WE DON’T LINE UP FOR RECESS:
THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A FIRST GRADE TEACHER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
EDUCATION

AUGUST 2014

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Keywords: Autoethnography, Early Childhood, Critical Literacy, Postcolonialism
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Christopher Au
Dedication

To my mother, who gave me time.
To my mentor, whose work inspired.
For the children, who I taught years ago.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Kimo Cashman, Jay Taniguchi and Gordon Bryson for believing in my project before I even typed a word. Eomailani Kukahiko, Kalehua Krug, Pohai Kukea Shultz, Stephanie Furuta, Kauaanuhea Lenchanko, Sheri Fitzgerald, Anna Lee Lum, Larson Ng, Aaron Levine, and Jane Dickson give me knowledge, laughter, strength, and friendship.

Julie Kaomea, Morris Lai, Donna Grace, and Hannah Tavares provide me with advice, rigor, and inspiration. Collectively their dedication to social justice has changed the world. I am fortunate to have such courageous scholars on my committee.

Richard Johnson, my advisor, has been a steadfast friend and inspiration to me for years; he devotes himself to the creation of spaces where young children can play, and he allowed me to play as I pursued this project.

I turn to Wayne Watkins whenever I need a song. He energizes every moment with a passion for new ideas, uplifting music, and a devotion to the voices of children.

Kathryn Au, Randall Au, and Susan Doyle are my kind and generous siblings.

My children feature in this dissertation as symbols of a love that will transcend time. Griffin Au is the fire that burns with creativity and verve. Shade Au’s potential is as limitless as the sky.

The person I most want to thank is Leilani Au, my beautiful wife, who is the sea that sparkles and the waves that embrace. I have loved you every moment and will do so forever.
Abstract

This dissertation, written as a series of autoethnographic stories and reflections, represents my effort to understand the subjectivities that shaped my experience as an Asian American, male, first grade teacher at a public charter school in Hawai‘i, during the end of the twentieth century. Upon admitting to myself that success as a teacher depended upon an acceptance of educational banking models and the maintenance of an authoritarian classroom structure, I decided to explore my complicity with the values represented by Hawai‘i’s public school system with the children in my classroom, and through a series of critical literacy projects, examined the discourse of schooling as a social text. It was during this inquiry that I discovered that the most potent colonizing force in my classroom was not the institution itself, but the authority that my personal history held upon my capacity to imagine new forms of teaching from within a culture of schooling that I helped to maintain. As such, I attempted to develop other subjectivities for teaching through the writing of an autoethnography that promoted the formation of a third space in which the physicality of my educational environment, the rememoration of my childhood, my adult anxieties, the constructions of children in my imagination, my conversations with first graders, and my new life as a teacher educator, could commingle and clash. This self-reflexive methodology becomes a medium for the expression of personal agency, layered reflection, and a critique of particular elements of schooling through a narrative that draws upon aspects of postmodernism, critical pedagogy, postcolonial studies, and personal loss. The pleasure and restlessness that accompanies autoethnography as a genre of arts-based research aids my imagination, and I hope that what is described in this dissertation can invite the reader to perform their own reflection,
and glimpse a curriculum in which children and teachers might co-author a world, before the ellipses of our inadequate language cause us to slip once again into familiar educational tropes and binaries.
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Introduction

Welcome to my autoethnography; it has been a long time in the making. It is a partial account of how my body, mind and emotions responded at different moments to the inhabitation of educational space. The stories you are about to read utilize the pain that I have experienced, and the pain that I have caused, as opportunities for the production of critical narratives that might counter a dominant educational language and invoke reflection and action in an audience. This dissertation is intended to invoke the novel, and is roughly divided into six chapters. The first serves to introduce the notion of autoethnography as a research method and includes the story of my parent’s divorce, my early encounters with school as a child, and the subsequent effect that those experiences had upon my work as a first grade teacher. The second chapter applies stories that map the desire to share power and authority with children onto an exploration of democracy in school, using the subject areas of art and reading as points of convergence. The images of the child that inhabit the social imagination are examined in chapter three, while the teaching methodology that can address so many of my interests, critical literacy, is proposed as a practice in chapter four. Chapter five looks at my identity as an Asian in Hawai‘i, includes a treatment of postcolonial issues in schooling, and includes moments in which I attempted to use my position as a teacher to decolonize my practice and the curriculum. An abbreviated history of my induction into the field of education, and my hasty exit from elementary teaching after the advent of the standards-based movement and an encounter with personal loss, concludes the autoethnography.

As the problem statement is found to be reoccurring and changeable, the five-part dissertation structure is utilized obliquely, and the review of literature, the discussion, and
the results, are woven into and between the stories that illustrate subject positions. Sources, for the most part, are bound to the particular time in which they were encountered while the autoethnographic narrative itself moves in a manner that is not constrained by sequential structure or singular theme. Graphical markings will sometimes call attention to chronological shifts, while at other times, events that occurred years apart will be laid against each other in a relatively jarring manner, without explication, in an effort to juxtapose events and investigations. Throughout, it is hoped that the autoethnographic layering of theory and story can suspend my inquiry in a pedagogical medium long enough for the reader to pick out particles that promote “continual questioning, [and] the naming and renaming and unnaming of experience” (Spry, 2011, p. 509).
Chapter One: An Autoethnography

When I was a child, my mother gave me rain. If speckles appeared on the sidewalk, my mother slowed our pace, and made me face the sky. She told me the world changed when it rained, and called my attention to the water that beaded on the leaves, and the cabbage butterflies that, steady and low, wobbled in their flight.

“Don’t you want to play in the puddles and squish the mud between your toes?” she asked. I hesitated, so she taught me how to make mud pies. We dug up a corner of the flowerbed with my little red sand shovel, and plopped mud onto the cement steps at the back of our house. I used the shovel to push the goo into the shape of circles and squares, and decorated the pies with dry leaves that I crumbled between my fingers. The sun gleamed beautifully off of the slick brown ooze, and baked our creations. As the afternoon passed, these reflections dimmed, and each pie began to shrink and crack. This was a transformation that I observed intently, but only during commercials.

The rain exerted change, but no change lasts forever. When the evening news began, I found my mother sweeping the steps. “It’s dirt again,” she said. The flowers shuddered as damp earth pelted their faces. She told me to fill my pail with water and splash it against the steps, to wash off what was left. I spilled most of the water on myself, and sneezed. “Evaporation is a cooling process,” she quipped, throwing me a towel.

My mom knew everything about everything, but I still didn’t want to touch mud with my fingers, or squish it between my toes. I didn’t like the way it felt on my skin.

Years later, it is still drizzling. I park a block away from the school because I have been told that the spaces labeled visitor are reserved for individuals who are on official business. One never knows when a district representative or evaluator might need to
speak to the principal. A rivulet is flowing down the street, and tall grass takes the place of the sidewalk, so I walk on a tightrope between them, like I did when I was a kid.

I squeeze through a gap in the fence, and jog through the parking lot, until I find the covered walkway that will lead me to the office. It is perfectly straight, and has a crisp blue stripe painted down its center. As I walk past the cafeteria and the length of two classroom buildings, I look down at it, and wonder if I should be to its right or its left. If I see another person, a child or an adult, I could imitate the expected behavior, but it is drizzling, so the school, at least on the outside, is a desolate place.

Following the line, I get a little mixed up, and enter the office through the wrong door. I feel embarrassed, but try to look in on the principal purposefully as I pass by; she glances at me and I wave slightly. Not recognizing me, she returns to her computer. She’s very nice in her emails.

At the counter, a secretary watches me scratch my name into the visitors log. She holds out her hand, and I fumble in my pocket and give her my car keys. I receive a laminated visitor’s badge in return. Neither one of us utters a word.

I return to the blue line and walk towards the kindergarten classrooms. Thin streams of water are now pouring off of the roof. I find Jee Sun’s classroom, but all at once, the part of me that fears a space that’s barren and controlled, stops moving.

I hear a child shout. “He’s here! He’s here!”

With grace and speed, Santiago rushes towards me, followed by the rest of the kindergarten class. I lean down, pat Santiago on the shoulder, and he scuttles behind me. He begins to push at the small of my back. I take an involuntary step forward and more kids surround me; they grab as high as they can reach and tug on my hands, wrists, and
forearms. I am relieved, as a male teacher, that they are only holding my arms. The
children who can’t get close enough pull on the kids who are already latched on, and I am
brought into the classroom like a breadcrumb being dragged to an anthill.

My student, Jee Sun, looks at me with amusement. “Thanks for interrupting my
lesson, Mr. Au!” She says, laughing. “OK boys and girls, we need to get back to our
desks and finish our work, remember we need to finish before lunch.”

The children, with much patting and hugging, release me. Santiago, gives me a
quick fist bump and dashes back to his desk. Feeling loved, I can’t regain my footing. I
stumble slightly and pretend that I am walking to a chair at the back of the room.

“You mean you didn’t send the kids out to get me?”

“No way. But they were waiting for you.” Jee Sun raises her eyes towards
Santiago who was apparently concentrating mightily upon tracing and retracing the lines
on his thinking map. “Especially that one,” she says, sotto voce. “He couldn’t relax until
he knew you were here. He really likes you.”

I sit down and begin to fill in the form that we use to evaluate the teacher
candidates. The descriptors seem dry and broken. Jee Sun has heart and humor. Not many
teachers would allow their entire class to run out the door to greet a visitor, and I can’t
figure out how to categorize her performance without flattening her spirit.

I snap my tablet shut and look at Santiago, and he wiggles his eyebrows. This is
his second time through kindergarten, and my third visit to the classroom. He shouldn’t
build my presence up so much in his mind, but I am pleased that he remembers me. I
imagine that I am one of the few adults in his life who seems truly benign, and fantasize
that I’m the one person who says nice things to him without telling him to work harder, or to change his behavior.

I’m just an observer, and I shouldn’t feel responsible for his joy or pain, but now I realize that I want to be; I want to take him, and Jee Sun, and all of the kids, out of this arid environment. I want to run through the puddles together, and get muddy, and laugh, and wonder.

After about ten minutes, Jee Sun calls the kids to circle time to share their thinking maps. Everything looks fine, but everything looks the same. After Jee Sun repeats herself for the fifth time, she apologizes to me over the kids’ heads. “This is just how they teach reading comprehension here. It’s OK right?”

I pretend to finish writing the evaluation, get up, and give Jee Sun a thumbs up. She smiles broadly at having passed another required observation. “Bye, Mr. Au!” She says in a melodic way. The children repeat her phrasing exactly. Santiago springs up onto his feet, and launches himself towards me on his long, thin legs. I give him a quick high five.

Taking care to avoid the mud puddles, I cross the lawn in the rain, so that I am soaked when I arrive again at the office. I stand, dripping at the counter, and the secretary gives me my keys without waiting for me to sign out. I return the slick, wet visitor’s tag to her, and after dancing on the blue line for a few minutes, return to my car. It is time to head to another school, about thirty minutes away.

Autoethnography is an emerging form of qualitative research that is continuously being redefined by its practitioners in relation to the discourse of social science. Patton
(2002) offers a foundational definition of autoethnography when he describes it as the process of “using your own experiences to garner insights into the larger culture or subculture of which you are a part” (p. 86). This definition is shared by many practitioners (Ellis, 2004; Holt, 2003a; Jones, 2005) and is useful as a starting point when pursuing an understanding of autoethnography because it positions the autoethnographer as a researcher who utilizes lived experience as a means to investigate a community from within the role of full-fledged membership. Because autoethnographers are members of the community they study, the relationship between researcher and subject is often collapsed, and, in response to postmodern critiques of representation and legitimization (Denzin, 1996), can offer texts to audiences that invite participation, collaboration, and praxis; in this way it could be said that autoethnographers are attempting to inscribe themselves into their research while writing their work into others’ lives (Arrington, 2004). Through circulating and active literacy, autoethnographers can therefore “argue that self-reflexive critique upon one’s own positionality as researcher inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 711). This self-reflexive approach may signal a shift away from a social science based on positivism, since as the term itself suggests, autoethnography as a methodology does indeed function in relationship to the narrative of traditional ethnography while being both dependent and critical of its use (Denzin, 2008).

Ethnography is a research technique derived from anthropology and was developed in order to allow scientific study of the primitive or the Other to take place in the Western academy (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2006). In the accounts of ethnography practiced
during the early twentieth century, the researcher embedded within a tradition of exploration and European domination (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Meyer, 2003), might travel a great distance with the intent to study native people in their indigenous environment; once he and his equipment were established in the distant locale, he would assume the role of an observer in the community, take careful notes, interview community members, and use photographs and recordings to capture the essence of the group’s cultural beliefs and practices (Vidich & Lynman, 2000). Since this was a practice based upon positivism, the data collected through fieldwork was kept untainted by subjective influences, and the ethnographer kept an emotional distance between himself and his subjects in order to maintain a sense of objectivity and scientific detachment in his study (Creswell, 2008). Later, safely ensconced back at the university, the ethnographer would analyze his data and compose an academic monograph that attempted to shed light upon the culture under investigation, in the hopes of revealing essential scientific truths about the nature of humankind to a civilized world.

Since representing a community as the Other is problematic in a poststructuralist or postmodern theoretical context, the conceptual turn of studying one’s own community while using the data collection instrument of one’s own body and experience becomes a reasonable response to the grand narrative of ethnography and prescriptive sociology in general. Of course, the nature of such a study in a local or interiorized context implies that no standard way of conducting an autoethnography can exist, and although it sounds glib, in many ways that is precisely the point of autoethnographic activity: since one can imagine that the entire realm of a researcher’s experience can potentially constitute data for an autoethnographic inquiry, an autoethnographer can select from a variety of
qualitative analysis tools, draw from literary or art criticism, and of course, from his own past, heritage, and aspirations, to craft his study in ways that may be unorthodox and genre-defying (Geertz, 1980). Thus an autoethnographer might find himself incorporating aspects of a grounded theory into his work or find himself sitting down and writing—really writing—about the social phenomena that he experienced and that he embodies in heightened, poetic prose (Richardson, 2000) with the intention of evoking a sense of verisimilitude and emotion in the reader. Thinking of autoethnography as an inversion, or even a satirical take on ethnography may be helpful in this regard, if not taken to comical or self-indulgent extremes; in this thesis I admit that I am an academic who occupies a rarified social position in the community I am studying, and yet, when this position is analyzed through a heightened feeling of self-reflexivity in conjunction with a distrust of positivism and scientific authority, a feeling of sheepishness and vulnerability, as well as open-ended intellectual activity is made manifest—and this marks a productive point in my data collection that can rupture the conventional methodology and application of educational research. While the outcome of an autoethnographic project might be of some academic significance to fellow researchers, and include implications for a particular community or an analysis of a community’s characteristics (L. Anderson, 2006), or a contribution to a research or program evaluation (LaBoskey & Cline, 2000), the aspiration of the autoethnographer may also be to craft something personal, that is at once visceral and subversive, and perhaps more straightforward in its relationship to its intended readership than much sociological, or in my case, educational, writing. If one is fortunate, it can even become a medium for the sharing of an occasional epiphany. As Carolyn Ellis (2006) explains, autoethnographers may wish to demonstrate:
…Struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn’t be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing. What are we giving to the people with whom we are intimate, if our higher purpose is to use our joint experiences to produce theoretical abstractions published on the pages of scholarly journals? (p. 433)

I feel that the potential that autoethnography embodies lies not in an apparent utilitarianism but in its ability to interrupt academic mores while sharing a unique sociological experience with a reader, as if it was a work of art or the source of literary expression. Within educational research discourses, we can accept that the process of data collection and analysis is affected and mediated by the researcher’s own shifting emotional impressions, his memory, and his culture (Fine, Weiss, Weseen, & Wong, 2000); however, the emphasis in autoethnography rests neither upon an ancillary admission or repression of these influences, nor towards the opposing pole of self-reflexivity and confessional, but rather upon the researcher’s ability to shape the presentation of an experience and gain insight through the lens of his own experience in order to more fully understand the way it constructs subjectivities and ‘selves’ for the author on the professional, political, and personal level (Hamdan, 2012; Spry, 2011) while inviting the audience to participate in self-reflection and perhaps, self-empowerment.

As such, I began this autoethnography during the advent of the standards-based
movement, around the turn of the new millennium, at a time when the distance between me and the child whom I taught seemed to become an ever-widening wound that might never be closed. Venting my frustration in my studio, while clumsily applying ill-fitting suture in the classroom, was no longer a viable strategy for coping with my overwhelming anxiety, and I experienced bleed-through (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2008) until my mentor suggested that I study critical pedagogy and its offshoot, critical literacy. Critical literacy researchers seemed to work like artists who were preoccupied with injecting social relevance and verve into a traditional, classicist teaching discourse; I thought that their interest in producing new subjectivities of resistance, of viewing the act of teaching as a plastic art rather than a repetitive craft activity, as an approach that productively smudged the lines between the expectations of the teacher, and his students, in the service of social equity. These critical approaches to teaching allowed me to apply an artistic effect to the curriculum in the form of dialogic teaching practices, and offered me the opportunity to be increasingly present, and more creative and inspiring, when working with my class. As the children and I worked through understanding questions and social issues in a text, I began to see and hear the children clearly once again. Reawakened, teaching became more of an art to me than ever before, and in turn a political act; T.J. Clark (1982), thinking of this intertwining, writes

The making of a work of art is one historical process among other acts, events and structures—it is a series of actions in but also on history. It may become intelligible only within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning; but in its turn it can alter and at times disrupt these structures. (p. 252)
Within the discourse of the public school classroom, with its standards-based and normalizing curriculum, the teacher typically works within a discursive formation that produces subjectivities of helplessness in the child and authoritarianism in the teacher. Critical literacy suggested to me that the standards-based curriculum could at times be reduced by praxis to its component materials, and just as it becomes difficult to read a landscape painting as a romantic and sublime interpretation of nature when poverty exists just beyond the museum’s walls, children could be invited to express questions that could transform a learning activity’s usual function into a meaningful social, and perhaps more relevant, educational text (Vasquez, 2004).

I approached the production of autoethnographical writing similarly and strategically as an arts-based form of research (Leavy, 2009c), that serves as a means of creatively interrupting the normative function of educational research and the tendency of the researcher to fixate upon improving the technical apparatus of teaching; it is hoped that through a somewhat complex and layered narrative research methodology, that my autoethnography may at once describe, analyze, and de-regulate the power of dominant discourses upon my body and consciousness in a process that invites critique as well as self-reflexivity in the reader. Though the arts-based researcher inhabits an often contested position in the continuum of qualitative research methodologies, art-based research’s development as a genre in the twentieth century has been assured since it was actualized in response to the diverse theories postulated by postmodernism and postcolonialism, as well as concerns raised by the civil rights movement and standpoint feminism. These social concerns called for a radical re-viewing of the ways that power relationships, dominant narratives of race and gender identity, and binary thinking, impinged upon
forms of knowledge generation amongst people of color, women, and other marginalized groups within the academy (Leavy, 2009b) who often relied upon communicating the knowledge and emotion of personal experience through visual imagery, music, storytelling, oral history, and poetry. The knowledge produced through these efforts resulted in a heady concoction, as art-based research “emerged as a social construction that crossed the borders between science and art, and was contextualized by diverse efforts to revolutionize institutionalized classist, racist, and colonizing ways of experiencing and discoursing about human experience” (Finley, 2008, p. 73) to both academic and non-academic audiences.

In terms of research as an artistic experience, Elliot Eisner (1993) once proposed in an address at an American Educational Research Association conference, that the crisis of representation and the diversity of human experience that we now seek to investigate compels us to look towards the application of different modalities in the production of educational research. Educational research projects and dissertations, he suggested, could someday take the form of performance, film, poetry, and the novel. Although many prominent educators resisted this idea at the time, and took it upon themselves to defend more conventional and positivist research tropes and its attendant culture and aesthetic, a discourse has formed around the use of the arts in educational research just as Eisner predicted. The convergence of particular notions of social science and art as autoethnography currently “creates a place where epistemological standpoints of artists and social science workers collide, coalesce, and restructure to originate something new and unique” (Finley, 2008, p. 72). I would argue, though, that the two disciplines were never really that distinct: historically, both were concerned with organizing,
understanding, and re-presenting phenomena to audiences, both rarified and popular, in relation to institutional practices for personal and public currency. It was, by and large, the discourses that governed the production and reading of said work that determined a perception of their differences. Ellis and Flemons (2002) have a character, who is a reconstruction of real-life social scientist Art Bochner, making a similar point in the book *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*. Venting in a restaurant at an autoethnography conference, the Bochner-character opines:

> It seems to me that both theory and art—as in artistic—are ways of patterning experience. The artist, just as much as the social-science theorist, creates a work that translates or transforms “raw” experience into some kind of representative or evocative pattern, abstracted from but connected to the “data” that inspired it. (p. 347)

The rationale for the use of arts-based research largely stems from the problematic of the representation of research, function, and subjectivity in the academy, for if autoethnography articulates an inherent critique of ethnographic norms and the social science tradition that spawned it, any writer who seeks to engage in autoethnography needs to embody not only its significance as a methodology, but the tension that it generates through a reflection of what Ellis calls “the hidden political agendas in the limits placed on how we can represent our research practice” (2004, p. 204). The application of the power/knowledge issues that have been explored by Foucault are indispensable here, since autoethnography is generally accepted as an attempt to embody and surface what Foucault (1980b) refers to as subjugated knowledges, or the explication of concepts and stories that the academy considers naïve, and which are “located low
down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificty” (p. 82). As personal experience is gathered and translated into data, subjugated knowledges become critical elements in autoethnography since their admission contributes to a destabilization of the lens that views data from the standpoint of a dominant institutional discourse, while opening heretofore obfuscated pathways to understanding. Thus, narratives akin to the folktale tradition, or in the case of this particular educational autoethnography, self-reflection, memories, and the “the oral tradition that imbues the Hawaiian and Asian cultures of the island’s population” (Affonso, Shibuya, & Frueh, 2007, p. 403) known as “talk story,” can all be considered data sources appropriate to the conceptualization of a subjugated knowledge, that through an materialization into a more visible and dominant mode of discourse that resists conventional academic tropes, might suggest to the writer and his audience an alternative means of conceptualizing children’s schooling, while producing useful subjectivities that are not “linked to the state” (Foucault, 1984, p. 424).

Like all artistic modes of expression, it is often the most painful of experiences that drive an autoethnographer’s work, and the autoethnographic methodology is often associated with charges of self-indulgence, particularly when an autoethnographic narrative might focus and describe in very emotionally evocative terms, the researcher’s process of coping with a traumatic experience. Susanne Gannon (2006) comments that depending upon the practitioner, writing in an autoethnographic writing modality may be interpreted as an expression of poststructuralist “self-writing,” as described by Foucault, that exists in service to a greater, collective understanding of social phenomena, rather than merely self-absorbed withdrawal. She notes that Foucault reminds us that self-writing is a classicist technology that serves the self’s need to confess, know and heal,
and is a practice that “leans toward the ancient imperative to care of the self in a constant practice of reflexive attention to the past, present, and future moment of subjectification within complex and contradictory discursive arenas” (Gannon, 2006, p. 480). The autoethnographer that selects from the catalog of memory and narratives that “emphasize discontinuities, [and a] search for disjuncture and jarring moments” (Gannon, 2006, p. 480) can gain insight into the subjectivities he or she was performing, and though vulnerable, enter into the realm of the self-reflexive and the performative, while inviting others to create their own narratives and contextualized performances singly, or collaboratively as interwoven metissage (Chambers et al., 2008).

The troubled memories of events, when retold, have the capacity to deepen, disrupt, and problematize dominant narratives in a manner that is consistent with Foucault’s notion of subjugated knowledge and self-writing. These experiences, when recounted through a narrative of self-consciousness and expressed in the rhythms of spoken language, are often saturated with personality and meaning and can be imbued with the ethos of a community—if not an exact accounting of fact (Yow, 2005). Taking a cue from oral history practitioners, most of the stories in my autoethnography are written as if I am speaking and function as scripts that may be performed for an audience. In oral history, as within all conversation, the political positions and storied lives of those who are interviewed will sometimes intersect, and sometimes compete against each other, forming an opportunity for what Alessandro Portelli (1998) calls the partiality of the narrator to exert itself over the fabled objectivity of the historian. He writes that

Partiality here stands for both ‘unfinishedness’ and for ‘taking sides’: oral history cannot be told without taking sides, since the ‘sides’ exist inside the telling. And,
no matter what their personal histories and beliefs may be, historians and ‘sources’ are hardly ever on the same ‘side’. The confrontation of their different partialities—confrontation as ‘conflict’, and confrontation as ‘search for unity’—is one of the things that makes oral history interesting. (p. 73)

Conflicts, ruptures and counter narratives, partiality, and self-reflexivity are necessary to my autoethnography, particularly when I find myself so conditioned by my own subjectivity and institutional notions of discourse that conveying an idea without reliance upon binaries and essentialistic thinking becomes difficult; in particular, I find that the stories of my classroom teaching often begin by invoking a narrative that compares the physicality of my surroundings and the imposition of institutional discourse to an artistic desire for individual self-determination, as well as comparisons between notions of freedom and those of control that might exist between the adult and child.

These starting points may be necessary to unfold a tale, but limiting in its means towards gainful insight. This became apparent through the initial process of writing this autoethnography, as it originally consisted of three voices, or conditioned personas, that were categorized awkwardly as that of the scholar, the elementary first grade teacher, and the adult’s memories of being a child. In broad terms, the scholarly voice was intended to comment upon the discourses that produced the subjectivities for the child and classroom teacher while presenting theoretical frameworks that might position the autoethnographic narratives within an educational research context; the teacher’s voice, as the central storyteller, represented a protagonist whose vulnerability in reaction to a dominant elementary educational discourse could drive the narrative inquiry towards a problematized accounting of experiences with critical pedagogical practices, while the
adult’s memories of childhood were introduced to justify the empathy of the teacher and
serve as a counterpoint to his authoritarian stance.

Each of these voices, conscious of the other’s artifice, wavered and stuttered
during the autoethnographic process, sometimes taking opposing sides and sometimes
coalescing; as individuals they refused to compete fairly or with eloquence; the academic
expressed himself naively, undercutting his own search for credibility, then bowed before
the teacher, a speaker who wished to forcefully cast himself as an epic, heroic character
who occasional triumphed, but who recalled events through an internal dialogue that
remembered most vividly the ordinary experience of being stuck in traffic when the
school bell rang, reading stacks of memos, and wiping children’s noses. Interestingly, but
perhaps not surprisingly, it was the adult’s memory of childhood that came to provide the
most presence in my autoethnography as it was being written, as the child’s insight into
the metanarrative of schooling and its continuing influence over the researcher’s social
identity helped me to analyze the forces that contributed most to its construction.
Additionally, even as my researcher-self, teacher-self, and child-self interacted,
conflicted and merged, additional voices, such as the parent and the teacher educator,
accepted invitations to participate. These voices enlarged the dialogue. Admittedly, this
sometimes resulted in conflicting passages and indistinct results, but as always, it was the
process and the inquiry that seemed to matter most, for as Eisner (2008) writes:

It should be recognized that answers to questions and solutions to problems might
not be arts-informed research’s strong suit. This method of inquiry may trump
conventional forms of research when it comes to generating questions or raising
awareness of complex subtleties that matter. The deep strength of using the arts in
research may be closer to problematizing traditional conclusions than it is to providing answers in containers that are watertight. (p. 7)

The problematizing possibilities that autoethnography offers is best met by researchers who are willing to move within and through experiences as writers or artists even whilst the validity of the autoethnographic study, using conventional research criteria, seems insufficient. Though now established as a methodology, the researcher who pursues autoethnography will risk being eclipsed by the greater academic landscape and may even jeopardize his career through strict adherence to the study of the self (Holt, 2003a); but when I fear that mistrust of autoethnography renders my work intangible, I take some small solace in recognizing that that position is not unlike the role of play in a child’s academic development or critical literacy projects in the discourse of the standards-based reading curriculum; movements of consequence can begin with what appears to be unremarkable activity and still have lasting effects.

In any case, it is important to note that discussing the affect of postmodernist arguments on social science does nothing to render research based on positivism obsolete. As Lather (1992) notes

Positivism is not dead, as anyone knows who tries to get published in most journals, obtain grants from most funding agencies, or have research projects accepted by dissertation committees. What is dead, however, is its theoretic dominance and its ‘one best way’ claims over empirical work in the human sciences” (p. 90)

This multiplicity can contribute to the theoretical mosaic, and be as notable to the researcher as negative space is to the visual artist, for it is that which is not rendered
immediately that ultimately gives the image its dimensionality and form.

