acts” (p. 161). This framing asserts a form of methodological sovereignty, refusing to peel knowledge away from culture, land, and relationships that give it life. In my inquiry, every creative act is a refusal to be erased and a commitment to Indigenous futurity.

Art-Based Research as Indigenous-Aligned Methodology

The Tidepool of Creation also holds arts-based research (ABR), a field that aligns naturally with Indigenous epistemologies through its emphasis on embodied, relational, and holistic inquiry. Sullivan (2008, 2010) explains that art is not merely a product to be consumed but a legitimate way of knowing in the world, positioning the act of making as a rigorous site of discovery.

Grounded in a spirit of care, Leavy (2020) demonstrates that arts-based inquiry opens the doors to emotional, sensorial, spiritual, and relational dimensions, ways of knowing that are often pushed to the margins of dominant academic traditions. This resonates deeply with Indigenous methodologies, which refuse to fragment the human experience into *data points* (Archibald, 2008; Chilisa, 2012; Kimmerer, 2024).

Approaching this from a place of deep accountability, Feghali (2023) exemplifies how art operates as both a method and a memory. Feghali states that “art is not a metaphor—it is a method and memory” (p. 82), teaching that creative practice is a way of becoming accountable to place. Their work reflects how creative inquiry activates living relationships with ancestors and

ecological systems. Within these commitments, Carew's (2018) work further illustrates how Indigenous art-making and storytelling function as place-based inquiry, cultivating a profound sense of belonging and identity through the hands-on practice of creation. In my work, ABR is the current that carries my (re)search toward healing and resurgence of my people.

Embodied Knowledge and Visual Sovereignty

Within Indigenous knowledge systems, artistic practice is a language of the body, transmitting wisdom through embodied material processes. Beadwork, weaving, carving, painting, performance, and land-based art encode teachings through the sacred language of patterns, repetition, rhythm, and touch (Archibald, 2008). As Gerber et al. (2012) describe, the act of art-making fosters a shared vulnerability and relational insight, creating space for both personal and collective healing to take root.

Visual sovereignty further strengthens this tidepool, asserting our right to be seen on our own terms. Mithlo (2011) introduces *blood memory* as a relational ground for understanding how Indigenous art carries ancestral knowledge across the spans of time. With the weight of this responsibility, Rains (2021) and Farris (2005) illustrate how visual storytelling functions as a powerful counter-narrative to colonial erasure, particularly through the work of Indigenous women who weave intersectional themes of land, gender, and identity.

Haakanson (2010) further demonstrates that our art and material culture are sustained through practices of stewardship. This work emphasizes community authority and firm refusal of extractive representation within relational spaces (Haines et. al., 2024). Haakanson's insights reinforce that art is a living responsibility held in careful relation to our ancestors, our land, and future generations.

Through the lens of visual sovereignty, art becomes a site of refusal and (re)articulation. It is here that we move beyond mere survival, asserting presence, knowledge, and sovereign futurity on our own ancestral terms.

Creation as Relational Practice in This (Re)Search

Within my inquiry, art functions as both the path and the destination. Visual storytelling, painting, weaving, and land-based creation are integral pulses of my design, the ways I listen to what is being asked of me. These practices allow me to (re)turn to ancestral knowledge while engaging with contemporary questions of identity, healing, and the deep longing for belonging.

Creation in this tidepool is inseparable from stories that birthed it, the land that it holds, and the kinships that sustain it. Through these teachings, my art becomes a way of listening, witnessing, and remembering, a way to carry my responsibility to ancestors, community knowledge holders, and the specific territories where this work lives.

Creation breathes story into the world through the act of making, where knowledge becomes embodied, enacted, and shared. Through these tangible practices, creation prepares my (re)search to linger next with Place, a loving teacher that does not just hold knowledge, but is Knowledge itself.

2.3 Tidepool of Place: Land-Based Knowledge and Self-Location

Place is the very condition that makes knowing possible. In Indigenous contexts, wisdom emerges from the literal ground beneath our feet. Our teachings speak of the Land as active and relational, a sovereign presence that shapes how knowledge is formed, carried, and eventually returned. Within these epistemologies, learning happens *with* place. The Land teaches through the quiet language of relationship memory, always asking for reciprocal responsibility (Cajete, 1994; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

Land as Teacher and Living Knowledge

Across Indigenous education scholarship, Land is consistently understood as an active teacher and guide. Cajete (1994) describes education as a process emerging through observation, participation, and care, while McDonald (2023) similarly characterizes the Land as a “living, breathing teacher that carries knowledge of generations” (p. 5). These teachings are echoed across Alaska Native communities.

Stepetin (2023) articulates subsistence cosmologies as relational protocols, sacred instructions for being with water, and our more-than-human kin. Stepetin emphasizes the concept of *Unangam Qaqamiiguu*, a living system of care and continuity enacted through the rhythms of everyday practice. This work honors the Land as an active participant in ethical life, reminding us that place is the foundation of our identity and collective duty.

Building on these cosmological frameworks, Livingston (2017) examines *qugax* as a rigorous Indigenous ethnoscientific system. Through *qugax*, our knowledge about navigation and survival has been sustained over time, reflecting a practice of relational accountability and intergenerational transmission grounded in place. Within these knowledge systems, learning is shaped by listening, respectful restraint, and attentiveness to the timing of the natural world (Merculieff & Roderick, 2013).

Within this tidepool, wisdom emerges through the senses and the act of return, watching the seasonal shifts, listening to water’s voice, and tending to familiar places (Bordignon, 2024). This knowledge is cultivated through a steady practice of presence (Kelso, 2011). What we learn depends on where we stand and how we choose to attend; knowledge is a response to being present.

Western educational frameworks often separate knowledge from place, privileging *portable* instruction that ignores context. This separation reflects settler-colonial logics that treat Land as a mere resource or property. As Tuck et. al. (2014) argue, such approaches allow schooling to proceed without accountability to the Indigenous territories it occupies. In contrast, land-based education refuses these extractive logics, insisting that all learning is situated within responsibility and the sovereign pulse of the Place itself.

Land-Based Education as Decolonial Practice

Land-based education is a deeply political act. Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy (2014) describe land education as a refusal of settler-colonial logics that attempt to frame the Earth as empty or available. Instead, land-based learning honors the Land as sovereign and storied. Adding to this, Calderon (2014) critiques curricula that seek to erase Indigenous relationships to place, arguing that land education serves as a powerful way to speak back to settler schooling by reasserting Indigenous presence, memory, and authority in every educational space.

Scully (2015) deepens this conversation by noting that Western place-based education often centers individual experience while bypassing the vital reality of Indigenous sovereignty. In contrast, our land-based pedagogies (re)center the Land's own agency. To learn with the Land is to answer to Indigenous presence that is simultaneously past, present, and future (Scully, 2015).

Place-Based Pedagogy and Cultural Resurgence

Land-based education is the heartbeat of cultural resurgence. Harasymchuk (2015) shows how Indigenous educators from Turtle Island to Aotearoa/New Zealand use place-based pedagogy to strengthen cultural identity and resist the restraints of settler schooling. Bowra and

Mashford-Pringle (2021) further describe the Land as “the epistemological foundation upon which Indigenous identities, language, and education systems are revitalized” (p. 48).

From this place of learning, Skokomish leader Bruce Miller’s *Teaching of the Tree People* (2006) illustrates how knowledge is a living cycle of care, naming, and return. Much like a tidepool shaped by repeated waves, the Land holds memory through the steady practice of being present (Georgeson & Hallenbeck, 2018). Simpson’s (2025) *Theory of Water* offers a fluid understanding of place, where water teaches us through movement, adaptation, and a fierce continuity, a lesson that resonates with our coastal and island wayfinding.

Extending this, the *Plant Teachings* curriculum (GRuB, 2020) provides a contemporary example rooted in Coast Salish storytelling and ecological wisdom. By (re)centering the plants, the seasons, and our relational ethics, the curriculum integrates healing and cultural continuity into the very fabric of learning. According to brown (2017), this *emergent strategy* that takes shape through being in right and honest relationship with living systems that sustain us.

Self-Location, Language, and Relational Accountability

Within Indigenous methodologies, self-location is inseparable from the Land; it is an act of naming the ground that holds us. Absolon (2022) reminds us that “location is about relationship” (p. 114), calling us as (re)searchers to honestly acknowledge how the Land and our responsibilities to it shape everything we know. This practice moves beyond static positionality statements toward a living relational accountability.

Language is the heartbeat of this location. Kimmerer (2024) describes land-based relationality as a *gift economy*, a system grounded in reciprocity and the deep breath of gratitude. My Auntie’s teaching that “our language holds more nutrients than the soil” (A. Lestenkova,

personal communication, 2025) speaks to the visceral truth that our words, our lands, and our worldviews are a single, entwined life-force.

Grounded in the Unangan and Alutiiq relational teachings, my inquiry approaches the Land as a living source of knowledge that carries its own memory and care. Ungangax̂ stories often begin with Tanam awaa Tanâ-Amî, which signals that all wisdom is born of place and nourished through relationship (Jochelson et al., 1990). Laktonen Counsellor (2012) affirms that language carries place-based philosophies and warns that when the Land is renamed through colonial frameworks, our ways of knowing begin to shift.

In light of these teachings, Absolon (2022) describes this as dis-placement, as the fracturing of relationships produced through colonial naming and commodification. Vine Deloria Jr. (2001) similarly reminds us that knowledge can only grow through sustained relationships with a specific Place. Within this tidepool, land, language, and identity are three strands of a single cord.

Land, Healing, and Relational Continuity

Land also carries its own medicine. Our scholars and knowledge holders describe the Land as a primary teacher and healer, offering guidance through plant relatives, the voices of the waters, and the steady pulse of seasonal rhythms. Learning to observe, listen, and respond to these shifts supports both individual and collective well-being. Drawing on the teachings of the thirteen moons, Frost (2022) emphasizes that cyclical time and ancestral connection are the true foundations of Indigenous wellness.

Like a tidepool sustained through the constant, foaming exchange between land and sea, our land-based knowledge systems hold an incredible memory and resilience. From this grounding, my work turns toward healing, guided by a Land that remembers us even when we

have forgotten ourselves, and a (re)search process that honors the relational continuity of all my relations.

2.4 Tidepool of Healing: Indigenous Well-being and Holism

With Land being the teacher, healing comes quietly into view. In our ways of knowing, well-being is relational and collective, upheld through our connection to the Land, story, and shared responsibilities. Healing is a living process of continuity and care, a way of being that honors the spirit as much as the body.

Across our knowledge traditions, healing happens in community and unfolds gradually, much like a tidepool shaped little by little by the persistent touch of the sea. Indigenous theorists describe this as a process of restoring balance across the emotional, spiritual, physical, communal, and ecological dimensions of life (Brave Heart, 2003; Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013; Walters et al., 2010). These understandings resist Western models that seek to isolate harm within individuals or to achieve closure through treatment alone; instead, we recognize that true wellness requires mending the whole web (Cordova, 2007; Tujague & Ryan, 2021).

Healing as Relational and Collective Practice

Our approaches to healing always begin with relationship. Duran (2006) describes healing as a direct response to the *soul wound* of intergenerational trauma, a process that must center on relational repair. While we acknowledge the collective trauma shaped by colonial erasure and forced displacement, we choose to focus on healing that unfolds through shared practices of ceremony, story, and the unbroken thread of continuity.

Building from this grounding, Million's (2009) concept of *felt theory* deepens our understanding of what constitutes healing knowledge. Felt theory honors our emotions, memories, and embodied experience as a valid Indigenous theory. Through our stories and our

felt truths, healing wisdom circulates across generations, refusing to peel the heart away from intellect.

This relational understanding of healing is also reflected in Walters et al.'s (2010) Indigenist Stress-Coping Model, which identifies cultural continuity and spiritual balance as our key protective factors for Indigenous well-being. This model emphasizes our inherent strengths, our relational accountability, and the sustaining medicine found in our land and culture.

Tuck's (2009) call for desire-based research provides a vital ethical compass within this work. Tuck cautions against *damage* as the primary lens through which to view Indigenous lives, urging us instead to attend to desire, presence, and futurity. In my inquiry, healing is the ongoing practice of living well in relationship. It is the act of thriving even in the wake of harm, focusing on the beauty we are building rather than the loss we have endured.

Story, Art, and Healing

Story and art are sacred vessels of Indigenous healing. Archibald (2008) reminds us that stories carry their own medicine, but only when they are handled with the utmost care and relational accountability. Deepening this, Archibald and Dewar (2010) describe how our creative practices support holistic wellness by engaging the emotional, spiritual, and communal layers of our being that Western medicine often overlooks.

This resonates with Methot's (2019) description of Indigenous art-making as a physical act of restoration. Making allows memory, emotion, and spirit to move through the creative process, through the hands and the breath, rather than being trapped in the mind or confined to a spoken explanation (France, 2020). Art offers ways to hold those experiences that are too heavy for words, allowing pain, resilience, humor, and survival to breathe together in the same space.

Land, More-Than-Human Relations, and Healing

Healing is also an ecological act, deeply tied to the Land and more-than-human relatives. Our teachings recognize the plants, the waters, the animals, and the seasonal cycles as our oldest healers, offering guidance through the economy of reciprocal care (Kimmerer, 2013). Cajete (1994) similarly describes healing as inseparable from these relationships, emphasizing that the Land and waters teach us balance and renewal through the simple, steady act of being present with it.

My work is further shaped by Deloria's (2001) wisdom on healing through our sacred ties to place and time. From this perspective, the Land is a relative whose presence sustains our memory and our possibilities. Learning to observe, to listen, and to educate the senses becomes the core of healing work, supporting the well-being of the individual by strengthening the health of the collective. We are healed by the very places that hold our history and our continuity.

Healing as Continuity, Survivance, and Responsibility

Indigenous approaches describe healing as a process of continuity, the ongoing work of carrying our responsibilities, our knowledge, and our care forward. Gone (2016) cautions against the Western impulse for a quick fix, noting that healing often means learning to live well with the scars of history while sustaining our cultural and relational ties.

From this shoreline, healing becomes a practice of tending, returning, and listening again (Ringland, 2019). It asks how we remain in a right relationship with our ancestors and those yet to be born. This understanding resonates with Leanne Betasamoske Simpson's (2017; 2020) teaching on resurgence, where everyday acts of refusal and care are seen as the ultimate forms of well-being. Healing, in this sense, is survivance, the active, vibrant presence of Indigenous life that thrives beyond narratives of loss (Vizenor, 2008).

Healing is the gift that is carried forward through kinship. What we tend through our healing requires a community to hold, share, and sustain it across generations. In this way, the tide of healing opens naturally into the Tidepool of Kinship, where care matures into responsibility, as illustrated in Figure 2.1

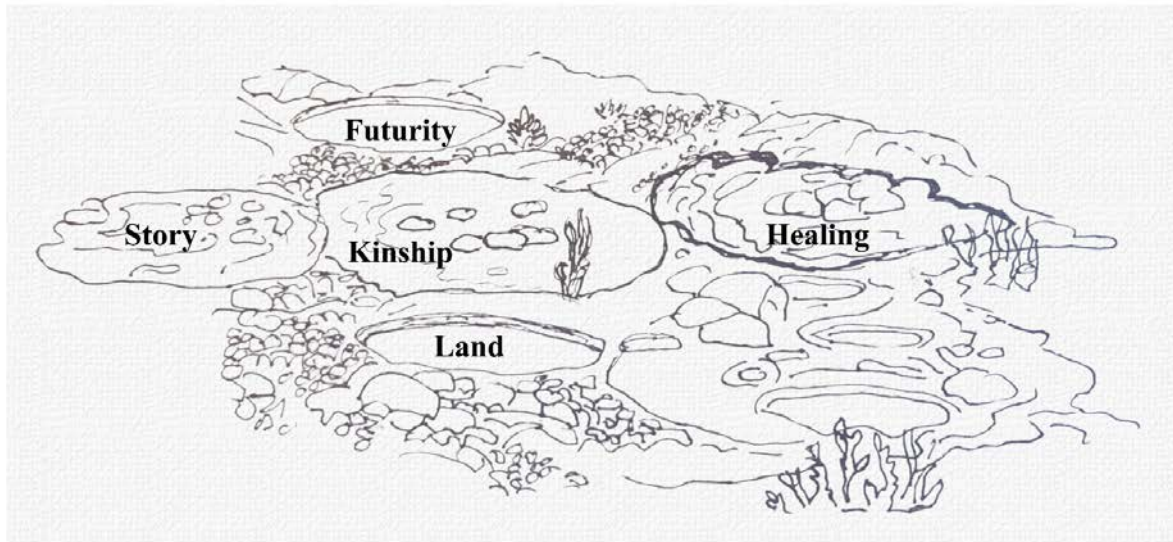


Figure 2.1

Kinship as Relational Continuity Across Land, Story, Healing, Movement, and Futurity. (Barry, 2026).