Because I have a background in the arts as well as early childhood and elementary education, my work leads me to many sources and is something of a bricolage—a piecing together of styles, methodologies and techniques, critical clues and artifacts, personal and professional experiences, significant moments and memories, emotions, and dreams (Patton, 2002). The text sometimes seems to be influenced by a positivistic world view and assumes that events can be recounted accurately through a straight-forward “teacher story,” while at other times the it reflects a more suspicious position towards the genre that it aspires to join and offers fragments and temporal juxtaposition with little explication (Pred, 2004). This approach to writing autoethnography is intended to not only help me explore previously overlooked routes as a researcher but also allows me to describe the messy, discontinuous process of teaching and living with young, curious, and complex human beings in the form of a metonymic device that de-centers my narrative goals in much the same way that I attempted to destabilize my first grade teaching practice (Ginrich-Philbrook, 2005). As I traipse through the hidden curriculum of my personal history and the emotionally trying arena of teaching in a public school, I often discover a heady mixture of ideas that leaves me feeling at once vulnerable and capable of great insight; and it is this persona that ultimately seeks to maintain a sense of wonderment, clarity, and control over the autoethnography at large.

Although my autoethnography is intended, of course, to be a contribution to social science, it relies heavily upon traditions established in literature, and is often expressed in a style that would be most familiar to readers of narrative fiction. Here, of course, the tropes of narrative fiction are not used to express “lies” but as a means to select and
juxtapose experience, share and analyze subjective responses, and write myself “into and out of problems of representation without the more cumbersome and constraining language of academic discourse” (Banks, 2008).

As an autoethnographer, I give myself the latitude to create characters, multiple plotlines, and reoccurring motifs that, although clearly based upon my experience of being a teacher at a specific site and moment in history, have no claim upon truth or objectivity in the traditional scientific sense (Ellis, 2004). Rather, the search for the production of verisimilitude in a teaching episode represents the analytic component of my inquiry, and allows me to create a discursive space in which the evocation of emotional reaction in my reader can suggest, (among other things) that a living, breathing search for meaning can exist in the classroom, for a teacher, in “real time.”

For me, this search first began to take shape while standing amidst dusty bric-a-brac and piles of old clothing; I was helping my mother straighten out her bedroom. She pointed at a box and told me to lift the lid. Inside I found books and toys from my childhood, and it was at this moment that I was reunited with Where is Christopher? by Anne Lawrence (1946) and De Brunhoff’s The Story of Barbar (1961)

Each book is over 40 years old. Their pages are spotted, their corners rounded and peeling, but their spines remain strong and fully intact. Reading them with an adult eye gives me the sensation of being near something familiar, and the discomfort that comes with trying to locate that which is missing, for although I can recall looking at these books on lazy afternoons with my arms and legs stretched out on the bed in all directions, I can’t bring myself to feel any particular sensation towards the childhood they represent;
the books feel firm in my hands, but I experience no bliss, no sadness, more of a crude curiosity and the almost mechanical sensation of attempting to impose images from my memory onto the pages I see before me. This embarrasses me, and I feel as if I am manifesting a loss for loss. I become curious about my inability to surface a child’s feelings, the feelings that I putatively spent ten years of my professional life as a teacher protecting. Surely we treat children with care, educate them systematically, and scrutinize the actions of parents and teachers because we understand that the sensitive emotions of a child’s mind marks him as innocent and easily damaged.

Then I sink and begin to see, with an adult’s eye, Babar as a young elephant living in the forest; though he will eventually be adopted by a kindly old woman who will buy him clothing and teach him how to fit into the civilized world, for now he is Riding happily on his mother’s back when a wicked hunter, hidden behind some bushes, shoots at them. The hunter has killed Babar’s mother! The monkey hides, the birds fly away, Babar cries. The hunter runs up to catch poor Babar. (p. 6)

A tiny prickle, (Barthes, 1981) and then the passage begins to bring back a fear of abandonment. When I was small, my mother spent all of her time and energy caring for me in our vast, empty house. She would teach me songs as we walked downstairs to the laundry machine; catch bugs with me in the garden; and explore the basement looking for treasures with me, treasures that belonged to my brothers and sisters who were, amazingly, already adults. To my mind, my mother and I were inseparable, almost one. I was deathly afraid of losing her if she ever turned a corner into another room, and going to the supermarket with her was a terrifying experience because I knew we could be easily separated. And now, yes, looking at the illustrations, I do remember closing my
eyes and flipping past the pages that showed Babar’s mother being shot, very quickly, whenever I read the story.

I pick up *Where is Christopher?* (Lawrence, 1946). The cover depicts the huge disembodied head of lion roaring at small black puppy. This book is also concerned with a youngster’s fear of abandonment and depicts two young children assuming the role of the mother and father in relation to their little dog. After the ersatz family runs happily through the entrance gate, they stop at the lion’s cage. A close up of a roaring lion’s head almost crowds out the text which reads “Leo opened wide his great mouth, and he roared until all the cages shook. Larry thought of poor Christopher who had never before been to the zoo. But…CHRISTOPHER WAS GONE!” (p. 6).

As a boy, I remember being delighted by the novelty of seeing my name in print, thrilled by the illustration of the powerful and fierce lion in the book, and worried about Christopher the cocker spaniel, all at the same time. My mother would often sing “Where’s Christopher?” to me when she brought me my lunch; I would run and hide behind the pillow of the couch in response. Whether pretending to be eaten by the lion or lost at the zoo, this little ritual made chicken noodle soup taste delicious.

Then, zooming out, I place the books next to the story of my father, who was cast as a villain. When I was young, I am told, he retained a bipolar condition and stayed away from home for weeks at a time and traveled about the country carousing. This was the reason my mother was so focused upon me when I was little, and was perhaps why I was given books that included themes of abandonment. The story of my father has caused me to remember childhood in different ways, and with pain, and as I grew older I didn’t
care if the details of being a boy fled before me, as I couldn’t remember the fun without also recalling the fear.

These formally idyllic, now horrid, now rewritten memories urged me to re-view the story of my teaching, and my relationships with my students, through an autoethnography. The resulting narratives, organized more thematically than chronologically, explore the shifting relationship between the subjectivities I experienced as an adult and child in relation to my work as a teacher, and attempts to use aspects of critical pedagogy, power/knowledge analysis, postcolonial theory, geocriticism, and other theoretical instruments in an effort to find meaning in the role of teacher and teacher educator, not to mention child and parent.

This approach has necessitated a very close scrutiny of my life that is far from objective but that is congruent with some responses to the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism. By the end of the twentieth century, the concepts of detachment and objectivity in anthropology, that were intended to bring validity to ethnographic research writing (Golafshani, 2003), were called into question by poststructural and postmodern critiques. Autoethnography, a method that “involves highly personalized accounts where authors draw on their own experiences to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture” (Holt, 2003b, p. 2) arose as an acknowledgment of postmodernist concerns that suggested “that many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimate and that no one way should be privileged” (Wall, 2006, p. 2) As these critiques interrupted the project of positivist research they gave rise to what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) referred to as the crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis in qualitative research.

Denzin and Lincoln contend that the crisis of representation occurs because
“qualitative researchers can no longer directly capture lived experience. Such experience, it is argued, is created in the social text written by the researcher” (2005, p. 19). As it became clear that ethnography came into being as a method for studying and understanding the exotic Other, and because “in the United States, for educated, White, university-based Americans the others were Blacks, American Indians, recent immigrants, working-class families, and the inner-city poor (and for that matter, anyone else not well educated, White, and university based.)” (Patton, 2002, p. 84) ethnography as a whole was called upon to answer “criticisms about how anthropologists were writing about ‘others’…from the perspectives of Western sociology and political science, and thus constructing these others with and within the constructs and languages of these perspectives” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 76). The crisis of representation was met by some ethnographers with texts that included self-reflexive components that closed the conceptual distance between the ethnographer and his subject (Vidich & Lynman, 2000), but the tendency to “unwittingly colonize, overgeneralize, or distort” (Richardson, 1997, p. 18) the lives and culture of the ethnographic subjects in these textual components continued to pose additional “questions of cultural representation and the ethnographer’s complicity in reifying hierarchical power relations” (Villenas, 2000, p. 75). Autoethnography, as a methodology that represents the process of scrutinizing the researcher’s own perspective, gestures towards “a desire to move ethnography away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433).

The possibility that science could be considered an apparatus of control that legitimated certain truths by “privileging one particular construction or perspective over
others, and as forms of normalization by constructing standardized categories and criteria against which people and things are judged” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2006, p. 24), makes the pursuit of objective truth through a representation of the Other problematic, and gave rise to the crisis of legitimation. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) write that the crisis of legitimation is a process that “involves a serious rethinking of such terms as validity, generalizability, and reliability” (p. 19). In this light, the terms that correspond to early twentieth century ethnography are viewed not as conditions that verify measurability in social science (Lather, 2006, p. 786) but as tropes that communicate the legitimacy of the “grand narrative” of science to its practitioners. A grand narrative “is a script that specifies and controls how some social processes are carried out” (Stanley, 2007, p. 14). As a critique of positivism and a distrust of scientific authority, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) discusses the grand narrative in The Postmodern Condition. Lyotard (1979) declares that the legitimacy of the scientific processes that build our conception of knowledge are contingent upon the institution’s ability to accumulate and distribute information, and it is this institution that is “authorized to prescribe the stated conditions (in general, conditions of internal consistency and experimental verification) determining whether a statement is to be included in that discourse for consideration by the scientific community” (p. 8). Commenting upon Lyotard’s critique, Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2006) observe that a conception of science is thereby created, not by learned individuals, but by “power relations, which determine what is considered as truth or falsity: in short, knowledge is the effect of power and cannot be separated from power” (p. 24). Lyotard (1979) notes that within a system of production that is steered by corporations and governments, scientific truth and commercial manifestations of power can become
indistinguishable, and as such

The question…now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer “Is it true?” but “What use is it?” In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to “Is it saleable? (p. 51)

The crisis of legitimation therefore invites the researcher to address the postmodern critiques that assert that conceptions of scientific knowledge are conditioned by narratives of functionality and performability. For the educational researcher engaging in an autoethnographic writing project, the crisis of legitimation suggests that one should reflect upon “how, in lifeworlds that are partial, fragmented, and constituted and modified by language, we can tell or read our stories as neutral, privileged or in any way complete” (Jones, 2005, p. 766).

The theories of philosopher and historian Michel Foucault posit some possible responses for research that supports engagement with autoethnography, insofar as Foucault further complicates issues of legitimation by examining the nature of knowledge production and the circulation of power within disciplines. Here, science, particularly social science, is seen as a function of power that authorizes particular kinds of knowledge production while limiting and controlling practices that do not conform to established norms. Those who participate in a process of building and disseminating the knowledge of their field restrict their language to “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Sarup, 1993, p. 64) and are engaging in what Foucault calls “discourse.” In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) writes that

Discourse is constituted by a group of sequences of signs…called a discursive
formation [that is] a principal of dispersion and redistribution, not of formulations, not of sentences, not of propositions, but of statements that belong to a single system of formation; thus I shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse. (p. 107)

To Foucault, discourse in the social sciences is not created by or imposed upon individuals but exists as a product of individuals and their activity within the confines of a discursive formation. The individual is shaped by the discipline that authorizes certain actions and a specific language even while individuals believe that they are adopting these actions and language as their own. In order for a participant in the social sciences to enter the desired discourse and to be able to speak the truth about another human being, he or she must become accustomed to operating within a “system of rules which govern the production, operation and regulation of discursive statements…[that are] not the will of one particular person or group but a generalized will” (N. J. Fox, 1998, p. 418). In education, particularly when children are involved, the discursive formation demands engagement to a practice that corresponds to “projections of legitimated knowledge and identity that are determined by the figure of the autonomous learner, evidence-based policy and metacognition” (Issitt, 2007, p. 383). Since our daily experience can “contribute powerfully to our normalization of certain practices and viewpoints as good and acceptable, and the rejection of others as alien and undesirable” (O'Loughlin, 2009, p. 71) we legitimate, govern, and discipline our behaviors as well as those of other individuals as a matter of course.

Foucault (1977a) argues in *Discipline and Punish*, that this process emerged during the eighteenth century as a way of ensuring that individuals govern themselves, because
unlike the ways that monarchial power was exercised over the individual, disciplinary power was found to be cost-efficient, far-reaching, and more effective than threats or confrontation. Foucault calls attention to the image of the prison panopticon as typification of the gradual application of disciplinary power through instruments of surveillance. Conceived near the end of the eighteenth century by architect Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon, which consists of a central tower surrounded by walls of circular prison cells, ensures that prisoners govern themselves and remain docile, since no individual can ever be certain that he is not being observed by a guard in the central tower at any particular time. Foucault traces the instruments of panopticism in the development of systems of assessment, classification and record-keeping within the prison, the school and the hospital, demonstrating that a confrontation with authority was not needed to create discursive formations and the desired effect of normalization for those who practiced the disciplines or for those who were subject to its gaze. Foucault (1977a) explains that:

Discipline ‘makes’ individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. It is not triumphant power which because of its own excess can pride itself on its omnipotence; it is a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy. (p. 170)

While monarchial power could be seen and opposed, disciplinary power quietly circulates throughout a system and cannot be located within the body or activities of any one individual. Since no one is ever outside of a discursive formation, a subjectivity that governs the ways an individual conceives of ideas and contextualizes experiences in everyday life is continually produced, and it is this subjectivity that limits the individual’s
ability to explore other ways of understanding knowledge and truth. For the educator interested in transforming the subjectivity of a student or teacher this can pose a particular quandary, since putatively liberating concepts such as freedom, independence and empowerment “postulate static and essential notions of selfhood…premised on the assumption that we can separate ourselves from the world and define ourselves independently from it” (O'Loughlin, 2001b, p. 61). As such, educators who wish to address Foucault’s conception of power and knowledge relations in their teaching will often elect to marry social justice approaches with their practice and invite students to delineate their own perception of institutional discourses (S. Baker, 2011) within the context of individual and collective educational experiences as a form of praxis.

Educator Paulo Friere (1993), who sought to socially liberate the illiterate underclass in Brazil, defined praxis as “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (p. 126). This definition of praxis informs my thesis and my ongoing autoethnographic project. Appropriately, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) note that the crises of representation and the crisis of legitimation inform and structure the crisis of praxis, which challenges the ability of the ethnographer, who is entrenched in a discursive formation, to offer work that can transform the lives of others. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2006), commenting upon the use of praxis as a postmodern approach to the conceptualization of early childhood education, usefully explicate Foucault’s intentions towards a conception of political transformation by stating that to Foucault, power:

Is in fact neither monolithic nor total, but fragile and open to challenge; moreover, to talk of constructed individuals is not the same as to talk of determined individuals. There is a possibility of choice and refusal in power relations;
individuals can learn how not to be governed so much. (p. 33)

As a school consistently applies technologies of gradation to individuals in an effort to measure, evaluate and assess, it also organizes individuals within temporal and physical boundaries that facilitate the process of classification. This process reifies the purpose of schooling and produces subjectivities for individuals that limit the way they think, act and communicate within the discursive formation of curriculum. The curriculum constitutes truth and knowledge and the application of proven teaching and learning techniques “ensuring that countless classrooms are filled with forms of ventriloquism” (Pinar, 2004, p. 186) rather than imaginative learning about the self and what is possible for the self.

My work is an effort to produce new subjectivities for myself as an educator and to suggest approaches to teaching young children that allow the teacher to re-view the subjectivities of the child in school, while allowing a multitude of voices to be heard.

Although this process may not, in practice, consistently result in praxis, it is perchance both a necessary and worthy goal, which is supported in a passage by Foucault (1984) wherein he states:

The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, and philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state’s institutions but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individuation which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for centuries. (p. 424)

Much of what follows in this thesis is an attempt to promote a new form of subjectivity for teachers based upon alternate ways of viewing the child and the adult in an
institutional setting; it is also intended to be a (mild) interjection into the discourse of teacher education, curriculum studies, and parenting.

Taking into account the crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis, I move my work into the realm of autoethnography in an effort to produce research that acknowledges the discursive formation that constitutes my language yet which points towards other ways of comprehending what it means to be both a child and a teacher. In a reflection on autoethnography’s place in qualitative research, Jones (2005) translates the crisis of representation, legitimation and praxis into the question, “what is the nature of knowing, what is the relationship between knower and known, how do we share what we know and with what effect?” (p. 766). This thesis offers a response to those questions, through my own field of vision, and invites the reader to share her own.

Perhaps it starts here. I look out of the window and see the top of a big sea-green sedan. It pulls noisily into the garage; my dad has come home from work early! As I hear him walk up the stairs, I sprint from the window, through the living room, and to the front door in a matter of seconds. I fumble with the wiggly, loose latch of the screen door and he waits for me to unlock it patiently, his tall, trim figure appearing perfectly relaxed. When I finally open the door, I step back to allow him inside as if he is royalty. He catches me by the shoulder, stokes my temple with the back of his index finger, grins, and walks past me with long, confident steps. I want to ask him what we are going to watch on TV tonight. I know that The Avengers, the show with that sassy lady, is on tonight. But he disappears into my parent’s bedroom and shuts the door. I pound out the soundtrack of a tyrannosaurus rex chasing a caveman on the piano to get his attention, but
he stays in there for a long time.

I am watching Gilligan’s Island on our big wooden console TV when I hear the bedroom door open and see him walk into the kitchen. Mom is in the kitchen busily making dinner, but they don’t exchange words. Instead, I hear ice break out of a tray. Dad must be pouring himself some of my Pass-O-Guava juice. He emerges with a blank expression, sits down on the couch, and begins to read the newspaper. I never sit in Dad’s spot on the couch because it is too close to the statue of Kuan Yin that rests on the end table. Mom says that she is the Goddess of Mercy, but she is just a big, scary, golden head resting on a table, and her shiny skin scares me.

I bounce onto the safe part of the couch and show my dad a drawing, and tell him about sea serpents. I explain to him that sea serpents can’t be plesiosaurs, because a plesiosaur looks like a skinny brontosaurus with fins, while the word serpent means that they must look more like snakes. A sea serpent would slither through the water, I say, as point to my sea serpent moving through blue lines of ink. I add a rhythmic swooshing sound to illustrate my point further. He smiles at me again and rustles his paper, before raising it in front of his face.

At the dinner table, I want to talk about the difference between seahorses and the hippocampus, which looks a real horse except for its flippers and tail, but my dad gulps his food, abandons his plate to the table, and sits down on the couch with the paper again. I haven’t even taken three bites of my own dinner. My mother and I finish eating in silence, and then I take both of our plates from the table and put it on the yellow counter, next to the kitchen sink.

My mother thanks me, and I stand still for a moment. I don’t want her to tell me
to dry the dishes because I want to play with Dad. Luckily she says, “You can go and watch TV, Chris.”

Mom makes very little noise as she washes the dishes. I chipped a plate last week by throwing my baby cup into the sink, so perhaps she just wants to be extra careful with the dishes from now on. When I walk into the living room the TV is blaring, but Dad is not watching it. He is just looking at the window. He must be watching the reflection of the TV in the glass. The image is reversed and distorted. I walk as near as I dare to him, holding plastic dinosaurs and trying to get his attention, but he doesn’t seem to notice that I am there.

When it’s bedtime, I run over to him say my favorite joke, “Good Night, Papa Pepperoni!” The brown skin around his eyes crinkle, and I get a big smile from him in return. I kiss him on the cheek. He smells like cigarettes. He tousles my hair, and I go off to bed laughing.

The bliss of sleep fades, and I awaken to a dull thumping. Still in my pajamas, I run to the living room and see my mother pushing furniture out the door. Her thin arms barely flex, yet she is incredibly strong. I ask her what she is doing and she says, without looking at me, “I can’t live with your father anymore.” The olive-colored armchair tumbles out the door, and I wait mutely upon the pale spot of carpet on which it once stood.

I’m certain that my father is still in the house, and for a moment I feel him behind me, but I don’t hear his booming voice, in fact, I don’t hear a word. He’s not here to diffuse the tension or explain away my mother’s actions with a joke, he is not there to explain why I am following my mother down the stairs, climbing into my uncle’s station
wagon, or riding across town to another house. It was the moment when I realized that everything could change in an instant, and that childhood—that life—was not what those in charge said it was, and that nothing was what it ever appeared to be.

I remember seeing my body from afar, as we arrive at our new house. It is painted in red and white. I remember waving to my aunt, who came out to greet us, then looking at my hand, then waving goodbye to my old house again. It is a memory that is reconstructed, and then interrupted, by an adult ineffectively trying to make sense of a child’s memory, a memory that is scrambling, and then slipping down the inside of a jar as it tries to escape.

My new house was bigger than my old one, but housed three other relatives. My grand uncle, who owned the house, lived downstairs in a small apartment and only came to the second floor at mealtime. My Uncle Donald and Auntie Brenda slept in the large, breezy master bedroom on the second floor. My mother and I moved into a smaller bedroom that overlooked the street. Unlike my auntie’s room, it was hot and stuffy. I remember clinging to my mother, on that first night, embodied confusion burning in the Enenue heat, listening to the strange noises of an unfamiliar world. That was the year I developed asthma.

Uncle Donald called me son, was very loud, and possessed a furious temper. He worked at the cannery and repaired the machines. He was a true local boy and spent his afternoons and weekends at the beach teaching tourists how to surf for free. My auntie was a receptionist at a fancy hotel and counted many wealthy Chinese Americans as her friends. She was soft spoken, generous, and doted upon me. Later I was told that they
didn’t, or couldn’t, have children of their own and I felt guilty after their deaths for taking so much of their love and returning so little of my own.

My aunt and uncle were very popular, and they attracted a parade of visitors. According to local custom I called each visitor uncle or auntie also, and to this day have no idea who might have actually been a blood relative. But this didn’t matter, since I withdrew from almost every one who called and didn’t form strong relationships. There was only one person I wanted to see.

My mother allowed me to visit with my dad occasionally. Once, my father took me to the tiny apartment he rented in O’opu, the tourist district. Everything in the apartment was beige, white, or grey, and I liked the sparseness of the decor. “There you go son,” my father said, pointing to a white drawer with a round knob. The drawer stuck slightly but I managed to open it by myself. I gasped when I saw that it contained a messy cluster of toy cars, brand new and still in their packaging. It was like another Christmas. I eagerly tore two of them open and pushed them across the bumpy carpet, and roared my head off. My dad turned on the TV so that I could watch cartoons while I played, then went into his bedroom to take a nap.

After a few minutes, I opened the drawer to add more cars to my collection, but the rest of the Hotwheels were all the same kind of car. I imagined my dad grinning and joking with everyone he met at Long’s Drugs and sweeping the entire peg of Hotwheels into his basket without checking to see what he had bought. He did everything quickly and boldly, and I loved him for it.
I was watching a cartoon about a singing whale when my sister came to pick me up and take me home. Then I remember that there was some sort of meeting, behind a door, and I think that because of it, I didn’t see my dad again for a very long time.

Around the age of ten, with a sad willfulness, I insisted that I be allowed to visit Dad whenever he called me. My mom agreed, but then that phone—that pale yellow, hard plastic telephone—hung on the wall of the kitchen and never seemed to ring.

My father managed his mental health better as I got older. When I was in high school, we saw each other almost once a month. He was sober, and getting treatment for his condition, but voice had lost its thunder. He said that he had found God. When I was with him, he would offer to pray for almost anything, from money and happiness, to a sanitary lunch, to assistance with a flat tire. I really didn't mind the praying in public, I just didn't know the words.

Sometimes he would ask me about school, and I tried to impress him with a list of academic achievements. I'm sure that he knew that most of my stories were complete bullshit—but he would smile with pride at my accomplishments nonetheless, lock my eyes onto his, and grasp me by the shoulder. I would hold his approval close to my body as he drove me home, and feed upon it during lean periods of silence.

We had an unspoken agreement after I left for college. While he could not be personally involved in my life, I was still obligated to write to him as much as I could, and to keep him updated on my progress. In exchange he would send me money and encouragement. I saw him from a distance, an imagined, idealized parent. Wanting him to think highly of me, I exaggerated my accomplishments in every letter. Once, I told him
I was going to get an architecture degree because I thought that would please him. As a response, he sent me back a funny greeting card with a hundred dollar bill inside.

I did eventually graduate, with two degrees in fine art, but by that time we weren’t corresponding; I was occupied with my marriage and a new job at the preschool, and unbeknownst to me, he was becoming very ill. He never saw me become a teacher, and I’ve often wondered if he would think of it as a fitting profession for a son.

I need to drive past my childhood home, every day, to get to and from work. When I lose my temper in class, which is often, this movement becomes difficult, and though it lasts only a few seconds, I avert my eyes and press on the gas pedal to make the old house whiz by as quickly as possible. It looks like a pink blur.

A boy sits at the front window, and presses his nose against the glass. He looks down, sees that the street is empty, and pushes himself away. He walks into the living room, and observes the fading sunlight that stipples the top of a glossy piano. He pokes his finger into the swirls of dust in the air and curses the warmth of the wooden floor beneath his feet. Suddenly angry, he kicks some weathered toys into the corner, hurting his foot. He thinks he hears the roar of a sedan coming down the street, rushes to the window, and sees me drive away. I stick my hand out the window and wave goodbye. It will be a happy day in school tomorrow, for all of the children, I promise.

“\textquote {It was a happy day in school…}” is how the next story could begin, which is a story about learning to let a child’s story become a part of my own. Since it was always much more interesting to look at drawing and watch a performance than to try to convince a first grader to scrawl out a written summary, reading in my classroom was
conceptualized as the ability to retell stories through the arts, and I loved doing projects with the children. This necessitated that I provide an endless supply of drawing paper, oil pastels and crayons, watercolors, tempera paints, modeling clay, and recycled scraps to the class so that the murals and sculptures, and the puppet shows and plays, could find continuous fabrication; but it was worth it. I took pride in being able to teach reading through the arts, and could assess the level of engagement the children had with a reading lesson by observing their messes on the floor. Fortunately, the room cleaner was a nice woman who loved the arts herself.

One day I find myself hovering over the tables, using the camera in my hand as a reason to interrupt the children’s work session. “You look like you have dreadlocks,” I say, as I snap a photograph.

“What? These black things are legs. The legs of Anansi the Spider, Mr. Au. The main character from the book we just read!”

“Sorry, Clayton.”

I put my camera away as Candice, sporting two huge brown paper ears, smiles slyly. She thinks it’s funny when I make mistakes. Her outline vibrates as her hand zips back and forth; she is laboriously coloring in a picture of a rock with brown ink. She’s quick and precise, but the marker’s tip is very skinny, and I’m worried that the task might take her the rest of the period. I begin to retrieve a thick drippy marker from the art supplies box, but thinking better of it, step back and inhale deeply; I’ve scaffolded the reading projects so that the kids will feel independent, make their own decisions, and take risks, and now I am having difficulty leaving them alone and letting them work!
I hear some tense, hushed voices outside the classroom, and then the sound of a cardboard box being dragged across the concrete. Shawn, Mackenzie, Sierra and Krystal have been working on the sidewalk, out of my sight, for about twenty minutes and I begin to worry. Shawn can be a bully and has very few friends, so like all manipulative teachers, I teamed him up with some children—some girls—that he didn’t know, in an attempt to suppress his aggressive behavior. His father left his mother earlier this year, and I suspect that she has been going out with her friends every night to compensate. Shawn has mentioned that he tries to do his homework with his grandmother, but since she is practically stone deaf, he just gives up and watches television.

“I hate you!” he shouts, so loud that I’m sure he is heard throughout the building. Prepared for steaming tears, and even the sight of blood, I stride towards the door.

Outside, I see Shawn wearing a lion’s mane. “You’re selfish! You don’t care! All you think about is your stomach!” He yells. He is playing the part of a character, and I confused it with reality.

“That’s great Shawn. You sound really angry. Maybe growl more.” He turns to look at me, smiles, then accidentally steps backwards onto a cardboard box that the group was using as a prop. The box folds and Shawn falls unto his back with a flop. The girls and I are stunned and for a moment, and I fear he will have a tantrum. Instead, he pokes his arms and legs up stiffly up into the air and begins to roar. The girls giggle and pretend to fall, and lie down next to him and scream.

I run back to my desk to get my Kodak camera and snap a picture of Shawn with a rare smile, lying on his back. Then they all stand up and pose for me, their thin arms
draped over each other’s shoulders. The sun dapples their faces and Shawn looks genuinely happy. I know he chose this moment, and was not tamed.

Unlike Shawn, I did not carry strength. I always felt too small, like the translucent baby geckos that were chased up the wall by their older brethren during the warm O’ahu nights. I always felt sorry for them, and if I saw one in distress, I would throw a wad of paper next to it, make it clamber into a safe corner of my room, and then try to shoo away the larger lizard with a slipper or a rolled up piece of newspaper. This wasn’t always successful and sometimes I would watch, in horror and fascination, as one gecko ate another on the ceiling high above me.