2.5 Tidepool of Kinship: Identity, Belonging, and Relational Continuity

Carried through relationship, healing gives rise to kinship. Across Indigenous knowledge traditions, identity is lived through relationships.

Kinship as Relational Identity

Indigenous identity is not a static label or a legal status; it is a living pulse of belonging born from kinship. Cornthassel (2003) describes our identity as grounded in our responsibilities to land and community, responsibilities enacted through everyday practices of care and participation. When we attend to these relational foundations, we resist what Pewewardy (2003)

warns against: the colonial reduction of our identity to mere race or appearance, a move that seeks to obscure the deep, ancestral obligations we carry as Indigenous beings.

From this shoreline, Deloria (2001) reminds us that our worldviews are fundamentally relational. Deloria describes the universe as a Person constituted through relationships. Our knowledge and our very sense of self are raised through sustained engagement with others, both human and more-than-human. Kinship is the ground upon which our ethics and belonging are built.

Kinship, Story, and Intergenerational Continuity

Story is the thread that weaves kinship across generations. Archibald (2008) illustrates how our stories teach us the ethics of *living well*, how to carry responsibility, and to never forget who we are and where we come from. Through the act of telling, kinship is made real, reinforcing the sacred connections among our ancestors, present-day communities, and those yet to come.

In this regard, Million's (2009) concept of *felt theory* illuminates how kinship is a visceral memory. It is felt in the body as much as it is spoken, carried through shared histories of survival and resistance. These affective dimensions of kinship allow our relationships to persist even through the pain of displacement or loss. When community knowledge holders share their stories, they are practicing kinship, witnessing, and maintaining a relational continuity that colonial borders cannot break.

Kinship, Land, and Belonging

Our teachings speak of the Land as relative, a family member who shapes how we understand our place in the world. Drawing from Cajete's (1994) wisdom, kinship is a lived responsibility that extends to the soil and the water. Simpson (2017; 2020) further describes

kinship as the heart of our resurgence, showing how everyday acts of harvesting, ceremony, and using our language reaffirm our belonging. Even when land-based proximity is fractured, kinship moves, carried in the *iqya* of our memory.

Kinship Across Distance and Movement

We must acknowledge that colonial disruption has sought to shatter our kinship systems through the violence of boarding schools and forced removals (Brayboy, 2005; Weaver, 2001). In my inquiry, diaspora is treated as a condition that requires our deepest care, rather than a *brokenness* needing repair.

For those of us living away from ancestral homelands, kinship is adaptive and portable. It is sustained through ceremony and shared responsibility, even when physical connection to place is strained (Besaw, 2022; Cornassel, 2003; Simpson, 2017). This understanding affirms kinship as continuity-in-motion, a relational life that refuses to be stopped by distance.

Kinship, Healing, and Collective Care

Kinship is the very medicine we need to heal. Walters et al. (2010) identify community connection as the ultimate protective factor for our well-being. Duran's (2006) aligns with this, noting that restoring balance requires us to mend relationships between family, community, and spirit. Here, care is not a service we receive; it is a distributed responsibility that allows healing to be carried out together.

(Re)Creation Stories and Becoming Kin

Our (re)creation stories are living teachings, renewed through every (re)telling. They act as our original maps, guiding us back to kinship with the Land, water, and spirit. Krawec (2022) reminds us that kinship sits at the center of decolonization, where “to truly become kin is to step into reciprocal relationships not just with other humans but with the more-than-human world” (p.

34). This sacred work of transformation invites a humble return to our accountability within the living systems that sustain us.

Kinship, Responsibility, and Futurity

Kinship is the way we dream our futures into being, a promise carried across time. Alfred and Corntassel (2005) remind us that our strength as Indigenous peoples is rooted in our relational obligations; our renewal begins the moment we restore relational ties to the Land and to one another.

This is what Vizenor (2008) calls survivance. It is the steady pulse of Indigenous life that refuses to be defined by loss. We sustain our survivance through our everyday acts of care, carrying for the memories and knowledge that keep our kinships whole. Kinship is both the nettle tea we share and the legacy we leave. We learn it through the warmth of story and practice it through the work of our hands.

Carrying the Tidepools Forward

Like a tidepool cradled by the shores, kinship is a space of repeated (re)turns. It holds our identity, our belonging, and our responsibility together as a living practice. It keeps our spirits in motion, anchored yet fluid. Across my inquiry, kinship acts as the thread that stitches together knowledge and healing. It binds story, land, and care into a single, unbreakable cord of continuance.

From this shoreline, we move forward as relatives grounded in kinship.

Chapter 3: Aalu̓x as an Indigenous Research Framework

Relational, Arts-based, and Autoethnographic Methodologies

This chapter carries the methodological story of my inquiry. It is a gathering of the threads: Indigenous autoethnography, arts-based research, storywork, and land-based practices, woven together through Unanga̓x epistemologies and the guiding movement of Aalu̓x. Here, methodology is understood as relational, ethical, and ceremonial practice. It is the way I walk in accountability to my community, the Land, and ancestors before and after me.

Guiding Questions for the Inquiry

How can Indigenous autoethnography, storywork, and land- and art-based (re)search serve as transformative practices for (re)claiming Indigenous identity, fostering healing from colonial trauma, and challenging settler-colonial academic structures?

1. In what ways do Indigenous storytelling, memory work, and collaborative arts practices support cultural resurgence and intergenerational knowledge transmission?
2. How does the integration of land-based knowledge, story, and visual art act as a methodology of decolonization and cultural healing within Indigenous communities and research spaces?
3. How do Indigenous autoethnographic and arts-based approaches challenge dominant Western research paradigms and reclaim Indigenous epistemologies in academic contexts?
4. What ethical and methodological responsibilities must be considered when engaging in Indigenous storywork and autoethnography to ensure relational accountability and cultural respect?

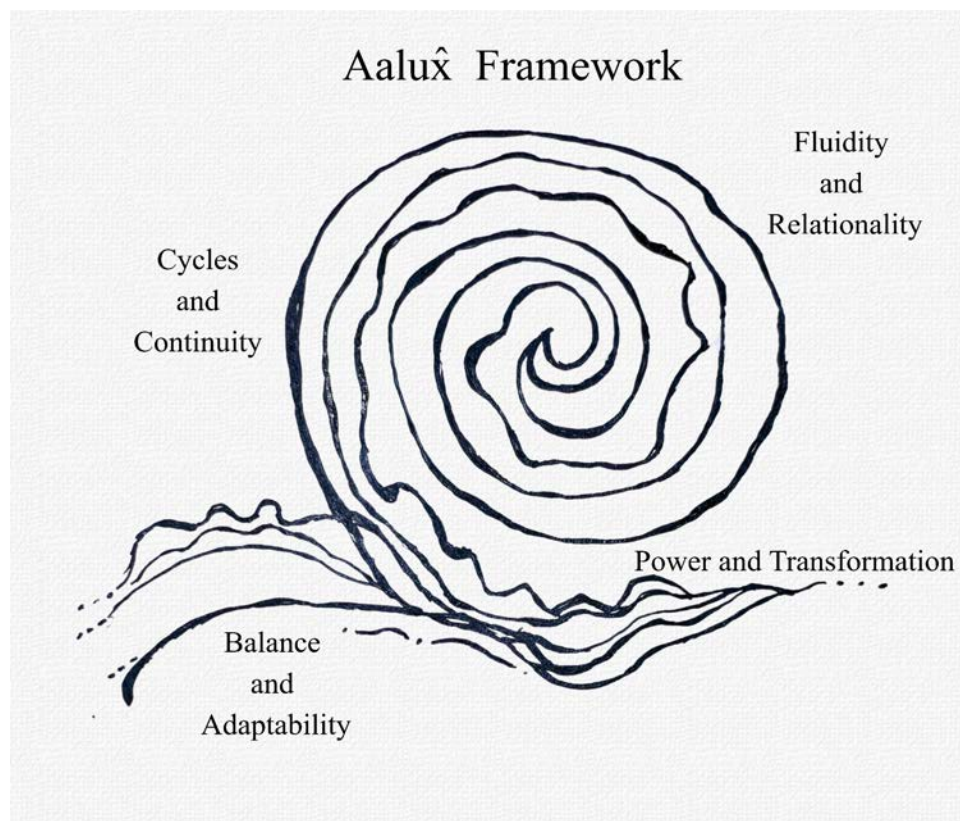
5. How does the researcher's positionality as an Unangǎ and Alutiiq scholar inform the research process, relationships, and outcomes?

Aalǔ as an Indigenous Research Framework

Figure 3.1

Aalǔ as an Indigenous Research Methodology Framework.

Note. Conceptual framework by S. Barry (2026). This figure illustrates my methodological approach using the metaphor of Aalǔ, a powerful ocean wave grounded in Unangǎ coastal lifeways and matrilineal worldviews. Aalǔ offers a structural and relational framework that guides how my inquiry moves across time, place, and relationships. Like the ocean, stories arrive, recede, return, or remain offshore until the time is right. Aalǔ guides my pacing and my presence in this (re)search.



Aaluê embodies:

- **Relationality:** Research unfolds through kinship with land, language, ancestors, and community (Kovach, 2010; San Pedro, 2019).
- **Continuity:** Knowledge moves across time, like tides, carried through oral tradition and ceremonial practice (Kovach, 2009).
- **Power and Transformation:** Research becomes an act of resurgence, (re)claiming Indigenous voices, and disrupting colonial structures (Smith, 2021).
- **Balance and Adaptability:** Navigating multiple epistemologies, like paddling an *iqyaê*, requires balance, cultural grounding, and responding to shifting tides (Peltier, 2018).

To live within Aaluê is to commit to a lifelong responsibility, shaping how I listen, interpret, and carry stories forward with a *Good Heart*.

The Anchoring Principle: A Braid of Responsibility

While Aaluê is a fluid metaphor, it is anchored by a braid of ethical responsibilities. On one strand, there are the seven foundational principles of Indigenous Storywork: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy (Archibald, 2008). These traditional pillars provide the hidden strength that allows the tide to move with academic rigor. However, the heart of my movement is guided by a deeper ancestral strand: “The Right Way to Live as an Unangaê” (APIA, n.d.). If the ISW principles are the stones beneath the sandbar, our Unangam Uniikaa values are the currents that guide my navigation of my *iqyaê*. To paddle an *iqyaê* requires more than strength; it requires *tunuêtakaaxê* (speaking with others) in a way that honors the balance of my *iqyaê* and the safety of the knowledge I carry.

My inquiry begins and ends with Interrelatedness, recognizing that I am walking in kinship with relatives and the Land. These connections bring a deep sense of Responsibility, a

lived obligation to hold stories as family heirlooms. Moving through my work requires Reverence, a quiet breath that honors the spirituality inherent in our ways. This is a commitment to *tuman agitaaku* (taking care of one another) and protecting boundaries of Indigenous Refusal. For the Aalu to be truly meaningful, it must embrace Holsim by attending to the intellectual and spiritual aspects of our stories in Synergy. Finally, just as the wave returns to the sea, my work is built on Reciprocity. My commitment to *sharing the gift* honors *ilgitxu* (to share with others), ensuring that knowledge flows back to nourish the people and lands that sustained it. By weaving these values together, I ensure my *iqya* stays upright and that my methodology remains a rigorous act of love and accountability.

Research Design and Approach

My inquiry is qualitative and Indigenous. I move through this work with a heart for visual storytelling, painting, weaving, and beading, as well as collective art-making. They are more than *methods* in the Western sense; they are ways of listening to the Land and to our more-than-human relatives as active teachers. My work is anchored in a relational epistemology, meaning that every choice is grounded in responsibility, reciprocity, and the care I owe to the stories entrusted to me (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; San Pedro, 2019). While I respect qualitative traditions that value meaning, reflexivity, and context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), I understand this inquiry first as a lived responsibility to our ways of knowing.

Methodological Justification

I chose these pathways because they mirror how we naturally hold knowledge, as something embodied, felt, and carried through life. My land-based practices honor walking, quiet

observation, and the time spent on ancestral, usual, and accustomed lands of local Tribal communities, which shape what can be known (Turner, 2008; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

Through Indigenous autoethnography, I position myself as a knowledge holder in relationship with my family and ancestors. This allows my own memory and reflection to serve as sacred sources of healing (Hart, 2010; Starks et al., 2010). Storywork ensures these stories are invited, and carried with the dignity they deserve (Archibald, 2008). The guiding metaphor of Aaluê brings these movements together into a single circle, reflecting how knowledge cycles and transforms over time.

Inquiry Practices

My inquiry took shape from ceremony and return. Guided by Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), *Research is Ceremony* (Wilson, 2008), and my life as an Unangaê and Alutiiq (re)searcher, I moved in cycles, returning to teachings as they surfaced through relationship and reflection over time. Guided by *The Right Way to Live as an Unangaê* (APIA, n.d.), I listened with my whole being and made choices that honored the *Right Way*.

Indigenous Autoethnography and Storywork

As both (re)searcher and participant, I weave my personal narrative into my community's collective memory. This is a distinct practice from Western autoethnography as it is an act of sovereignty (Chang, 2016). This approach allows me to position my experiences, language, and identity within a broader Unangaê and Alutiiq worldview and affirms lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge production (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008). Through the warmth of journaling and artistic practices, I reflect on the intergenerational knowledge from my kukaê (grandfather) and family, while remaining honest about the shadows of colonial entanglement.

Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008) guides my ethical practices. I approach stories with care and responsibility, attending to when they are meant to teach, when they should be revisited, and when they should remain protected, in ways that reflect Unangax̂ and Alutiiq teachings and relational accountability. Storywork thus shapes not only what is shared, but how, why, and for whom stories are carried forward.

Reflexivity and Cultural Accountability

Throughout my inquiry, I walk in a cycle of reflection grounded in Unangax̂ and Alutiiq values. I understand (re)search as a way of being in the world, one shaped by commitment to relationship and care (Kovach, 2021; Absolon, 2022).

For me, reflexivity is the quiet ongoing conversation I have with myself about my own positionality. I return often to these shores of my identity, asking how my lived experience and relational obligations shape how I listen to others. I am constantly mindful of how I interpret the meanings we make together (Kovach, 2021), ensuring that my voice remains a humble vessel for the collective.

In our ways of knowing, consent is a living relationship, and not a one-time signature on a form but a continuous practice of care and trust (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). While my work is honored and approved by the University of Washington's Human Subjects Division, my deepest accountability is to the people, the lands, and the ancestors who make my work possible.

I carry a heavy and beautiful responsibility for deciding which stories are shared and which must remain protected. Guided by Archibald's Indigenous Storywork Principles (2008), I consult with our knowledge holders to ensure their stories remain their own. I explicitly seek permission at every turn, moving with an awareness that I am speaking from and with my community to prepare the grounds for the one not yet born (RedCorn, 2017; Peltier, 2018). My

inquiry also respects the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) principles, ensuring these rights stay where they belong: with the people.

Gathering the Circle: Relational Knowledge Holders

I carried out this (re)search in relationship and care. I walked alongside Indigenous artists, Elders, and knowledge holders from Alaskan Native and local Coast Salish communities, while stepping into my own role as the primary (re)searcher. My own family members joined this circle, sharing teachings through kinship-based storywork, knowledge not carried in books, but through lived practice and the weight of responsibility. In total, fifteen knowledge holders contributed to my inquiry through conversations grounded in trust, care, and a shared heartbeat to story, art, land, and cultural continuity.

My (re)search was not a *sampling* of strangers; it flowed naturally from the sea of existing relationships. I extended invitations as a relative, moving only when there was mutual readiness to engage in storywork. Participation was never a transaction but was honored as part of an ongoing relationship grounded in accountability and reciprocity (Kovach, 2010, 2021).

As an Indigenous woman, my positionality has shaped every breath of this work, and the unique histories I share with each of the fifteen individuals are honored in the chapters that follow.