Of the two, my drawings depicted the more powerful, angry, and independent persona. I rendered dragons as long and serpentine beasts that lived alone in the clouds. Beneath them, hairy monsters would shamble through forests, crushing animals and brush. These beasts were uninhibited by sentiment or relationships. And then there were the muscular and confident superheroes that I tried to draw in dynamic poses, who flew about having adventures that always ended in victory.

I attempted to draw these characters as faithfully as I could, after the comic books that I studied for hours at a time. Spiderman swung with ease through New York City, making jokes and punching villains, the webbing on his mask rendered with loving detail; Superman flew, confident and strong, into the sky with a limitless grace, his cape fluttering behind him, all movement and speed. Creeping along, hidden in the impossibly huge shadow of his cloak, the Batman would steel himself for a night of crime fighting, while the ears of his mask reached into the night like the horns of a demon. These characters were masculine, confident and active, and the comic books never left my side.
These drawings, lovingly scratched onto folder paper with a number two writing pencil, were popular among the other boys, but needed to be hidden from my second grade teacher. Mrs. Tanaka was a strict, older woman who valued order and obedience, and disliked messes. Scribbles on a desk or in the margins of a worksheet needed to be removed immediately. When she gave instruction she spoke in a funny singsong voice, but when she became angry she roused a deep, rumbling tone from deep within her throat that sounded artificial and genuinely threatening. I could feel my eyes quiver when she scolded someone else.

When I first came to her class, she tried to convince me to use my right hand for printing. Fearing her, I obliged, but this resulted in odd, shaky handwriting that drifted away from the light blue line that was meant to ground it. Giving up on that idea, she allowed me to use my left hand, but kept tilting my paper so that I wouldn’t smudge the letters as I wrote them. This configuration made me twist my wrist into a painful position, but my writing did become satisfactory that way, and to this day I still associate writing by hand with physical discomfort.

She loved the holidays and at Christmas the room was transformed, with decorations and tinsel, into a magical place. Mrs. Tanaka hung a wreath on the door, taped cardboard elves and snowmen to the walls, and hung ornaments, well out of our reach, from the light fixtures. One afternoon she told us that we were going to create our own angel decoration that we could take home to our mommies and daddies. She held up her example, a doll with perfectly symmetrical features, bright orange hair, and a glittering halo. The girls in front of the room gasped at the sight.
Mrs. Tanaka said that she would help us put it together if we listened to her instructions carefully. The angel consisted of three paper plates; one plate was folded and curled in upon itself so that it resembled the body of the angel wearing a gown. The second plate was stapled to the first and become the angel’s head. The third plate was cut into two pieces, and attached to the body from behind, to resemble wings. Because the plates were scalloped, the wings and the bottom of the skirt appeared pleated and soft. She said that after we had cut out the pieces that we could draw on the details, and then she would help us put it together.

The supplies were laid out on our desks. I took my safety scissors to the heavy black lines that Mrs. Tanaka had drawn on the disposable plates. Even though the cardboard was thin, it was difficult for me to cut out, because the scissors were dull and made for a right-handed kid. I switched the scissors to my other hand and after a long and repeated effort, managed to cut them out with a rough, zigzagging edge. I gingerly trimmed the fraying pieces away so that the plates looked perfect. I was glad that I did this, because she picked up Stuart’s angel and trimmed it for him when he cut out the face sloppily. His eyes watched her hands without any expression, as if it was expected.

When every child had finished cutting, Mrs. Tanaka pinned her example to the bulletin board and pointed to the colors, lines and shapes. Matching her colors, I drew fingers on the hands and wavy lines on the wings to depict feathers. I counted how many little blue waves were needed to make the feathers and calculated how wide to make them in comparison to the surface area of the wing, then drew them to look exactly like her model. She walked between the rows of desks with her distinctive wobbly, lumbering
gait, until I could feel her behind me. I saw her tan colored hand, with its wrinkles, pink painted nails, and jade ring reach out and pick up the wings that I had just decorated.

“See how Chris did the winnnngs? That’s how I want you to do it,” she said, holding the paper plate and waving it in time to her song. This was one of the few times that I received any positive attention from her. My heart fluttered; I felt immensely proud and excited. I knew that I was good at art and now Mrs. Tanaka knew it too; she gave me back my wings and touched my shoulder gently.

Now it was time to draw the angel’s face. I pressed the paper plate down onto my desk firmly and drew the eyes, as if in prayer, as two gentle $U$ shapes, just like the one on the board. Then I made a small upturned nose and added the lips with red crayon. The mouth looked a bit like a heart. I took a moment to look up at the children around me. Most of my classmates were still working on drawing the feathers on the wings. I was far ahead of the other kids and thought that I might even finish my angel first. I quickly drew the five eyelashes on my angel and proudly took the pieces to Mrs. Tanaka’s table for assembly.

“Oh, little Chris, this is perfect” she said, while stapling the figure together. “Except for the eyelashes. See, you made them go up abooove the eye, but her eyes are closed. When we close our eyes the eyelashes poinnnnnt…” Her voice trailed off, a signal that I needed to finish her sentence.

“Down,” I said softly.

I couldn’t believe that I made such a stupid mistake. I felt like I was going to cry. I could draw an angel better than this one, but I knew that wasn’t allowed. Mrs. Tanaka noticed my distress, and in a soothing voice said, “Why don’t you put the lashes
underneath. It will still be verrry nice.” I did as she suggested, but could barely look it afterwards. My powers had failed me. The seraph, disfigured, was placed carefully into my backpack at clean up time, but I tore it angrily into pieces as soon as I was out of Mrs. Tanaka’s sight. I always sought approval from the same source as fear.

❖

My son’s teacher looked at me with a steady gaze, and for a moment I thought she had something to say about my actual child. Fortunately she did exactly what I tell my education students to do and read me some comments she had prepared. She told me something positive about his academics, then something he had to improve upon, then something positive again. Apparently he was doing very well with his math, but needed to improve his reading and the pronunciation of his /w/ and /r/ sounds.

“What are you guys going to do now?” she asked, as she walked us to the door.

“We’re going to the beach,” I answered breezily.

“Excellent!” she said, high-fiving my son. Overwhelmed, he took my hand and walked quickly out the door of the school, while taking care not to be seen running.

We went to Ala Moana. I found a parking space next to our favorite swimming spot, and we changed in the car. As we crossed the sand towards the water the young man sitting in the lifeguard station nodded at us.

My son dove into the shallows and splashed wildly but stopped suddenly and stood up, hugging himself. The water was freezing! I waded in next to him and touched him between the shoulder blades, encouraging him to relax and float on his back. He closed his eyes and I watched his little belly bob up and down as I stiffly cradled him in
my arms. The buoyancy made him seem weightless, and I wished that I could support him this way forever.

I looked towards the sand, and saw a blurry shape on the beach. It was a large man lying on his side, sunning himself at the water’s edge. He was a tourist; his skin was just starting to turn red. After a few seconds, I noted that his body was in an extremely stiff and unnatural position and that he was lying with his entire weight on his left arm. The patter of waves and the splashes of salt water against his face elicited no reaction. He could have been unconscious or even dead, and I wondered if the lifeguard could see him from his station. I decided to bring my son to the sand with me to check on the man, when a couple of teenagers ran up to him. Just as the first teen was about to tap the man on the shoulder, the lifeguard blew his whistle. The teen looked up, and the lifeguard gestured with the shaka sign, extending the thumb and pinkie, and imitated someone drinking from a bottle.

A new subjectivity was produced, and pity immediately turned to scorn. The teenager took a swat at the air in front of the man’s face. The two boys ran off and what few curious onlookers there were, dispersed. The man stayed there in the sand, roasting in the sun, appearing and behaving exactly the same as before, and I knew that now that his body was pathologized he would not receive any help. But perhaps he didn’t need or want any assistance; perhaps this was his choice. He began to look defiant and strong to me.

I glanced down at my son. I had made him fearful and quashed his expression because I feared his teachers and feared how others would judge him. But there was no
great reward there, just more containment. I closed my eyes and faced the sun until my eyelids burned red, then lowered my arms until my son was floating.

I let him go, and he tells me a truth about school.

❖

The truth is there is only time, and it is in short supply. That is why I always let the children play for the first few minutes of the day. It gives me time to look over my lesson plans and prepare for the long instructional block that precedes recess. While the other students talk, laugh, and turn in their homework, I notice that Sara, a small and wide-eyed little girl, is by herself, lying on her tummy in the middle of the floor. She draws for a little while and manages to ignore all of the activity around her, but when a boy hits her with the bottom of his backpack, she puts her marker down, shoots him a look, and walks over to my desk. She waits patiently as I help a kid who lost his necklace of beads the day before. I have no idea where the necklace is, and didn’t even know he brought one to school. When I finally look up at Sara, she says, in a very business-like fashion, “I need to tell you something private.” She grabs my hand and pulls me behind the bookshelf and we sit down cross-legged on the floor, the way we sit during important classroom meetings.

“Last night,” she says, “my stepdad and my real mom yelled at each other. Then my stepdad drove away. I slept with my sister. They are going to get a divorce.” Her eyes shine, and I know that she is close to tears.

“How does that make you feel?” I say in my best “caring teacher” voice.

“Sad!” she replies, with some impatience, and waits for me to say something else. For the life of me, though I can’t think of anything to say that will sound genuine.
Instead, I offer her a hug and remind her, somewhat lamely, that it is OK for her to feel whatever she feels. Sara gets up quietly and goes back to her drawing. With great difficulty, I ask the governor of the class to call the kids to the rug for morning message. I limp over to the board and begin to write out a new morning message. The kids gather at my feet, expecting to learn.

I think about Sara throughout the morning and have difficulty raising my voice and managing the children during their language arts lesson. It is a relief when the bell rings and signals our lunch. I take a few moments to watch the first graders congregate on the concrete walkway in front of our room. They jostle together playfully and call one another to get into line. Pedro, who is standing at the classroom sink, seems hypnotized by the lather forming on his hands. He ignores the children who are yelling his name, and wrings his hands together again and again, making bubbles.

We are a little early for lunch, so I decide to take advantage of the pause in activity and ask Sara to leave the line and talk to me privately. I’ve decided to convince her to talk to the counselor about her parent’s divorce. I kneel in the grass, a few feet from the sidewalk and squinting into the sunshine, look up at her. This is a technique for talking to kids that I learned from working in a preschool—by making yourself small and compact, you appear less threatening and can better encourage the self-esteem of the child.

“S-sara,” I stammer, “You know, you can talk to Mr. Chong about what you told me…his job is to listen to kid’s problems.” Sara doesn’t say a word, and stares at me with some impatience. “He is really a nice person.” I continue, “I think he could really help
you.” There is a long silence. The children see the other classes starting to walk to the cafeteria and begin to murmur in protest.

Sara looks at them, then suddenly turns back to me in exasperation. “No! I only trust you!” she blurts out. She runs back into line and the kids begin to walk to lunch together. I quietly follow them. My class seems to meander, yell and push, and get in the way of all of the other first grade classes who are walking in very straight lines, in alphabetical order, with the teacher in the lead in nearly perfect silence.

I catch up with the counselor near the back door of the cafeteria and tell him about Sara and her parents’ situation. He asks me a few simple questions and promises to come and visit discreetly that afternoon, to check on Sara and give me advice. I feel an enormous sense of relief after talking to him. He has a friendly, caring personality and I am sure that he can help her. I walk casually beside the long Formica table where my class is eating until I am next to Sara. She has finished her sandwich and has turned around so that she is sitting backwards. She swings her legs and laughs as the girl next to her whispers a secret in her ear.

“Hey!” I say in a conversational tone, “I just ran into Mr. Chong. He said he could stop by our class later today.” Then I bend over, and lower my voice so only Sara can hear me and say, “You can talk to him in private during reading time.”

I smile like I’m offering her a delicious treat. I expect an excited nod, but instead Sara’s entire body stiffens. Her eyes widen. She straightens right out of her seat. I realize that I have made a horrible mistake. She glares at me, and doesn’t speak again until I put my face very close to hers.
“You mean you told him!” She hisses. He hot breath sticks to my skin. The lunchroom monitor, hands on hips, blows her whistle and sweeps the kids towards the stage, where they wait impatiently for me to escort them back to class. Standing in the noisy cafeteria, and looking through the doorway at the neatly tended grounds, I catch a glimpse of myself as a child, sitting alone under a tree after school, waiting for my mother to pick me up. Watching the other kids jump into cars, or slowly wander off to the park to play could make minutes seem like hours. Sometimes I would wonder if she had forgotten me completely. My mom did always pick me up, of course. But when she finally arrived, when I at last could jump into the torn, comfortable seats of our old white Dodge Dart, I couldn’t tell her that I was scared or angry because she was late. Instead, I would wait quietly for her to ask me about my day. Sometimes she didn’t ask.

❖

Remembering the adventures I shared with my mother, who bravely raised me alone, makes me remember the awful night that the phone rang in our little apartment in Van Nuys, California. It was my sister. *Dad has cancer and liver damage and it is inoperable come home now or you might be too late.* My wife gave me a passionate kiss and drove me to the airport. That was the longest airplane ride ever. I remember being unable to see out of the windows of the plane, because the night’s sky was so dark; all I could see was my reflection, which was a face that I knew would gradually turn into my dad’s face.

My sister picked me up from the airport and we went directly to Palaoa Hospital, where I was born. When we got there, I was shocked that Dad looked so well! He smiled and joked with me.
“Come on in Old Man! Pull up a chair! Welcome to Hotel Heaven!”

“Hey, Dad!”

I laughed and grabbed his hand. He had the same booming voice and firm, strong grip that I remembered from my early childhood. I grinned and tried to make eye contact with the others, but knowing better, they looked away.

Dad stayed in the hospital for about a month. As he got weaker, he stopped inviting us to visit, but he and I would still talk on the phone. He continued to joke with me in conversation; this kept me at a distance but also made me feel loved. I don’t know exactly why, but I felt like the barriers of time had been removed; I felt like we mattered, for the very first time, as father and son. I didn’t need to lie to him anymore about my life’s accomplishments, since it was simply no longer a topic of conversation, and I didn’t expect him to give me anything but his ear. We were balling up the past and throwing it away.

Finally, as the doctors say, he crashed. When my sister came to pick me up I asked my mother if she wanted to come with us. She shook her head, and like an angered little boy, I ran down the stairs, two at a time, and jumped into the car. When I saw my dad in his bed, scrawny and pumped up with morphine, I was shocked. Tubes were stuck in his arms and he was on an ill-fitting respirator that disguised most of his face. I went up very close to his bed and watched him watch television. His dry, glazed eyes barely moved. After a few minutes, he noticed me and grabbed a pen and a scrap of paper and signed his full name on it in a shaky hand. Underneath he wrote, simply: Thanks for coming.
At that moment, he didn’t recognize me, and I realized that I never could see him clearly, either. I can ask people facts about where he was born, and how he grew up, and if I am ever brave enough, I could even ask my mother for stories about how she met him and why they divorced. But there are an infinite number of first-hand, insignificant, in-between moments that I will never be able to own because I spent so little ordinary, everyday time with him.

Memories shuffle themselves. I’m flying back to California feeling dizzy and sick; I’m working with young children, and want them to be happy. I create calm and stable learning environments because it makes me feel safe and in control. The authority of the school is comforting, and I want to be a part of it. First graders are the age that I was when my parents got divorced; I yell at the kids who misbehave, but I don’t want to be an authority figure; I distrust the principal and will fight against her policies for the sake of the children; I want the classroom to be an ever-changing collective space; I teach twenty-two-year olds how to be teachers by checking off boxes on a form; I’m on an airplane staring at my own image in the darkness of the window, and crying, and no one can hear.

After lunch, it’s circle time. The children gather excitedly on the rug, ready to talk about their feelings and the day’s activities. It was pizza day at the cafeteria and this puts the kids in an exceptionally good mood. As the kids take turns applauding the kindness that was demonstrated to them by a fellow classmate, I begin to smile; watching friends socialize and praise one another always gives me a warm feeling. The circle is raucous,
silly, and full of that particular kind of vibrating energy that only a group of young
children who have a case of the collective giggles can create.

However, the laughter dulls itself into a whisper when Shane’s turn arrives. His
parents have been arguing every night, and are on the verge of a separation. Several
seconds pass and Shane simply sits, staring straight ahead. The circle is now completely
silent, and the other children wait like statues. They know that something vitally
important is at stake.

The governor asks, kindly, “Shane, clap or pound? Or do you pass?”

After an excruciatingly long minute, I intervene. “Shane, we can talk about
anything in circle. It’s a safe place,” I say in what I hope sounds like a calm and
reassuring tone. He doesn’t respond, so I take a chance. “You can talk about what’s going
on at home, too.”

Big miscalculation. Shane flops backwards, hitting the girl next to him in the eye,
and rolls away from us, until he is on the other side of the room, lying on his back under
the science table. When will I learn not to play God? Not only did I embarrass him and
lose his attention for the rest of the day, but now he will go home and tell his mommy
what I said—who in turn will call the principal, who will talk to the counselor, who will
come to the classroom and watch us for the next few days through the eyes of a lawyer.

I send the kids to reading. As they dutifully begin lining up next to my chair for
quick tutoring lessons, I watch Shane out of the corner of my eye. He has cleared the
microscope and insect books away from the center of the table and is drawing, with great
concentration, on a piece of wrinkled paper that he found under the printer. The recess
bell rings and Shane stays behind. When all the other children have left the room, he
brings me his drawing with an air of solemnity.

“This is what happened last night Mr. Au.”

I don’t say a word, it’s his turn to create a space. “My mom was running away
from the house with the money. My dad got really mad and grabbed my mom’s purse out
of her hand. She cried and said I hate you. Then the ambulance came and took her away.
I stayed at my Auntie’s house.”

He looks up with me with an open expression. To avoid talking, I study his
drawing carefully. He has a real talent for the visual arts. Unlike most drawings by first
graders, this picture fills the entire piece of paper, and abounds with detail—although it is
detail that I find disturbing. I am fascinated by the father’s expression. He is depicted as
an evil anime character with pointed teeth and hair that sticks straight up like dark grey
weeds. He seems to lunge towards the mother, who is screaming iateu (I hate you). The
rod of Asclepius is shown on the side of the ambulance as two snakes wriggling around
each other with darting tongues and sinister eyes. Across the street, far from the yelling
and screaming, a small cat innocently climbs upon an otherwise empty swing set. I bet
Shane used to play on that swing set everyday after school before this happened.

I don’t want to play the teacher or child psychologist anymore, least of all with
my friend. Something needs to be shattered immediately, so my voice squeaks out, “My
dad left me and my mom when I was six, too.”

For a few seconds Shane nods to himself. Then he looks up at me, and holding
back tears asks, “Do you miss your dad?”

“I do Shane, sometimes when it is very quiet and I feel lonely, I miss him a lot.”
“It’s OK Mr. Au. I’m your friend,” he says, trying to reassure me. When Shane entered my class from kindergarten, I was told that he was spoiled at home, and immature, but now that I see him standing before me, a chrysalis reflecting light and calmness, I wonder how we can be so brazen, and so full of hubris, to believe that our assessments can bring anything of real significance to the life of a child.

Shane spends the rest of the afternoon reading quietly at his desk. Insisting that he participate in the math problem-solving project seemed absurd. When the dismissal bell rings, Shane waits for me to hug him and struggles into his heavy backpack. “Can you take me to Kids-Plus, Mr. Au?”

The Kids-Plus afterschool care is in the cafeteria, which can’t be more than a hundred feet away, but I gladly accompany Shane on his journey. As we walk, with an uncharacteristically slow pace, Shane veers to the edge of the sidewalk, and pretends that he is about to tumble down into the flowerbeds.

“Catch me, Mr. Au! I’m falling! Catch me!” I reach out as if we are in a Hollywood action movie, and grab his plump little hand, just in time. “Don’t let me go, Mr. Au!” Shane laughs. I pull him back to me, a little bit harder than I need to, and try to keep him safe.

“I’ll never let you go Shane!” I tell him. “Never.”

Danielle draws an eye with a tear coming out of it in the margins of the Rod of Asclepius story. I am a little surprised that she even read it, as we’re not very close and she has been extremely busy with her student teaching. Eager for praise, I ask her what
she thought of my writing after class. Packing up her bag, she answers simply, “It shows that you need them much more than they need you.”

I let her go.

Danielle became a successful high school mathematics teacher. I run into her occasionally. I don’t think she remembers my name, but she is always very friendly and warm. The last time I talked to her she was pregnant, and walking around the hospital grounds, trying to progress labor.
Chapter Two: Thoughts on Power and Democracy

When I was first joined the faculty as an art teacher, the mission of the charter school consisted of one line: “to prepare students to engage productively in a democratic society.” With the chill absence of a father lingering in my mind, I became attached to this statement in a romantic way; it sounded like the formula for utopia, and I convinced myself that if taken to its logical conclusion, that children would soon be put in charge of their own learning. Of course, on my first day of work I actually met said children and realized that my notion of democracy in the school was misdirected and naïve.

I opened my eyes. The site, unlike myself, was fixed in time and space, and despite its reputation as a progressive chartered enterprise, was still an example of a traditional American public school, one that treated students as a class of people who were situated well below that of the adults. A superficial reference to voting in a classroom lesson, or an allusion to governance by our board in a newsletter, was the only suggestion that democracy was exercised at the school in any form at all. This is a condition that “reflects the dominant American state of mind in which democracy has an uncomplicated and fixed meaning that we can not quite express” (Hoffert, 2001, p. 26) but which we, as educators, can still take comfort in invoking.

Of course, having been an elementary student myself, I understood that democracy was never taught or practiced as an active response to unsatisfactory conditions and was never used to organize decision making amongst the children, even though the children were the majority of the school’s population. As Michael Apple and James Beane (1995) explain, This occurs specifically because, such experiences would allow participants to “tie their understanding of democratic practices inside the school to
larger conditions on the outside” (p. 12) and threaten an existing social order. At the same time, any occasional expression of democracy that does occur in the school will be necessarily overshadowed by capitalist values. These values have entrenched themselves into the minds of the teachers to such a degree that an obsession with the improvement of productivity and measurement can be viewed as a virtue. Soder, Goodlad, and McMannon (2001) explain, in the introduction to Developing Democratic Character in the Young, that

One area of agreement has so come to the fore that has narrowed debate to matters of implementation to the exclusion of all other views: the mission of the schools is to prepare the young for work and for the enhancement of the economy. (p. xv)

The question of how to best teach children to care (Charney, 1992), to learn to consider the importance of making sound moral judgments while shaping an individual life path, and to participate earnestly in governance to improve a community, often becomes attached—almost as an afterthought—to a perfunctory discussion about curriculum content and its delivery. It is as though many of us feel that democratic values can be most easily and naturally transmitted through the teaching of the skills that are prized by the workplace. In the introduction to Becoming a Nation of Readers (R. C. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson), a federally sponsored report that was released in 1985, the relationship between the individual’s experience, education, and the values maintained by our capitalist society are conflated to produce this rather peculiar, yet emblematic, rationale for reading instruction:
Reading is important for the society as well as the individual. Economics research has established that schooling is an investment that forms human capital—that is knowledge, skill, and problem-solving ability that has enduring value. While a country receives a good return on investment in education at all levels from nursery school and kindergarten through college, the research reveals that the returns are highest from the early years of schooling when children are first learning to read. (p. 1)

John Dewey (1944), the great champion of democracy in schooling, criticized this tendency decades earlier, when he recognized that schools were not only inclined to isolate children from meaningful experiences and collaborative processes, but from the contribution that specific fields of study might make towards the development of self-determination in the child, and the construction of their accompanying life-worlds. In Democracy and Education, he opines:

Health, wealth, efficiency, sociability, utility, culture, happiness itself are only abstract terms which sum up a multitude of particulars. To regard such things as standards for the valuation of concrete topics and process of education is to subordinate to an abstraction the concrete facts from which the abstraction is derived. (p. 243)

It took awhile, but as a classroom teacher, I eventually realized that I wanted my beliefs, my approach to curriculum, and the relationships I forged with my students and their families, to be based upon the premise that exploring the meaning of what Dewey calls abstract terms—such as happiness—was not only worthy of every individual’s attention, but a community’s interest, as well. Was it possible to start a revolution, I wondered,
from a space wherein every child you see, is considered your equal?

When I was a kid, it was the smell of hot gravy that made my stomach lurch. I never felt hungry at lunch because we ate so early. I took a tray from the stack and slid it along the counter behind Heidi. My skinny fingers are wrapped around my tray like a bumper, so that our trays don’t clack together when the line stops. She’s wearing a pink dress with frilly lace that looks too tight around her stomach. She’s bigger than me. Almost all the girls are bigger than me, except for Melissa who looks like a Girl’s Day doll. Melissa has dark eyes and pale skin, and will talk like a baby when she wants Mrs. Shota to brush her hair. Whenever the line stops, I close my eyes and make Roy’s voice fade into the background, then make it come back again. The teachers say that the cafeteria is too loud, but it’s easy for me to pick out words.

Today, we are served carrots and applesauce first. Then a scoop of rice is placed on my tray, and then I’m surprised to see two brown, glistening shapes land next to it. Roy murmurs, “Shoyu Chicken. Shoyu Chicken.” If he’s excited, I’m in trouble. When we get to our table I squeeze in close to my classmates and hunch over my food. Heidi pulls the edge of her skirt away from me with a huff, but I’m not worried about her anymore. I thought Mom checked this. Trying to look casual and occupied, I cut small pieces of meat away from the bone, swirl them into the rice, and push them toward the outside edge of the tray. Whenever Mrs. Shota walks by, I take a sip of milk. It seems to work. All the other kids have gravy smeared around their mouths. Mark’s napkin is soaked in it. I see the other third grade class get up to empty their trays, so it should be our turn to go soon, too. Then I feel something pressing on my back.
“Eat your chicken!” Mrs. Shota orders. Her pudgy hand is pointing to my tray, inches in front of my face. Her pink fingernails are not long, but look very sharp.

“Eat your chicken!” she says again in her angry, crazy voice. My back tingles and I can feel the heat of her soft stomach on my shoulder blades. I feel like I am going to lose my balance and fall into my tray. The kids at the table stop talking and begin to stare at me. I should feel embarrassed that all the kids are looking at me, but instead I feel frightened and desperate.

“I can’t. I can’t eat it!” I manage to exclaim.

“And we can’t go until you eat your chicken!” Her hand reappears, and this time I see part of the gold ring up close. It is so tight on her finger that the flesh is squeezed out on either side as if trying to get out from under it. She’s married. My teachers are always married and old and mean.

I can’t say the word quite right, but I try. “I’m alur-sheek! I got alur-shees! Fo’reel I can’t eat it!” Mrs. Shota just snorts back. Too late already. She never changes her mind. Ever. I pick up a piece of chicken and put it in my mouth. Salty, sweet, greasy. It tastes really good. I stuff rice in next, making my cheeks puff out. Even Heidi smiles at that one. Roy stares at me. He looks like he’s going to cry. I blink at him and lick the juice into my lips between mouthfuls. I’m already beginning to feel it.

Mrs. Shota gets off of me and says, “Line.”

I hate her guts. I hate third grade. We follow quietly, stiffly, as Henry walks to the rubbish can to empty his tray. Because of me, we walk in line like it’s the first day of school. But she’ll be sorry. When we sit on the rug and I look up at Mrs. Shota at story time, she’ll see what she did. I’ll probably get sent to the nurse. I might go home early.
Leaning forward to scrape my tray I can feel the blood breaking out of my lips, right on time.

In *The School and Society*, John Dewey (1990) finds that our dreams for the individual child and the destiny of a community not only strengthen each other, but are intertwined precisely because, as educators, we are always imagining a brighter future:

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members. All its better thoughts of itself it hopes to realize through the new possibilities thus open to its future self. Here individualism and socialism are one. Only by being true to the full growth of individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself. (p. 7)

The possibility for democratic education exists in every public school classroom, but sometimes only as a vibration in the air, occasionally stirred when a child asks a question about fairness, or refuses to follow directions (O, at that moment, how we long to throw out our lesson plan and incite the social inquiry of that young mind!). However, since the curriculum is designed as a series of lessons meant to produce particular outcomes, there is really no reason to consider giving children choices, let alone the opportunity to participate in discussions centered upon social equity or the question of power relations. The authority of the adult is something that must never to be questioned. As a first grade teacher, I recall that for the majority of my career I cared deeply for my students, but also
strictly restrained their behaviors and opinions. My classroom governance, although consistently perceived as generous by my peers, actually reflected only one possibility: an agreement with my beliefs and manner of conduct. It is true that, after the academic goals of the day had been met, I gave my students a choice of activity, but this only reinforced the impression that, on a basic level, I believed that they were there to do a job, and were inferior to my own state of being. A.V. Kelly (2004) notes that a curriculum concerned with transmitting content:

- Does not encourage or help us to take any account of the children who are the recipients of this content and the objects of the process of transmission, or of the impact of that content and that process on them, and especially their right to emancipation and empowerment. Their task is to learn as effectively as they can what is offered to them. (p. 52)

Countering the narrative of schooling as a process of transmission can be almost impossible to achieve through conventional methodologies and prefabricated curriculum frameworks especially since the “multidimensionality of teaching and the vast array of differences among students are realities that prescriptions for practice cannot account for” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 72). Investigating democratic education can be an extraordinary challenge to the teacher who wishes to meet the academic needs of every child in a classroom, while still being conscious of the personal and cultural histories that each child embodies. However, I believe that if teaching is practiced as a collaborative, creative, and socially just art form, a democratic form of education could arise in the classroom with little pretense, and actually emerge with much vigor. McEwan (2003), as part of an examination of the mythic origins of teaching, observes that the admittedly
romanticized narrative of the artist as teacher in contemporary times can be supported by Dewey’s contention that careful planning and preparation can be combined with “the active and participatory learning of informal teaching” (p. 426) and believes that:

The idea of the teacher that emerges from this synthesis can be compared to that of the primitive artist, such as Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso, who at the beginning of the twentieth century both aimed to achieve the appearance of a childlike simplicity and directness in their art (p.427)

It would seem then that democracy can form one of the underlying principles of an educator’s aesthetic sense, and suggests in turn that an emergent curriculum or a project approach to learning, if conducted in a manner that invites the authorship of every individual in the class, with all of the complexity and messiness that that process may imply, can form a curriculum that is vibrant and active, while not being overly reliant upon the teacher as an authority figure or a director (Vasquez, 2004). In turn, the power that the teacher has over the children, and the social narrative that the teacher and other adults represent, can serve as a reoccurring topic of study that would surely be of great interest to every young child. The process of planning and reflecting upon the learning experiences that a group of young children may create, might also invite a view of the child as “a co-constructor of knowledge and identity in relationship with other children and adults” (Dahlberg et al., 2006, p. 7), which is a more generous conceptualization of the child than what the standardized curriculum and traditional teaching methodology usually allow.

The danger of sketching theory in print is great, and a premise will seem prescriptive if not qualified. I do not feel that our usual concerns, such as academic
achievement, should ever be overlooked, nor do I believe that the teacher-artist can ever eschew the classicist requirement of preparedness and endlessly wing it with kids. Rather, I mean to suggest that lesson planning can include the thoughtful process of preparing a space, and a question, and the gathering of the physical and intellectual materials that his creative partners might require before undertaking learning. When the children enter the room, the teacher-artist will be prepared, not with a script and a predetermined outcome that might reduce the his ability to engage fully with his students, but with conceptual tools, an entry towards inquiry, and a yearning for a day of creative adventure; as such, the reification of teaching and assessment that we are currently experiencing in public schools might be problematized by a more open and participatory classroom atmosphere that assumes that the children themselves are capable of implementing curriculum, visualizing and inscribing learning goals, and advancing knowledge for themselves.

Famed art historian H. W. Janson (1964), contends that for the artist

Conception and execution go hand in hand and are so completely interdependent that he cannot separate one from the other. Whereas the craftsman only attempts what he knows is possible, the artist is always driven to attempt the impossible—or at least the improbable or unimaginable. (p.12)

I hesitate to suggest that there is a hierarchical distinction between the artist and the craftsman in teaching, since teaching requires a pattern of discipline, control, and skill, as well as creativity and imagination. Still, I find Janson’s contention useful when visualizing my work in an educational arena, since I tend to associate the “impossible, improbable, and unimaginable” as a learning community’s primary pursuit, and feel that the best way to emerge sense out of children’s often colliding, then mingling, then
juxtaposed worlds is to allow them not only to dream, but to investigate the fearful, the beastly, and the taboo (M. Fox, 1993; Linfors, 2004; Paley, 2005). Adults can learn a great about the nature of the world that they have constructed for children, and their own biases, when facilitating such discussions.

Further, just as some feminist postmodern artists might use the language of patriarchy to upset particular narratives of male dominance (Cottingham, 1989), I believe that over time, a teacher and his students can refine their co-constructed curriculum, and become adept at not only examining issues of power in a school, but the art of subverting their application. In a piece entitled, *You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men*, photographer and conceptual artist Barbara Kruger (1983) uses the vocabulary of advertising to unsettle the gaze of a viewer. The “You” in the piece’s text is directed—not at some nameless, fictional malevolence—but towards the consumer himself. When I view this work, I become complicit with the oppressive forces that this piece seeks to make visible. The art of democratic, participatory, and critical education can perhaps function in a similar way, and serve to help the teacher feel similarly unsettled in school and humbled by the role he plays in the lives of children. When Van Manen (1986) considers the child’s tendency to imitate an adult’s example, he reflects upon his own anxiety, and finds that the relationship, that forms the basis for this tendency, is at once troubling and promising:

I am confronted with my own doubts. Is this the way I want my child to act and be? And if not, is it the way I want myself to act and be? The child becomes my teacher. As he or she tries out possibilities, I am reminded of possibilities still open to myself. In this experience of pedagogic possibility lies the truth of the
saying that children make us feel young again. Children in their trying out express that there is hope, that there is possibility of living life differently, and better. And once again I grasp that hope for my own life (p. 14)

I discovered something similar as I imagined another kind of teaching, particularly when the liberatory and transformative education that I sought to give to children found me, instead. When I attempted to demystify the act of teaching with first graders, when I tried to represent myself as something other than an authoritative text—when, as an homage to Brecht (1980) we shattered the fourth wall with words—the child and I exchanged the task of authorship, and suddenly undisguised, I was revealed as young and vulnerable again but with a new-found awareness that second chances come at a high price. The act of putting personal trust in the children around me made me feel very vulnerable; I was “grasping hope for my own life”, and though perhaps I had merely made another adult narrative manifest, at least for a moment, I felt that I had reappeared, and was teaching—and that there was courage and meaning in the activity, and some value in retelling the story.

My professor made me read Teaching Children to Care: Management in the Responsive Classroom in an introductory course. In it, Ruth Charney (1992) describes a classroom meeting technique called Center Circle wherein a child communicates with classmates through gestures and eye contact: a firm handshake from one child to another indicates that the student is happy with his or her relationship with a peer, while a “pound” on the rug in front of a classmate shows that he or she is angry or troubled by something the other child has done. The children are then allowed to discuss their
feelings with one another in an emotionally safe context. I used this kind of meeting in my practice, as well, and influenced by the work conducted in the Philosophy for Children program (Makaiau & Miller, 2012), posited the meeting on the process of inquiry, the practice of thinking clearly, and an investigation of democratic ideals with young children. I called these class meetings “Government”.

And like most of my ideas, I found it easily destabilized.

The children wiggle restlessly as they sat on the floor in our Government circle. Hideo, always more active than anyone else, shuffled on all fours and pretended to be a dog. The girl who sat next to him frowned as she leaned out of his way. I was sending emails to the other teachers, but when the children called me, I rushed away from the computer and in my haste to find my spot in the circle, stepped on Hideo’s hand!

One of the girls giggled as Hideo yelped with pain. I quickly apologized and sat down, my mind on the meeting and what I wanted to say to the class.

My apology was not nearly enough. Hideo glared at me, his eyes hot with tears. I could tell he was more angry than hurt. In fact, if I was a kid, I’m sure he would have hit me. A six-year-old governor started the meeting. Going around the circle, the kids clapped for friends and pounded the rug at people who cut in line or teased them. When Hideo’s turn came, he just hung his head. “C’mon, Hideo, clap or pound? Or do you pass?” the Governor urged. Hideo didn’t move.

A dry, quiet voice came out of my throat of its own volition. “Hideo”, I murmured, “you know you can pound at me, if you want.” Surprised, the other children grew quiet. They stopped wiggling and sat up straight and polite. The tension seemed to leave Hideo’s shoulders as he thumped the rug forcefully.
“Mister Au!”

“Why did you pound at me, Hideo?”


“I heard you, Hideo.” I replied, and we smiled at each other. The relationship between my students and myself had just become very complicated but hopefully, it had also become more sincere.

▽

“Paul is a really good boy, Mr. Asau, you don’t have to worry,” I said, trying to untangle myself as quickly as possible.

“If he ever gets out of line, you have my permission to give him a good smack,” he said.

“…I could never do that, um, it’s illegal and—”

“I know Asians don’t spank their kids. I know. But I’m giving you permission. He needs to learn.”

I was reading Rousseau (1979) for a philosophy of education class; because he wrote about nurturance and allowing time for the child to develop, he is often counted as a major influence on modern and progressive education (Platz & Arellano, 2011). My principal gets excited when she sees me sitting with the book. “In Montessori we love Rousseau,” she tells me, lingering over my shoulder.

I am more interested in his descriptions of education as control. Rousseau creates a persona of himself in Jean Jacques, the governor of a boy who he is raising to
demonstrate that “social inequality is legitimized only as long as it reflects natural
inequalities” (Trohler, 2012, p. 488). He wishes to prove that a natural man can survive
the pressures of corrupt society, and if educated properly, can contribute to its
recuperation. Forming philosophy into story, Rousseau writes about his relationship with
a student in a way that differs considerably from the heartwarming narratives of teaching
I usually consumed, tales wherein a naïve young teacher will enter a world markedly
different from his own, encounter tough, disenchanted and withdrawn students, and
through adventure and journey, discover the value of sacrifice and what it means to truly
be a teacher; for as Jean Jacques creates educational puzzles for Emile, it becomes clear
that Rousseau believes that “educational theorists ought to concern themselves with
identifying and eliminating harmful or useless pains while encouraging and facilitating
students’ experiences of beneficial ones” (Mintz, 2012, p. 250). Accordingly, the
character of Jean Jacques is free to dedicate himself to the manipulation of the child’s
emotions and burgeoning sense of self-worth, without contrition, providing that it serves
his educational purpose.

This premise is illustrated vividly in the second book where the teacher,
intending to teach Emile the concept of property, invites the child to plant beans in a
country garden in a spot that has already been sown with melon seeds by the gardener, a
character named Robert. Emile and Jean Jacques visit the small plot of earth everyday
and the child is depicted, as I am about to do, as concentrating all of his youthful
enthusiasm and energy into the careful cultivation of his plants. Emile is thrilled to
observe the beans sprout and thrive under his earnest care, but one day Emile experiences
a disaster, and finds that all of his fragile, beautiful plants are destroyed and mixed
mercilessly into overturned soil. Pretending to sympathize, the teacher tells us how
“first sentiment of injustice comes to shed its sad bitterness in it. Tears flow like streams.
The grieving child fills the air with moans and cries. I partake of his pain, his indignation”
(Rousseau, 1979, p. 99). Sobbing, Emile seeks out the offender, who is none other then
the gardener himself, Robert. When Emile demands an explanation, Robert replies that he
had planted melons on that spot of earth, long before Emile had planted his beans.
Because his young melons were destroyed, he felt it was within his rights to deprive the
culprit of the beans as well, and then averts solace when he explains that he intended to
share the sweet melons with Emile and Jean Jacques, once the melons matured. The
lesson learned, the educator, triumphant, notes that “in this model the way of inculcating
primary notions in children one sees how the idea of property naturally goes back to the
right of the first occupant of labor. That is clear, distinct, simple, and within the child’s
reach (Rousseau, 1979, p. 99). Emile and the gardener come to an understanding: Robert
allows Emile a small area of the garden to use for his next gardening project, if he will
henceforth respect the property of others.

This episode problematized, in a most amusing fashion, the narrative of teaching
that constructs the child as a precious, fragile flower which we, as teachers, must
cultivate with care; Rousseau’s suggestion is on one level appalling to my precious
sensibilities, but as literature I felt it was another resource with which to provoke critical
conversation about authority and control amongst the children in my class. Since we were
growing lima beans anyway, there would be a level of symmetry between both activities.

I looked at the small bags of potting soil that were nestled in the corner of the
room, next to the sink. Then I looked at the little chairs and desks that I rearrange every
quarter to keep the students from socializing too loudly, and for a moment I actually felt guilty about being an adult, weary of the story I perpetuated, and wary of the one I was about to create. But we search for renewal.

Using her little green spade, Aisa scooped soil into a plastic bag. Not a single crumb of dirt fell to the ground. With the tip of her finger she made a shallow hole, placed a lima bean into it, and covered it again. She dipped the same hand into a bucket of water and sprinkled diamonds onto the soil’s surface. The morning sun lit the bag with a glow and a promise, and Aisa held it before her eyes and squinted at it, urging the seed to sprout.

By necessity, Dalt, who was ungainly and tall for his age, needed to adopt a different approach to planting his lima bean. “Hold this open for me, Mr. Au,” he chirped, and handed me a bag. As I spread its lips, Dalt dumped two handfuls of dirt onto my forearms. Precious little of it entered the bag, but the second attempt was more successful. “This is fun!” he said, forcefully pressing his seed into the dirt.

After the seeds were sown, I acculturated the first graders into the West’s scientific process and peered, in pretend curiosity, into one of our ersatz planters. Then I talked into the air. “I wonder if the seeds will sprout without water. Or without light?”

I wrote “Do Not Water” on a piece of masking tape, stuck it in a bag, placed it next to the window, and then slid a second bag into the depths of our old grey storage locker. My acting was terrible. Still, the seeds sprouted in darkness just fine, and every day we saw them stretch their pale arms out further and further in a futile, slow search for sunlight.

“Look how long and skinny the stems are,” Dalt said, opening the locker one day.
“Yeah,” I mumbled. I was bent over Amber’s composition book, where we were both trying to remember how to spell the word *chlorophyll*.

Dalt sniffed the air, raised an eyebrow, and asked, “Did you know the beans would grow in the dark, Mr. Au?”

“Yeah,” I said dully, without thinking. Dalt didn’t say a word. Instead, he slammed the door of the locker with all of his strength. The locker tilted, the door bounced open again, and the little plant trembled in a dim, unstable world.

The unit continued for two more weeks, and my first graders, like the fictional Emile, became quite enamored with their plants. The children learned how to water sparingly and to move slowly amongst the desks so as not to spill anyone’s plant onto the floor, and I enjoyed watching them transport the plastic bags from window to window, in an effort to give each specimen long doses of sunlight. This was, of course, all accompanied by my summary discussion on plants and their needs as organisms. Admittedly it was a rather undemanding example of elementary school science.

I gathered them unto the rug and presented *Emile’s Bean Story* to them as a reading response lesson. Rarely receiving the opportunity to touch books that were more than twenty-four pages thick, the first graders loved the girth and weight of my copy of *Emile*. While they passed it back and forth and pretended to read it, I explained a bit of its background to them, and steadily built up to my storytelling persona, until my voice soared and dipped through the narrative. Illustrating the “Beans Story” with markers and drawing pictures of Mr. Rousseau, Emile, and Robert as stick figures was quite fun, and I made sure to draw a little wig on Mr. R. so that he looked like the picture on the book’s cover. Slyly, I did not reveal that it was known to Mr. Rousseau that Emile destroyed the
melon seeds when he planted his beans; and instead described the plot only as it appeared to Emile. After describing Emile’s distress, I invited discussion.

“Emile and Robert are both right, Mr. Au,” Mahina said. She was already a bit bored and turned to Cindy.

Cindy agreed with a slight frown. “Emile, the boy, he should have asked if he could use the land.”

“It’s a rule. Don’t kill someone else’s plants. It’s someone else’s property,” Wyatt said, using the new word he had learned.

Michael, a sensitive boy, was upset for both of the characters. Working through his concerns, he said, “Robert and Emile are wrong. Robert is wrong because he squished. But Emile stepped into Robert’s property. Draw that, draw Robert’s property, Mr. Au.” I drew a little orange plot of land inside a fence, and hung a placard labeled ‘Michael’ to its gate. He seemed pleased with that, while I felt like I was serving Saint-Exupery’s Little Prince (1993), which is perhaps, the best way for a teacher to feel, anyway.

“OK, but here’s the secret, Mahina,” I said. “Mr. Rousseau knew that Emile’s garden was going to be squished the whole time! He did it because he wanted to teach Emile a lesson about property!”

Now there was a palpable feeling of surprise among the children. I actually saw Cam’s jaw drop, just like in the cartoons. Rousseau and I had designed a dramatic little moment, and I took no small pleasure in revealing a plot point, conceived by an eighteenth century philosopher, to an audience of six-year-olds in the twenty first century; but a few seconds later, I recognized this as pride, as another selfish adult pretension, and my mentor sighed at me, visibly irritated.
“Your head is in the clouds,” she said to me in a harsh whisper. “Y’know what you need to do, Chris? Collect lunch money. Take attendance. Do the nuts and bolts of teaching.”

“Guys, I guess I told you that story because I want to learn about my own teaching. Its part of the idea of the university class, the grown up school class, that I’m taking.”

“My Auntie goes there.” Haley said.

I struggled to explain what I was really trying to understand, and my voice fell. “No, the teaching, I-I don’t know what it’s like for you…I…do a lot so stuff where…remember when I tricked you and pretended that I didn’t know if the seeds would grow in the closet? Do you think that is OK?”

There are moments when you lose students. Alexis didn’t care about my anxiety. Why should she? She retreated into her imagination and played with her hair, while Jennifer, sitting next to her, looked apprehensive and directed her gaze towards the window. Trying to promote dialogue before I lost the group’s attention, I wrote in sloppy block print “Is it alright for a teacher to trick a kid in order to teach a lesson?”

As I added the dot to the question mark, Cindy snorted, “Emile brought it on himself! Children need to think before they act!” The sharpness of her tone was frightening.

Amber raised her hand politely, and waited to be called upon, but seizing the silence, Kyle said, “Children don’t learn when they are told something. Emile had to learn it that way.” Amber put her hand down and refused to meet my eyes.
Victoria smiled tightly. She was a leader among the children, but one who rarely spoke during class discussion. “No,” she said, “Mr. Rousseau knew Emile would get sad. He was trying to trick him on purpose.” She stated the inevitable in a modest and commanding way, and I saw the weight of each child’s brow crook towards the floor. We traded a few seconds of silence. I rocked my chair gently, and allowed criticality to entangle the space. Dalt was the first to stir. He straightened himself and looked at me, and his blue eyes examined me closely. His father was a watercolorist, and an old friend of mine, who often praised me to his son.

“It’s OK for the teacher to pretend he doesn’t know something, right Mr. Au?” he said, soothingly. I grinned back and shrugged.

Wyatt trusted me, too. “Mr. Au knew the beans in the closet would grow,” he said, “that’s a trick, but it’s an OK trick.”

“But it’s not nice to trick children like Mr. Rousseau did! That was a hard lesson!” Dalt added.

The willingness of my students to follow my agendas, my rules, and my constructs without complaint may signify more than a mere compliance with adult authority. It might indicate, I remember thinking, that they naturally wanted to trust and love this adult—this person—at this moment. Perhaps I could learn to accept that condition. I thought of Dalt when I read in Rousseau (1979) a few chapters later:

Then, in revealing to him all I have done for him, I shall reveal that I have done it for myself, and he will see in my tender affection the reason for my care. What surprise, what agitation I am going to cause in him by suddenly changing
language! Instead of narrowing his soul by always speaking of his interest, I shall now speak of mine alone, and I shall touch him more. (p. 323)

Unlike myself, Dalt didn’t forget about the bag of dry soil on the shelf, with the seeds that did not receive water. He dug the seeds out clumsily, when no one was watching, and turned them into mash on his desk. I found the mess while he was at recess, brushed the remains into my palm, and threw them outside for the bugs and birds to nibble.

Three decades pass, and I’m a teacher at the same school, in a classroom just one door down from Mrs. Shota’s, the woman who I will forever associate with shoyu chicken. A faint but alluring scent drifts on the breeze to our classroom. Today we are being served spaghetti in meat sauce, one of the tastiest meals on the cafeteria menu, and one to which my body has no physical reaction, other than hunger. Joshua, who is reading out loud, stutters in an effort to finish sharing quickly. He has written a fiction story about a finding a jewel stuck on the inside of an active volcano, and though he worked diligently on his final draft, his stomach’s rumbling takes sudden precedence.

“…and the helicopter pulled and I got out.” Joshua says. He smiles, put his paper down hastily. “That’s The End. Any questions?” The children applaud politely and Joshua gives me a cue with his eyes.

I know my part. “That was an exciting story, Josh! O.K. it’s time for lunch. Remember to put all your drafts away nicely so you can work on your story some more tomorrow. Then wash your hands and line up nicely.” Papers rustle and pencils clatter to the floor as the children rise and store their belongings. Joshua almost trips while
sprinting towards the door. But Toby stands up slowly and quietly. He is sensitive and artistic, but also excitable, and jumps and bangs his tray against those of his classmates instead of creeping humbly in line, and needs to get up from the lunch table every few minutes to stretch and wiggle. Because of his behavior, Toby rarely escapes a scolding at the cafeteria, and the midday meal, to him, means trying to eat while adults watch his every movement with suspicion.

The cafeteria used to be a loud and sloppy place where kids ate noisily, but our new principal despises unruly behavior in children. She felt that the reinforcement of proper manners could restore some much-needed peace at lunchtime, and retrained the staff and adjusted the atmosphere accordingly. Grade levels now lined up at the cafeteria five minutes earlier. The cafeteria monitors, mostly grandmothers, were encouraged to be very strict and walk between tables while loudly instructing students to “stop talking and eat”. After fifteen minutes, the children received a signal to get up from the table as a group, walk in line, scrape the remaining food off their trays, walk in line, and sit noiselessly on the steps of the cafeteria’s little stage until their teacher arrived to lead them back to their classroom. It was a harried, stressful way to eat a meal, and a dull, oppressive way to metabolize it. I suspected that the changes in the culture of the cafeteria had more to do with the efficient operation of its food service, than the behavior of the kids, but had no way to prove it.

Since I wanted to shield the children in our class from the pestering adults, and let them eat in a relaxed and social climate, I experimented with sitting with the kids during lunch. The children begged for attention and amusement while I was there, and this was
tiring, but the grandmothers did leave us alone, though they circled our table warily, like sharks.

The principal had really changed. She appeared so caring and friendly at first. Initially she spent most of her time in the office, and left only to supervise children during periods of transition. A former teacher from a private school setting, she apparently wished to apply the management skills that had kept her classroom running smoothly, and her lessons on schedule, to the entire student body. She watched students during recess time and assisted parents with drop off and pick up. She seemed very helpful and polite.

What I didn’t understand, naively, was that she was using that time to gather data. Someone, somewhere, had tasked her with improving procedures and the conduct of the student body, and within a month of her appointment, she began to make changes. Teachers on recess duty were assigned specific zones to watch while kids played in the yard, and cones and red tape appeared to mark the space where a mother’s car could idle—for five minutes—while waiting for her child. After these changes were implemented, the principal’s attention turned to the cafeteria. As a first step towards lunchroom civility, she issued the supervisors shiny metal whistles.

One day, I saw her walking briskly past my classroom. I gathered my courage, left the children, and went up to talk; this was difficult for me to do, since I thought I looked like an upstart child in her eyes.

“Can you please take a look at what’s happening in cafeteria? I don’t think the kids like it. They tell me the grandmas are too intense and scary.”
The principal looked at me and smirked, as if to say that that was the intent. I was appalled.

“Please take this seriously! Developmentally, the kids need to relax and eat and socialize!”

Her demeanor relaxed a little, and she looked at me with slight affection, if not respect. “OK, Chris. I will”, she said. Then she thanked me.

A few days later, I walked alongside my class as they joined the children lining up on the shaded concrete path. The cafeteria appeared, from the outside, like an enjoyable place to take a break and eat a meal with friends. The exterior was colored a soothing pink and adorned with colorful banners that encouraged everyone to practice “Lokahi” and show “Respect” to each other at all times. But as I approached the entrance, I noticed an unnatural quiet, and heard nothing but a low collective whisper. My kids held the swinging door open for me, and I saw the cafeteria monitors stalking fish like egrets among the tables, their heads swinging low, glaring at the kindergartners, whistles at the ready. Something had changed, and it had gotten worse.

“Are you going to eat with us today, Mr. Au?” Heather asked hopefully.

“No, sorry, me and Mrs. Moy have a lot of work to do.” I patted her on the shoulder, promptly turned around, and went back to the classroom to eat a sandwich in my room alone.

After lunch, I craned my neck carefully around the door, to see if my kids were waiting for me, and saw Toby standing very still. He was getting a lecture from the lunchroom supervisor. This forced me to enter its maw. I held my breath and strode up to
them, hoping to help the supervisor investigate a problem. But there were no questions to ask, and the consequence for Toby’s actions had already been decided.

“Mr. Au,” she said to me in loud and exasperated voice, “this one ran with his tray and cut in front of another student at the trash can, and ran to the stage steps so that he could be the first in line!” She gave me a moment to respond. The discourse demanded at this point that I frown, glare at Toby, and tell him I was disappointed. This is how our school taught and disciplined children.

But I couldn’t answer, and no words came. The supervisor sputtered slightly and resumed her performance. “Running like that is dangerous. So I told him he lost his afternoon recess!”

Toby looked at me with pleading eyes, and silently implored me for mercy. I couldn’t help smirking back, just a little. The supervisor didn’t know that Toby always gets his afternoon recess, no matter how he inappropriately he might behave; he is an active child and I needed to let him run around outside at least four times a day.

I palmed the back of Toby’s head and pushed him ahead of me. “Thanks, we’ll talk about it.” I tried to leave with a strong, authoritative bearing, but I could feel her eyes burning into the back of my head, even after we were out of sight. I hoped that Toby would be careful this afternoon, and spend his recess among the trees that lined the basketball court.

Back in the safety of the classroom, Mika, the class governor, called each child’s name. The kids began to sit on the floor in a circular formation next to each other, touching knees. If one of the kids hesitated to join the circle, Mika invoked a popular notion of Hawaiian culture and explain that it was important to show that we are an ohana,
or a family, in the classroom. “Ohana means family, family means nobody gets left
behind, or forgotten,” she liked to say, quoting *Lilo and Stitch* (Sanders & Deblois, 2002).
She often expresses this idea in a cadence that sounds uncomfortably like my own voice.

Like many lower elementary teachers, I rationalized the use of circle time as a
democratic, community-building exercise, which allowed children to share their feelings
in a trusting and caring way; at the same time I understood that it could also be a very
powerful management tool, since the circle, even when silent, could persuade a child to
express regret for misbehavior. It sometimes felt like the third act of a crime drama.

The last of the children sat down. Some of the first graders were not fond of Toby
and glared at him, like spectators at a trial. I looked at the criminal. Toby was huddled
down next to me, hanging his head.

“Mika, can we talk about what happened instead of doing the usual claps?” I
asked.

Mika nodded. She loved being in charge. “Toby”, she said slowly and solemnly,
“are you sorry for running around?”

Toby looked at me and I winced, making a funny face. I knew that I was in
danger of undermining the authority of my own problem-solving procedure, but I felt that
we couldn’t live as characters in a Camus novel any longer. Mika looked at me, and
always on the side of the teacher, started to smile. Toby lifted his eyes in wonder.

“Guess what, Toby, you made a mistake,” I told him, chuckling. “Are you sorry?”

“Yes, Mr. Au.” Like much of the class, he is bewildered by the distance between
my words and my demeanor, and didn’t know how to respond. Neither did I. My desire
to exercise the teacher’s authority was becoming more and more tentative, but it felt good.
“That’s nice, but I don’t think it was really your fault,” I said. I looked at the kids in our circle. “Toby wasn’t safe, but Toby running is like the wind blowing…and you can’t scold the wind!”

This flippant remark seemed to trigger a feeling of unrest that was building among the class for weeks. Tara stopped stroking Jessica’s hair and looked at Mika, who sensed a turn in public opinion and reclaimed the government circle by posing inquiry and inviting praxis.

“The big people yell at us for eating too slowly,” she said rhetorically. “Why are we not allowed to talk and enjoy our lunch?”

“Yeah, It’s scary!” yelled Joshua.

“I was just telling a joke!”

“Grandma yelled at me but I didn’t do anything!”

Mika showed the kids the palms of her hands, another gesture that she acquired from watching me, signaling that it needed to be quiet. “It’s not nice and it’s not fair,” she said with a chirp.

I raised my hand and Mika called on me. “Well, let’s take a break from the cafeteria,” I said. Tomorrow we can go get our lunches, but bring the trays back to the room.” Every child in the class cheered with excitement, including Toby. “But you guys need to behave yourselves and clean up the trash,” I hastily added.

“Can we have centers after lunch?” Anna asked, hoping for a party.

“No, it still needs to be calm, yeah? So when you finish you just go to quiet reading. Then after that it’s a math day, so we will do our Junction math, I guess.”