Conversational Interviews

Conversations in my inquiry were shaped by Indigenous protocols of orality and the sacredness of the spoken word (Kovach, 2010). While I shared guiding questions, I did not let them direct us. Instead, we followed the flow of relationships and place. I refer to those who spoke with me as *knowledge holders* to honor their knowledge as something lived, embodied, and carried with responsibility.

As I listened, our talk moved like water, flowing between art, land, identity, and resistance. Each knowledge holder engaged these responsibilities in their own ways. I remained attentive to not only what was said, but to what required protection, and what was held in the sacred place of the unsaid.

Conversations with my family members were approached as kinship-based storywork. I entered these spaces first as a relative, a niece, a daughter, recognizing my aunties and parents as intergenerational keepers of intergenerational wisdom. Across all conversations, prompts remained story-centered and flexible, allowing each knowledge holder to share in ways that felt appropriate to their role, relationship, and comfort.

Conversational Protocol / Storywork Prompts for Knowledge Holders

Before we began, I shared an oral consent grounded in the *Right Way to Live*. While it met the requirements of the University of Washington's Human Subjects Division, it was, for us, a moment of relational protocol. I emphasized that consent is a living thing and revisitable throughout our time together.

The storywork questions that follow reflect a shared core guide that guided most conversations. I did not approach them as a script. Instead, I offered them as openings for storytelling around identity, land and water, cultural practices, healing, and responsibility to future generations. As the tide of our talk rose, new paths of inquiry emerged, led by the knowledge holders and the spirit of the moment.

Story-Centered Prompts

1. Identity and Origins

- Can you share a story that helps us understand who you are and where you come from?

- What are the roots of your identity, and how do you incorporate cultural teachings into everyday life or creative practice?

2. Art, Story, and Land

- What role do story and creativity play in your life?
- How do you express or receive teachings through your relationship with the land?
- Considering your experiences, what is the relationship between land and art?

3. Reclamation and Resurgence

- Describe a time when art or storytelling helped in reconnecting with culture or heal from colonial harm.
- How do you see your work contributing to a cultural resurgence in your community?

4. Knowledge and Teaching

- What does Indigenous knowledge mean, and how do you pass it on?
- In what ways do you engage younger generations or community members through story, art, or land-based practices?

5. Systems and Resistance

- How have you navigated settler-colonial institutions such as education, art spaces, research, etc., while holding true to your ways of knowing?
- What does resistance look like in your work or story?

6. Dreaming Forward

- What do you envision for the future of Indigenous storywork, art, and community healing?
- What would it be if you could offer one piece of advice to other (re)searchers on this path?

Reflection Questions for Me, the (Re)searcher

These can be revisited throughout the process, in journals, audio reflections, or visual storytelling.

1. What stories am I carrying into this space? How do they shape how I listen, witness, and co-create?
2. In what ways is this (re)search ceremony? How am I honoring the spirit of the work?
3. How am I being accountable to the relationships this (re)search relies on (with people, land, ancestors, and community)?
4. How is my identity and positionality (Unanga̓ and Alutiiq scholar, educator, artist) evolving through this process?
5. What teachings are emerging that I didn't expect? How will I hold them with care?
6. What does healing mean for me in this (re)search and how do I support the healing of others?

Arts-Based Inquiry: Creative Ceremonies

In my (re)search, I turn to visual storytelling, painting, beading, and weaving as both methods of inquiry and sites of ceremony (Leavy, 2020). These creative acts are my way of transmitting knowledge that lives beyond the reach of the written word.

I came to this work first as a painter, using the brush to translate the movement of the spirit onto canvas. However, this journey also called me to pick up the needle and the fiber to engage in beading and weaving. While I am a humble learner in these traditional practices, I chose them intentionally because they require a different kind of presence. Beading and weaving demand a slow, rhythmic patience that mirrors the steady labor of (re)claiming cultural identity. By stepping into the role of the learner, I allow the materials themselves to become my teachers,

connecting my hands to my maternal lineages of Unanga̓ and Alutiiq women who have always used the forms to hold our stories.

The artworks I have gathered, including a visual representation of Aalu̓, serve as ceremonial offerings and knowledge bundles. Through them, I engage in visual resurgence, and, allowing story, memory, and place to surface in ways of their own vibrant language (Archibald, 2008; Higgs, 2008). This creative work also ripples outward into our community, creating space for remembrance, connection, and care.

As part of this inquiry, I facilitated a community healing activity titled *Hands for Our Missing Relatives*. I invited my Indigenous doctoral community to trace their hands on red, black, or brown tagboard, colors connected to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit (MMIWG2S) movement, to represent a missing or taken relative, past, present, literal or metaphorical.

Each handprint became a living archive, a refusal of invisibility. As we bound these hands together on a shared concertina, we created a collective space of remembrance and care, holding our grief and our presence in one steady, artistic breath.

Land-Based Engagement: The Land as Teacher

For me, Place is not a backdrop; it is a teacher, relative, and knowledge holder. As I walk and gather stories from the Land, I also gather fragments of my own spirit, weaving an identity shaped by Unanga̓ and Alutiiq worldviews. Whether I am engaging in seasonal subsistence practices on ancestral territories or visiting with knowledge holders over Zoom, I strive to be in relation and place simultaneously, even across distance. I document these moments through field notes, sketches, and land-based storytelling and art. Through this work, I treat the Land as a living archive and honor the cyclical time and ecological relationships (Myers, 2004).

Gathering and Listening: Analysis as Relational Care

Knowledge held within my inquiry lives in many bundles: journals, essays, paintings, beadwork, weavings, and the echoes of our conversations. These knowledge bundles were gifted and co-constructed through a practice of relational accountability with human and more-than-human kin.

My process of meaning-making unfolded slowly as I (re)turned to these bundles again and again, much like the tide returning to the shore. I attended to Archibald's (2008) Storywork principles, approaching each offering with care and responsibility to the specific ecosystems and ancestral lineages that held them (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, Breen, & DuPre', 2019). My analysis was inseparable from ethical responsibility to the web of relations that made my inquiry possible. In this way, I practiced listening, holding, and responding.

What might be called *themes* in Western qualitative research, I approached as relational gatherings, currents that moved across story, art, place, and kinship. These currents were shaped through reflexive journaling, visual mapping, and relational accountability. As I (re)turned to these reflections multiple times, I listened for what surfaced, what lingered, and what asked to be carried forward. These currents finally come ashore in Chapter 4, where they are held together as a living story of our continuance.

Figure 3.2*Relational Knowledge Practices and Forms of Knowing*

Note. This figure illustrates how knowledge moves through relationship, practice, and responsibility across my inquiry.

Relational Practice	Knowledge Bundles	Purpose & Responsibility	How Knowledge Moves & is Carried	Coming Ashore: Carrying Knowledge Forward	Relational Accountability
Indigenous Autoethnography	Memory, stories, quiet reflections, and family teachings	Identity (re)clamation; healing; responsibility to ancestors	Journaling, storywork, and lived daily practice	Shared through reflective narrative and selective storytelling, sacred seeds remain held within self and family	Self as primary (re)searcher; family and knowledge holders
Arts-Based Research (ABR)	Paintings, weavings, beadwork, and visual metaphors	Ceremony, communal healing, and sensory meaning-making	Art-making as inquiry; visual journaling; collective creation	Shared through visual forms, exhibition, and community witnessing, meanings remain open and fluid	Ancestors, community, future generations
Conversational Storywork	Shared stories, heart-centered dialogue, and oral teachings	Co-creating knowledge through the warmth of relationship	Relational conversation; story sharing within trusted relationships; listening with the heart	Shared only with permission, paced by relationship; some stories carried symbolically or withheld	Knowledge holders and story-keepers

Land-Based Engagement	Field notes, sketches, seasonal rhythms, songs of the land, and place-based reflections	Reconnecting with ancestral lands; listening to Land as first teacher and relative; guidance and healing	Walking, harvesting, observing the shift in tides and seasons	Shared through reflection and art, honoring the knowledge the Land continues to hold in secret	Land, water, more-than-human relations
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Sharing the Gift: Reciprocity and Community Return

In our ways, (re)searching is never a finished product meant only for the library shelf. It is a living gift that must find its way back to the circle. To ensure this process is not extractive, I am committed to community reciprocity, honoring the generosity of those who shared their breath and stories with me by ensuring that the knowledge we gathered returns to nourish the community from which it arose (Kovach, 2021). Guided by the values of Aaluê, I will carry this knowledge back to the people in many forms, beginning with the creation of personal knowledge bundles for each participating knowledge holder. These bundles, containing their shared stories and images of our creative expression, ensure that the family remains the primary keepers of their own intellectual and spiritual property.

Beyond these personal gifts, I intend to host a community witnessing, a gathering where our work can be seen and felt. This space will serve as an interactive open house, allowing the art to continue its vital work of collective healing and remembrance. Finally, I am committed to accessible storytelling, translating the core teachings of my dissertation into forms that live outside the academy, such as a digital story, a podcast, or a children's book. By removing the barriers of academic jargon, I ensure the wisdom of our ancestors and Elders is ready and waiting

for the next generation. Through this act of *sharing the gift*, I honor the relational accountability that is the heartbeat of this work, ensuring the Aaluê always returns home (Wilson, 2008).

Navigating the Rough Waters: Methodological Tensions

In Western research, we're taught to list limitations as if they are failures of the researcher. But through an Indigenous lens, I see these moments as the rough waters, the spray, and the churn that happens when our traditional ways of knowing meet the rigid walls of the Academy. For me, acknowledging these tensions is an act of decolonial humility. I am constantly navigating between two very different worlds.

I felt this most deeply in the struggle between academic timelines and cyclical time. The university operates on a linear clock, with quarters, credits, and hard deadlines. But Indigenous Storywork moves with the season. There were times when the tide of this research told me to wait for another visit, a longer silence, or a different season, even when the dissertation calendar was screaming for speed. In those moments, I chose the Land over the clock. I let my inquiry breathe, even when the academic shoreline felt a long way off.

Being an *insider* as a (re)searcher and relative also brought its own waves. While my community ties offered trust, they also demand Indigenous Refusal (Simpson, 2014). I had to be the one to say no to the academy and recognize when a story was too sacred or private to be put into print, even if it would have made my academic argument *stronger*. These aren't obstacles; they are the ethical guardrails that kept me walking *In the Right Way*. My work is a living struggle to help Indigenous knowledge breathe with dignity in the space that wasn't built for it.

Carrying Aaluê Forward

This chapter has laid the groundwork for my inquiry and for all that follows. Guided by the metaphor of Aaluê, my (re)search is a braided path of accountable practices.

As we move into Chapter 4, we transition from the grounding of method into the flow of meaning-making. Here, the wave of Aaluŋ carries our stories, our art, and our land-based reflections into the light. My analysis is a narrative interpretation that listens for how memory and responsibility surface through image and story.

In this way, the methods outlined here do not end; they continue. The wave returns, not to repeat, but to deepen the path.

Chapter 4: Voices in Relation: Stories Carried by Land, Art, and Responsibility

“We are your Ancestors. We are still here waiting for our people to grieve.”

—Larry Kuuyix Mercurieff (personal communication, 2026)

4.1 Gathering the Waters

I see this chapter as a gathering place where the voices and teachings shared in my inquiry come together. They move through the relationships that made this work possible and through the responsibilities we carry for Land and memory. The voices you will hear in these pages are offered as teachings, and I hold them with the care you feel in your chest when you know the relationships themselves made the words possible.

These stories move like Aalu̓x̓. They pull from different depths and arrive from different directions. And still, they wash up here without losing the power of their source. Each voice carries its own histories and responsibilities that come with them. Their words are grown in a particular soil and belong to specific relatives. Our conversations were guided by our relational protocols grounded in mutual respect and reciprocity. Before and after each conversation, I followed the Unanga̓x̓ values I was taught: offering time and presence, and when appropriate, small gifts in acknowledgment of what was being shared. These practices reflect how to be a good relative and honor the knowledge entrusted to me.

In these spaces, relationships set the rhythm. The knowledge holders guide how their stories are shared: by how they speak, when they listen, and just how we are with one another. Stories are shared when they, and we, are truly ready. They linger, pulling back like the tide for a time, then returning when a person needs that teaching most. Meaning is found in how we hold these stories: through what we make with our hands, the places we return to, and the families and

kinships we belong to. It is shaped by the everyday. By how we live out our relational accountability to the Land and generations yet to come.

That relational depth matters. It shapes how the knowholder tells the story and how we are meant to receive it, to carry it. Across these conversations runs a shared understanding: our knowledge is living. These stories remain where they stand and move forward because we choose to care for them and stay accountable to the Land and the generations who come after us.

Sitting here with you as a relative, I feel the weight of these teachings. It is a lot to hold. I can feel it in my body. I am asking you to sit with it, not just to hear the words, but to feel the breath in them. That is how we stay awake to each other. It is how we make sure these stories reach the ones who are meant to carry them next. I come to this work as a relative already in relationship with these stories.

Guided by Aalu̓x̓, this chapter brings together Storywork, autoethnography, and land-and-art-based (re)search as interconnected methods. They move through relationship. As I returned to these stories, they are gathered into currents: Stories as Carrying Place, Hands at Work, Places that Teach, and Stories that Carry Responsibility. These currents emerged through repeated listening, through making, and through returning.

I begin with Story as Carrying Place, where Land and Water speak first.



4.2 Story as Carrying Place

When we speak of Story as Carrying Place, we are saying a story is more than a sequence of events. It moves like a great wave, pulling from the deep strength of our Ancestors and

washing up on today's shore. In that movement, it carries a weight we learn to stand with. It steadies us.

Stories are our guiding stars. They show us where we are and remind us to whom we are accountable. They carry our humanity like dirt under our fingernails and the sting of the salt water. They exhale the very breath of our relatives and kin who kept our people safe through every season. As we come to understand story in this way, we begin to see that we are not just caring for these stories, but tending to them so they can keep *us* alive. They move like currents that carry us forward. As one teaching shared in this work reminds us, “Aang waan—our other self. Every living thing in existence is our relative.”

Larry Kuuyux Merculieff, an Unanga̋ elder from Tana̋ Ami̋ (St. Paul Island), shared Storywork and teachings from his upbringing of listening to Land and his Ancestors. Larry described how his Aachaa (mentor/elder teacher) taught him to watch, listen, and learn. Larry recalled walking three miles from the village at six years old in the dark of night to sit beneath the seabird cliffs before sunrise. Hundreds of thousands of birds rose from the cliff in what appeared to be complete chaos. Yet, he marveled that none of them collided. He reflects,

I thought, how do they do that? What’s the difference between a seabird and me? Then I realized birds don’t think, they just are. They move in a field of awareness. (Merculieff, personal communication, 2026)

I realized the teaching was more than the birds; it was also about what Larry learned by being present with them. The seabirds became his teachers because he watched, listened, and sat quietly long enough for the lesson to arrive. This is how Storywork lives. It rises from the Land itself and carries teachings forward when the relationship is ready.

This is where those teachings take shape, moving through the work of our hands and the paths our feet have worn into the earth. It lives in the quiet, steady promise we hold for the ones who are yet to come, the ones who will one day stand in the exact same spot where we are standing now.

Now that I have named Story as a Carrying Place, I want to invite the voices of those who trusted me with their teachings. Each conversation felt like its own current and came with its own depth, its own temperature, and its own direction. Some of our talks started with the Land. Others started with a memory, or even a refusal. But in every exchange, I could feel that the stories didn't start with us. The Land was already speaking; the Water had already remembered.

Listening in these moments meant I had to slow down and realize that what was being shared was not just a narrative but a responsibility, memory being carried forward with immense care. What is shared here is not mine to own, but mine to carry with care. What follows are those currents of memory, offered as teachings and held together by the relationships that made my inquiry possible. Across these conversations, Storywork becomes a living practice through which knowledge flows across generations like a current, carried forward through our relationships with Land, Water, and our kinships.

Auntie Aquilina, an Unangaŋ relative and cultural knowledge holder from Tanax̄ Amix̄ (St. Paul Island), offers the first current. When she begins speaking, you can feel the pull from the deep, like Aalux̄ rising, bringing the presence of our Ancestors close. Her memories do not feel distant or buried in the past. They feel near, almost as if they are sitting beside her while she talks. The way she tells it, there isn't a clear line between Land and our Ancestors; they move

together. Remembering, in her words, isn't just about looking back; it is about carrying what was given and knowing you have a responsibility to it.