“Can we sit anywhere we want?”
“I don’t see why not. You can even go outside.”

The children nodded vigorously during the negotiation, and when Mika called for a vote, and not a single hand was raised in objection. The following day, twenty-two first graders walked in a line from the cafeteria to the classroom like ants, balancing lunch trays on their forearms, their faces beaming. In the classroom, they separated themselves into clusters and chatted merrily. I made a silent bet on how many of them would spill their food. I was sure that one of them would be Toby, since he trotted about from one clique of children to another with his tray; if he heard a conversation he liked, he would sit down with a group of kids, take a couple of bites, then leave in search of another group of kids. This continual movement was necessary for his digestion. Isaac, a slight and shy boy, walked up to me and handed me his milk.

“Wow, thanks! I am a little thirsty,” I teased.

“Open this please, Mr. Au.” He asked, gently.

I waved my hand over the milk carton. Nothing happened. Then I pointed my finger in the air as if remembering a secret. I passed my hand over the milk again and intoned an ancient spell. “Zimminy Zorta Zopen, Milk Carton Now Open!”

The spout of the carton magically unfolded itself. Isaac was delighted and shared the rhyme with his friends, who laughed and rewrote it as they tore apart a packet of shrink-wrapped cheese. It had been some time since I had seen such relaxed and happy children, and I was pleased to observe that at the end of the meal, the first graders kept their promise, and cleaned up after themselves before picking up some books to read.

Although each child finished eating at a slightly different time, the entire meal didn’t take more than half an hour. This was about ten minutes more than what was
allotted to the class in the cafeteria. It was a nice change, and it made the children feel secure, but I was actually hoping that this would be temporary, and that after a week or so our absence from the cafeteria would become conspicuous. I imagined the principal coming to the classroom to talk to kids and offering an apology. She knew that we have been using critical literacy practices and democratic circles, and I was certain that she would understand the necessity of communicating honestly to the children.

A week passed, and we did receive a message of sorts: the cafeteria monitor sent us a box of large, thick garbage bags for the cardboard trays and leftovers. We were expected to use two bags each day and send them back, filled with trash, to the door at the ewa side of the cafeteria, nearest the dumpster. The note said that when we ran out, she could give us another box.

After a few more weeks, eating in the classroom with the children began to take its toll; the children often prevented me from finishing my afternoon prep, behaved boisterously, and left gooey clumps of food on the tables and chairs. I started to get frustrated. I knew that I was in danger of replicating the conditions of the cafeteria if I started to scold them myself, and wearily, I knew that I needed to make a decision.

I watch Toby put away his writing folder, wash his hands, and drift into line. As I walk along the outside of the cafeteria with my class, I thought upon the system’s efficiency. Getting one’s lunch and eating didn’t need to be a terrible experience, and there was a reason it was set up this way. It was really like moving through an airport; it is often unpleasant, but you followed directions, and joined the lines, so that everyone could attain their goal. In this case, you are given a hot meal and a place to consume it quietly.
I pat Toby on the shoulder, and say goodbye to the class. As I begin to walk away, I hear a whistle blow, and a yelp that sounds like Toby getting into trouble. I chalk it up to my overly sensitive imagination, look down at the lines on the sidewalk, and return to my empty classroom.

At the time I was beginning to abandon my belief in traditional teaching and play with the relationship between teacher and student, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) began to build a following, and I viewed it as a great threat to the democratic conceptualization of teaching that I was trying to achieve. It is against the backdrop of its effects that my resignation occurred, since by design it created strict expectations for teacher methodology, served children only by listing an inventory of what they needed to learn, and was enforced through a testing system that represented, according to Noah De Lissovoy and Peter McLaren (2003) “a violent reification of human consciousness and creativity” (p. 132). As with many narratives in education, NCLB putatively began with individuals in positions of power invoking the phrase “educational research”; for, as always, it is the individuals who control research that can control the production of knowledge and the aims of schooling (Smith, 1999). In a move that effectively wiped away the relevance of nuanced qualitative research in relation to public education, the NCLB news report released by the Whitehouse at the time called for federal funding to be “spent on effective, research based programs and practices” (Whitehouse News, 2001). Elaine Garan (2004) noted that this version of educational research was endorsed by a small group of experts who defined learning as the assimilation of a discrete set of skills that were based on the notion that a medical model can exemplify the most dependable
expression of educational research.

Typically, a study that was congruent with the NCLB ethos included an analysis of data obtained from a treatment group in comparison to data collected from a control group (Garan, 2002) but though celebrated as evidence-based, these studies interpreted the complexity of human behavior through a reductive, positivistic process that “typically tells us which instructional approach or plan worked better, on average” (Allington, 2005, p. 218). Thus, these studies only reported a raise in posttest scores for some students, under certain conditions, at a particular time—and were of little value to the elementary teacher who wished to engage fully with the complexities that his children might have embodied in terms of community, culture, interests, temperament, learning style, family background, personal history, ethnicity, age, and physical comportment.

Although the conclusions derived from these studies were not generalizable for all groups of children, they were often presented as if they were cure-alls for low achievement and low test scores, were heralded in the educational literature, and rapidly assimilated into the knowledge bases that served as a point of reference for conservative advocates of school reform. Indeed, the research was often commodified, formulated into curricular packages, and sold to school districts by publishers for profit rather quickly (Edelsky & Bomer, 2005). These packaged curriculums and programs usually came complete with convincing statistics and case studies, as well as expert trainers who were adept at implying that educational standards would be met, and that higher test scores would result, through a focused application of their program. Since the NCLB Act required school systems to test students annually on their knowledge of a set of standards, and to make Adequate Yearly Progress on the tests in order to receive federal funds, the
purchase of a packaged curriculum by a public school was understandable and inevitable. Once in play, these programs helped to promote the establishment of a narrow discourse congruent with the “notion that knowledge is pure, and unrelated to the knowledge seeker” (Ohanian, 1999, p. 3) in a public school. Thus models for curriculum design, school community, and teacher dialogue that were not congruent with the aims of NCLB became marginalized by a version of science which adheres to what Patti Lather (2004) wittily calls “your father’s paradigm” (p. 25). Lather notes that this form of research “disavows decades of critique and (re)formulations toward a science after the critique of science” (pg. 27), and in this case, could be viewed as an unproblematised use of positivistic research practices that was reduced and reified into their simplest, most romantic forms, and which existed under the NCLB narratives unencumbered by issues of representation, power/knowledge questions, postcolonial theory or the democratic role that the individual might play within a community of learners.

Within the discourse of No Child Left Behind, my work as a classroom teacher was only as valuable to the charter school as its supposed contribution to educational reform. I thought this appalling, because I felt that teachers, like the kids, deserved a democratic outlet for the ideas, questions, and theories that were generated by their professional activity. In any event, the continued responsibility for motivating students, connecting the curriculum to lived experience, and making learning meaningful, will always belong to the teacher, and though this responsibility may have been mentioned, it remained largely unaddressed by NCLB. We turn a blind eye, not only to this obligation, but to the fantastical images we create in the name of the child, that allow us to produce this strange concept called schooling.
Chapter Three: Images of Childhood

Particular pictures reside in my mind that I can’t evict. I romanticize my childhood, and superimpose my childhood self into stressful adult situations, even as I struggle to free myself from the subjectivity that produces the image; as an introduction to an exploration of the images of children that are commonly constructed by our culture, I offer a monologue that rememorates a flight to O‘ahu that I took on the occasion of my uncle’s funeral.

Listen, that was a nice thing that you did. And you look like an intelligent and sensitive person, so I’m going to share a very important secret with you. Are you staying in O‘opu? Good. When you go to the beach, try stop between the rock wall in front of the Outrigger Hotel and the lifeguard station. Under the sand, right there, lies a complete brontosaurus skeleton.

Yes, brontosaurus. Not apatosaurus. I know the difference quite well. I assembled it on a trip to the beach I made with my uncle, years ago, all by myself. You can believe the accuracy of my claim. When it comes to dinosaurs, I am an expert. I spent hours studying my aunt’s Time-Life Nature Library when I was a boy. I could print the words “prehistoric” and “allosaurus” with felt markers well before I could read.

It’s true that the scientists in my auntie’s books never seemed to dig for dinosaurs in Hawai‘i. I always thought that was strange. But dinosaurs must have been here because Hawai‘i has active volcanoes and whenever there was a picture of a brachiosaurus up to his shoulders in a lake, or a tyrannosaurus rex confronting a triceratops, there was a smoldering volcano painted into the background.
The important thing is to know where to look. While the other kids caught waves or made sandcastles, I practiced paleontology. See, pieces of gleaming bone are uncovered whenever a wave washes out. I used to clean the sand and limu off the fossils, carry them carefully past the sunbathing tourists, and assemble what I could find in the high, hot part of the beach, where the sand was dry and I could work in peace.

I remember the dinosaur’s spinal column, shoulder blades, and skull appearing as if by magic. The skeleton was huge. I traced a body around the bones with my toe, and this gave the creature muscle and heft. Then I wished and wished that it would come to life. Have you ever read *Danny and the Dinosaur*? (Hoff, 1992) I didn’t want that, a talking brontosaurus. I wanted a real one, thirty feet tall. And roaring.

When the surfing lessons were pau, he whistled for me twice—that was my cue to move as fast as I could. You didn’t keep a man like my uncle waiting. I quickly poured sand over the bones to keep them safe and smoothed everything out with the palm of my hands. When the work site looked like an ordinary stretch of beach, I ran to meet him at the car.

So much has happened between that day and this one. I’ve been back to the beach many times, but it looks different, there’s nothing at all familiar. But you are new to the islands, and you’ll be very sensitive to your surroundings. Please stop between the rock wall and the lifeguard station. When your eyes sparkle, you will see it. You can retrieve my brontosaurus.

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Certain popular images of the child dominate our imaginations as educators, and shape our teaching philosophy and methodology. Woodrow and Brennan (2001) identify
three archetypal images of childhood, naming them “child as innocent”, “child as threat or monster”, and “child as embryonic adult”. These oneiric images are instantly recognizable to us all, and I find them very difficult to banish from my teacher’s imagination. The first image, that of child as innocent, conjures up the picture of an ingenuous, wide-eyed child who needs protection and love, and who benefits from listening to an experienced adult who knows what is best by virtue of his experience and wisdom. One can see this innocent child dressed in a costume on cute calendars, and this image is often mentioned on the television news when a safety issue or moral crisis in our schools is being debated (For the children’s sake, the children!). On the other hand, it is best to teach strict conformity to the monstrous child who has the capacity to upset order through his undisciplined behavior and essentially savage nature. Sometimes we find humor when these monstrous children appear as characters in the media, such as Dennis the Menace or Bart Simpson, but they are no laughing matter in the classroom, and it is these ill-disciplined children that form the need for classroom management and the curriculum of character education. Finally, when the child is viewed as an embryonic or unformed adult, it becomes one of society’s treasures that must be protected and nurtured. It is through this image that schools enact curriculum for the child’s best interest; the endangered children who are “literally being left behind” in a world that demands “increasingly complex skills from its workforce” in the language of No Child Left Behind (Whitehouse News, 2001, p. i) or the students who might “still remain behind other nations in terms of academic achievement and preparedness to succeed” (National Governors Association, 2009) in the language of its offspring, the Common Core Standards Initiative, exist primarily because of this third image. All three of these
images construct the child as someone who is helpless, inferior, and ultimately malleable—and as someone who we believe should act as obediently and passively as possible in our adult presence. These images, these subjectivities, make conventional schooling and parenting feasible. Significantly, these images also serve to distance the teacher from his or her own childhood, making it difficult for educators to share the experience of being a child with one another or to base practice and theory upon the too-often subjugated knowledge of their own lives (Foucault, 1977b; O'Loughlin, 1996).

The images of the child as an inferior, potentially uncontrollable, and unformed being is clearly sustained in lower elementary school through notions of standards, developmentally appropriate practice, and patriotic socialization, all of which serve to uphold the values of a hierarchical and capitalist society (McLaren, 2005). The standards movement, driven by NCLB, the Common Core Initiatives, and programmatic teaching, emphasizes the achievement of a narrowly defined collection of national academic criteria and makes each public school’s funding contingent upon the attainment of passing test scores. The necessity of finding ways to bring all children up to standard, while raising their performance on tests, has led to the formation of a narrow discourse in many elementary schools, one that is dominated almost exclusively by issues of content delivery, productivity, and assessment. This discourse is fueled by the fear that elementary schools have been failing to educate children properly in the last few generations (Meier, 2002), and creates an atmosphere of moral panic that limits the academic freedom of teachers; at its worse, it tends to predispose the role of the teacher in his students’ lives to that of a taskmaster, and in his own eyes, to that of a technician. The level of interaction between teachers and students in the age of accountability and
standards is often mediated by the use of curriculum packages that include scripted lessons or “teacher proof” units of study that are purchased by schools in an effort to boost test scores (Edelsky & Bomer, 2005). When forced to teach using these programs, the opportunity for an educator to cultivate his or her professional teaching style in a satisfying manner is curtailed, and is replaced by the need to conform to a model of teaching that subordinates constructivist notions of depth, discovery, and collaboration beneath instructional (survival) strategies that emphasize rote learning, subject area coverage, and student recall.

The teaching of reading as a subject area and practice, premised upon the image of child as a helpless innocent and unformed adult, has become colonized by the discourse of standards. From within the classroom, at edge of the millennium, I observed this process first hand, as advocates of practices that were congruent with NCLB, such as Direct Instruction and diagnostic instruments such as the DIBELS, were invited by the principal to display their wares. The presenters relentlessly emphasized a connection between particular reading curriculum packages, measurable student gains, and scientifically based research (Garan, 2004) and were not above instigating a moral panic amongst the teachers in order to sell their programs and expand their bases of power. Once, I asked a question, and the workshop facilitator handed me, with some smugness, an article by the author of the DIBELS assessment, Edward Kameenui (1993). The section she highlighted stated that “the pedagogical clock for students who are behind in reading and literacy development continues to tick mercilessly, and the opportunities for these students to advance or catch up diminish over time” (p. 379).
Since the reading research that is sponsored by the federal government is generally limited to quantitative studies that show the effect of treatment upon the acquisition of skills associated with decoding, or the ability of a child to recognize a series of written symbols as sounds, words, and sentences, a discourse has been created in which the reading teacher’s role is reduced to the delivery of mechanistic skills to young children in a way that belies the social dimension that is inherent in the practice of learning language (Lankshear, 1997). Deeper interaction with the philosophical and social aspects of language arts education are thus very difficult to explore from within the standards-based ethos; these circumstances make the exploration of a critical look at the images of children that we appropriate in education, all the more urgent.

I was taught to view children through the lens of “developmentally appropriate practice”, or DAP. DAP is often described as the “ages and stages” of childhood development and I learned that it provided a complement to the images of the child as innocent and unformed being that I kept in my head. Based upon the work of Piaget (Feeney, Christensen, & Moravcik, 2001), DAP in early elementary settings has become a hindrance upon our ability to engage with children’s literacy education in a complex way. Valerie Walkerdine (1998) has shown how Piaget’s notion of child development, as a pedagogical construction, has been legitimated in the last century through the historical intersection of social concerns, such as the perceived threat of poverty and aggression in the lower classes, and scientific advances such as the theory of evolution and mental measurement. The need to alleviate social ills through the promotion of children’s independence and freedom, coupled with the scientific penchant for observation and measurement, has been combined over time and reified as a normalized practice that
“good” early childhood educators use in “good” early childhood classrooms, to nurture the development of “good” children today. Developmentally appropriate practice continues to be taught in teacher preparation programs and makes up the primary discourse for teachers in early childhood settings. DAP’s value is contested (Jipson & Johnson, 2001), and is often applied in a totalizing way to all sorts of childcare situations, regardless of their locale, cultural demographic, or participants’ socioeconomic class, and tends to exclude the formation of other discourses about the child (Prout, 2000). This is possible because the image of the child in school that developmentally appropriate practice produces has been normalized around an abstraction of a child that could not possibly exist in reality (Burman, 2000). As a result, much of the emphasis of the popular developmentally appropriate practice discourse has been expressed in terms of saving the child from possible obstructions to its normal development in a timely manner; sometimes, this even includes scrutinizing the behavior the child’s parents and his or her home environment (Johnson, 2000). This can force the teacher into the position of a gatekeeper who must continuously observe the child in a way that borders on panoptic surveillance in schools—even in playground situations that connote freedom of movement and expression (Ailwood, 2003).

When I was a preschool teacher, I found that the narrow view of the child as a subject of the adult’s gaze placed intense pressure on me. Recalling Piagetian milestones, playing the role of the all-knowing expert, and accurately assessing a child’s development, were considered primary teaching duties. Luckily, by that time, it had become common practice to list the child’s cognitive, physical and emotional deficits on a chart, and his academic accomplishments on a rubric, before talking with parents or
administrators. At that point, I knew that my development as a caregiver, and my capacity to respectfully nurture and befriend young people at school, had become ancillary.

Another popular narrative in elementary schools, based upon the image of the potentially monstrous child, and the child as an unformed adult, states that a child can learn to be an American even when her ethnicity, religious beliefs, or social class veers away from those of the majority, and suggests that one of the foremost aims of schooling is to promote patriotism in a child in order to acculturate her successfully into American society. This premise originated with Horace Mann’s common schools in the nineteenth century and takes as its starting point the assumption that the philosophical, religious, and economic structures of mainstream society that exists when the child is in school, should be valued and maintained by that same child when she becomes an adult (Spring, 1994). The common school conception remains strong in classrooms today and is expressed through conspicuous signifiers such as the American flag hanging in the classroom and the ubiquitous parade of posters, in the office and cafeteria, that encourage a view of school as a harmonious and productive workplace. It is more subtly conveyed through the coercion of the young person’s attention towards a seemingly endless collection of experiences that stress the importance of following of directions and the need for compliance (Walkerdine, 1998), such as learning to line up before moving on to outside activities, or practicing instantaneous recitation of a teacher’s words. These experiences intimate an educational benefit for the student that may or may not materialize in the future, and I would argue that one of the only curricular outcomes that we can be certain of engendering in the such an educational environment is that of blind
obedience—a value that will most certainly be transferred at some point towards an agreement towards acceptable norms of behavior, a devotion to work, and a sense of patriotism during times of war.

Significantly, the concept of democracy that John Dewey (1963) suggested bringing to the public school, that he describes in *Experience and Education*, which was meant to infuse the curriculum with the re-creation of adult knowledge forms through a variety of mutually constructed social experiences, is largely irrelevant to the narrative function of acculturation that I am describing. Dewey believed that the “organized subject-matter of the adult and the specialist cannot provide the starting point” (p. 83) for schooling and that the genesis of educational activities should be the purview of the child; and it is at this point that I wonder if Mann’s process of acculturation, and Dewey’s notion of curricular democracy, must necessarily form competing narratives.

Perhaps it doesn’t matter. The teacher must hold no doubt, and strive to see himself as an expert whose role is to thoroughly understand and guide the child intellectually, psychologically, and morally for the betterment of society at large (Burman, 2000). A school full of such teachers, such as the charter school that I once inhabited for nine hours a day, can then represent itself as an institution that works to improve society even while it functions as a normalizing agent; the discourse that requires the child be subjectified as a deficient and needy individual, and who is imagined as a smaller, less formed, and incomplete in comparison to the adults in charge, can then become easily entrenched within the school’s culture. This subjectivity serves to normalize and sustain a hierarchical structure in the classroom and facilitates an authoritarian delivery of curriculum where the teacher, from within a position of power, calls for the maintenance
of order and the continuous production of student work; the current approach to the teaching of reading in America’s public schools is profoundly limited by the notion that children cannot achieve literacy without strict management of their time and intellectual output. This is a capitalist invention, a literal inversion, and evidence that the child exists as an abstraction and an emblem.

I was relieved to have a vacation planned at Loulu, Kaua‘i for fall break. My wife drove the family to the airport with the windows open and I leaned back half asleep and watched her long red hair wave in the wind as we sped along. A security guard raised his hand to stop us at the entrance to the airport’s parking structure. Despite being part of heightened security measures he seemed very relaxed. Carefully letting a tiny bit of local inflection into his speech, he politely asked us if he could look inside the hatch of our old Subaru Outback. My wife reciprocated by answering, “Yah”, in her local haole way and the guard walked to the back of the car and peered into the rear window.

The hatch was filled with toys, beach mats and towels, children’s clothes and odd bits of fast food trash—and our suitcases were thrown carelessly on top of the mess. The guard squinted, smiled casually, and waved us through. My wife grinned as she drove up the ramp of the parking structure. “You can get past security if you have a messy car!” she laughed.

A recorded announcement warned us repeatedly about the special measures that were in place as we stood in line at Security. My son ignored the sonorous metallic voice and talked excitedly about airplanes. When we got to the metal detector, the guards separated our family. They said they needed my son to go through it on his own. My son
looked at the entrance to the strange metal and plastic doorway and hesitated. A guard on
the other side of the metal detector beckoned him to hurry.

I started towards my son to urge him along, but I was stopped.

“No! By himself, please, sir!” the guard yelled. I am always irritated by people
who use polite phrases, but express contempt instead. I always taught the first graders to
put sincerity into their voices. My son heard me exhale in frustration, but gathered his
courage and walked through the metal detector by himself, with his arms spread apart as
if he was balancing himself on a top of a rock wall. The security guard, now satisfied,
nodded and turned his attention to the next group of travelers. My son looked relieved.
He grabbed his little Batman suitcase off the conveyer belt and strolled in the direction of
the terminal all by himself. He screeched to a halt next to a young soldier carrying a large
gun, and waited for us to join him.

My wife and I put our belongings back into our bags, tied our shoes and slipped
on our windbreakers while my son stared at the young soldier. He looked like he had
recently been transferred to Hawai‘i from the mainland. He was very fair and had
incredibly short blonde hair that gave the skin above his brows a yellow glow. His helmet
seemed too large, and floated slightly above his head. I could tell that the gun weighed
heavily upon his shoulder, because he had a lopsided stance. With a baggy gold and
brown uniform hanging loosely about his frame, he almost looked like a boy wearing a
costume.

When I was a preschool teacher in California we received donations of toy guns
and child-sized fatigues quite often. Then we would be forced, as a staff, to discuss
whether or not to put military clothing in the dress-up corner. This was always a touchy
issue, because some of the parents were in the armed forces, and we wanted to respect them; on the other hand, we were young and liberal teachers, who loudly proclaimed that we were against war and violence. As I recall, we eventually reached a compromise in which we hung the uniforms in the dress up corner, but put the pretend weaponry into a large trash bag, which was put into storage in the basement. Personally, I never suggested to any of the children in my playgroup that they could dress up like soldiers, ever, and tried to scrunch the little uniforms into the back corner of the dramatic play area. But times had changed since then, and the swelling feeling of patriotism that the country was experiencing, had popularized the military.

“That’s a real army guy,” I told my son, who had only seen military personnel on the television news. Usually, I take him right up to people to talk story, so that he can learn about different professions, and feel like a part of a community. We had had nice conversations with truck drivers, salespeople, bank tellers, plumbers, and mail carriers. But this time I did not encourage movement towards the object of my son’s curiosity. Instead, I looked obliquely at the kid with the gun. Was it a machine gun? We were so close to it that I could see end of the barrel and the blackness inside of it. I tried to picture a scenario that might make that gun fire in the Honolulu International Airport. Every situation I could imagine seemed preposterous, and yet, whoever stationed this marine here, thought it a distinct possibility.

The Marine seemed indifferent to our presence and I decided to keep it that way. As a kid, I walked barefoot everywhere and learned how to avoid broken glass. I turned my son’s attention to the snack bar that was selling spam musubi near our gate. As we walked away from the security checkpoint I took one last look at the young man with the
gun, and purposefully inscribed him into my memory. Sometimes, when I am reading the news, I think about that grownup child in the baggy camo and I wonder about how he grew up and why he became a soldier. I wonder if he is still alive.

In elementary school reading is often presented to young children as a basic skill that is necessary for subsequent school success and a requirement for future employment. To this end, repetitive engagement with the practice of decoding skills and repetitive reading tasks account for much of the child’s time in school. Jean Anyon’s (1980) study, *Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work*, demonstrated that children who attended working-class schools were taught to obediently engage in fragmented, repetitive tasks and to follow instructions, while students in middle class schools were expected to understand procedures and know how to find the answer to questions that were pertinent to an assignment. The former group, it seemed, was being prepared for mechanical, industrial jobs, while the latter was prepared for the more bureaucratic and technical vocations. The commonly held belief that these tasks adequately prepare a child for the job market became increasingly doubtable as we moved forward through the turn of the century. Gee (2005) observes that schools in the early twentieth century did indeed produce students who had good basic linguistic and mathematical skills and the ability to follow directions—traits which, when developed properly, were satisfactory preparation for an industrial middle class job, but he maintains that that type of position is rarely obtained in the new capitalist society of the twenty first century, since technologies and globalization has changed the composition of society’s workforce. Gee finds that the middle class is shrinking rapidly and that the workforce now consists of a large group of
service workers at the bottom, a small group of low level technical workers in the upper middle, and an elite group of knowledge brokers at the top who find ways to manipulate social identity, technologies, and symbols for the production of capital on a massive, corporate scale. These knowledge brokers at the top of the hierarchy depend upon the expertise and creativity of the technical workers to aid their projects; however, this does not necessarily result in job security for the technical worker since his or her job depends upon fixed economic and technological conditions in a world that is now characterized by rapidly shifting, isolated, and often temporary concentrations of capital (McLaren, 2005).

In this sense, the notion of teaching the skills of language arts to children in order to prepare them for work, which we value so much in today’s schools, could be viewed as an inadequate holdover from factory model schooling of the last century, and will not necessarily empower an individual in the economy of tomorrow (Lankshear, 1997; Serafini, 2002). Gee’s observation calls for a critical approach to the teaching of reading.

A memory: when I was a first grade teacher it seemed crude and surreal to be in a teacher-parent conference and discuss whether or not a six-year old child was learning the skills she needed to become a successful member of the workforce; it entailed a great deal of speculation, and a colossal soothing of nerves. Whenever I was asked to find some correspondence with behaviors that were of value to the workforce and how a child performed in the classroom, I lied.

“Chelsea’s doing great. She’s a good listener and is very independent.”

“See how Hoku drew every feather? She is very detail-oriented.”

“I guess it does look like Mark is goofing off sometimes, but I think he’s a deep thinker.”
All I really knew was that each child was facing a complex future that would test their ability to apply conceptual understandings towards the social constructions of work, political alliances, and personal interactions simultaneously, in accordance with the interaction of a multiplicity of discourses (Luke, 2002)...but this was a thought that could not be uttered.

In educational terms, in autoethnographic terms, in critical terms, the creation of school experiences that encourage students to embrace their developing personalities and cultural identities in relation to the lives which they choose to lead is an outcome that is truly worthy of our attention, and can help to banish the images of innocent, monstrous, or unformed children from our minds. This leads me again to I wonder if meaningful reading instruction could be premised upon children learning to test the narratives that adults espouse, in relation to the personal, social, and historical lifeworlds that the children themselves might wish to inhabit. As such, the following autoethnographic stories study the emergence of worlds that children might bring to school, and that a teacher might elect to embrace. It begins with my very first encounter with elementary school.

I listened to the rain tapping on the roof and the blood chugging in my ears. Tomorrow was my first day of school, and my mother had sent me to bed early. I know she wanted me to be well rested, but the excitement of finally attending school—the school that was less than two blocks away from our home, the school that I had seen everyday of my life, the school that was so full of mysteries—kept me awake. Lying in my parent’s enormous bed, I projected images of kindergarten onto the darkness above. I
saw myself sitting on the floor of the sun-drenched classroom. I had a huge book in my lap; its stiff pages contained pictures of elephants and fierce, growling tigers. Behind me, on the wall, snaking rivers and snow-capped mountains crisscrossed over a gigantic, colorful map of the world. Outside the classroom a parade of firemen, policemen, and doctors purposefully walk up and down the street, each of them cheerfully greeting the grownups and offering sage advice to those on their way to work.

No fellow travelers accompany me in this fantasy. Until I was enrolled in kindergarten, my experience of play and learning were solitary and influenced by trips to the library with my mother, and hours and hours of public television. Indeed, in the final moments before sleep, I saw puppets going to school instead of children. They made silly mistakes like writing with the wrong side of a pencil, or reading a book upside down.

I awoke to the smell of freshly fallen rain. My heart pounded in quiet excitement, as my mother and I got ready for our big walk to school. She made sure I brushed my teeth and hair, and fed me toast and juice at our large round dining table. Brown denims were pulled up onto my thin legs and she gave me a soft plaid shirt—with autumn colors—to wear with it. I was to take the time to button up this shirt myself, from the bottom up, so that my shirt was straight and no holes were missed. This was simple to accomplish and it seemed obvious, after passing this test that kindergarten was going to be easy.

The outside world glistened as we walked up the street. It was very quiet and as we passed our neighbor’s homes, I heard the sound of water dripping heavily and slowly off of leaves and rooftops. When a car hissed up the street behind us, I took special care to stay on the sidewalk; I thought this pleased my mother, because she was always
worried that I might be hit by a speeding car, but she didn’t seem to notice. The asphalt was broken next to the school playground and it was here that we came across a puddle with oil on its surface. I swirled the pink and turquoise gloss with my finger, puzzled by the observation that the colors did not mix together like paint. My mother was oddly quiet but she nodded and gave me a tissue with which to wipe my fingers. A cockroach with short stubby legs and a black slug with a yellow stripe down its back were crawling in the same direction as we were. I pretended they were going to school, too. As we reached the gate of the kindergarten courtyard, I could barely control my excitement and gripped my mother’s hand as tightly as I could. We pushed open the gate noisily. The courtyard was empty and still and all I could hear were the lilting, muffled voices of the teachers from inside their rooms.

My mother and I walked until we were just inside the doorway of my new kindergarten classroom. It was a long, narrow room with toys displayed on unpainted, low wooden shelves. The children were on the opposite side of the room and the boys were playing with blocks and toy cars. It was surprisingly warm inside and my shirt, which I worked so hard to button correctly, began to feel sticky and itchy. The teacher walked up to us and greeted me by name. I looked up at her, but she was frowning and smiling at the same time, so I looked away. The teacher was wearing a very neat, very simple dress of pale green. It looked like a dress that my sister might have made for herself, using the patterns that she bought at Woolworth’s. I wanted to ask my teacher about her sewing machine but my attention was captured by a little piece of laminated cardboard, with my name on it, that materialized in my teacher’s hand. It was pinned skillfully and swiftly, and didn’t poke my chest.
The teacher gestured towards the area where the boys were playing and I eagerly rolled onto the carpet to play with the blocks. Each block was much bigger than any that I had at home, and they came in many interesting shapes. As I began to lay the blocks onto the floor in a line to make a freeway, I noticed that the teacher was talking to my mother in an unusual tone. I couldn’t make out the teacher’s words over the sounds of the children playing, but it reminded me of the way my mother talked to me whenever I misbehaved. After a little while, my mother nodded at the teacher, looked at me from across the room, and left without waving goodbye. As soon as my mother was out of sight, the teacher began to talk into the air; it was time for the boys and girls to clean up their toys, and go to their desks.

One never quite feels prepared for the first day of school. Since the custodial staff cleans the rooms during the summer, teacher workdays are not spent making name tags and papering bulletin boards but rearranging heavy, mismatched furniture and sorting all of the books, math manipulatives, and art supplies that were so hastily boxed in June.

The voices of excited children and nervous parents tingle down the back of my neck as I hide a garbage bag of mismatched toys under my desk. I walk around the classroom and survey it from every corner. The environment looks very bare, but appears purposeful. Though squished together, I have a math shelf, a science station, and a large library full of pretty books. Writing paper is stacked carefully upon a low, round table, and I can visualize the kids sitting there, discussing ideas and sharing memories. I just hope that my new parents see the room the way that I do; I worked on it until eleven o’clock the night before, and I want to make a good impression.
The shutters rattle as if hit by ball; it is twenty minutes before eight o’clock. We agreed as a faculty not to open the doors until 7:55, but I don’t know how much longer I can stand this tension. I push a row of desks ever so slightly towards the periphery of the room, to increase the amount of area on the carpet. I like to have as much open space on the floor as possible, because most of my instruction takes place while sitting in a circle with the kids. For some reason, the desks tend to isolate the children from each other’s presence. Maybe it is the rectangular shape. I often wish I could get rid of them altogether, but like me, the desks are assigned to the room.

I hear a father on the other side of the door, “E, you boys better stop running on the sidewalk! If Mr. Au catches you, you gon’ get scolding!”

He says this just a little bit too loudly, as if on stage, as if urging me to come outside. It works; I grab my clipboard and step out to bask in the warmth of my new family. The children want to run into the room, but I stop each one and very officiously shake their hands at the doorway as if I am a diplomat or foreign minister; this makes the kids giggle. One little girl even pretends to swoon. I answer questions as nervous parents enter the room. They speak in coded phrases that signal emotional distress, but something prevents me from talking openly with them about their anxiety; it is the first day of school and I am here to establish the schedule, organize the children’s belongings and manage the group’s behavior. I stayed up until eleven o’clock last night to establish that fact, didn’t I?

“Please put the cleaning supplies near the sink and the school supplies in the cubbies. Yes, I will walk Sheila to afterschool care. No, I think those clothes are a little too dressy for first grade. I did read the file, I know all about Kelsey’s peanut allergy.
Hey—thanks for the mango! Yes, there is homework in first grade but Rocky won’t get any for about a month.”

One mom wants to stay in for the morning and help me sort out everyone’s school supplies, but I tell her that I am not sure where the sponges, binders, and folders go yet, and I invite her to come back next week, when I will have lots of labeling to do. It is a half-truth. Finally, after about twenty minutes, the last goodbye kiss is given, and I am left alone with the class. I look at the children sitting at their desks. Right now, they are names on a list. Although a couple of boys smile at me eagerly, the room remains eerily quiet. Some of the children react subtly to my movements while I walk to the front of the room—they pretend to color or read, but I can see their eyes darting back and forth like wary animals, watching me and not watching me.

It is time to start giving the first graders directions. My mentor teacher whispers in my ear, “You must lay down the law from day one. Tell them who’s boss. Don’t smile until November.” Trying to make my body smaller, I sit down on a little chair and ask the children to join me on the carpet.

A professor of elementary education begins to lecture me, “Without consistent and caring management,” she says, “learning cannot take place. On the first day of school, explain the consequences for misbehavior and establish yourself as the leader of the class.” I pick up my ukulele and strum quietly as the kids push their chairs in and sit down swiftly, in rows, at my feet. The principal asks me to move from the back, to the front of the cafeteria, before beginning her presentation.

“Please submit your discipline plan to the office by August 15th,” she says in a mechanical but cheerful voice. “If there are any students you need to flag, you can send
us their names at that time, too.” The children look at me with tense but attentive
expressions. The kindergarten teachers would be proud of the way their students listen to
me and follow my instructions. Fred Rogers talks directly to the camera, and directly to
me.

“Hello, Neighbor,” he says over the sound of my mother knocking dishes together.
“You know, I like you just the way you are.” I miss Mr. Rogers. I play a couple of chords
and ask the kids to say good morning like a seal. They reply, but the barks are very soft,
like sandpaper on wood. I guess they are using their indoor voices.

“Say hello like a lion!” I tell them, as I bang the strings of the ukulele, and this
time the first graders roar back at me and giggle. I play faster, urging them to roar louder.
As they begin to crawl upon the carpet, a little girl gnashes her teeth together, and I laugh
uncontrollably when a boy pounces upon an invisible zebra, and tears it to pieces.

Instead of taking a group photo of the entire class, the studio takes individual
portraits of each child and arranges them into a symmetrical design. The principal and I
float above the children and we all smile, separate but together. It is a nice enough
remembrance, but I miss the bumping elbows, the silliness, and the wasted time that used
to accompany class picture day. I suppose I must get used to living in an age of digital
efficiency where children no longer squint into the sun, scowl at strange photographers,
or make bunny ears appear behind their teacher’s head.

I receive a roll of the first graders portraits in the form of stickers. I suppose they
are intended to be some kind of premium. I stick one onto the spine of each student
portfolio and arrange the binders alphabetically on a low metal shelf next to my desk. By
May, these binders are full of student work and each little face grins at me over a swollen belly, full of the learning experiences I made them collect.

The children can remove their portfolios at any time and review their work, but few dare to enter the circle of authority emanating from my desk. Since I want the assessments to remain carefully organized for parent visits, I am fine with this arrangement. I rarely invite the children to revise the contents of their portfolios more than three times a year, and never without supervision.

At my computer, an email reminds me that I have only one more week to submit my PAPTA, my required reflection on instructional improvement. “You didn’t forget, did you?” my mentor Mary Seki, who had a position in administration, asked.

When I was first hired I wrote a report for PAPTA about rearranging the desks; I observed that the children journaled better when the physical environment directed traffic away from the writing center. Although I received some kind of credit towards continued licensure by performing this self-assessment, I really felt PAPTA encouraged superficial and trivial observations. Still, if I needed to submit a report, I was determined, this time, to push the charter school towards critical thinking, research, and the unexpected. Fixated upon the issues of representation of minorities in children’s books, I wrote a proposal that suggested that talking animals are used by adult authors to create insular worlds, so that sticky issues of representation could be avoided, and tried to intimate at the end of my proposal that animal characters allowed the authors of children’s books to safely ignore issues of race and representation when creating casts of characters. It was a very vague stance and an idiotic proposal. I (once) was young.
“What if Arthur the Aardvark was an Asian boy, and instead of not liking his long nose, he despised his slanted eyes?” I asked Mary smugly. She rolled her eyes in return.

The next day I send the attendance to the office, grabbed *Arthur’s Nose* (Brown, 1976) and *Franklin Goes to School* (Bourgeois, 1995) from our book box, and banged my tambourine. The kids settled onto the carpet. “We’re going to do another reading project. Can you guys remind me when recess is coming up? We always go too long. But do not watch the clock!”

David salutes me and sits down in one swift motion. He loves to do these projects, and I enjoy hearing him engage in thoughtful conversation, although I need to be very careful about what I say, because his father feels uncomfortable about some of the remarks he has been making at home.

“Today I want to talk about children’s books again. I was thinking about the difference between them and grown up books. Like here is Arthur. He’s an aardvark. Here is Franklin, he is a….” My voice pauses, cuing the children to fill in a blank.

“Turtle!” they yell, vigorously. This was going to be easy, I thought.

“And I want to know why that is. I never have talking animals in my books.” Shayla interrupts me right away. “Like when you read books they have people dying in them.”

“Sometimes.” I draw a line down the middle of my chart paper and write “talking animal characters” on one side and “people dying” on the other. This is going to be a very simple chart, divided into two sections that can be reproduced and given to administration.
People in charge like it when evidence of learning takes the form of simple, organized assessments that they can understand at a glance.

“Romeo and Juliet,” Owen says. He points to me like I have food on my face.

“What about it?”

“They both die at the end. They kill themselves,” he explains, still pointing.

A bit hesitantly, I note Owen’s idea on the chart paper as well. Sakura, all of three feet tall, stands up and quickly goes behind my desk. “What’s that book you have in your backpack? You showed it to me yesterday,” she tells the class declaratively. Since Sakura visits me after Japanese school at 3:30 in the afternoon, when the rules of the classroom are relaxed, she seemed to think she had special privileges. I needed to work on that.

She lugs my bag into our meeting area and begins to sort through my belongings. I can’t search inside her cubby without breaking the law but she pulls _King Lear_ out of my backpack like it’s a prize in a cereal box. “That’s the Shakespeare I’m reading now. We are going to see that play this summer,” I explain.

Shayla immediately demands to hear a retelling of the story. I’m sitting here like an idiot holding _Frog and Toad are Friends_ (Lobel, 1970) and my first grader wants to study _King Lear_.

“Well, I guess it starts off like a fairytale. There is this king with three daughters and two of them are evil.”

“Like evil stepsisters?” Shayla asks, sticking her chin out. That gesture indicates she is losing patience. Like her mother, who is a business woman, Shayla wants me to bottom line it for her, so I rush through the rest of my synopsis, our roles reversed.

“So the main character dies,” she says, “and the good daughter too.”
“That’s a weird fairy tale,” Lori sighs. This makes me nervous. Her mom will not like hearing about this at the dinner table.

David raises his hand. “My mom reads gross books with guys getting stabbed!”

“Well, those must be mysteries,” I remind him. “It’s not about the murder, it’s about solving the mystery.”

Shayla has wild eyes. “So all the kids books are la-de-dah, lah-de-dah, they lived happily ever after, and all the grown up books have sad endings!”

“No, no, not all of them,” I say in a very even voice. I’m trying not to sound irritated. This conversation is getting out of control, the topic is getting lost, and if I have to do this lesson again, my report will be late.

Paul touches my knee lightly and points out that his mom only lets him watch movies if they don’t contain violence. “But when you acted out Hamlet you said there was a sword fight with poison!” he says, accusing me of great hypocrisy. I think I reply by staring at him a little too long. This makes Samuel, with his white undershirt and skinny arms start to laugh. It’s a sound I am not used to hearing. His dad is in prison, and the counselor suspects that his mother is having some problems of her own. Samuel rarely smiles at school.

Then I think about what I must look like to him, with my unkempt hair, wrinkled aloha shirt and jeans, sitting in my broken rocking chair and acting serious, while talking and talking about nothing at all, and I feel like laughing, too. I laugh at this ridiculous Shakespeare kick, at how fucking pretentious I’ve become, at the parents I’m so scared of offending, at my project that has the subtlety of a Sherman tank. “You know what would
be really funny?” I ask the kids. “If we rewrote the children’s books to be like grown up books!”

“Yeah!” Shayla shouts. “Take away all the happy endings!”

I try to record everyone’s project with my camera. Most of the work reminds me of the cynical cartoons one reads in the New Yorker, and the humor that the kids inject into their stories begins to lighten my mood even more. Pua draws a hilarious picture of a girl washing a window in a beautifully appointed mansion, while three other young women, dressed in evening gowns grin, chuckle, and insult her work. “This is Cinderella,” Pua tells me to write under her picture. “She stays like that”. When I ask her why each stepsister is holding a handbag, she explains to me, as if I’m hard of hearing, “They are going to the ball. They have money in there!”

Sakura decides to rewrite the ending of Tiger Trouble (Goode, 2001). Instead of trapping and guarding a burglar, the tiger eats him. In her picture the burglar’s bloody legs are sticking out of the tiger’s mouth, while the owner watches, grimly, with his hands behind his back. “The man didn’t even call the police,” Sakura giggles.

Dorian, Moses and Ikaika lie on the floor and busily scribble on a piece of paper. While they draw, they make the sounds of laser rifles and spaceships. After a couple of minutes, Moses flips the paper over, and Dorian trots to the other side of the room, gingerly removes another piece of paper from the printer, and takes it back to his friends. I watch them do this for about twenty minutes and begin to get a little suspicious. “Are guys doing the assignment? Are you changing the ending of a story?”

Moses looks up at me. “This is Star Wars!” he explains, as if greatly offended.

“But this only shows the middle.”
“Supposed to be,” Dorian explains. “They’re attacking the Death Star. The war goes on forever and ever!” This remark causes Moses and Ikaika to slap each other on the back and roll on the floor. I begin to ask Dorian if their story was influenced by news about the war, but stop myself. Instead, I snap a picture of the boys laughing.

In an effort to capture the work more concretely, I made a small summary sheet for the children to write down their reflections, but we ran out of time, and the papers sat on my desk, bound by a paper clip, for weeks, until a substitute teacher threw them away.

Most of my photos were badly composed, ill timed, and captured the kids walking out of frame. When the children were in the frame they were either posing stiffly, or caught with their mouths open and their limbs flailing. The photos were not suitable for display on our bulletin boards or in our portfolios. I snapped a rubber band around them and but them in a plastic bag. Every once in awhile I’ll pull them out and riffle through them like a flip book. Not to see the images, but to remember incompleteness. I did something else for PAPTA that I don’t remember.
Chapter Four: On Critical Literacy

Many of the stories in my autoethnography index notions of critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Patton (2002) describes critical theory as an orientational qualitative research framework that “seeks not just to study and understand society but rather to critique and change society” (p. 131). Critical theory draws upon many intellectual and political antecedents, so representing it as a discrete project or agenda is difficult. What can be stated, though, is that critical theory concerns itself with identifying and investigating power relations, and formulating theory and activity which can be aimed at redressing inequality. An educator working within the framework of critical theory is focused upon developing teaching approaches and definitions of learning “that may enhance the possibility of collectively constituted thought and action which seeks to transform the relations of power that constrict people’s lives” (Simon & Dippo, 1986, p. 196). This dissertation attempts to convey this possibility into the work of the teaching of young children, albeit in a narrative form that attempts to respond to issues of representation and legitimation through autoethnographic analysis.

Critical theory was originally based upon Marxist principles and the work of theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, such as Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno, and was a critique of late capitalism and it effects upon human consciousness. In a society in which the life experience of most individuals becomes reduced to notions of productivity and limited financial gain, critical theory becomes a means to scrutinize the way existing social frameworks control human activity and suppress the desire to build a more equitable society while theorizing ways to oppose domination and exploitation. In his essay *Traditional and Critical Theory*, Horkheimer
(2002) explains that critical theory “is wholly distrustful of the rules of conduct with which society as presently constituted provides each of its members” (p. 207) and warns the reader that critical theory is an intellectual activity that is concerned with transformation and not

The better functioning of any element in the structure. On the contrary, it is suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable as these are understood in the present order. (p 207)

Critical theory also advances the notion that traditional or positivist science contributes to the formation of an inequitable economic class structure, since it operates in an uncritical manner and remains fettered to mechanisms of social control. Frankfurt school intellectuals argued that positivism was “not only a flawed philosophy of science, but also a flawed political theory that reproduces the status quo by encouraging conformity with alleged social and economic laws” (Agger, 1991, p. 119). Of additional relevance to the orientational framework of this thesis is the Frankfurt school’s concept of “reification”.

Under capitalism, reification is a condition that subjectifies the individual’s agency and gives dynamic value to commodities while inverting the terms of the relationship between the laborer and the value of the object of his consumption. In this model, an individual has less life among his fellows than the products that are purchased and exchanged (Sensat, 1996). Explaining the traditions of critical theory and the Frankfurt school, Kellner (1990) writes that because of the process of reification is

The unnatural conditions of the capitalist economy and labor process, the commodification of all goods, services, and objects, and the new modes of thought
promoted by the mass media and positivist science appear to be ‘natural’ and to form a system impervious to human control or intervention. (p. 20)

Reification elevates abstractions to the level of reality and manifests passivity within the consciousness of individuals, whereas critical theory suggests that the function of social abstractions may be identified and overcome. Many of my stories cluster around the theme of resisting reification in school and a sense that the value of relationships between the children and myself suffered from the stagnation induced by a classroom economy that valued the production of student work, and the evaluation of their progress, more than the pursuit of individual and collective agency. This occurred, I think, largely because I represented conformity to the dominant culture’s values as a necessary, and yet value-free, component of the teaching and learning process to the children I taught and the parents whom I served.

Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist philosopher, believed that education in society was one of the institutions that served to reproduce the interests of the powerful through the delivery of a purportedly value-free knowledge base to its students (Giroux, 1988). When schools “convey to individuals a system of values, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and morality that supports or reproduces the established social order and the class interests that dominate it” (Braa & Callero, 2006, p. 358) a process of social domination, or cultural “hegemony”, is enacted that is difficult to recognize. Hegemony, to Gramsci, was not only a way to explain the mechanism of ideological control but also a call for social transformation (Connel & Messerschmidt, 2005; McLaren, 2005). In the classroom, this transformation may be actualized through a study of the existing curriculum as well as a critique of the fundamental social assumptions upon which the school’s program of study
is built. Henry Giroux (1988), a proponent of critical theory and a practitioner of its educational counterpart, critical pedagogy, notes that “opposition, not transmission, is the critical theme Gramsci posits as the key pedagogical task of radical schooling” (p. 202). The classroom projects that I present in this thesis were originally intended to examine and counter the hegemonic transmission of values that can serve to control a child’s sense of identity, morality, and agency, but sometimes my own interests and alliance to the dominant culture’s worldview seemed to avert the emergence of what I thought of as cultural critique and opposition, and this exigency urges me to explore episodes from my past and examine my shifting relationship to hegemony in relation to the subjectivity of childhood.

Critical pedagogy maintains that students have the capacity to examine the ideologies that structure their social experience through the vocabulary of their own experiences. Paulo Friere (1993) theorized and practiced a style of dialogic teaching that exemplifies for many educators, the potential of critical pedagogy. Whilst working with illiterate peasants in Brazil in the late nineteen fifties and early sixties, Friere proposed that the purpose of education should be the affirmation of the individual’s social agency and the community’s transformation, and fashioned an educational method that served to assist the development of a class consciousness and opposition to hegemony in his students. Friere described traditional models of schooling as “banking models” in which the teacher’s interaction with students extended only as far as the level of communication needed to deposit facts or phrases into them, as if they were passive receptacles. By performing the counter-intuitive act of stepping away from the role of the all-knowing professor and allowing dialogue about social issues that concern the community to ensue,
Friere avoided the banking model of education and encouraged active thinking by challenging the assumptions students might have about the social order through what he termed “problem posing”, or the process of questioning students Socratically about the nature of reality. In his famous treatise, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Friere (1993) explains that the discomfort that the teacher might experience while participating in problem posing education pales before the responsibility that the teacher has to the formation of socially and politically literate communities:

Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of problems of human beings in relation to the world. (p. 78)

The criticality of this approach occurs when members of oppressed communities work together to identify conditions that maintain their subjugation. Through the process of discussion students “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Friere, 1993, p. 49). The conversation which ensues in this context pinpoints, theoretically, the mechanisms which the ruling class uses to exploit the oppressed. Critical pedagogy allows for the development of intellectual growth while encouraging the individual to see herself or himself as a change agent within society. Friere explains that this process—this praxis—must include personal reflection as well, so that moral boundaries can be joined with activist impulse. Friere (1993) writes
Let me emphasize that my defense of praxis implies no dichotomy by which this praxis could be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action. Action and reflection occur simultaneously. A critical analysis of reality may, however, reveal that a particular form of action is impossible or inappropriate at the present time. (p. 128)

When discussing the implementation of Frierian praxis in higher education settings, Sweet (1998) writes that critical pedagogists “may have to temper their politically informed pedagogy with some sensitivity to the constraints imposed by their colleges and universities” (p. 109), particularly when attempting to preserve a career. I’ve found that developing a language of praxis in the classroom with young children can be challenging in a similar manner, since the discourse of standards-based elementary education, which supports a banking model of education, takes place within a highly regulated classroom environment that is controlled by the teacher’s voice, and that voice, in turn, is continuously observed by colleagues who can regulate it with their own.

Here, once again, it is assumed that content delivery can lead towards specific learning outcomes only if the child listens carefully, assimilates information, and answers the teacher’s questions with correctness and certitude. This conception of learning is linked to the management of the children’s attention and behavior, while the necessity of the teacher’s ability to manage the children is evaluated and normalized by an institutional culture that values an authoritative demeanor, and which identifies the application of power as a necessary and purposeful component of all educational activity.

For this reason, public schools place a great emphasis on the teacher’s capacity to manage a classroom environment. I work with beginning teachers, and I often find
myself reminding them that classroom management is not terribly difficult to master, since children are conditioned to living in classrooms that reflect a social structure that favors the adult’s desires over their own. Children are habituated, through discursive narratives that conflate compliance with personal growth and learning, to experience school as a space where the capacity to reproduce the teacher’s utterances matters more than the development of personal opinion or critical analysis. Sitting obediently on the floor, raising their hands to answer questions, talking only during particular moments, walking in line, and moving through designated areas, were normalized behaviors for the children in my classroom, and my influence was such that I could observe children voluntarily disciplining their bodies and behaviors, and often those of their unruly peers at school, as an everyday matter of existence. Because the educator’s capacity to regulate the classroom environment and deliver easily digestible packets of information to children through the application of disciplinary power is continually produced and encouraged, the critical pedagogist might find that he cannot easily extricate himself from the power disparity that winds together both teacher and student, since this subjectivity is produced by a discourse that is fixed within the cultural intersections of historical and cultural norms; students will react in particular and fixed ways to the teacher’s authority, regardless of how the teacher conducts himself.

Ira Shor, who continued the work of Paulo Friere in the United States, wrote about his attempts to enact praxis in a community college setting in When Students Have Power (1996), noting that students who sit at the back of the classroom, and who react to the teacher’s presence with disquiet and silence, are not necessarily demonstrating a singular reluctance to learn, or a hostility towards the educator, explaining that
Power problems are social and historical, not personal peculiarities; that is, they already exist in class before...the teacher utters a single word, because education is a social activity formed within the cultural conflicts of society at large. Thus...we first need to face the already existing conflicts between student and teacher, between students and the institution, between students and the economic system (class, gender, racial inequalities), and between the students themselves. (p. 17)

Shor believes that before the facilitation of dialogue can begin, the critical pedagogist must release control of the classroom discourse to his students and actively diminish his authoritative presence. Ideally, this process is set into play from the very first class meeting, and in a passage quite autoethnographic in nature, Shor depicts what goes through his mind as he attempts the seemingly impossible feat of leading his students without exerting authority, all while behaving as an educator who is interested in offering questions, rather than in explicating an academic opinion. He reveals that “I would not say that this is easy. Patience, patience, patience, I say to myself in class—don’t overreact, don’t speak too soon or too long—ask yet another question, listen some more before you speak...and sometimes it works” (1996, p. 42).

I find that this inner dialogue is even more pronounced in the early childhood classroom where the teacher is the physically the largest person in the room, and often watched warily by children. One approach I discovered, that helped to bridge the gap between us, was to conflate the principles of individual choice and self-reflection used in our elementary writing workshop (Calkins, 1994; Routman, 2005; Spandel, 2005) and the circle time dialogue of the large group meetings, into one activity. When I first began teaching, these meetings, that I referred to as government, originated as many such
management practices do, as an opportunity for me to help the first graders communicate with each other, since the children often needed guidance when offering a compliment to a friend or trying to resolve an argument that occurred on the playground. I introduced connections to democracy as the government meetings changed into an exercise in group problem-solving, and as we tried to meet issues in the classroom, with the creation of rules that were fair to everyone, stories that began to reflect themes of discontent towards adults at the school, came to the surface. Once, for example, after puzzling over the limited number of balls that the grade level had to play with at recess, the story of a counselor who took—and kept—play balls so that they would no longer roll down the street, came to the surface. It was moments like this one that underlined the need for me to weaken my authoritative presence, and just listen.

When these moments occurred I often found it difficult to consistently support the actions of my fellow educators, or the dominant discourse of the school, and frequently questioned my role as a teacher and my complicity with an institutional culture that normalized an impassive manipulation of children’s bodies, minds and emotions. Friere’s approach then became, through conversations that were built around themes of community, about student choice and equality, and a means to prompt inquiry into the way children were treated by adults; mesmerized, I listened and responded to the emotions and ideas conveyed by the children in their government circles with both empathy and a critical ear, and finding a space through which I could express a vision of curriculum that might be punctuated by moments of praxis, gave serious thought to a reclamation of my childhood, a process which is partially documented in this autoethnography; for as Friere (1993) believed, the process of taking theory developed
through dialogue, and transforming it into social action had as its ultimate goal not only the liberation of the oppressed, but emancipation of the social and moral mind of the oppressor, so that each became “restorers of the humanity of both” (p. 44). I was relieved to blink, and view teaching as a force that allowed me to re-see myself and those around me as potentially more; Friere’s construction of critical pedagogy contributed to the release of subjectivities defined by power relations, and I loved it when the roles of the child, parent, and teacher floated freely through space.

Critical pedagogy’s descendent, critical literacy, is an approach to the teaching of language arts that suggests that a conceptualization of reading that is limited to the decoding of symbols and the repetition of canonical themes serves only to maintain and reproduce narratives that limit the purpose of reading, in the minds of children, to functionality. When children are invited to respond to books using a critical literacy approach, they are encouraged to research the text actively and to identify the social discourses of power and domination that are conspicuous in the story, or made conspicuously absent, through the author’s choices. By investigating the text through a multiplicity of viewpoints, and by using prior knowledge about the makeup of society, students can analyze the way a text’s use of language, characters, settings, and plotlines locate the reader and represent the world, which in turn helps them to form a basis for inquiry about social norms in the process. Children can, in this way, take on the role of researchers of language and learn to play with the power it embodies, instead of spending most of their time in school learning about the conventions and mechanical uses of language (Green, 2001). In critical literacy, reading and writing are not seen as isolated
skills but rather as part of a larger social activity that involves discourse, evaluation and action.