The basic meaning of the term, Unanga, is like shore-dweller, sea-sider, or someone who lives on the shore... I am still living by the shore. I'm looking out the window here in front of me, and I can see the Sea.

Papa would go to the shores and beachcomb after Agafon drowned. In the summertime, when school was over, it became a family outing. We would all go out. I look back and wonder: if Papa didn't take us out to the shore all the time like that, would I have the love affair that I have with this island that I have now? Those happenings taught me how to smell ala, the Sea, and really take in an essence of who I am.

When I go for walks right now, I think about Grandma and how she had her time looking at the sea. You would see tears in her eyes many times. And for me, I look at the sea, and it's like it's always ever-changing and always in motion, and I want to be like Sea—to be able to embrace this land and be able to crash upon it when I need to, when there's a storm. At the age of nine, is probably when I became aware of life's happenings being my teachers. (Lestenkova, personal communication, 2025)

Auntie teaches us that being Unanga is something you live every day, breathing in the salt air, watching Papa and Grandma carry what life has given them, and walking the shoreline again and again. For her, the Sea is a teacher and a witness. It is the actual place where loss and love sit side by side. Listening to her, you begin to understand that the Water has been teaching long before anyone put words to it. Auntie begins at the shoreline, where Sea carries memory from one generation to the next, showing how story is inseparable from the place that holds it. The shoreline of Tana Ami is just outside the window where she sits and tells these stories.

Figure 4.1

Shoreline of Tana̓x Amix̓: St. Paul, Alaska, as Seen Within Her Home and Along the Coast



Note. Photos by Aquilina Lestenkova (2025).

From there, another current emerges. The tide shifts. You can feel it settle differently.

Roger Fernandes, a Lower Elwha S'Klallam storyteller, educator, and artist, speaks from a place that feels grounded. Roger talks about how stories shape a person from the inside, through spirit, through relationship, through the way we understand ourselves in the world.

When Roger speaks, Land is his family. The river is a relative, and the salmon are kin. To him, the Earth is a covenant he lives out every day. His teachings begin from that firm place, the ground where spirit and story meet.

Stories are my anchor. They hold me, they give me voice, and that voice connects me to my people. Story assures me that I belong and that I can help others.

Western culture is what I call a brain-centered culture—I think, therefore I am—but Native ways are spirit-centered. Spirit is not religion. Religion is merely how a culture allows its people to show their spirit. Everyone has spirit.

For the Elwha people, the river is family. Two dams were built illegally on that river a century ago. They killed the salmon runs and stopped the river's movement. Our people fought for over one hundred years to remove those dams. When they finally came down, outsiders said it was about fishing and money. But our people said, "We did it to bring the river back to life."

The salmon are our relatives. We have made a contract with them, that we will take care of the world so they can continue to live and come up the river. The Earth does not belong to us. We belong to the Earth. (Fernandes, personal communication, 2025)

Roger teaches us that our stories are like a shoreline, holding our People in relationship with the river, salmon, and the Earth. Story carries place by grounding identity within the relational accountability to Land and water as a sacred responsibility.

As these stories move across shorelines, the currents widen, creating space for others who are living these teachings in their own ways.

Kelly Sullivan, a Port Gamble S'Klallam weaver who carries the name Hamək^witən, a name that reflects her place within her kinship, describes receiving her S'Klallam name as an adult as a transformational thread of reclamation, weaving across generations. In her story, culture is something you spin, dye, and wear, and sometimes gift away.

My S'Klallam name, which I received last year, is Hamək^witən. It means someone who is a decision-maker, who knows a lot about family lineage, and helps family stay within culture. Receiving it was a huge honor. We did it intentionally as a family to create a safe

space to learn. No one in my family, going back seven generations, had a traditional name we could find records for.

Asking my dad to receive a name was important. When I asked him, he said he had always wanted one but didn't know how to get it. It means a lot that I could help him do something he already wanted. It felt like I had come into myself, worthy in a way I didn't before.

When I gather from the Land, I ask permission. I say what I am intending: "I am here to teach my little one how to find mushrooms. If you could show me some. I'd love that."

When I forget to ask, I often can't find anything. When I stop, pray, and open my eyes, there they are. That's a lesson in doing it right, in relationship. The Land remembers you.

(Sullivan, personal communication, 2025)

For Kelly, memory shows up in what she does. When she says her S'Klallam name, she is (re)claiming what had been lost. You hear it in her voice. You see it in the way she thanks the cedar before taking bark, pauses to speak to it, and in how she brings her children along to find mushrooms. Her story is carried through place, where identity, practice, and memory come together. Kelly has nothing to prove; it's just how she lives. She teaches us that being *Strong People* means moving with a prayer in your breath and carrying gratitude with you.

Figure 4.2

Kelly Sullivan (Hamək'wītən), Port Gamble S'Klallam weaver, standing with her work.



Note. Photo by Olya Blase (2025).

As these stories continue to move, another current comes forward. In doing so, they do more than remember; they carry teachings forward across generations.

Rachel Anna, a Port Gamble S'Klallam knowledge holder, begins with voice. She reaches back into a time when the *nəxʷsłáyəm* were quiet and afraid, and tells the story of how they found their strength again, not through force, but through their relationship with the Plant People. In her telling, Nettle becomes a teacher, a medicine, and a guide.

A long time ago, our S'Klallam People were very quiet and afraid. Big canoes would come down from the north, burn our villages, and steal our women. So our People live in fear.

One day, a man prayed and asked for help. That night, stinging nettle came to him in a dream and said: in the spring, gather my young shoots, make tea, and have every person

in the village drink it. When they drink, have them say, “I will be strong for my Ancestors. I will be strong for my People. I will be strong for the ones to come.”

Later, the nettle came again and said: in the fall, gather the warriors, men and women, and whip them with my stalks. As they did, they said those same words. “I will be strong for my Ancestors. I will be strong for my People. I will be strong for the ones to come.”

When the canoes returned, the entire village ran down to the shoreline and sang in one voice. The canoes looked and said, “These People are not afraid anymore,” and they turned and left. That’s how our People found their voice. I learned that story from Roger Fernandez of the Lower Elwha Tribe, and I have permission to share it.

But the Plant People—their stories, and how they care for us—have been so impactful. They helped me become rooted. I used to look into the forest and see just a sea of green. Now I look and say, “There’s Nettle,” and if Nettle stings me, I know I’m awake and alive and strengthened. I see slələʔ, and I think about endurance and nourishment for our People. I see Camas and the story of our literal roots and teachings in this Land.

These Plants teach me how to be, how to walk, to be kind, to be strong, how to give and receive. Learning reciprocity and relationship with the Plant People is a foundational part of me as a Native person, and it’s how I teach my children. So many of our stories are child- and generation-centered; sharing them with my kids matters deeply. (Smart, personal communication, 2025)

Rachel Anna is one ripple in the current of nəxʷsłáyəm, a voice carried forward through the People. Her return to the Plant Teachings mirrors how Nettle once taught the People to stand together and find their voice. What once felt like a sea of green to her now has faces and names. She does not just see trees; she sees teachers. Feeling rooted came when she slowed down and

paid attention. Here, healing happens through the Plant People, through the body, and through what she passes on to her children.

From the place of listening, a voice begins to take shape. Maria Shaa Tlaa Williams, Tlingit scholar and educator, illustrates how a voice fills a room. Her traditional opening reflects her ancestral roots and connection to place.

Maria Sháa Tlaa Williams yóo xat duwasákw

Yéil naax xat sitee; Deisheetaan áyá xát

Dakl'aweidí yádi áyá xát Tikhatnu/Anchorage xat sitee

Maria Williams I call myself.

I am of the Raven moiety and of the Beaver clan

I am a child of the Killer Whale (my father's people)

I live in Tikhatnu, which is Dena'ina Dene lands.

We are a matrilineal society, so we inherit our clan and moiety from our mothers. We also acknowledge our father's people, saying, "I am a child of..." I like to share this because it tells a story about our People: that we still have our clans and moieties, that we still hold potlatches and koo.éex', that we still reinforce our origin stories.

When I see the renaissance of Alaskan Native music and dance, I almost cry every time. I think about the Ancestors who suffered from disease, from oppression, and then I see little kids dancing with utter joy, speaking their language, wearing regalia made by their

families. Nothing, nothing is more powerful than that. It's amazing to me. It's a miracle.

(Williams-Uhot, personal communication, 2025)

Maria's traditional introduction illustrates a powerful intergenerational, place-based story of cultural continuity, where the *I* becomes the collective *we*. In our ways, our introductions become a story that carries relationship forward, grounding our identities in Land, clan, and lineage, locating us within the places and people we come from. As she reflects on the powerful transformation from our relatives who suffered to our young ones dancing with joy, it is the miracle not of our survival, but of our *survivance*. She bears witness to the collective healing. Maria reminds us that our ways of sharing do not always fit within classroom spaces. Desks in rows can make it hard for our stories to move, to be spoken, and to be held in relationship.

From there, the teaching returns to the shoreline, where June Pardue, Supiaq (Alutiiq) culture bearer and artist, begins with the smell of the ocean and the work of her hands.

When I step off the plane in Old Harbor, I can smell the ocean right away. That's healing for me. Living inland, I miss it. The waves, the air—it's like something inside me settles. ... For a long time, I was the only Sugpiaq woman who knew how to do that waterproof gut stitch. I don't want to stay that way. I tell people, "Don't be stingy with what you learn. We've had too long where we didn't know." If I can do it, someone else can too. Teach it. Pass it on. ...

It's one thing to have a gut parka sitting in a museum. It's another thing to be making one.

If no one practices it, it will be lost again. (Pardue, personal communication, 2025)

When June returns home, the stories flood her senses with the sharp scent of salt water and smoked salmon. She talks about the sarai in Oak Harbor, about the cold mornings spent stirring the berry barrel, and the feel in her hands when she folds the seal gut just right before pulling the

needle through. June doesn't spend much time talking about cultural preservation because she is too busy sewing and teaching. She pulls other women into the circle.

There is a quiet urgency in her hands. She worries that if people stop practicing, the knowledge will go silent again. For June, teaching is her way of making sure that the knowledge stays in motion, so others can carry it forward through making. In her current story is held through the work of her hands and the places that continue to shape it. This is where practice keeps culture alive.

Figure 4.3

Bear Gut Parka Created by Sugpiat (Alutiiq) Artist June Pardue.



Note. Image reproduced from KMXT News (2025), and the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository (2025).

Watching June teach others to sew and share what she knows made me think about what it means to keep learning these practices ourselves. The patience in her teaching stayed with me. A few weeks later, I signed up for an online Alutiiq culture class to learn how to bead an Alutiiq-style bracelet. I did not want to just write about these practices. I wanted my hands to remember something, too.

I received a small padded envelope in the mail. Inside was my Alutiiq bracelet kit: thread, white and blue beads, needle, and button. Tucked into the instructions was a simple *Quyanaa*. Words from home.

When I logged into the culture camp class, I was greeted with a familiar *Cama'i* and a grid of smiling faces. We introduced ourselves and laid out our material on kitchen tables and desks across different places. We were not in the same room, but we were beginning together.

I was nervous. I had never beaded before. My fingers fumbled threading the needle, and I quickly fell behind. The teacher moved patiently through each step, explaining the history of the three-strand bracelet and the design that originated around Kodiak in the mid-1800's.

Slowly, I began to find a rhythm, counting beads, pulling the thread tight, beginning again. As I worked, I could hear the others chatting about children and previous classes, laughing softly. Even through the screen, there was a sense of being in relation. The beads began forming rotating hearts of blue and white. My hands were clumsy at first, but they were learning. When I tied the final knot and turned the bracelet over in my hands, it was not perfect, but it was mine.

Figure 4.4

Alutiiq-Style Beaded Bracelet



Note. Blue-and-white bracelet made during the Alutiiq Culture Camp, 2025. Photograph by Sonia Barry (2025).

I am still learning. Still counting beads. Still listening. I began to understand that story is also counted, threaded, tightened, and worn. Through this small act of making, I came to see that reflection can live in our hands, and not only on the page. It is how knowledge is learned and carried.

As I could not travel to Alaska, I took a virtual tour of the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository. Even through the screen, I felt something shift as I lingered over the words and the artifacts, recognizing them as the living breath and works of my Ancestors. I learned the difference between *quiliyanguaq* (a story about historical events) and an *unigkaq* (a story about how the world came to be). This distinction stayed with me. Some stories tell us what happened. Others tell how the world came to be and how we are meant to live within it.

One *unigkaq*, *Qik'rtá Tekilluku* ("Pushing the Island"), during my virtual tour of the Alutiiq Museum, taught me that the high peaks of Kodiak form the spine of the island, establishing a spiritual connection between the Sky World and the Land World. Learning this, I began to see the Koniaq Glacier differently. Painting it became an act of reaching across time and space. Although I was not standing on the ice or feeling its chill, I was moving in relationship through brushstrokes and color. The painting became about the connection to place. Like the

bracelet, the glacier holds layers. Snow compressed over centuries. Time made visible. It reminded me that place carries story even when we are not physically present. It waits for us to notice.

Figure 4.5

Where Our Stories Live



Note. Acrylic on canvas, reflecting story, place, and memory. Painting by Sonia Barry (2026).

The stories shared in this current do not resolve. They move through classrooms, through shorelines, through plants, and through our hands. I feel them moving through me now.

And like the tide, they return to the places that taught them.



4.3 Hands at Work: Art, Making, Embodied Knowledge

This current moves through the knowledge carried in our hands; hands that know how to pull a thread until it is watertight, how to carve the smooth bend in the wood, or fold the cedar

tight. Our Ancestors learned through repetition and pattern. Through their hands, they learned by watching and sitting close to others. Many of the knowledge holders in my inquiry described their learning as being present while their grandmother was weaving or sitting near the tools, listening to stories while someone worked. In this current, knowledge was woven into the fabric of their daily lives. Making, as shared in these stories, begins with relationships, with materials, with relatives, with future generations. It begins with Tutakuê, listening.

Several artists described sitting with a piece of wood or canvas for a long time before beginning. Sometimes they described watching the Land outside their window, noticing colors and patterns that later found their way into their weaving or carving. Others spoke about moments when the material simply refused to cooperate; a finish that would not hold, a stitch that would sit too tight. You can feel it in your hands.

Listening to them, I recognized those moments from my own painting. There are times when I sit in front of a blank canvas and know something is off, even if I cannot explain why. It sits there, just out of reach. I might step back. Walk away. Come back to it later.

There is a kind of humility in those moments. The artist does not completely control the outcome because the material participates in the process. Wood, fiber, paint, and hide all come from the Land, each bringing its own character. Learning to work with them teaches us patience. Sometimes the work asks us to slow down and listen before we move forward. In this way, hands are not separate from story. They carry it forward.

This current gathers artists who understand creative work as more than expression. For them, making is a responsibility. It can be a way of resisting the pressures that try to turn culture into a commodity, and a way of bringing forward stories that have long been overlooked. In their hands, art is one way in which inheritance continues.

One artist who speaks directly to this understanding is Jen Angaiak Wood, a Yup'ik artist with roots in Tununak. Jen understands that creative expression begins long before her carving tools touch the wood. It begins with belonging. When she returned to her father's village after years, she shared her experience as a homecoming:

The older people I ran into remembered me immediately. As soon as they saw me, they gave me a big hug and said, 'Welcome home.' ... My dad said, 'Well, it's because you belong there. That's home. You're part of that place, and it's part of you. And there's just this... centering that happens when I'm there. It feels so comfortable.' (Angaiak Wood, personal communication, 2025)

Her story re-centers relationships beyond Tununak's physical location. Her father's affirmation that she is "a part of that place" reminds us that belonging is reciprocal. Like a salmon returning to the river, her body remembers the current of home before her mind can explain it.

Jen's memories demonstrate how Indigenous knowledge is carried forward through observing her grandmother. When she was little, she spent hours watching her grandma weave baskets. Her grandma's home was filled with items that Jen later realized carried teachings, like a seal stomach bag on the wall that nobody ever talked about but that created the fabric of daily life. "It feels like how our Ancestors lived. It wasn't something separate from life. It was just part of it. It's part of who we are. It's part of who I am" (personal communication, 2025). Another memory Jen carries is of a grass mat her grandma had woven. Her uncle pointed out that the two raised lines show her family's ownership mark. This mat, once ordinary, transformed into a visual language. These core memories lay the foundation that Jen leans on when she designs masks.