Critical literacy advocates will often explicitly orient their pedagogy towards the affirmation of a social justice agenda, proposing that the act of engaging children in the examination of issues such as racism and sexism through the critical examination of texts, will encourage them to become fair-minded citizens who will gladly fight for equity, liberation, and social transformation—now—and for the rest of their lives. In terms of practice this might, in its simplest form, entail reading a book to children from within the context of a social bias by asking them to discuss its themes using multiple perspectives. For example, one might read the *Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 2000) story to a class and ask them to dramatize the book from the point of view of Ruby, a girl who, in 1960, had to walk by an enraged mob of White protestors in order to enter school every day or, perhaps more interestingly, from the perspective of one of the adults who sought to block her way. As the students articulate and compare perspectives in the story, it is hoped that children will learn to understand the way racism oppresses individuals, and that through this learning, they might become advocates for equality (Ciardiello, 2004). On the other hand, a critical literacy lesson might be include of a series of investigations that allow children to name the discourses that disempower and subjectify individuals in their everyday lives, and an account of the individual actions and choices that students might make in light of that investigation; Vivian Vasquez’s brilliantly understated account of preschool students interrogating the marketing strategy that McDonald’s uses to sell their Happy Meals to children is an example of this type of lesson (2004).

The politicized agenda is one that I sympathize with, to be sure, and is the impetus
for my experimentation with a critical literacy curriculum in the classroom. As Allan Luke (2000) points out though, the so-called agenda of critical literacy “is not about the imposition of a particular political ideology; rather it is about beginning from the supposition of the embeddedness of reading and writing, of all texts and discourses, within normative fields of power, value, and exchange.” (p. 453) Therefore, the adoption of critical literacy in the classroom for the express purpose of redressing what the teacher perceives as social failures can produce, in many instances, yet another narrative that serves to subjectify and over-determine the young child’s experience of school. This problematic is one with which I feel very familiar.

The following story rememorates one of my earliest attempts to play with notions of Frierian praxis with the first graders and was meant to address inequity through social action. It was not, perhaps, very successful, but it did briefly open curricular possibilities.

It was the Friday afternoon before the three-day weekend, and we had finished the familiar first grade exercise. We had read the Luther King Junior storybook, looked at a map of the United States, talked about racial bias, and discussed the generalization “never judge someone by the color of their skin”. Now the kids were about to sit down at their desks to quietly color a worksheet about the life of Martin Luther King Junior, but as I watched the first graders obediently unpacking their crayons and roll them across their desks like bored housecats, I suddenly felt, with an ache in my spine, that something was wrong: I felt relaxed. I could easily sit at my desk until the dismissal bell, and I wasn’t used to the feeling of absent-minded authority; the lesson had gone smoothly, as well, and I wasn’t used to having so much control over my work. The more I thought about it,
the more I realized that there was simply no discomfort involved when we were discussing the work of Martin Luther King, and I understood that we should feel more uneasiness. I wanted us to experience tension and perhaps in the process, be able to find that tiny kernel of courage that we admired in this great historical figure. I glanced at the text set that was displayed on the shelf. On the covers, the images of Martin Luther King Junior looked cartoonish and crude (and for God’s sake, the man had been shot—had died for his beliefs).

I called my first graders back to the rug. Unable to think of exactly what to do, and stuttering slightly, I asked them to look at the color of each other’s skin. In terms of encouraging conversation, this proved to be a very vague stimulus. Most of the kids knew their ethnicity, but the discussion got very awkward when we began comparing one body to another. My lesson was quickly becoming pointless and offensive, and the children were becoming restless, and more boredom loomed over us. With their restless squirming, they were signaling the need for change. I was frustrated, and began to scold the kids who were playing…but then I heard their protestation.

We needed to get out! Quickly, I turned over the chart paper and asked the class to think of things that adults did at school that bothered them, and to help me make a list of rules for adults. I explained hastily that each of us could write a favorite message on a sign, and that then we could have for a real protest march, just like Martin Luther King!

“Are we really going out, Mr. Au?” Kamuela asked, his eyes widening with excitement. “Well,” I answered a bit conspiratorially, “only if we have something to say!”
Mahina looked at me with some disdain and crossed her arms. “We should go to the office. The principal is the boss.” I felt slightly relieved that she did not think that I made up all of the rules.

I thought that the students would throw themselves into the spirit of protest and take the opportunity to really question adult authority. As we began to make a list of possible slogans, though, I realized, that I was projecting a romantic expectation upon them. The children tended to suggest safe statements that restated the goals of the school’s character education program, such as “don’t be mean to other people” or “be responsible”. The only really child-centered slogan that ended up on the list was “don’t keep kids inside!” Unfortunately, its author felt a little uncomfortable after suggesting it, so it was crossed off the list.

Still, a glow can signal the presence of warmth. The children wrote their slogans on pieces of construction paper, ripped strips of masking tape, and pulled yardsticks out of the closet. The hastily assembled protest signs were perfectly sized for six-year-olds. Then I could barely keep the kids from leaping out the door! Before locking the classroom doors, I tasted uncertainty. I trotted over to my computer and sent an announcement to the office staff, and all of the teachers, telling them that we were coming. ‘We are staging a kids protest! We will disturb you!’ I wrote.

It was so much fun to march about the school! The walkways and courtyards were conspicuously empty of students at this time of day so there was even a sense of danger and disruption, as if we were resisting a spell meant to keep us tethered to books and worksheets and sickly-lit classrooms. And it felt like more than mere re-enactment when Amy, giggling, bopped me on the top of the head with her protest sign. We burned our
slogans and whatever else came to mind into the afternoon air as the children’s slippers and sandals clicked rhythmically at their heels. At first, I led the line into the classrooms, but after a while, the clusters of kids went into any room we happened to pass with little hesitation. Many of the children seemed to enjoy causing a disturbance, while others seemed slightly embarrassed by the project: Jessica, blonde curls bouncing in the sunshine, smiling broadly, and always seemed to be in front of the line, while Kent, the smallest and shyest boy in our class, usually stood outside of the classrooms we entered, patiently waiting.

When we got to the office, the counselor, Mr. Chong, met us with applause. He was delighted by the children’s enthusiasm and charmed by the inventive spelling that the first graders used to write their signs. Circulating, he patted the children’s backs and used his booming voice to read the slogans that most closely reflected the character education program that he had implemented in the school. “Respect others! I like that, I like that one!” he yelled.

He sounded as if he was hosting an assembly. I felt proud of my students, so I took out my camera and snapped some pictures. The principal came out of her office and feigned surprise. Then she and the counselor posed with the children swarming about their knees. The kids smiled up at the adults and, I think, felt loved but if there was any actual dissidence in room it was subsumed quickly with condescending looks and supportive words. The administration expressed no interest in taking the spirit of the protest seriously; I suppose it just appeared too cute and staged.

The next year I tried to repeat it with more intentionality.
The signs the kids carried this year were more confrontational. One sign had “talk to kids nicely” written in large red letters, while another read “we want more recess”, followed by seven exclamation marks. Energized, and perhaps a little angry, we marched into each classroom. This time we arrived unannounced.

“Go kids!” I yelled, raising a fist in the air.

The fourth graders stared at us and there were a couple of seconds of awkward silence, before the first graders yelled, “Go kids!” in return.

“What do you want?”

“More recess!” shouted Sabrina, leading the charge.

The first graders roared, and raised their signs, to show support for this idea.

“What about me, Mr. Au?” Tadao pleaded.

“Yeah, yeah, tell the fourth graders about yours!”

“Mine says,” Tadao explained in a loud voice, “That we want to borrow more than one book from the library!” The fourth graders didn’t understand what he meant. “You guys get two. We used to get two, too, but then the librarian, she said we lost too many books, so we only get one at a time,” he clarified, a little meekly. The girl sitting next to him at her desk nodded, and then all of the fourth graders, and their teacher, clapped. Of all of the demands the kids had come up with, Tadao’s was the one I felt had the most possibility of actually succeeding.

The principal by this time had changed, but understood my intentions very well. When the children squeezed into her office and sat before her desk on the cool tile floor, she was prepared to have a conversation with them. I lingered in the hallway and listened to the words rise and fall. After congratulating the first graders on their protest march, she
listened to each child’s idea and then promised to take the demands seriously. I smiled to myself. The principal supported our project and acted just a little bit haughty, and I knew that her demeanor would give my class a great deal to about when we got back to class.

I was relieved by the march’s success and tired out from the exercise. I wanted to go back to our classroom-home. A senior citizen who volunteers in the office caught the group on its way out. “What are you doing?” he asked, in the tone that adults use with children when they aren’t actually asking a question.

“Protesting!” David replied, still flushed with enthusiasm. David was about to explain the goals of the project but was cut off.

“You explained the problem… but do you have a solution?” He looked at the children patiently and the kids looked back at him quizzically, and then slightly anxiously. Unfamiliar with institutional strategies of deflection, the first graders dared not venture a single word. I realized I had made a huge error; I not only tried to control the way the protest march was conducted by the children, but the interactions between the adults and the kids, as well. I wanted to appear giving and sympathetic, and offer the children the opportunity to create some change based on their own interests, but also I wanted everything to go smoothly. Real advancement for the treatment of the children at the school was, perhaps, never my intention. It was another packaged protest. Paulo Freire (1970), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, comments that Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued
opportunity to express their “generosity”, the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. (p. 44)

The sobering thought was that I knew that I dispensed false generosity in my classroom every day, and that I thought of it as simple kindness to children. When we got back to class, the Martin Luther King Junior storybooks were still sitting on the shelf, as they did every January. “Wasn’t it enough to just hear their voices?” I asked. His face stared back, immutable. He knew I was merely playing with power at school.

A few days later, I stood outside of the front door to the classroom stapling photos to the bulletin board and greeting the children. Mr. Moore was a very tall man, so I saw him ambling down the sidewalk with David a few minutes before the got to the classroom. This was very unusual, so I mentally prepared myself for a complaint. I went through a list of possibilities: did David forget his lunchbox yesterday or was he arriving too late for afterschool care? I hoped that he was not being bullied on the playground, as that often takes weeks and weeks of investigation. I smiled up at Mr. Moore as he and David arrived at the classroom’s entrance.

“Have a great day son,” he said, and patted David on the back. David hopped into the classroom and snuck up behind Paul, hoping to startle him. Mr. Moore looked down at me. “May I talk to you for a minute, Mr. Au?” he asked. We walked until we stood in front of the girls’ bathroom, a few feet away from the door.

“So David told me about the Martin Luther King project. The kids made signs and sat in the principal’s office, huh?” he said, chuckling.

“Yep, I was trying to make it really come to life.”
“I think it’s great. It’s American history. Really important.” The first bell rang. He bent towards me slightly, and with a look of discomfort on his face asked, “But do you think you could use the word ‘demonstration’ instead of ‘protest’ when talking about MLK instead?”

I had absolutely no intention of changing my vocabulary but answered, “Sure. Why not?”

“Thanks Mr. Au, I just think it’s better for David. For all the kids.” We shook hands and he walked away.

In sixth grade I sat next to a chatty, silly girl named Jennifer. She laughed when I teased her about her glasses or her untamable, curly hair that she tried to tie back with barrettes and long ribbons. Even though I was an easy target, and small and scrawny, she rarely teased me back. Having her as a friend protected me from the taunts of the rest of the girls in our class, and if I ever daydreamed, which was often, Jennifer would nudge me awake, and tell me what we were expected us to do, in a loud stage whisper that the teacher, Mr. Waid, always found amusing.

The best thing about Jennifer was that she did not frighten easily, and if I found a chameleon at recess, I could bring it to her to hold and pet, even while the other girls were screaming. Once, we entered Mr. Waid’s room with solemn faces and a bright green lizard, four inches long, clinging to the back of Jennifer’s shirt. We sat down quietly at our desks and waited for the chameleon to instinctually make its way towards the light of the window. As it leaped from desk to chair, seeking freedom, causing commotion and screams, I began to laugh; Jennifer put her hand on my shoulder, opened her eyes wide
and shook her head slightly, urging me to be quiet. This, of course, made our joke even funnier, and it became the basis of a grand tale that only the two of us could share. For the rest of the year, I only needed to pretend to laugh and swallow an egg at the same time, to make Jennifer squint and smile at me in return.

When school began the next year, I was surprised to discover a very different Jennifer. Alchemy had transformed her body over the summer into that of a young woman and the magic had not only affected her hips and breasts, but also her eyes. She no longer wore glasses, and for some reason this caused me to become invisible.

She began keeping company with the taller, more muscular boys who were on the football and waterpolo team. To me, these guys looked like young superheroes, and were everything I aspired to become. They swaggered when they walked, and yelled to each other across the hallway in loud voices that reminded me of my father. They seemed to own the school and all of the female attention. I tried to imitate their movements in the privacy of my bedroom. But it was no use trying moving like them, without the grace and strength, I looked like a skeletal marionette. They were becoming men, while I remained a boy.

Jennifer now took to letting the twisting coils of her hair fly gently in the breeze as she walked, and I had to admit that she looked quite pretty. I could still feel her touch upon my shoulder, and wanted her to touch me again, but as she walked towards me, my eyes, seeking safety, would drift towards other sights instead. To my right: a row of lockers; at the end of the courtyard: naupaka bushes drying in the heat. In the distance: a teacher in a dull aloha shirt, walking to his car.
Beneath me: a scarecrow chest and a protruding collar bone, weak and spindly legs, a stubby male organ, tangled black hair, bony hips, and an emaciated waist. It is a body unrecognizable, and unfit to touch. Swinging from cords of flesh, the body’s hands are relaxed, and feel nothing but air, nothing but air, even as the heart beats wildly. And the body forces itself to walk, as curls of gold pass into its peripheral vision.

Jennifer taught me how to maintain disinterest towards anything I longed to be near. This is how I survived middle school. In high school, when I thought I would fade completely into nothingness, I met a beautiful red-haired girl. We both travelled to California for college and then she became my wife. How odd it was to suddenly find myself married. Now I’m a teacher, and one of three males at an elementary school, where I receive an uncomfortable abundance of female attention. Was that woman really flirting with me in the cafeteria at breakfast? Was the teacher’s aide who was batting her eyelashes, looking at me? It must be my imagination.

I heard the first graders shuffling up the sidewalk from the far end of the courtyard. It sounded like Andrew was arguing with Kawika as they stood next to the water fountain. Hopefully Andrew was not in a bullying mood. I waited to hear if the quarrel escalated.

Kahaea was the first to appear in the doorway; she looked grubby and sweaty, but refreshed. Exercise always seems to have an invigorating effect upon children; I used to keep kids in from recess when they misbehaved, but discovered that that only releases more poison into the atmosphere. When Kahaea noticed that I had a video camera in my lap, she walked up to me and stared at my right ear, in order to imitate one herself. I
stared straight ahead as if she wasn’t there, and we both became statues, resisting the urge
to laugh. Enticed by our performance, the rest of the class came in quietly, whispering
and giggling.

“Kahaea will move first!” proclaimed Andrew, his red hair pulsing in the
fluorescent light.

“No way. Mr. Au is shaking already,” Beatriz said.

Breaking the spell, I quickly placed two fists on top of my head, and turn into Mr.
Slater, the talking mouse from _Lily’s Purple Plastic Purse_ (Henkes, 1996), one of our
favorite classroom books. “Do you think you rodents could handle a semi-circle?” I
asked, in a loud, goofy voice. Rendered as creative, good-humored, nurturing, and
competent, Mr. Slater is the only male teacher in children’s literature that I can stomach;
every other male teacher I’ve met has been a parody of the disciplinarian.

While the other children laughed and flopped onto the carpet, Kahaea made her
own mouse ears, and in a very high pitched voice said, “Squeak, squeak, yes Mr.
Slinger!” She sat down exactly where she was standing and grinned up to me from the
side of my chair.

“I’m ready!” she peeped.

Kahaea is a natural leader and set the tone for the class every day. When she gave
me her attention I knew that the project could commence. “I love books, books tell us
things, but sometimes I notice that the book don’t tell us everything,” I said. “I thought
today we could talk about boys and girls.”

A thin hum began to emanate from the carpet as I felt the children’s attention lock
onto my person, energizing my performance. “It’s a big deal in this room! Do you
remember how in the beginning of first grade the boys would only play with boys, and
the girls would only play with girls? But then Keoni and Tara became friends…but they
were teased.”

“Yeah, they teased us that we were boyfriend and girlfriend!” Tara shouted. She
sidled her eyes towards the clutch of girls that were sitting behind her and crinkled her
nose. Keoni, who was sitting next to her, looked sullenly down at the carpet.

“Is it because boys and girls are so different from each other? That’s silly,” I said.
“We know that boys and girls can work together and be friends. But…there are still some
boys and girls in our class that don’t like to work together.”

Keoni perks up at this remark, and hurled a little dart of his own. “Yeah,” he said,
“Kawika only plays with boys!” Kawika winced in reply. He used to be Keoni’s best
friend.

“I wonder if the books we read make us think like that. I wonder if some books
have boys doing things, and the girls are not in the story.” I said. Keoni sat up very
straight and listened intently. “Let’s make partners, groups with boys and girls in them,
and see if we can find books that show only girls, or only boys, or girls and boys. Then
we can talk about it.”

Though my instructions were vague, no one questioned my rationale, or asked for
clarification of the task. Only a few of the children formed pairs according to gender, and
this was for the best, because as I watched Keoni and Tara rush towards opposite sides of
the room, I regretted making the proposal. Keoni stopped short, wavered, and dived
towards a box of books under the computer table, coming precariously close to knocking
over Andrew in the process. Luckily, Andrew didn’t seem to notice, or we might have had a fist fight.

The children heedlessly tipped boxes onto the carpet, and the floor was soon covered with books. Holding my cheap little blue and silver video camera, I carefully tiptoed to the middle of the room so I wouldn’t slip, and stood there like part of security system. After about five minutes Tara strolled up to me, eager to be interviewed. “Hi Tara,” I said. “I wanted to record the project. Can you explain the assignment again for the camera?”

In a clipped, professional tone, she replied, “We’re trying to find books that have girls and boys in them ‘cause in our class there’s some boys and girls who don’t want to be partners and some books only have boys in them so we’re trying to find some that have boys and girls!” She held up a thin softcover. “I found this book, The Lunch Box Surprise. There’s a boy who forgot lunch, and then there’s boys and girls helping share lunch with him.”

I loved the way that Tara articulated the project’s goals. Maybe my clumsy introduction managed to focus the children upon questions of gender categorization and relationships, after all. But then I realized that it was not my teaching that made the topic meaningful; the question hung heavy in the air above our heads all year, as it did in every elementary classroom. It just needed to be plucked.

A cluster of kids began to surround me, all wanting to record their opinions on tape. Wing, who was from China and spoke with a slight accent, bounced up and down in the back of the crowd, trying to get my attention. I instinctually turned to reprimand him but he spoke before I did. “I found Amelia Bedilia. It has boys and girls having fun.
Amelia Bedilia is the main character.” I shouldn’t have found myself so surprised by his eloquence.

Sharley, our gifted and talented student, walked through the throng with an air of great seriousness, and waved a storybook nonchalantly above her head. “This one has boys and girls working together. All Magic Schoolbus books do.” Wing looked at her respectfully as she passed between us. She sat down and waited for us on the carpet, looking bored.

While peering through the viewfinder at Minami, I feel a light tapping on my right shoulder. I turned, and saw the fuzzy image of Kahaea holding a thin purple primer in her hand. She held the book in front of the lens for a moment, to make it go black, then pulled it away, creating her own fade in; this gave me a slight headache, but I found myself laughing along with her audacity. “I found this book called The Cat Boy. It’s one of our practice books. It’s about boys. Boys and men only. There aren’t any girls.”

“Why do you think that is?” I asked.

Kahaea began shouting. “Because this book was written by a man! A man wrote this book just about boys!” On camera, she looked both angry and jovial at the same time. The other kids smiled as Kahaea abruptly turned away from me, then they followed her as she walked triumphantly back to the carpet. We were now ready to discuss our findings.

The children waited patiently as I placed the emblem of adult control gingerly on Matthew’s desk and trained it at my rocking chair. I felt compelled to document the class discussion, though I wasn’t sure what I would do with the footage. I didn’t have any
signed waivers. I wanted to use it for my research, though I was no longer sure what the word meant, particularly against the backdrop of No Child Left Behind.

“You know what Kahaea was saying…I wonder if that’s always true. Do boy or man authors only write about boy’s adventures?”

Beatrix snatched the book about Rosa Parks off of a shelf. “No!” Beatrix explains, “This book is about a woman and it is written by a man!”

“Let’s see that cover, Beatrix.” As I held up the book, four kids moved towards me on their knees and pressed their heads together in front of me, trying to sound out the author’s name. “It says David Adler. That’s a man’s name all right! So not all books written by men only have men in them?”

“Well not all. But lots!” Kahaea says. The class began to murmur in agreement.

“Wait, this is important,” I continued. “Can anyone show us a book that is written by a man but is not only about boys?”

Keoni slowly and deliberately raises his hand. “Arthur,” he answered simply.

“But that’s a book about a boy.” My careless comment caused the children to groan in unison; it was obvious that Mr. Au had not read very many of the books in his own classroom.

Keoni nodded at his friends and corrected me. “Arthur’s not just about boys. There are girls in the books, too,”

“Oh, yeah. You mean like Francine and uh….”

Deejay slapped her forehead in mock frustration. “What about Muffy!” she shouted.

“Or D.W!”
“and Sue Ellen or Fern!”

“I like Grandma Thora, too,” added Matt.

Embarrassed, I tried to lead the class once again. “OK, OK! And I think there was an Arthur story about girls not having to do girl things, right?”

Sharley leaped to her feet and retrieved the book. “Here it is. This girl, Muffy, wants Francine to take ballet. But Francine likes sports.” Sharley stood directly in front of me and showed the book to the class. I was eclipsed. She turned a few pages, turned to smile at me, then skipped back to her spot on the carpet.

“So men don’t just write about boys, and Marc Brown is an example of that. Sorry Kahaea!” Kahaea scrunched up her eyes and stuck her tongue out at me. “I know what you meant, though. It seems like men write for boys, and women write for girls. I wonder why it seems that way? I’ll write that down here as a question on the board.”

Elizabeth, her voice barely audible, raised her hand politely, and said, “Me and Deejay found Angelina and the Princess. It has boys and girls in it, Mr. Au.” I squinted at the cover of the book, which depicted two mice in classical costumes performing ballet.

“Does it really? I’m surprised, it looks like it is just about girls.”

“It’s not! I read that!” Andrew said, jutting out his chin. Kawika looked at him in surprise.

“It’s mostly girls. But it has boys in it too. Girls and boys can read it,” Deejay says. I am honestly surprised that Deejay is supporting him, since he has bullied her in the past. Still, it is a delight to hear these children assert that the books in the classroom were not strictly gendered. I decide to goad Andrew a little bit more; I know I run the risk of embarrassing—or even enraging him—but his opinion carries a great deal of weight
among the boys on the playground and I want him to share a little of that power with me today.

“What do you think about Angelina and the Princess, Andrew?” I asked quietly.

“I like that book. It’s not just for girls. It shows that boys can dance ballet, too.”

Andrew scrunches up the corners of his mouth, puffs out his cheeks, and looks straight ahead as I chart his response on the board.

The children suggested ways to categorize the books under examination, and I drew a crude table on the board. I smirked: the last time we practiced sorting, we looked at color and shapes in our shell collection. “I bet there are a lot more examples, but I’m more interested in figuring out what is going on here. In the Cat Boy, the boys have an adventure and there are no girls in the story at all. I wonder why the author wrote it like that?”

“He thinks the boys should only do stuff, but that’s not fair,” says Tara.

Kahaea adds, “Girls can do stuff, too.”

“What do you think, Keoni?” I asked.

“I think boys and girls can have adventures.” I felt like hugging him. Now I knew why everyone wanted him for a friend.

“Remember when I told you that what is not in the book is sometimes just as important as what is in the book?” I asked, looking at Sharley meaningfully.

“The author makes a choice, just like in writing workshop, we decide what the story is about.”

“Whoa! We better write that down! I think you are on to something, Sharley!”

Then the question in the books is ‘what are the writers trying to tell us about boys and
girls’, and then ‘why’?’ Hey! Even the way I said that... why do I say boys and girls? I very rarely say girls and boys, or ‘children’, or ‘friends’ like the teachers at the preschool.”

Sharley nodded at me approvingly. “You do say Keiki Naia, sometimes,” she said, referring to the name the class voted upon at the beginning of the year.

“She’s a new chart paper, let’s figure out what is true about women and men, or girls and boys, before we do anything else.” It was a very awkward transition, and I knew my thinking was getting muddled. Part of my problem was that I felt like I was on breakfast television, and needed a segue between every segment.

“Men are good at work,” Sharley said.

“What kind of work?” I asked.

“The kind that uses muscles.” Sharley blinks trying to think of an example. “Like digging.”

Marie blurted out, “My mom chopped down a tree!”

“Really?” I said, feigning surprise. “That takes a lot of muscle!”

“Well, they can do it, but men are better at that,” Sharley maintained. I felt a bit guilty using her this way; but I also thought that I might have finally found a way to challenge her academically.

“Does everyone think so?” I asked the class. A few children nodded and whispered, but most of them sat quietly, thinking. I counted to ten like my professor taught me, and asked, “What about women? What are they good at?” My marker was poised to write on the chart paper.
Sharley had a doubtful tone in her voice, but ventured a guess. “Maybe crafts…like sewing?” When she made that remark, I understood why I was using gender as a topic for a critical literacy project: I wanted the children to help me define my own masculinity.


It was the early afternoon of the last day of school, and there was a sweet lull in the day. The children were cleaning out their desks, writing each other little notes, and wishing their friends a happy summer. In one hour, we would form our final government circle and say goodbye. There will be time for tears, laughter, and one last round of singing *Forever Young* (Dylan, 1974), but I stubbornly wanted to finish the gender roles project, first.

As I looked at the walls of my classroom, I felt some sort of closure was needed. A bejeweled princesses, dressed in a majestic pink gown, smiled down at me from above the doorway while her neighbor, a muscular superhero in yellow and black tights, fought a monstrous, fire-breathing lizard. Almost every piece of artwork in the room was gendered—expressing a desire, a wish, or a story about what it meant to be male or female from a child’s perspective. The male characters in their drawings never appeared with the female characters. The first graders were trying to make sense of these odd, fixed categories that named their bodies and subjectified their social interactions. As such, their artwork tended to incorporate what Browyn Davies (2000) calls category maintenance work, “whereby children ensure that the categories of person, as they are coming to understand them, are maintained as meaningful categories in their own action and the actions of those around them.” (p. 23)
It was actually a terrible time to begin a project, but I wanted to see if we could deconstruct a simple representation of gendered performance in a text as one last critical literacy project. I wanted to use the *Rooftop Mystery* (Lexau, 1969) as a text; it is a class favorite, a funny book about a boy named Sam who is forced, because of a mix-up with his family’s moving van, to carry his little sister’s doll across town. Afraid of being teased as he walks through the neighborhood, he decides to ask his friend Amy Lou to carry it for him. He sets the doll down on the rooftop of her building, and goes to knock on her door. Amy Lou agrees to help Sam, but when they go back for it, the doll is missing, forcing Sam to care about something he never has cared about before. Thus begins an *I Can Read Mystery*. I actually like this book very much, as it has an integrated cast and the author demonstrates how absurd Sam’s actions are in terms of gendered performance throughout the story in a nonjudgmental way. I’ve found that the critical literacy projects work better when I don’t blatantly despise the representations in the text, and I’m sure the children will have fun analyzing Sam’s dilemma.

Kawika, seeing that I had a book in my hands, bounded over to the light switch. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but after a soft click, it instantly felt cooler. “I was putting books away and found one of our practice books in the wrong box.” I shook my finger at Manami, as if to admonish her, and she smiled back at me, with tiny beaming white teeth and round dark eyes. I blessed her; she thought I was incapable of real anger.

“This book is *The Rooftop Mystery*. It has the same artist as *Danny and the Dinosaur*.”

Kai’s eyes brightened. “I read that! It really is a mystery!” he said, relishing the fact that he already knew how the story would end.
“I was thinking about our women and men, girls and boys problem, and I thought we could look at this book again, even though lots of you already read it.” The class waited, confident in their collective genius. “Remember our problem? Think about what we said about how women and men are shown in these books. And as I read, tell me if this looks like what you know is true about boys and girls, OK?” I started to read, “It was moving day for Sam. He was moving four blocks away. Albert was helping” (Lexau, 1969, p. 7).

Tara pointed at the first page and accused it of a crime. “The mommy is holding the baby. The daddy could hold the baby,” she said.

“What is the dad holding the door open?” asked Wing.

I couldn’t even get past the very first page with this critical audience and I began to laugh. “That’s a hard one Wing…I think because the dad is paying this moving man to carry things. The dad is giving orders. It reminds me of a king in a fairytale.”

“In the 500 Hats of Barthomelew Cubbins there is a king. He’s greedy,” said Matthew, from the back row.

I gestured majestically, lowered my voice, and looking down my nose at the class said, “All I see is mine!” No one bowed towards me; instead the children laughed and turn into kings and queens on the rug.

Matthew got onto his knees and pointed. Now a head taller than the other children, he said, “The dad thinks he doesn’t have to work. But he could still work.” This reminded me that I promised to watch Matthew do tricks on his skateboard after school today.