One of Jen's grounding stories is *The Boy and the Seals*, which teaches responsibility and reciprocity. In the story, the Seals transform the boy into one of their own so that he can eventually return and teach the Human People their original instructions. She reflects, "I love that story because it shows the importance of reciprocity, the importance of responsibility. We have to take care of the things around us if we expect them to take care of us" (Angaiak Wood, personal communication, 2025).

Figure 4.6

Checking In II



Note. Alder, stained glass, plate glass, metal rings, grout, and pigments. Mask by Yup'ik artist Jen Angaiak Wood depicting a seal checking on humans to ensure reciprocal responsibilities are upheld. Image reproduced from Jen Angaiak Wood (2024).

Jen also describes wood as her co-collaborator. Following the teachings of an Athabascan carver who taught her, *If you don't have an idea, grab a piece of wood and stare at it until you can see what's there*. There was a piece of alder that took its time to communicate with her:

As soon as I drew it onto the wood, I knew it was what was supposed to happen. And if a piece doesn't want to be finished a certain way, it just won't work. (Angaiak Wood, personal communication, 2025).

In this current, the materials hold their own agency. Sometimes, they resist, allowing the story to unfold when the relationship is ready. For Jen, creative expression allows teachings to surface that words alone cannot carry. Jen continues, "Creative expression feels like another way of conveying these ideas. It offers a different path for people to understand. It helps people feel more connected" (Angaiak Wood, personal communication, 2025). As Indigenous artists, we also have the right to exercise resistance.

Jen recounted her response to a gallery that discouraged political art and her refusal to participate.

Every bit of work we do is political. What they were really saying was that they wanted pretty things that wouldn't offend anyone. I want my work to be part of a shift back toward artists creating what is true to themselves and true to their heritage (Angaiak Wood, personal communication, 2025).

Creative expression is a way to exercise visual sovereignty, enabling Indigenous artists to maintain control over how their stories are expressed and shared. (Rains, 2021). Through carving, Jen carries forward the teachings that shaped her, giving them form so others can see and feel them.

That same movement, from teaching to practice, continues through the work of our hands, where story is carried in both what is told and what is done. Knowledge here is lived, shared, and held in relationship.

Figure 4.7

Barbara Lawrence (Suquamish) in the Forest.



Note. Barbara Lawrence is a Suquamish storyteller and cultural knowledge-holder; her woven cedar hat reflects the living relationship between story, material, and place. Photo shared by Barbara Lawrence (2025).

Barbara Lawrence, Suquamish elder, storyteller, and cultural knowledge-holder, reminds us that storytelling puts the spirit to work. In an Indigenous lens, theory is not separate from

practice (Brayboy, 2005). As Barbara tells it, stories did not happen *after* the work was done; they moved *through* it.

Elders in the tribe would come get us and bring us to tribal events. Digging clams, picking berries, cleaning the cemetery, learning singing, dancing, drumming. While we worked, the elders would tell us stories. At first, I thought they were entertaining us. Eventually, I realized the stories were teachings, lessons (Lawrence, personal communication, 2025).

Barbara remembers cleaning the cemetery as a child, tending the grounds of her Ancestors while listening to stories carried through everyday chores. Through these moments, her hands busy and her heart open, the teachings about responsibility and belonging took root as she learned by doing.

Barbara shares how stories can teach children cultural values without direct correction. One memory that stood out was how her Auntie Ida told a story about a young Crow who worked really hard to avoid work. “I suddenly realized... this story is about him,” she laughs, remembering how the lesson mirrored her brother’s behavior without naming him directly (Lawrence, personal communication, 2025). Aunt Ida’s story allowed the teaching to come forth without shaming the children; she invited the listener to see themselves within it.

She also describes a story about a traditional practice that fostered emotional discipline long before it was needed. *Come Forth Laughing* is played on the beach with the children, balancing shells on a stick, trying not to laugh. While on the surface, it looks playful, it’s a deeper teaching that actually prepares children to control their fear or pain if danger or enemies are near.

It took some time for Barbara to see herself as a Storyteller. She listened to elders, read, and accepted invitations. Over time, she accepted that her title of Storyteller was earned through practice and her community's recognition as a knowledge holder. She now teaches her grandchildren, planting the seeds for budding storykeepers.

The Canoe Journey brings many of these teachings together, as it requires strength of the mind, body, and spirit. As the rhythm of pulling together requires relational accountability as its foundation, Barbara describes what happens when someone strays off course. A cultural practice known as *Stand Them Up* may be used. “Every person in the circle says something supportive and corrective, but supportive. It helps remind them of the foundation they needed” (personal communication, 2025). Like paddling a canoe, this practice restores the balance within the community. The canoe stays on course only when everyone moves together.

For Barbara, the resurgence of the canoe culture after the Centennial Accord has strengthened many forms of cultural continuity. “The resurgence that came from the Canoe Journey: its songs, its dances, its language, its cedar weaving in every form, its paddle-making, its spirituality, its respect and responsibility (Lawrence, personal communication, 2025). Resurgence, she reminds us, is practiced, stroke by stroke.

In this current, the teachings continue through the work of our hands, carried forward through making and teaching.

Denita's weaving reflects a conversation between the land and waters of the Suquamish territory. As a member of the People of the Clear Saltwater, she approaches her work as an act of witnessing, a response to both the beauty of her ancestral homelands and the weight of Indigenous histories.

When the news of the children found at the Kamloops Indian Reservation reached her, Denita felt an urgency to weave what was right in front of her. In one series, Denita created a piece inspired by $dx^wqig^w\acute{a}c$, also known as *Place of the Deer*. This secluded sanctuary, reserved for tribal members, became the inspiration for a skirt woven in forest greens and sandy browns. She adorned it with deer tracks and deer-hoof shells. She reflects, “The intention is relationship with that Land” (Holmes, personal communication, 2025). Through color, landscapes, and deer motifs, she ensures that every thread is tied to the Land and the stories it carries.

Repetition is another important aspect of how knowledge moves through Denita’s practice. When she learns a new design or medium, she intentionally repeats the process several times before teaching it to others. As she explains, “When I make something, I make it at least three or more times... we tell stories in threes or fours... repeating helps me grasp it and then share it” (Holmes, personal communication, 2025). Through repetition, these teachings settle into the hands, allowing it to be carried forward and shared within the community.

For Denita, creative expression is one pathway for healing and reconnecting as people find their footing and return to their roots. It helps them remember who they are and where they come from. “Art can be the first step back into relationship and culture,” she explains. “Art is my step one” (Holmes, personal communication, 2025).

This first step often begins with $dx^wqig^w\acute{a}c$, the intentional act of removing heavy energy and unwanted thoughts. By clearing space, the act of making becomes a way to reconnect with family, Land, and language. Denita creates spaces for this into her community work, where the process of weaving is as much about emotional grounding as it is about the craft.

I experienced this firsthand during one of her cedar belt-making workshops, where the texture of the cedar and the rhythm of each layer began to tell a new story. When I arrived at the

old tribal center on the water, I noticed immediately that Denita had turned the kitchen into a weaver's circle. The tables were set, food was delivered, and large pots of cedar strips simmered gently on the stove while others soaked in nearby bins. The room smelled faintly of cedar and salt air drifting in from the open back door. The space itself felt like part of the teaching.

We began in a good way, greeting one another and settling into the space. At first, the room was quiet, and I felt nervous sitting among experienced weavers. Denita had printed off patterns for us to follow and laid out bundles of dyed cedar in natural, black, and red. I chose the natural cedar and beginner pattern she recommended, moving slowly as I tried to understand the rhythm of folding and tightening each row.

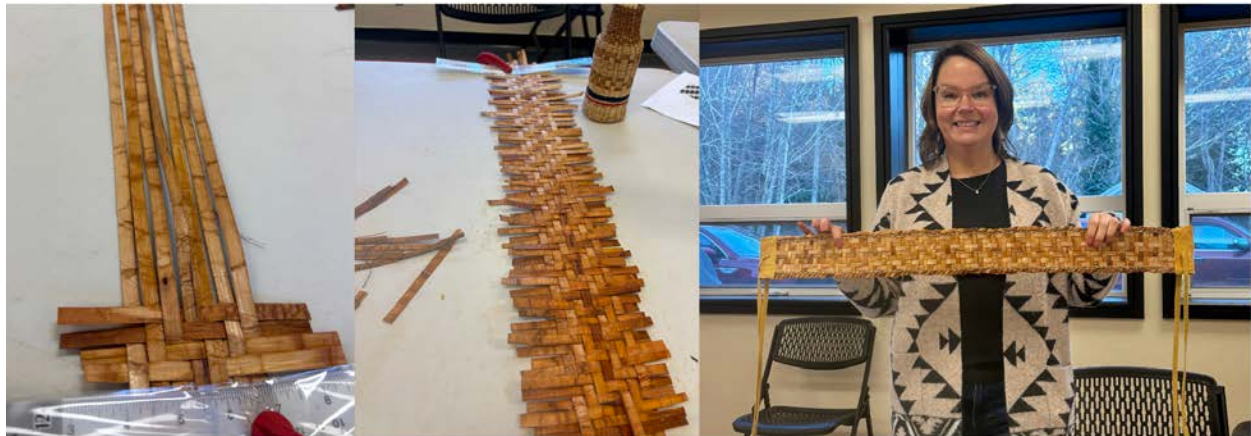
At one point, I stepped outside for a break. I stood by the shore, watching the tide and letting the wind move through me, an act of grounding I later realized was the very essence of *dx^wqig^wəc*. I was removing my hesitation, clearing my mind by reconnecting with the salt water before going back in.

As the hours passed and the weavers became more comfortable, the conversations began to flow. Denita moved expertly around the circle, checking in, offering a hand, and allowing space for us to learn through repetition. By the end, I learned more than how to weave cedar; I learned how to slow down enough to listen.

Sitting in the circle with Denita helped me understand how repetition and patience shape learning through hands. Our process of weaving and completing a cedar belt is shown in Figure 4.8.

Figure 4.8

Cedar Belt Weaving Process During a Suquamish Workshop



Note. Steps in cedar belt weaving taught by Denita Holmes. Photographs by Sonia Barry (2025).

In Indigenous inquiry, creative practice carries our teachings and sustains our culture. At times, art also creates space for witnessing. Some works begin in celebration, while others are inspired by a responsibility to acknowledge difficult truths and honor stories that must be remembered. For my daughter's high school graduation, I created a small pendant during a beading workshop at the Suquamish Museum. The beads were tiny, and my needle moved slowly as I tried to keep the row even. As I stitched, my mind kept drifting to my daughter and to all the steps it took for her to reach this moment of walking across the stage. I also realized how our daughters carry our stories into places where we were not always able to go. My parents' time in boarding school was shaped by an education system that worked to separate them from these very practices. In our community, we continue them anyway. Wearing a cedar graduation cap or sewing beadwork onto it is a quiet way of saying *we are still here*. By the time I tied the final knot, the pendant felt like a small beaded blessing sewn into the fabric of her future.

These moments remind me that knowledge is not only spoken or written; it is carried through the hands.

Figure 4.9

Beaded Pendant for Graduation Cap



Note. Pendant created during a Suquamish Museum beading workshop as part of Indigenous graduation traditions, reflecting cultural continuity through making. Photograph by Sonia Barry (2025).

Sometimes our knowing takes shape in response to absence, to those who are here and are not. One such piece took shape through a community healing activity I led, titled *Hands for Our Missing Relatives*. It was created in response to the ongoing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirited relatives (MMIWG2S), a crisis rooted in longstanding patterns of violence and systemic neglect.²

Gathering in our room at the Muckleshoot Tribal College (MTC), members of my Indigenous doctoral cohort traced and offered their hands in remembrance of those missing from our families and communities. Our process unfolded relationally as we settled into a steady rhythm: scissors moving through paper, the soft murmur of voices as we worked. We created space with care, recognizing that what we were sharing carried real weight. As each cohort member started, I acknowledged why we were gathering and who we were gathering for. We understood what we shared was held with care and relationship. Our intimate, reflective

² The crisis of MMIWG2S reflects longstanding systemic failures to protect Indigenous lives; Indigenous women experience disproportionately high rates of violence (UIHI, 2018; CDC, 2020)

conversations moved gently through the room, and we held space for one another. Some paused in long reflection, others wiped away tears, and several shared the stories behind the hands they were making. Their names and memories stayed close to their hands as they were added to the concertina, which was able to fold inward or extend outward. Like the stories it carries, it moves between compression and expansion, where each part remains connected to the whole.

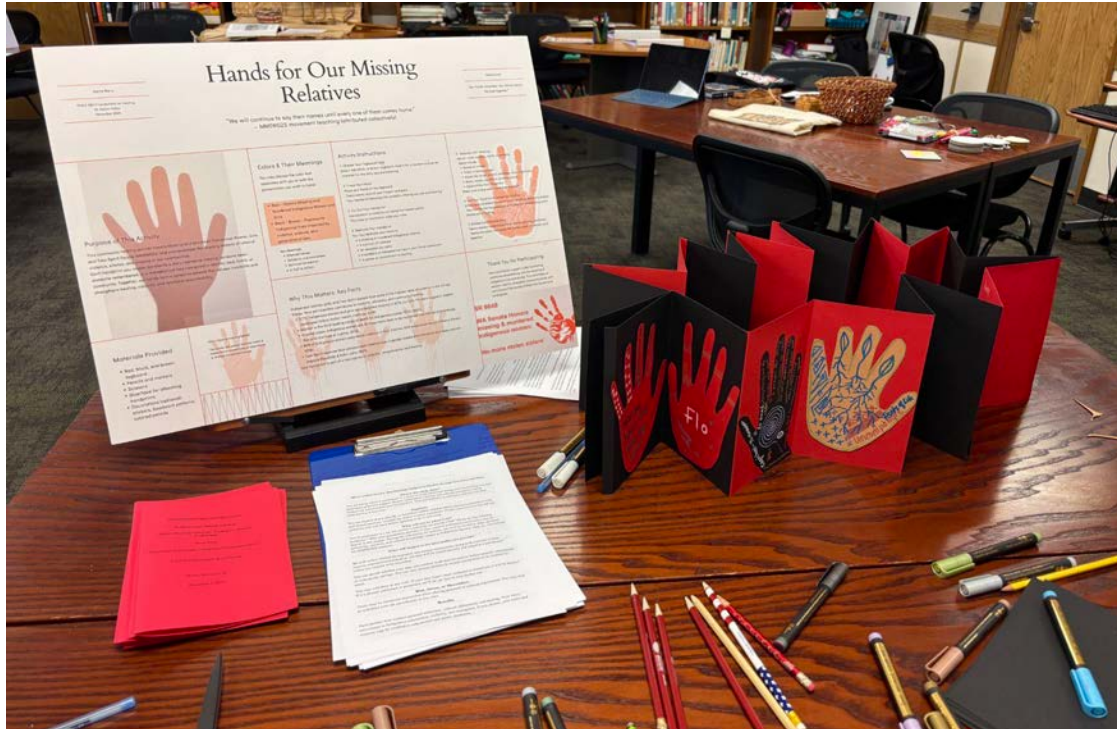
In total, eighteen hands were created and placed together into an unfolding concertina, forming a collective artwork of witness and care. The act of tracing our hands became a way of holding what could not always be spoken. As we followed the outline of our hands, the weight of our stories moved through our bodies and into our work, allowing us to sit with grief in a way that words alone could not carry. Each color carried its own meaning, shaped by our shared histories: red to honor our missing sisters, and black and brown to represent lives impacted by systemic violence, erasure, and generational loss. Each hand held its own prayer, sometimes named, sometimes a commitment to healing.

Within the walls of the Muckleshoot Tribal College, we created a sanctuary that reminded us that even in the face of profound loss, our relatives' stories continue to live on. In the quiet work of tracing, cutting, and placing each hand beside another, they stayed with us. in our memories, in our community, and in the work we continue to do.

The collective artwork that emerged from our community healing activity is shown in Figures 4.10 and 4.11.

Figure 4.10

Hands for Our Missing Relatives



Note. Concertina artwork created during a community healing gathering with members of my Indigenous doctoral cohort at Muckleshoot Tribal College. Red, black, and brown handprints honor Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirited relatives and represent collective remembrance. Photograph by Sonia Barry (2025).

Within the larger gathering of hands, each one held its own story. Some included the names of loved ones, while others carried symbols, landscapes, and waterways, or prayers offered in remembrance of relatives who are missing or taken. Three examples of individual hands contributed by cohort members are shown in Figure 4.11.

Figure 4.11

Hands for Our Missing Relatives (detail)



Note. Close-up examples of handprints contributed by cohort members. Photographs by Sonia Barry (2025).

Through these stories of making, I realized that Storywork can live in our hands, where memory, grief, and care are carried together through the work itself. What is carried there does not only stay in our hands. It also lives in the places that continue to teach us through Land, Water, and the ways we move across them.



4.4 Places that Teach

As the previous currents illustrate, stories often carry knowledge of place and begin in the work of our hands. These teachings carried through art and making are interrelated. They also grow from the places themselves: shorelines, rivers, forests, villages, and the waterways that have connected our communities since time immemorial.

In Indigenous ways of knowing, the Land and Water are our teachers and relatives. They shape our language, guide how we move, and carry the memories of those who traveled before us. When knowledge holders speak about how they learned from place, they are describing their lived experiences formed from walking shorelines, gathering plants and medicines, paddling ancestral waterways, and listening to the stories held within those territories.

In my inquiry, knowledge holders repeatedly return to the belief that our teachings arrive through the movement across Land and Water. Our Places that Teach also emerge through many voices traveling alongside one another. Each voice offers a different vantage point, yet together they move like ripples within the same current.

Suquamish and Iñupiaq artist and cultural specialist Kate kyʔkablū Neayūq Ahvakana described how Water changes the way a person sees Land itself. From a canoe or a ferry, the shoreline becomes visible in a new way to us. It reveals the perspective of those who traveled these waterways long before highways existed. As she explains,

Being on the Water gives a different viewpoint. You're seeing the world from where your Ancestors saw it, from the Water looking toward the Land. (Ahvakana, personal communication, 2025)

This way of seeing flows into Kate's work as an artist. Many of her public artworks remind people that the places they move through every day carry Tribal histories.

One example is her work at the Mukilteo ferry terminal, located near the site where the Point Elliott Treaty was signed in 1855. The terminal sits along the Ancestral waterways of the Coast Salish peoples. Kate created welcome figures for the entrance so that travelers arriving at the shoreline are greeted by visible reminders that this place has always been Indigenous. Through this, her work becomes another current of story, returning these teachings to the place

where they began. That place still holds the histories her work calls us to remember. As she describes,

On the male welcome figure, I placed the X marks of the chiefs who signed the treaty.

Those treaty signatures are on his dance apron. (Ahvakana, personal communication, 2025)

Through this public installation, treaty history also becomes visible on the shoreline once again. The welcome figures stand as reminders that these Waters and shorelines are layered with memory, relationship, and responsibility.

Underlying her work is an Indigenous worldview grounded in transformation. As Kate reflects,

We don't have a word for goodbye. We just say, 'We'll see you later.' Things don't just end, they transform. If a cedar tree falls and becomes a canoe, it has transformed into something else. (Ahvakana, personal communication, 2025)

Through her words and her creative practice, Kate shows us how Land, Water, language, and story continue to shape one another. The places that hold our histories still teach those who take the time to listen. These teachings are not held only in the past. They continue to gather people back to the shoreline in acts of remembrance and responsibility. The photograph below captures a later moment of remembrance, when tribal leaders and community members returned to this site to honor their history.

Figure 4.12

Point Elliot Treaty Day celebration, Mukilteo, 1912



Note. Tribal leaders and community members gathered at Mukilteo during the first Point Elliot Treaty Day Celebration. Photograph courtesy of Washington State Archives (1912).

Today, this same shoreline continues to hold these stories. Through public art and cultural design, Coast Salish artists such as Kate Ahvakana are reaffirming Indigenous presence in the places where our histories unfolded.

Figure 4.13

Welcome Figures, Mukilteo Multimodal Ferry Terminal



Note. Public artwork by Suquamish artist Kate Ahvakana near the site of the 1855 Point Elliot Treaty. Image reproduced from Dezeen (2021).

These teachings about place are also reflected in the experiences of those who travel these waterways today. For Muckleshoot educator and canoe skipper Willard Bill Jr., learning about homeland took on a new meaning through his roles in the Ocean-Going Canoe Society and the Black River Canoe Family.

For many of us, it's much, much more than just the physical aspects. The teachings that come to you, and the connection to your people and ancestral lifeways, have been a huge part of my identity growth and development, especially since I did not grow up with the canoes as a child.

It was where I felt at home on the water, where I felt connected to my people, where I felt place and a sense of worth as an Indigenous person. (Bill Jr. personal communication, 2025)

For Willard, sitting in the canoe and pulling alongside his canoe family brings him back into relationships with his people and the waters his Ancestors once traveled.

Figure 4.14

Canoe Traveling Ancestral Waterways During a Coast Salish Canoe Journey



Note. Members of the Black River Canoe Family travel across Puget Sound with Mount Tahoma (Rainier) visible in the distance. Photograph courtesy of Willard Bill Jr. (2025).

Out on the water, those lessons come quickly. As Willard explains, the canoe teaches humility, reminding paddlers that they must move with the tides and weather.

Being on the ocean-going canoe, traveling on our Ancestral highways, will humble you very quickly. When we travel with the tides, with appropriate weather, when we don't travel, when we make those choices... there's no gas lever or pedal we can just push down harder. We can make our pullers pull stronger, but we don't control the elements.

For our ancestors, this wasn't just a cultural practice; it was a lifeway. (Bill Jr., personal communication, 2025)

These teachings emphasize relational accountability with the waters and elements, reminding pullers that the journey itself teaches respect for forces greater than themselves.

Willard also reflects on how traveling these waterways reshaped his understanding of homeland and history. When he taught students to analyze history from multiple perspectives in the classroom, the canoe journey offered lessons in a different way, through time on the Water.

In my classroom, I would talk about learning history from different perspectives. We'd write in different voices, draw pictures, and so on. But being on the canoe, in the Ocean-Going Canoe Society, completely changed my perspective of our homeland and our people. Traveling on those waters so intimately changed how I see where we live, who we are as people, and the strength it took to live ancestrally. (Bill Jr., personal communication, 2025)

Like Kate's reflections from the ferry, traveling by canoe reveals the shoreline from the perspective of those who moved through these waterways long before highways existed. From the canoe, the Land begins to tell its story.

For Willard, these waterways are tied to the histories of the places his community comes from.

"Black River Canoe Family" really goes back into our history, where many of our family members' ancestral villages once existed on the Black River, at the confluence before there was the Duwamish River, and what that place means for our people. It was an affirmation. (Bill Jr., personal communication, 2025)

He also speaks about the relationships formed within the canoe itself.

When we call ourselves a canoe family, it really is that. We fight like family; we argue, but the essence is being in togetherness. You learn each other at a much deeper level, and those connections are powerful. (Bill Jr., personal communication, 2025)

In the canoe, no one travels alone.

The teachings carried through these journeys extend beyond the canoe itself. Indigenous knowledge reminds us that the wisdom guiding these relationships comes from generations who learned how to live in balance with the Land, water, and one another. Unangax scholar and Elder Larry Merculieff speaks about these deeper layers of ancestral knowledge.

Our ancestors developed knowledge systems that allowed them to live in harmony with the natural world for thousands of years. These systems were based upon observation, respect, and understanding the relationship between all living things. (Merculieff, personal communication, 2026)

For Larry, the land and waters are teachers who shape how we live.

Everything in the natural world has something to teach us if we are willing to listen and observe. (Mercurieff, personal communication, 2026)

In different ways, Kate, Willard, and Larry remind us that knowledge lives in relationship with the places that continue to teach us, through Land, Water, and the journeys that carry us across them.

These teachings about place are also reflected in the work of cultural institutions that help communities reconnect with ancestral knowledge. At the Museum of the Aleutians in Unalaska, museum educator Thomas McLenigan works with collections and community programs in partnership with the Qawalangin Tribe of Unalaska. Through youth camps, research, and collaborative service projects, the museum helps younger generations understand how the Land and waters of the Aleutian Islands continue to hold the stories of their Ancestors who lived here since time immemorial.

Thomas describes one example through Camp Qungaayuġ, where youth spend time learning directly from their homelands:

A good example is Camp Qungaayuġ, where we're out every year with the Qawalangin Tribe, teaching archaeology, talking about the fact that people have been here for over 9,000 years. We teach kids what archaeology can tell us, mostly through midden piles, which are a major focus of our archaeological work here. We also talk about caring for what comes out of the ground and what responsibilities come with that. (McLenigan, personal communication, 2026)

At the museum, the collections themselves also become teachers. Descendants return to study the work of earlier generations, learning directly from the materials and techniques preserved in each item.

The items I find most interesting are the ones that are teaching the current generation about the previous generations. We've had basket weavers and gut-skin artists come in to study pieces in the collection, looking closely at the stitching and weaving techniques to recover methods that may have been lost over time. (McLenigan, personal communication, 2026)

The materials themselves carry these teachings.

A proper basket is made out of beach grass. These weavers all have their own places where they go to collect grass. They harvest it, treat the grass, split it apart, and they start weaving with it. (McLenigan, personal communication, 2026)

Thomas also points to the language itself as another place where these relationships become visible.

If you look at the Aleut dictionary, something like fifty or sixty pages are just place names. And they're not mountain names, they are bays, inlets, channels. That tells you how important the water and the islands are to Unanga's culture and worldview.

(McLenigan, personal communication, 2026)

Listening to these teachings about place also shaped how I began to move through place myself.

I found myself returning to Point No Point, a shoreline on the usual and accustomed lands of the Port Gamble S'Klallam tribe in what is now called Kitsap County. This is a place of importance, where the Treaty of Point No Point was signed in 1855, and where relationships between Land, water, and the Tribal nations who gathered here continue to be held.

I return early in the morning, when the shoreline is quiet and the tide is low. The sound of the water welcomed me first, steady and familiar, washing ashore in a rhythm that settled my breathing. As I walked, my pace began to slow down, and my shoulders softened. My steps

shifted with the sand as I moved around the driftwood and small stones scattered along the beach.

From the shoreline, the water was the first thing I saw. It stretched outward, and I started to see what it meant to look at the Land from this direction. It is not something I stand on, but something I approach, my perspective shifted. I reflected on the teachings shared by Kate and Willard and how the movement across the water changes how place is understood.

I paused near the edge and tried to imagine this place in January of 1855. The cold. The wind. The arrival of canoes gathering. It was difficult to hold on to, but the shoreline did not let it slip away. The water continues moving past this same place, carrying what has happened here forward.

There are signs along the beach now, warnings about rip currents and changing tides. I noticed the tensions between those warnings and the knowledge held by those who have traveled these waters since time immemorial. Those warnings are meant to keep visitors safe, but they also reflect a way of understanding the water as something to be cautious of, and that can turn dangerous without notice. The teachings shared by knowledge holders speak differently. They come from a long relationship with these waters, learning their rhythms, reading their movement, and moving with them rather than against them.

This place holds both.

I keep walking. I keep listening. I keep noticing.

Being here asks something of me. Not just to remember, but to pay attention to how I move, what I see, and what I carry with me when I leave. As I returned to this place, I started to carry these reflections into my own creative practice. Painting became another way for me to sit

with what the shoreline was teaching me, another way of working through movement, memory, and place.

Figure 4.15

I Keep Walking



Note. Acrylic on canvas inspired by my walks at Point No Point. The shoreline is shown through fog and driftwood, drawn from what I noticed while walking and sitting in this place. Painting by Sonia Barry (2026).

In my painting, the fog carries what is difficult to see clearly, the parts of history that are not always visible but are still present. The driftwood along the shore feels like what remains, pieces shaped by what has happened here and what continues to move through this place.

While I was standing on the beach, I started to understand what the knowledge holders had been sharing with me all along. Place teaches us through how we move, how we listen, and how we stay in relationship. In these moments, I realized identity is something lived and remembered through relationship. These teachings shape who we are and how we are meant to be with one another in the world around us.

The voices shared in this current remind me that learning from place is about receiving knowledge and understanding what we are asked to do with it. The shoreline, the water, and the stories held within them call us to remember and to respond.

As these teachings continue to flow through my inquiry, they begin to take on a sense of memory and a different kind of weight. They ask how we hold what we have learned and how we live our relationship with one another, our communities, and the generations yet to come. Standing in this place, knowing what was agreed to and what was taken, that question feels heavier. The marks made on the treaty are not only part of history, but they also continue to carry forward what they represent. Being here, I came to see that remembering carries a responsibility to how we move forward.



4.5 Stories that Carry Responsibility

As I have been sitting with these stories for a while now, I am starting to understand what they are asking of me. The way certain stories stay with me after they are shared. For me, it is a kind of knowing that comes without instruction. It just settles in and remains. This responsibility is about how we carry what has been entrusted to us.

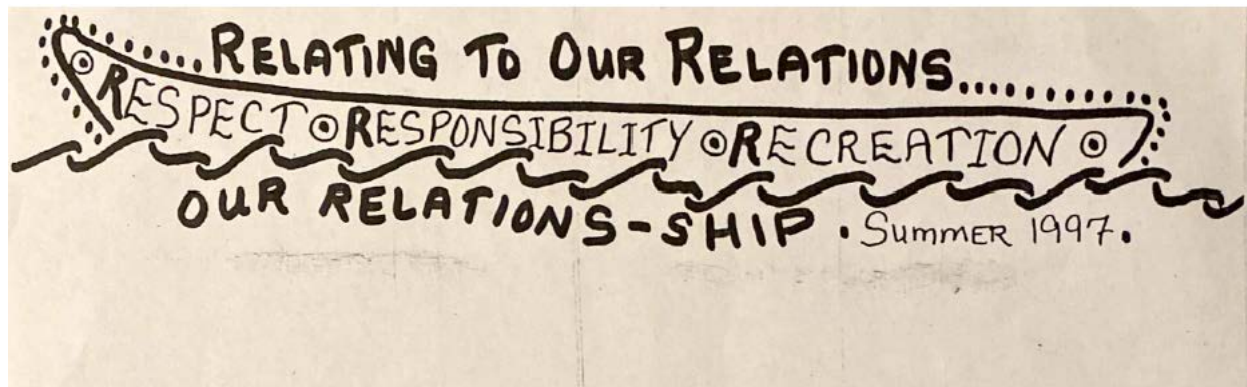
That responsibility grows the more you lean into your relationships, with family, the Land, and the stories themselves. Over time. I keep returning to the same question: what am I supposed to do with everything I have been given?

Listening to my Auntie Aquilina's teachings helped me begin to understand that responsibility is carried through re-creation. I started to see how it is lived in practice. As she reflected on her work, she returned to the idea of re-learning, re-searching, and re-creating—how these are more than words. They are ways of living. As Aquilina shared, “We should be constantly re-creating who we are,” carrying those teachings forward in how we live today (personal communication, 2025).

She has been carrying these teachings for decades, not just in words but in practice. This piece is one way those teachings have been carried forward.

Figure 4.16

Relating to Our Relations: Respect, Responsibility, and Re-creation within Relationships



Note. Summer, 1997. Personal archive of Aquilina Lestenkova.

This way of thinking has shaped her work for many years. While working with youth, Auntie created a visual that centered respect, responsibility, and recreation within relationships, naming this as a way of relating to our relations. Reflecting on that work, she returned to the word recreation, describing how it holds the deeper meaning of re-creation: what we do together,

through story, language, and community, is part of how we reconnect and stay in relationship with one another.

In her work with language and story, Auntie teaches us that this responsibility is carried through action. As she explained, “My role is to at least put in stepping stones behind me so they’re in front of the next generation” (Lestenkova, personal communication, 2025). She is creating pathways for others to go further than she has been able. In this current, language revitalization is an act of relational responsibility that connects generations. She also shared that language revitalization meant more to her than just learning words. It is “a way of becoming more human... and understanding my place as a human in this whole picture” (Lestenkova, personal communication, 2025).

Auntie Aquilina also explains that responsibility is relational. When we carry teachings forward, we also carry the people who shaped them. She teaches, “You don’t just say, ‘I learned this from Aquilina.’ You say, ‘She learned it from Doris Krukoff’” (personal communication, 2025). This reminds us that what we share is shaped by the people who taught us and by those who came before them. Stories are never held by a single person. They move through us. They ask us to continue caring for them.

As I sat with Auntie’s teaching, I reflected on how stories are carried and who carries them. I am still sitting with that. I found myself returning to questions about what it means to share and to teach in ways that honor the people and relationships the stories come from. These are decisions I find myself sitting with over time. They ask me to stay accountable to where stories come from and how I carry them forward.

In my dad's stories, responsibility was something you learned by living it. As he shared, growing up, "You were expected to know how to support your family" through hunting, fishing, and contributing in whatever way was needed (personal communication, 2025).

He described how responsibility was learned through work. From a young age, my dad learned to contribute to his family and community through the work of his hands, collecting berries or eggs, helping with construction, or working alongside others in the village. This is how he learned what it meant to contribute and take on responsibility over time. As he shared, "Everybody had a role. There was a summer job to collect garbage, to help carpenters, to dig a ditch" (personal communication, 2025). He described how work was part of life and how everyone recognized their collective responsibility to help one another. In these stories, identity is carried through the everyday ways we care for one another.

Similar to other stories shared in this chapter, what felt like play or daily chores, like walking the hills and picking berries in the summer, imparted values and taught him how to care for others. As he remembered, "It was a big treat for us to go out and pick berries and bring them home to please your mother," knowing that his efforts would contribute to making jam or pie for the family (personal communication, 2025).

Even after he left home to attend Mount Edgecombe boarding school in Sitka, this sense of responsibility remained rooted in family. At that time, there was no high school on the Pribilofs, so he had to leave home to continue his education. His fondest memory was returning home each summer and enjoying the blackberry pie his mom would make for his first meal. She saved the berries all year for this moment. As he shared, "My mother would bake a blackberry pie... just to please us, because she knew we loved it" (personal communication, 2025). This was

one way care was carried, through remembering, through saving, through preparing for a loved one's return.

He also describes how responsibility was carried through relationships with elders. Growing up in the village meant learning how to listen (TutakuX) and communicate respectfully. As he reflected, "You respected your elders... because they were the ones who taught you what you needed to know" (personal communication, 2025). They were part of everyday life, shaping how villagers worked, spoke to one another, and lived together in community.

Responsibility in my dad's stories was also about learning how to move within changing systems. When he left St. George to attend Mount Edgecomb, it meant being away from his home, separated from his family for long periods of time. He, like many others, had to learn how to stay connected in different ways. He shared, "You would get sent away to go to high school; months later you'd go home. We basically had to write letters. That's how we kept in touch with our family" (personal communication, 2025). These experiences shaped how he learned to carry responsibility across places, learning how to navigate that system, while staying connected to his roots and values he was raised with.

These teachings continue in how people show up for one another in community, in the everyday ways my Auntie described: making time to be together, sharing food, and stepping in during times of need. My Auntie Doreen, Stephanie Lestenkof Mandregan, is UnangaX from St. Paul, where she has lived most of her life and continues to carry knowledge through story, art, and community life.

In her stories, responsibility is lived in how people show up for one another. As she shared, "Community didn't just happen. It was something you had to make happen" (personal communication, 2025). She reflected on how, even in her own life, staying connected was

something she had to be intentional about and she had to prioritize. She confided, sometimes it is easier to stay home, but “you have to make yourself go out and be with people... it’s important that we do” (personal communication, 2025).

Stephanie also carries stories passed down from her father, my grandfather, about growing up during World War II. At that time, villagers were forced to live under blackout conditions for their safety. Despite the government mandates, they still found ways to come together. As she shared, “They didn’t stop being together. They didn’t stop being in community” (personal communication, 2025). These stories reflect a way of life in which caring for one another was necessary. It continued, even then.

Like my dad, my Auntie remembers berry-picking as a treasured memory growing up on the island. It was something special that families did, spending time out on the tundra together. She remembers, “Berry picking was always a family event... we would go out for the day and pick berries up in the hills” (personal communication, 2025). Now, she notices those practices that meant so much to her growing up are shifting because there are fewer berries on the island now and fewer villagers going out to gather them. Even so, she continues to pick berries, often not even for herself, but to share them with loved ones.

In both their stories, berry picking became a way to show care for family and stay connected to place. Hearing her speak about these changes, I felt it in my chest. My dad remembers coming home from boarding school and being greeted with blackberry pie made from those berries. Now my Auntie is watching the land change as those berry patches shift and disappear. The bond they both carry is more than food; it is memory. It is care. And it continues.

I can still see it: the berries, the hands that gathered them, and the smell of the pie coming out of the oven. I find myself asking, who are we gathering for now?

Figure .4.17

Blackberry Pie Made From Berries Gathered Through Family Practices on St. Paul



Note. Photographs by Stephanie Lestenkof Mandregan (2026).

This sense of responsibility continues in how the community of St. Paul gathers today. Auntie described how even now, during times of loss or holiday celebrations, people come together to support one another. She explained, “When something happens in this community, people really do come together” (personal communication, 2025). Whether through preparing and sharing food, building coffins, or setting up for community gatherings, the responsibility is carried collectively.

At the same time, Auntie also spoke about how this responsibility is not evenly held. As she reflected, “Sometimes... it feels like only a few people are holding that responsibility” (personal communication, 2025). Even so, she emphasized how deeply it is appreciated and felt when people do show up for one another.

She also spoke about the importance of remembering and sharing stories across generations. She reflected, “Everyone has a story... and those stories connect to each other” (personal communication, 2025). She described how this happens through community gatherings, such as the annual Remembrance Day commemorating the evacuation on June 14,

1942. Each year, villagers gather to walk the same path the evacuees walked, while singing songs and reading the names of our relatives who were taken from their homes. She shared, “When we sing, it feels like remembering the past while also walking toward the future” (personal communication, 2025). Although there are fewer survivors of the evacuation each year, the stories continue through those who carry them.

In this current, responsibility is about caring for the people around us while continuing the stories that hold the community together by choosing to remember, gather, and carry these teachings forward across generations.

Hearing these stories, I started to think about my place within them and how I carry what has been given to me. I realized that I am not outside of these teachings. I am shaped within them. I created this piece as a way of working through those questions.

During my conversation with Aunt Doreen, as we sat together over Zoom, I noticed that her mannerisms, the way she spoke, and the way she moved, I recognized them in myself. It was a moment of seeing what has been carried, even across distance.

As I painted each figure, I thought about what it means to be held by aunties: being guided, corrected, cared for in those quiet ways understood only through presence. These are the teachings that stick.

Each figure holds a part of who I am remembering: my aunties, my family, and the knowledge holders who carried these truths long before me. They remind me of where I come from, even as I navigate diaspora and the heavy layers of Russian and American colonization. The seal at the center grounds me in that memory, returning me to what has always been there. The figures are nested together, each one shaped by the others, just like the ways these teachings live in me.

Looking at myself in these figures, I realize responsibility is not something that I step into alone. I am already within it. I am shaped by it. I carry what has been carried for me.

This piece became my way of asking: How do I carry this forward? What does it mean to continue these teachings alive in a good way? Returning to Aalu^x, I am reminded that the wave does not hold still. It gathers, moves, and returns. In this way, responsibility is not only something I carry, it is also something I move within. I am learning what it means to stand at the shoreline as part of that movement.

Responsibility moves this way, through generations. Something we receive, and something we continue.

Figure 4.18

Held in Their Hands



Note. Hand-painted nesting dolls representing intergenerational responsibility and teachings carried through relationships with aunties and family. Acrylic on wood. Artwork by Sonia Barry (2026).

The teachings shared across these currents move together. They show us how the Land guides our listening and our remembering. Our hands carry these lessons forward through the act of making. These stories we are gifted ask us to live them out: in how we move with one another and with the generations to come. This responsibility includes carrying the stories of those who are missing or have been taken; by remembering and speaking their names, we resist erasure and remain in active relationship with them.

For those engaging in this work, these teachings may also serve as an invitation to reflect on your own connections to the Land and stories you carry. Across these currents, I am beginning to see that Storywork, Land, art, and relationship move together as the methodology itself. Through this, I have realized that identity emerges through relationship. It is something I come to know through my family, my community, and the Land. In this way (re)creation is both a remembering and continuing, a return that carries responsibility forward.

Like a current, these teachings do not stop here. They live in how I listen and how I remain in relationship with the knowledge holders and places that shaped this inquiry. What has been shared in this chapter stays with me, serving as a constant reminder to be careful with these stories to honor exactly where and to whom they belong.

Chapter 5: Returning to the Wave: What We Carry Forward

5.1 Returning to the Wave

This chapter begins with a return to the wave, acknowledging that the currents gathered earlier in this inquiry continue to move, reshaping the shoreline for those who will walk here after me.

The Land, Storywork, and the work of my hands have shifted my sense of responsibility. What was shared is fluid, settling into the way I think and how I lean in to listen. It guides my forward motion. I carry the shared grief, and I also carry the continuance of knowledge holders, those who teach, make, paddle, weave, carve, and keep our practices alive (Simpson, 2020). I carry these teachings through time with Auntie Aquilinia, June, Barbara, Denita, and Jen, each offering their own ways of carrying responsibility, story, and what it means to live these teachings in everyday life.

These teachings remain rooted with the knowledge holders and their homelands, but they have traveled into my own life. Returning to Aaluê brings these currents into focus for me. They show what needs my care. As I am woven into these stories now, I carry a responsibility as both a researcher and a relative. If the previous chapter was about gathering and listening, this one turns to what I have been given. The work is in my hands now, in how I steady these stories so they remain a gift for those who follow. Through this return, I understand this work as one of (re)creation and (re)claiming, where identity is lived and carried forward through our stories, our art, and our relationships to place.

5.2 Returning Through Aaluê

Returning to Aaluê pulls these disparate currents back together. While each one carries its own weight and history, they churn and pull as one. When I sit within the movement, I realize

the depth of what I am being asked to carry. This chapter returns to the shoreline, unfolding through the clarity that only comes from being back on the water's edge.

The shoreline is where the tensions become impossible to ignore. I felt this distinctly in the different setups between the spaces where we gathered. In the weaver's circle at the tribal center, we sat close enough to hear a sigh or slip of the cedar in our hands. With the door propped open, salt air lingered around the tables, akin to the way we chatted between ourselves. In other spaces, where desks were arranged in rows, that kind of movement stops. I could feel the shift in what was permitted. In rows, learning moves in one direction, making stories difficult to move or be held with any real tenderness. Structured rows reflect a physical manifestation that intentionally separates people from their relationships and from their place (Brayboy, 2005).

I felt this tension intensify when I led the *Hands for Our Missing Relatives* activity with my doctoral cohort at the Muckleshoot Tribal College. We started by moving the tables out of rows to intentionally create spaces to gather. When we began tracing the red, black, and brown hands for our MMIWG2S relatives, people leaned in. It no longer felt like a regular classroom. We became relatives. Some of us shared our stories, and others cried. Our collective artwork changed the very *way* of our being together. I learned that even within institutions, we can move differently and hold the weight of our histories together, instead of carrying them alone.

Land, story, hands, and teaching all have their own rhythms, yet like converging currents, they eventually pull in the same direction. I have come to see Land as the place where our learning begins and inevitably returns (Cajete, 1994, 2015). While Storywork carries our teachings forward through making, knowledge becomes something we can feel (Archibald, 2008). This kind of teaching begins with our relationships and continues through sitting together. I notice how much of this practice depends on staying close. Close to people and places. Close to

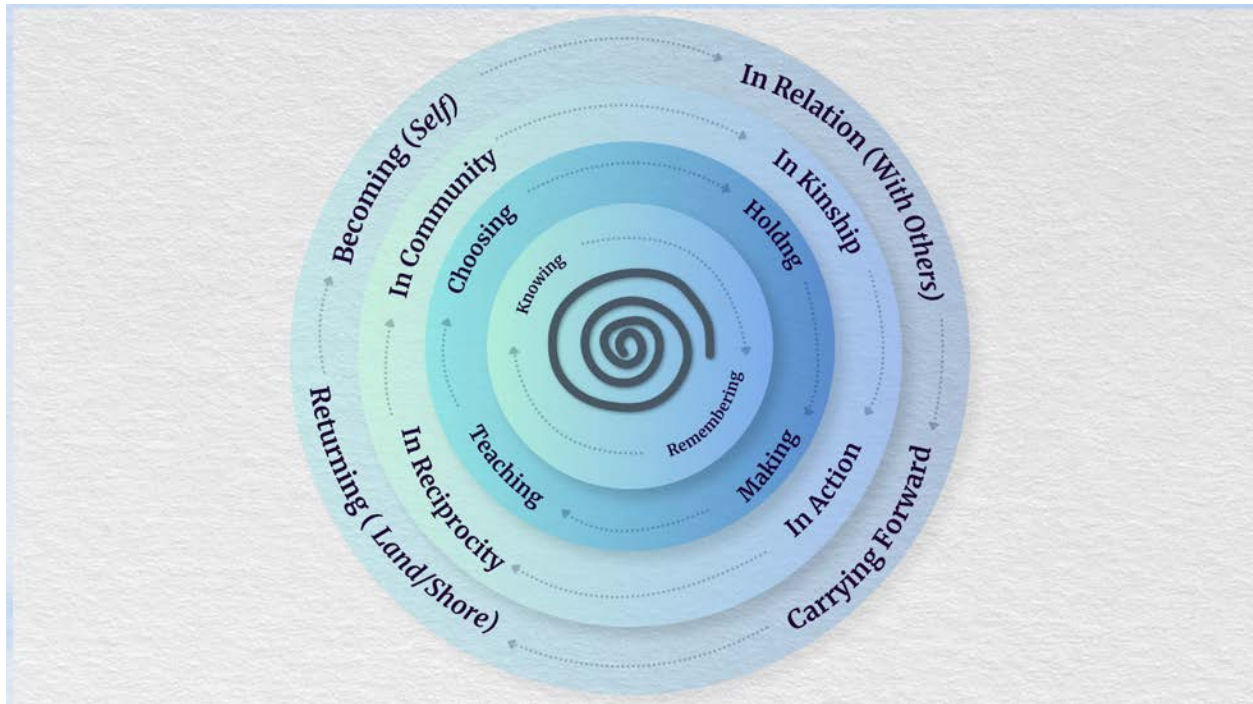
the teachings themselves. They hold each other. Staying close shapes how I listen and carry what has been shared.

There is also a weight that feels like grief at the center of this work. It is not always something we name aloud, but it is still there (Million, 2009). I keep returning to Larry Mercurieff's reminder that our Ancestors are still waiting for us to make spaces just to grieve. I feel that in my heart.

Although the weight remains, it has shifted. It feels steadier in my hands now, like a tool that I can hold. Traveling this shoreline has required me to slow down, to sit with the uncomfortable silences, and stay with what surfaced, even when it was difficult to witness. Returning to Aaluê has clarified the purpose of this inquiry: it is about the *how* of what I carry and the intentionality of *how* I move it forward from this shoreline. To make sense of this movement, I return to Aaluê as a living framework, one that has been present throughout my inquiry but is coming into clearer form as I understand how these teachings are carried.

Figure 5.1

Aaluê: A Living Framework of Relational Becoming and Responsibility



This framework moves as a relational process. At the center are ways of knowing and remembering that come through our lived experience and relationships. From there, that knowing moves outward through what we do with our hands: holding, choosing, teaching, and making in everyday spaces. Through beading, weaving, and our making together, our teachings are lived and carried, keeping us connected to people and to place. These actions happen within our relationships, in community, in reciprocity, in kinship, and in action, shaping how our knowledge is shared and continued. Together, these movements unfold across spaces of becoming, in relation *with* others, returning to Land and shore, and carrying responsibility forward. Like Aaluê, it gathers, shifts, and returns.

5.3 Moving in Relation: Relationality and Reciprocity

I was woven into these conversations from the beginning. I sat with knowledge holders as a relative who followed their lead. What they choose to share with me flowed through our

relationships. I knew I was responsible for how I carried it (Wilson, 2008), part of the movement within Aalu.

With June, learning was an exercise of being fully present. Her teaching unfolded slowly and required patience. I felt that most clearly when I was learning to bead, when I found myself falling behind and trying to catch up. I had to slow down and stay with the process. That struggle stayed with me, deepening my understanding of research, which develops over long periods of time and through the tending and care of our relationships (Smith, 2021).

With Denita, I experienced firsthand how knowledge lives in our hands. Her weaving *was* the teaching. These moments remind me that making is a way of knowing. Sitting beside her showed me that some truths can only be learned through the physical act of doing and through the sacred rhythm of repetition. As she shared, repeating is how understanding takes root. My role was to sit close and learn in the way it was being offered.

I also kept returning to Larry Mercurieff's reminder that our ancestors are still waiting for space for us to grieve. I could feel that collective waiting in the room during the *Hands for Our Missing Relatives* project. As the room settled into our shared silence, we held the names of our taken relatives in our hearts, even when they were too heavy to speak out loud. As our hands moved, I thought about Denita's teaching about dx^wçax^wad, clearing the energy that settles in our bodies. Through the movement of our hands, we released the heaviness into the work we were holding together. Our experience showed me that our work carries so much more than just loss. It carries our survivance. Witnessing our cohort hold space for each other was a powerful act of continuance: proving we are still here and we still matter (Vizenor, 2008).

There were also moments when I chose generative refusal, deciding not to ask more. Not everything belongs on a digital record or in print (Tuck & Yang, 2014). I learned to listen to the

pauses and the wisdom shared indirectly. I often think of my Auntie Aquilina sitting by her window in Tanaâ Amiâ, her gaze fixed on the Sea. In our time together, her silence carried as much meaning as her words. My responsibility was to hold what she gave me with absolute care, while respecting the sacredness of what she chose to keep for herself (Kovach, 2010).

Place was a silent partner in all of this. Whether we were at the Muckleshoot Tribal College or gathered in the digital *kitchen tables* of Zoom. The Land and the spaces we gathered in shaped how we shared and guided the very form knowledge takes (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). I saw this most clearly in the ways place shaped how stories were carried and returned. With Willard, teachings were grounded in the waters connected to his canoe family and what that place held. With Kate's work, I saw how art returns our histories to public spaces, reminding us that the places we move through every day carry the presence of those who have always been here. In spaces like the Museum of the Aleutions, I also see how place can shift. When our stories are held behind glass, they risk being distanced from the relationships that give them life. But when these spaces move toward relationship, they become places where knowledge can breathe again. A kind of homecoming, as Jen described it, where our work returns us to ourselves and where we come from. These experiences showed me that place is an active relative that shapes how knowledge is shared, held, and continued.

I carry this reciprocity forward by returning the art pieces and summaries from this inquiry to my Tribal communities, but the real work continues in my own life. I am still connected to these people and these stories. I often think about the teaching shared earlier, "Aang waan—our other self. Every living thing in existence is our relative" (Mercurlieff, personal communication, 2026). That truth stays with me. What has been gifted to me asks something in

return. As I move forward, the work of my hands and the way my heart listens will shape how these stories are known. I carry them back to the water where they began.

5.4 Offering Language: Returning Words to Relation

What I share here is an offering, a knowledge bundle gathered through relationship and returned with care. Our ancestral languages moved through this inquiry in most everyday ways, deeply woven into how people lived and were raised. I have come to see that our languages never truly leave us. They simply wait for the moment they are called back.

I carry forward a teaching shared earlier in this inquiry about the difference between *quiliyanguaq* and *unigkaq*. Some stories tell what happened. Others show how the world came to be and how we are meant to live within it. I have come to understand that what was shared with me moves across both. These stories do not only describe the past; they guide how I listened, and how I carry what has been given. They are also a part of *Aaluû*, where language and story hold what we remember and how we come to know.

My *adaû* (father) described Unangam Tunuu as a relative at his childhood dinner table. But when school began, English was forced to the center—a tool his parents encouraged so he could navigate a rapidly changing world. Despite this, Unangam Tunuu stayed with him, dormant, waiting to return. He told me years later, while learning Bahasa Indonesian for work, Unangam Tunuu flooded him, washing over him as he remembered. Hearing him share this changed my own internal shoreline. I realized my ancestral tongue remains within me, too, simply waiting to be remembered. It is exactly as Larry Mercurieff suggests: our Ancestors are waiting. Some parts of our spirit stay whole, even when they go silent for a lifetime.

Our names are the physical roots connecting language to place. Maria Williams-Uhot opened with her traditional introduction, she was grounding herself within her kinships and her

home. In that moment, language pulled her entire community into the room. I feel this same tether when I think about my own name, Haka̱ Suna̱, (Took Feather), gifted to me by my Auntie Aquilina. Receiving that name was a heavy, beautiful turning point; it is something I carry now that connects me to exactly where I come from. Kelly Sullivan shared a similar honor, receiving her S'Klallam name, Hamək^witən, which served as a guiding star, returning her to her ancestors, her identity, and her place. A name is a living place we occupy.

These stories carry weight similar to a rip tide. My dad's history of being sent away from his village, cut off from his family for months on end, fundamentally changed how Unangam Tunuu was passed down and how he understood himself. Yet, I also witnessed our profound continuance. I heard how my grandfather returned to the old texts and to Unangam Tunuu as he aged, finding his words again and teaching them with a new depth. I listened to Barbara, Roger, and Rachel Anna, who continue this work by planting seeds in the hearts of the children, ensuring a harvest for tomorrow.

This inquiry shifts how I view *language loss*. I see now that our languages are held in our very movements, in our art, our songs, and the rhythm of our dances (Archibald, 2008). From this shoreline, I understand language as whole and relational; it lives in the listening as much as the speaking.

This (re)search taught me that our language breathes through intergenerational togetherness. It lives through the spaces we gather and through the relationships we refuse to let go of. I often think of my Auntie Doreen sharing how they mark the ground each year to remember where the berries grow. In the same spirit, this work is my way of marking the ground where these stories live now, so that they can always be found again. Our language is still here, waiting. This inquiry holds our stories in a steady place, even as they continue to move forward.

5.5 Carrying Responsibility into Systems

The spaces we learn in shape what becomes possible and what is lost. For generations, schools have played a primary role in disrupting our ancestral languages. My father's time in boarding school is a living testament to this: a place where his daily life demanded English-only to meet institutional demands. This displacement impacted how Unangam Tunuu would be passed down in our family, even as the language itself stayed with him, waiting.

English-dominant literacy frameworks persist today, treating reading and writing as the only valid ways of knowing. In most modern classrooms, language is taught in a vacuum, practiced as something separate from relationships and the Land. Western educational systems create a hierarchy that marginalizes Indigenous ways of knowing (Smith, 2021). As a result, our ancestral ways seem secondary and optional, even while they continue to live within our Tribal communities.

This inquiry shows that learning can move differently. Practices like land-based learning, language integration, and creation are essential acts of resurgence. These practices reflect what I described earlier as resurgence, the continuation of ways of being that have always been present in our communities. When we invite the Land and water into the classroom, when we treat Language as a Relative, and when we allow hands to create, knowledge stays connected to people and place where it belongs (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). This is part of the outward movement of Aaluû, where what we know begins to shape how we create spaces and carry our responsibility forward.

Decolonizing also requires a fundamental shift in authority. Knowledge holders, artists, and community members are already doing this work. Jen spoke directly to this in how she understands her work as an artist, emphasizing the importance of creating what is true to her and

to her heritage. She described wanting Indigenous art to be experienced on its own terms and for collectors to move beyond only valuing what fits their aesthetic. For her, this means encouraging young people to create unapologetically, without fear of critique, as a return to how our people have always expressed ourselves.

It is time for school districts to move in partnership with Tribal communities, seeking guidance on how to re-center holistic learning practices and language acquisition (Brayboy, 2005). The structure of classrooms sends a message. Rows of desks reflect a rigid way of organizing power. In contrast, gathering spaces, like the weaver's circle or small groups of tables, allow learning to flow through relationships. Redesigning learning spaces is about the physical arrangement that creates conditions for relationships to guide how we share (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013).

Decolonizing also demands a different relationship with time. Institutional learning often moves quickly, dictated by schedules and outcomes. My experience throughout this inquiry required me to slow down. To repeat, and to sit in the quiet until understanding takes shape. Moving at this relational pace is the only way for this kind of holistic learning to truly happen (Archibald, 2008).

None of these ideas are new. They are ancient practices that have never left our Tribal communities. The real question is how institutions will respond: will they continue to perpetuate structures that limit our knowing, or will they finally create space for the holistic ways of life that have been there since time immemorial (Smith, 2021)?

I am reminded of Roger Fernandes's telling of *Pushing Up the Sky*, where it takes all of us working together to lift the sky so there is room to live. No one person can do this work alone. In the same way, transforming our educational systems cannot rest on a single teacher, leader, or

program. It requires our collective responsibility, where each of us moves in relation to one another and does our part to create space for our languages, our ways of knowing, and for our young people to thrive.

I carry this responsibility forward in my own work, intentionally laying stepping stones for those who will follow me, knowing I do not do this work alone. Through the choices I make, how I set up a room, how I center our language, and how I stay accountable to the hands that shared with me, I am creating space alongside others who are also doing this work.

5.6 Becoming in Relation: Carrying this Work

This inquiry has reshaped what it means for me to be a (re)searcher. As I moved through it, the teachings shared with me settled in. They are a part of me. Early in this journey, I described feeling the weight of these teachings in my chest and in my bones, a soul wound (Duran, 2008). But as I have continued to walk this shoreline, through creation and listening, that weight steadies my feet. I can stand with it now. What I have learned begins to shape who I am becoming and how I carry this work within the movement of Aaluû.

This shift has dissolved the boundaries of research and my life. Through (re)creation and transformation, I no longer write from a distance or from a place of absence. My positionality sits at the center of this inquiry. In Figure 1.1, I described my painting, *Grand Entry*, as a visual prayer. I know now that my Ancestors have heard it. I show up differently as a leader and as a relative, with them by my side. I stay accountable and honor the names of those who taught me. I design learning spaces with the intention of connection and collaboration. Sometimes this looks like moving desks out of rows to create space for gathering, inviting students to learn through making, or allowing time for stories to be shared and held with care. These choices shift how people come into relationship with one another and with what is being learned. I share these

examples with intention, knowing that not all parts of this work are meant to be fully explained or taken up outside of relationship.

As an Unanga and Alutiiq woman, relative and educator, this inquiry has been a homecoming. This return to the shoreline has pulled me closer to my language, my family, and the ancestral values that guide my spirit. What I carry now is to live my name, Haka Suna, as a profound responsibility. This gift guides how I (re)create spaces for others and how I practice generative refusal in my decisions about what I will not take or share. I will also be mindful not to carry what was meant for my hands alone.

Aang waan, I am a part of this work, one swell in a larger wave of care and continuity.

5.7 Backwash: Sovereign Boundaries

There are places in this work where the tide does not carry everything forward. In academic writing, these are often called limitations. But within the relational foundation of this inquiry, they are the backwash. That moment when the wave pulls away from the shore, refusing to leave behind all that it carries. In this movement of Aalu, everything moves forward, and some knowledge returns to where it belongs. In the same spirit, not everything gifted to me was meant to settle on these pages.

I remember moments in our conversations when a story would begin to surface and then quickly recede. When a sudden pause hung between us, or a shift in tone signaled they had said enough, I learned not to push or ask clarifying questions. Other stories I simply choose not to move forward with here, not because of insufficient *data*, but as a refusal to contain them. Here, the tensions of ambidextrous consciousness (Little Bear, 2020) washed ashore. I stood there, where the water meets the Land, on that fluid line between what could be written and what needed to remain withheld. I choose to leave out certain stories deliberately to honor the

relational accountability that extends well beyond this inquiry. Within Indigenous research, refusal is an act of sovereignty. This reflects what I described earlier as generative refusal, the intentional choice to protect what remains within the relationship. The deepest currents are the ones that move beneath the surface, shaping the shoreline even when they remain unseen. Like a riptide, they must be respected for their power and for the life they protect. These limitations are actually sovereign boundaries, marking the places where the wave turns back and where our knowledge remains in motion with the people and places to whom it truly belongs.

5.8 Returning: What We Carry Forward

This inquiry was never meant to reach a final destination; instead, it asks something of us. I keep returning to my Auntie Doreen's teaching about marking the ground to remember where the berries grow each year. Those markers are a map for those who follow, ensuring we can find our way back to the shoreline, where our language and our young people find sustenance.

Our ancestral languages remain at the center of our responsibility. What I heard throughout this inquiry is that our language is still with us, waiting for the breath to bring it to life. The work ahead is to cultivate the right conditions, re-creating the kitchen table spaces where language lives in the small, everyday moments across generations and in constant relationship with the Land. This requires our breath and attention now.

I also return to spaces and the work of Alutiiq scholar Nadia Jackinsky-Sethi, whose leadership in museums and public boards serves as a bridge for Indigenous presence. Through her work, I see how institutions can finally shift from holding our stories at a distance to allowing them to breathe again. When these spaces move away from display and archives toward

a living relationship, they stop being places where knowledge is kept behind glass, locked away, and more like places where knowledge can be shared and carried home.

What we choose to do next matters for our young people. When they reach out, they should find tools to keep re-creating: language, teachings, songs that remind them of who they are. They deserve to sit close to their Elders, learning through the act of making, and feeling themselves woven into a continuity that began long before them. What this looks like will be different for everyone. The tools each person carries will emerge differently, shaped by the skills and gifts our Ancestors speak through them.

Resurgence is already in motion through our daily lived practices (Simpson, 2020). Knowledge holders, artists, and educators are already carrying these teachings in their own hands. Part of our responsibility is to support them and recognize their efforts as central to how learning happens.

What are we asking the next generation to carry? What are we responsible for in this moment?

I carry these questions forward in how I show up and re-create spaces in my accountability to the kinship who shaped this journey. This responsibility continues in every step we take to mark the ground for others to return.

5.9 Stories that Carry Responsibility

This inquiry finally returns to the shoreline where we began.

The stories shared here continue to move in the Land, in the People, and in the relationships that hold them. I realize now that story is never truly finished; it passes from one set of hands to another.

I return to the question that has followed me through every tide of this work: What am I supposed to do with what I now carry? What I carry now lives in how I move, in the stories I tell, and in the spaces I help create.

I carry these stories in the very work of my hands, in the memory of the hands we traced together, in the scent of cedar, and in the salt carried on the air. These teachings move with me. Aalux̂ reminds me that when the wave reaches the shore, it gathers strength, shifts shape, and returns to the deep. This inquiry is also part of that same movement. I return these stories to the salt and motion they came from, trusting the water to carry them where they need to go, far beyond what I can see from this shore. Research is ceremony (Wilson, 2008). I have become part of the very ceremony I have been practicing. My responsibility is to the life of these relationships and to those who will come to find these stories again when the tide brings them back to the sand.

The wave will return.

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Appendix A: Language, Story, and Meaning in This Inquiry

Because language carries theory and responsibility in Indigenous (re)search, I clarify key terms here as they are used through my inquiry. They are shaped by the teachings, stories, and scholarship that inform how I understand and carry them. These meanings continue to deepen through relationship, experiences, and return.

Historical Trauma names the cumulative and intergenerational impacts of colonial violence, including displacement, assimilation, and systemic disruption (Brave Heart, 2003; Methot, 2019). These experiences continue to shape identity, relationships, and well-being across generations. In this inquiry, historical trauma is held alongside survivance and the ongoing work of healing, recognizing both the weight of what has been carried and the strength that continues.

Cultural Identity Silencing happens when systems or interactions dismiss, invalidate, or render invisible the lived experiences and identities of individuals and communities (Leigh, 2018).

Within educational and institutional spaces, this often appears through the privileging of dominant narratives while Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and expressing identity are minimized or overlooked. In this work, naming this silencing is part of making space for voice, presence, and recognition.

Identity Sovereignty is carried in the ability to define oneself within the context of community, culture, and relationship, rather than through externally imposed categories (McDonald, 2002).

Identity is lived and held through kinship, responsibility, and connection to Land and community.

In this inquiry, identity sovereignty is understood as both a personal and collective act of (re)claiming.

Visual Sovereignty - names the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to represent themselves through visual forms such as art, photography, and performance (Raheja, 2007; Rains, 2021). It

moves against imposed narratives and reclaims storytelling through image, material, and creative expression. In this inquiry, visual sovereignty is practiced through art as a way of carrying knowledge, honoring story, and returning meaning to community.