“Matt, What about the kids?” I asked.
Sharley answered for him. “See how that little girl is holding the doll. She looks just like the mom. She’s not helping either.” Sharley is very good at anticipating an adult’s intentions, though her parents were worried about her ability to socialize with other children.

I smiled broadly. “That is so funny! Could the mom and girl help? Well, maybe the girl is too little, but man, when I think about Mrs. Au, I can’t stop her from helping!”

“My mom likes to wɔrrrrrrk!” Beatriz said, rolling her tongue, and making the kids giggle.

“My mom likes to work, too. She always tells my dad there’s more work to do!” shouts Gabriella, who was no longer a quiet little girl.

“If Mrs. Au was in this story, she would pick up box after box,” I said excitedly. “And she’s hapai now. I think she works more now that she’s pregnant!”

“The mom and girl should be working. Women and girls can do things. My mom always tells me I’m a strong girl,” said Kahaea, with her characteristic firmness.

Something about her statement of conviction wounds me. She knows that women are oppressed, and that her skin color and culture marked her as different, but she wanted the freedom offered to her by her mother’s work ethic. And now it was passed on to me, and the rest of the class. I just hoped that we could be worthy of it.

“You are a strong girl Kahaea.” I said softly. “And I don’t mean just your muscles. Your brain and heart are strong. When you grow up, you can do anything.”

Andrew groaned and put his chin in the palm of his hand. “Mr. Au, can you please read the story to us now?”
I read the story as requested, and afterwards, asked if any of the children wanted to draw the first picture in the book again, in order to make it more look more like how women and men, and boys and girls really acted. When a few agreed, I quickly ran out the door, leaving the kids alone, and made a copy of the text that included a generous amount of white space below the image. All children’s books should include lots of white space so that the reader could rewrite them, I thought to myself.

“I can draw the picture again? But this time different?” Wing asked me incredulously. I could tell, that like myself, he was struggling with the notion of freeing himself from the authority of the text. I offered him the worksheet that I had made, but instead of drawing, he quickly wrote, “The dad shuld hlep the move ing man because Sam’s dad is moveing to! The boys is just hlelping!”

Then, Tara, Beatriz, Minami and Elizabeth silently presented me with images of the father carrying and caring for the baby with a smile on his face, while the rest of the characters lugged boxes out the door. Tara explained, “Here’s our pictures. The mom should be doing moving and the girl and the dad. It would not be fair if the boys only did the work.” I loved the strong, simple charm and declarative quality of the drawings. They dazzled me.

“I love these drawings! Good job!” I said. “Y’know, it’s funny, but if I was moving I don’t think I could hold the baby while everyone else carried the boxes.”

“Why, Mr. Au?” asked Elizabeth.

“…I guess…it would make me feel weak or something.”
“You got to be strong to take care of a baby!” Kahaea shouted, from the other side of room.

Kahaea and Derrida (1978) understand that texts that claim to contain fixed and particular meanings will inevitably be composed of signifiers selected to convey so much specificity, that upon careful reading gaps can be perceived between the message the author wishes to convey and the meaning the reader is asked to accept. With a deconstructive procedure, Sarup notes, “the text is seen to fail by its own criteria; the standards or definitions which the text sets up are used reflexively to unsettle and shatter the original distinctions” (1993, p. 34). Children’s books are wonderful opportunities for children to practice deconstruction, as the texts so often reflect a normative view of society that children can compare to their own lived experience. Another very useful text to share with children is one’s own life and anxiety.

Hesitantly, then, I would suggest that it is possible to invite, through critical literacy, an interrogation of the teacher’s inclination to control, dominate and influence his student’s lives as a form of a what Benjamin (1978) calls “an organizing function” (p.233); that is, as a pattern of inquiry that can serve as an entryway into critical thinking across many topics and domains. As the teacher learns to share his motivation for teaching in a particular way, and his relationship to the normalized content he is delivering, he could begin to emerge as less of an authority figure to the young children, and something more akin, perhaps, to a dramaturge—a playwright whose role is to decipher, contextualize, and clarify archaic plot devices and obscure passages of text for actors and audiences. I choose the image of the dramaturge here because her presence at a
play can immediately signal a demystified shift in the relationship, a merging of audience and performer—as well as a search for Brechtian moments of artful exploration of social worlds that exist beyond the theater walls. Keeping in mind Bruner’s notion of scaffolding (Feeney et al., 2001), I hypothesize that through this intimate and playful process, young children can learn to deconstruct the teacher’s normally hidden involvement with educational narratives and become experts at understanding power relations in the classroom themselves. Freire (1993) believed that a collective effort on behalf of the teacher and students to understand the influence of subjectivities is necessary for the formation of a community’s political consciousness. He writes that:

A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice co-intentional education.

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for liberation will be what it should be; not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement. (p. 69)

The greatest challenge to the teacher who is interested in generating a critical ethos in an elementary school environment may, in a way, be the degree that he is willing to share power with children, reject the dominant discourse, and deprofessionalize his practice. Of course, such a process cannot be enacted without anxiety and a sense of risk. An empowering curriculum is challenging to implement since the teacher must, while facilitating critical discussion, carefully balance his authority against every participant’s
life experience and their relationship to the dominant motifs of social narratives such as race, culture, gender, age and socio-economic class. This problematic, in the words of Ira Shor (1999), is compounded by the fact that the “difference in an unequal society means that teachers [will] possess uneven authority when they address students” (p. 14). As educators, I feel that we should seek to overcome such complications in the classroom and face the challenge of negotiating and weaving a critical dialogue into our too-often scripted and regulated interactions with students, and productively use the uncertainty that such a project generates to create a third space with our students. And if it fails, as Hamlet said, we will gain nothing but shame and the odd hits.

Influenced by the postmodern analysis of spatial geographies by Edward Soja (1996) and the postcolonial theory of hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), the third space in education is often defined as an uncharted sphere of classroom discourse that attempts to eliminate the binary relationship between the dominant social narrative and the individual’s construction of his or her lived identity and personal relationships (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999). The resultant work environment, that invites the sharing of personal, cultural, and oppositional knowledge, helps to create “a space of resistance and engagement, of motivated and creative alternatives to the current social order” (Brooke et al., 2005, p. 369) in which, perhaps, pedagogies such as critical literacy can be enacted with relevance and candor and the narratives of power can be critiqued; in the process, new narratives and subjectivities may emerge through dialogues that suit the complicated identities and educational aspirations of the participants. Empowered by such a project, students may find a way to assert their knowledge and recognize that their voices really do matter to their education, and consequently transform
their everyday schooling experiences from one of mostly obedience, to one of possible agency.

Geocritic Edward Soja (1996) draws upon the work of Lefebvre and Foucault to focus a theory of thirddspace upon conceptions of geography that seek to remove the boundaries of binary thinking that can inhibit the imaginative relocation of human experience. In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Real and Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Soja invites (playful) theory building and political action from within the private and public worlds of the lived experiences that are continuously spun from a trialectical relationship between spatial, historical, and social existence. The usefulness of Soja’s interpretation of thirddspace theory to my autoethnographic project is discovered as I trace the relationship betwixt firstspace and secondspace at school. Soja delineates firstspace as the physical mapping of space; in geographical terms, this is most often expressed as mathematically informed conceptions of territory that are used to determine, with ever-increasing precision, the spatial relationship between material features and how surfaces are inhabited and utilized over time. This positivist construction of geography tends to construe human behavior as a consequential attribute of the numbering of points in space, producing a subjectivity that can “invisibly…shape our ‘action spaces’ in households, buildings, neighborhoods, villages, cities, regions, nations, states, the world economy and global geopolitics” (Soja, 1996, p. 75).

Secondspace arises as a challenge to this deterministic view of social interactions and the impenetrable description of causal links studied by firstspace geographers. Secondspace is an imaginary where individuals can interpret and reconfigure phenomena and actualize conceptions that were invisible from within the limiting view of objective
firstspace renderings, and as such can be associated with the creativity and social idealism of the artist and philosopher. Whereas firstspace is disposed towards what is conceived, secondspace draws upon what is perceived in space. Soja writes that in relation to firstspace, in secondspace the “actual material forms recede into the distance as fixed, dead signifiers emitting signals that are processed, and thus understood and explained when deemed necessary, through the rational (and at time irrational) working of the human mind” (Soja, 1996, p. 79).

Here the oft-observed binary contention between the scientist and the artist follows as firstspace and secondspace thinkers refute the conceptual authority of each other’s knowledge production whilst subsuming or trivializing activity that forms outside of the epistemological territories that they choose to inhabit, even while their sphere’s activity is critiqued from within; for just as firstspace becomes subject to the geographer’s interrogation of the “normative modes of political and territorial compartmentalization” (Newman & Paasi, 1998, p. 191) that typify firstspace, secondspace activity may be deconstructed by the artist or philosopher when sweeping corrections of existing social defects becomes the focus of a work. The effect of this compartmentalization, these oppositions, this mechanism that drives theoretical declaration from both inside and between firstspace and secondspace, contributes to the fomenting of thirdspace as a means to smudge the lines between the objective and the subjective, the perceived and the conceived, the calculated and the creative, and to purposefully change the rules, and reach across disciplines and discourses (Bennett, 2000). As such, the positioning of lived experience as a third element that interferes with the incomplete and binary relationship between reductionist historicism and dominant
social constructs of spatiality can generate new ways of thinking about justice across a variety of disciplines (Soja, 2009). Soja’s (1996) conception of thirddspace then, is:

A knowable and unknowable, real and imagined lifeworld of experiences, emotions, events and political choices that is existentially shaped by the generative and problematic interplay between centers and peripheries, the abstract and concrete, the impassioned spaces of the conceptual and lived, marked out materially and metaphorically in spatial praxis, the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into (spatial) action in a field of unevenly developed (spatial) power. (p. 31)

Drawing upon Soja’s trialectics is helpful, and I practice recalling the first space within physical descriptions of the school, and second space as a creative and idealized response to that plane, before revisiting the autoethnographic stories that reveal an attempt to reconfigure the spatial experience for myself and the first graders in my class by encouraging children to include, within their critical analysis of the intended functionality of the physical and temporal environment in relation to the curriculum and the society of the school, a sense of agency and creative playfulness towards a lived sense of space and time. As a teacher, this was admittedly directed by my own interests and typically appeared as simple aversions of curricular tropes such as not requiring youngsters to sit, in a habitualized position, cross-legged on the floor before me, or spending long blocks of instructional time performing songs by Bob Dylan and Bob Marley for the sheer enjoyment of singing together, to actions that offered more critical resistance to spatial norms such as marching to protest the rules of the school; avoiding the “mean ladies” who worked in the cafeteria by eating in our classroom for several weeks, and refusing
the institutionally approved reading tests in favor of our own classroom reading practice. In every case, conversation with the first graders, in which they often engaged in Bhabha’s (1994) notion of mimicry of my teaching persona in a hybrid space, and personal reflection upon these critical incidents (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2005) and their impact upon the developing, tiny, and temporary culture of our classroom, helped me to recognize the school’s spatiality as a social construction that manifested itself as a purview of my authority as a teacher and adult.

This inquiry, these projects, these critical actions in our life-world, were responses to particular signifiers that shifted and re-ordered some curricular tropes while leaving others untouched, and in that sense were best “understood as temporary, a strategic foregrounding” (Soja, 1996, p. 171) that opened up thirdspace possibilities for the children and myself, and very pointedly contributed little to the production of measurable progress in subject area assessment scores or a refinement of teaching techniques. If anything, as I became more and more interested in pursuing lived and critical space, my practice became sloppier and even more inexact. But it was worth it. A thirdspace did at times develop, and this assisted us when we wished to crack open the standards-based curriculum, at those times when we wanted to “assert affective and cognitive intensity, some emotional and intellectual daring, something at stake in the problem posing” (Shor, 2006, p. 31) and find something to help us to meet critical challenges, and something to carry us forward, from day to day.
Chapter Five: On Decolonization

I stayed up very late one night. Staring at my computer screen for hours and hours, I waited for words that never came. I went to bed at around two-thirty and blinked three times. Then it was morning. I drove to school in a daze.

My muscles ached and my eyes burned as I tried to work with the children in my classroom. My nerves were red hot. The first graders who misbehaved irritated me easily and I growled at them for the slightest infraction. For some reason, there were also quite a few children wandering about on the school’s lawn that day, and the kids in my class kept running out of the classroom to see what they were doing.

Since I don’t write lesson plans, and since I didn’t feel like emerging a curricular goal with the kids through conversation, I ran out of ways to keep the children busy very quickly. Finally, I decided to just sit the kids down in rows and read them a story. I scowled at the class as they sat cross-legged on the floor at my feet, then furiously dug through the book box, looking for a story with lots of pictures that would be easy to read.

A smiling youngster from Courtney’s first grade classroom materialized before me. He handed me a book about Earth Day and skipped back across the courtyard. I had forgotten that it was Earth Day. Now I knew why all of those students were wandering around outside; they were looking for trash to pick up! Earth Day was the only day of the year that the campus looked so clean.

I really think that Earth Day is a very colonial notion, and quite ridiculous, but the children in my class saw the orca on the cover of the book and asked to hear the story right away. “Why not?” I thought to myself, “It will take up the time that’s left before recess.”
The book was quite long for a children’s story. The book was written from the point of view of the planet. In it, he benevolently explained that he was feeling sick, and that all of his children—who were the animals and plants—were feeling sick too. The text was accompanied by ephemeral airbrush drawings of ghostly animals floating through the air. At first the story seemed very creepy and trite; but for some reason, as I recited the words on the last few pages, I began to weep. The image of my son’s face kept appearing in my mind; I guess fatigue had worn down my defenses. Every time the storybook alluded to the future, I felt a sob catch in my throat. Soon all of the children in the front row were quietly sobbing along with me. When I finished reading, I closed the book and set it gently down upon the floor, and wiped my eyes with my sleeve. I didn’t feel cranky anymore. I felt like a teacher again.

By reflex, I began a literature response lesson. “Well, I guess that was kind of sad, huh? Let’s talk about the book. What was it about? What feelings did the author put into his story?” Sara, who always sits as close to me as possible, raised her hand. Her eyes were shining. She looked at me intensely and blinked.

“Mr. Au”, she whispered, “I don’t know what the book was about. I was only crying because you were crying.” I heard myself inhale involuntarily. When the recess bell rang, the entire class was still sitting on the carpet, feeling the weight of my person.

I needed to break the spell. I reached down, and with one finger, gently touched Sara’s nose. “Beep!” I exclaimed. Sara smiled and then pressed her own nose, and the nose of the girl next to her, at the same time.

“Beep! Beep!” the children yelled at once, as if on cue. I ran to the classroom door, stopped, and watched them flow like swiftly moving water around my legs. The
sound of their footfalls blended into a warm clatter on the school sidewalk and faded into silence.

Revealed to me in textual fragments, unconscious intentions, and the spaces we visit in dreams, is the childhood I most desire, though I know the one most I want for my students, has never been mine to impose.

I thrust my hands into my pockets and felt warm light on the back of my neck. Shadows were cast onto the wall outside of the classroom and I watched the grey leaves whisper in and out of focus, for ten minutes, until another bell rang, and I heard the din of the first graders returning from play.

Sometimes, when I look depressed, my wife yells, “Chin up, Old Man!” and I grab my dad’s strong, warm hand in mine, and we both burst into laughter.

In one of the first methodology courses I ever took, the professor told us that skillful supervision in the classroom was a necessity, since it allowed a teacher to transmit knowledge to children efficiently and productively; a teacher invited misbehavior when he did not clarify expectations and establish routines. At that early point in my development as a teacher, I disagreed, and tended to imagine myself teaching through nurturance alone. I admired the passage in *Emile or On Education*, where Rousseau (1979) wrote:

Respect childhood, and do not hurry to judge it, either for good or for ill…you know, you say, the value of time and do not want to waste any of it? You do not see that using time badly wastes time far more than doing nothing with it and that a badly instructed child is farther from wisdom than the one who has not been
instructed at all. You are alarmed to see him consume his early years in doing nothing. What? Is it nothing to be happy? Is it nothing to jump, play, and run all day? He will never be so busy in his life. (p. 107)

I believed that I could establish a happy family in my classroom and as a constructivist (Vygotsky, 1986), sought to perform what I thought of as openly democratic teaching; I wanted the children in my class to experience freedom and love and looked for a methodology that supported my belief. I would assess children, I decided, by observing their work and encourage progress by appealing to their developing rationality. Most of all, I promised myself that I would find happiness and peace whilst being with children, and by doing good work.

Thinking back, I find the narrative I was trying to invoke, at least as a beginning teacher, reminiscent of what Mary Louise Pratt (1995), in her examination of the travel writing that accompanied European colonial expansion, describes as the “anti-conquest” of the late 1800s. The explorer who writes the anti-conquest describes a journey of hardship through colonized landscapes using the innocent eyes of a Linnaean scientist who interacts gently with natives and the environment, in order to collect small plant and animal specimens to take back to Europe. Pratt explains that this narrative reveals the colonizer’s fantasy, his complicity with hegemony, and most significantly, perhaps, his remorse because

Even though the travelers were witnessing the daily realities of the contact zone, even though the institutions of expansionism made their travels possible, the discourse of travel that natural history produces, and is produced by, turns on a
great longing: for a way of taking possession without subjugation and violence.

(p. 57)

This yearning, which leads the traveler to position himself innocently alongside and yet above the people he encounters, is familiar to me. My mentor teacher, perhaps as a type of hazing, took great delight in seeing me gradually replace the gentle facade of classroom management that existed in my imagination with a more authoritarian position over time; eventually I changed into the familiar bossy teacher that resembled something that might be called, politely, a professional. Interestingly, for nearly ten years I continued to write my newsletters using the collective pronoun “we”, in an attempt to make my authority over the children seem less distinct and their learning moments more independent. I depicted the children in my newsletters as able to “spontaneously take up the roles” (Pratt, 1995, p. 163) I wished for them without any effort on my own part. My gesture towards student-centered, nurturing, non-controlling teaching became another mechanism that subjectified the children in my classroom. As a local Asian teacher I was the colonizer and gained an elevated sense of my place in the school community through the process of othering the first graders, while I ignored the repressed conception of history that my own body represented.

It always seems to go back to schooling, the control of minds and wills. Education was one of the tools favored by the Calvinist missionaries who came to Hawai‘i in the 1820’s and was employed with great effectiveness towards their efforts to convert Hawaiians to Christianity and the ali‘i towards sympathy with an American value system (Meyer, 2003). By the middle of the nineteenth century, literacy—and the exchange of both native and foreign ideas—flourished amongst the Hawaiian population, as
Hawaiians employed the newly-developed conventions of the language as a written medium while accepting the form of Hawaiian language education that was taught at missionary schools (Warner, 2001). The technologies of control that had been fixed upon the spiritual, physical, political and intellectual lives of Hawaiians over the course of the colonization process reached an inglorious apotheosis when American forces overthrew the Hawaiian government in 1893. At almost the same time, English was made the official language of schools in Hawai‘i, a decision that effected the public school structure for decades, as the schools became instruments for the silencing of Hawaiian culture and knowledge, well into the twentieth century (Kawakami & Dudoit, 2000).

A sizable portion of the students who attend public school in Hawai‘i today, and their teachers, are the descendants of Japanese and Chinese immigrants who came to work on the white-owned plantations in the early twentieth century after the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. The ascendency to political power by many Japanese and Chinese families after only two or three generations, and the successful participation of Japanese and Chinese citizens in the social fabric of contemporary Hawai‘i, contrasted against the continued oppression and marginalization of native Hawaiians during that same period of time, represents a troubling state of affairs to Hawai‘i’s reputation as a melting pot; and gives the so-called local public school teacher, like myself, much to reflect upon—especially when he realizes that he is paid to uphold American ideals (Fujikane, 2000; Trask, 2000).

I embody a troubled history, and as a classroom teacher I usually experienced a “mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath” (Gandi, 1998, p. 4) in its stead. I feel that this loss of historical memory, especially in relation to my loss of personal childhood
memory, led me to employ authoritarian teaching practices and standardized American content—and a particular teaching methodology, curriculum, and philosophical belief—that were congruent with hegemonic narratives that promoted a colonial mentality (Taiaiake, 1999) and American capitalist values (McLaren, 2005). Steeped in the narrative of the American myth that all children can succeed in life if they work hard in school, I insisted that children could achieve in school if they “followed directions”, “did a good job”, and “cooperated with others and listened and behaved”. Instead of noting that an alignment with colonial values was really all that legitimated my expertise as an educator, which would have been more honest, I usually used my knowledge of normalizing discourses, expressed through a weak version of Hawaiian patois, to reinforce my authority as a “local made good” and dominate the children and parents around me (Gee & Lankshear, 2002). I now wish that I had utilized the subjectivity of being a local Chinese teacher to interrogate my colonial leanings with the children in my class through the lens of a moral purpose (Fullan, 1993) more explicitly. This regret, more than anything else, motivates an exploration of postcolonial theory and my interest in the possibility of decolonizing educational norms.

In her overview of postcolonial studies, Ania Loomba (2005) writes that colonization is not only “the takeover of territory, appropriation of material resources, exploitation of labor and interference with political and cultural structures of another territory or nation” (p. 11) but also a force that “locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into [one of] the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history.” (p. 8) The notion of “de-colonization” can therefore encompass many meanings and invoke many images, including a revolutionary, nationalist call-to-arms or a political
resistance that exists on more subtle, subversive and spiritual level. It is, above all, the “process of dismantling colonist power in all its forms...including the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved” (Ashcroft et al., 2006, p. 63). This process is necessary because, as Linda Smith (1999) writes:

The reach of imperialism into ‘our heads’ challenges those who belong to colonized communities to understand how this occurred, partly because we perceive a need to decolonize our minds, to recover ourselves, to claim a space in which to develop a sense of authentic humanity. (p. 23)

Although I am fairly certain that I am not intended audience for this passage, I draw inspiration from Linda Smith and other indigenous scholars, and while wary of occupying intellectual territory that I perhaps have no right to inhabit, and speaking to discourses I cannot possibly understand, I do feel that my exploration of the notion of decolonization in the young children’s classroom can be a worthwhile endeavor on both personal and professional levels.

Embarking upon this journey was not an immediate interest, and it wasn’t until I was introduced to notions of critical literacy (Green, 2001) that I thought to experiment with decolonizing the social text of schooling as curriculum. Here, I sought to identify representations of colonial power in my classroom with the children in an effort to forge a narrative that might dismantle some American constructions of schooling. As always, this seemed like a simple matter of reversal at first, and I encouraged an aversion to reciting the Pledge of Allegiance (we made up our own pledge) and standing in line in the cafeteria. Eventually, though, I understood that nearly every conceptual instrument in the
school, from the discourse of best practice and standards, to the hierarchical structure that organized the relationships between faculty, staff, and administration, to the existence of the school’s physicality in space and its use of punctuated time, could be interpreted as a colonial construct. Attempting to dismantle the dominant and entrenched educational ethos through a pedagogical medium seemed almost impossible after such a realization, and almost shocked me into paralysis.

It was at this point that I became aware of the manner in which my interest in decolonization was received by my fellow teachers: when I tried to represent the children’s interests by voicing dissatisfaction with the part-time status of our Hawaiian studies teacher, I was identified as Hawaiian by blood, and a nationalist; when I called for the involvement of younger children in school governance, I was deemed a radical, and even an anarchist. Of course these narratives were limiting, but beyond that, they produced subjectivities that made me feel even greater unease—who was I to speak to the lives of these children, anyway? Certainly not Hawaiian, and certainly not a child! Gayatri Spivak’s (1999) famous question/accusation, “can the subaltern speak?”(p. 269), that implies that “no act of dissent or resistance occurs on behalf of an essential subaltern subject entirely separate from the dominant discourse that provides the language and the conceptual categories with which the subaltern voice speaks” (Ashcroft et al., 2006, p. 219) seemed appropriate here, since I could only express my position on issues of culture in the school by essentializing the children around me. And this was no doubt a misguided, controlling, and exploitive formulation.

Taking a cue from the practice of autoethnography, where the researcher uses his own body and experience as an instrument to investigate social and political issues, I
became fairly sure, as time passed, that I could at least decolonize my thinking process—and could start by becoming very aware of the anxieties, assumptions and ambitions which flitted about my consciousness, rather than be only concerned with those I saw outside myself. I drew myself into personifying my beliefs as practice, tried to feel less self-conscious about my liminal identity, and performed critical literacy lessons based upon a process of decolonization, that though awkward and problematized by my own subject position, did provide me with some small sense of what it was like to unfix myself from the subjectivity of the colonizing and colonized Asian settler teacher in Hawai‘i: it was, above all, about inhabiting a space of experimentation, while embracing the feeling of that I would not know what was going to happen next. In *Rethinking Indigenous Education*, Cathryn McConaghy (2000) writes that although

There are sound arguments for the need for conventions about representations…there is also a danger that conventions about speaking positions may lead to an atrophication of ideas, a reluctance to engage in critical thinking and the reproduction of hierarchical structures and oppressive systems within education. (p. 7)

As such, what seemed to begin as an activist effort on the behalf of young children instead became a meditation on the “compelling seductions of colonial power” (Gandi, 1998, p. 4) that I embodied as a first grade teacher at the charter school. The following stories are an attempt to share this process with you.

❖

Every parent cherishes the innocence of childhood, but nurtures it differently. An infant’s large eyes and unsteady gait, might invoke a particular day, now barely
remembered, of wandering unprotected through grass and sunshine. After I became a father, I had a dream about my mother’s childhood; in it, I saw her as a little girl, running and playing in the shade of the ironwood trees in the yard in front of her house in Oama, Maui. The house was set on the beach. It was very large, and the thin walls were painted a dark green, a rich color, that was now fading. Snickering, she picked up a handful of small, spiny pinecones and threw them at her sister. My mother began to climb a lime tree, heard the trucks rumbling through the sugarcane fields, and waited until the front door slammed four times. She and her sister ran to help their mother set the table. Laughter rose behind her and she saw Uncle and her brothers ambling into the kitchen. They took the time to kiss her tenderly on the cheek and forehead, yet talked over her as if she wasn’t there. The dinner table creaked and waggled as the men nosily sat down at their places. Father was the last to come in; he sat down silently with that peculiar, sullen expression that he has worn every day of her life. Her aspiration was to someday make him smile.

The appetites of these energetic, hard-working men seemed endless. They loaded their plates with mounds of boiled chicken, fresh green vegetables, and steaming white rice. Watching them hunker over their meal, sit and stretch, and seeing the movement of their lips as they talked and gulped their food, marked them in her memory as giants, colossi who daily confronted and consumed the world. Each was moving quickly into family history, with his own calling, his own particular destiny, and she found herself thinking about the day when a hot meal might be placed before her, after her own long day of adventure, and wondered if she would ever talk to her father one evening about her own day’s work, and make him smile.
After eating, the men pushed themselves away from the table, and moved into the living room to talk story; my mother knew that in twenty minutes Uncle would be snoring. It was time for the girls to wash the dishes. Standing at the sink, Sister danced with a dishrag and sang a funny song. My mother didn’t want to learn the words, but as she dried the plates, she found herself singing the song on my clock radio. I awoke in the twenty first century. The birds called one another through the distance between the trees and the telephone poles. I placed my palm against the wall next to the bed. The sun was already warming the thinness of the wall and piercing the grime on the window screens. I didn’t feel all that far from the plantation.

Later, as I drove to school, I thought about the little girl in my dream. Perhaps it wasn’t my mother, perhaps it was my mentor teacher, or the remnants of some collective memory I picked up from simply living as a Chinese in Hawai‘i. Whoever it was—wherever it came from—I knew that that girl’s future depended upon her being quite smart and very lucky, for being the youngest and being female not only spared her from many chores during the day but also from the opportunity to work, to move freely about the world, and to possess wealth. Perhaps it was really a Cinderella story, and the beginning of the story of how my parent’s met and married. I liked that thought: beginnings are so much more enjoyable than endings.

When visiting classrooms in Honolulu, I am always delighted to find an ethnically diverse population of children to greet me as I walk though the door, and then disappointment when I see the same old, monocultural curriculum being implemented; it is a bouncing vibrancy absorbed by sodden tedium. When one recognizes that the
classroom reflects the diversity of the state’s population and that a classroom in Hawai‘i can contain members of many races and cultures including Native Hawaiian, Filipino, White, Japanese, Marshallese, Hispanic, Korean, African American, Portuguese, Samoan, Chinese, and Tongan children, and that many an individual—like my own boys—represents a multiracial heritage, one can see the value in attempting to forge a curriculum that engages the cultural identity of each member of the class, particularly since Hawai‘i, despite the government-approved, name brand, tourist-centered discourse (Kaomea, 2003) that is promoted through its advertisements and literature, and despite its reputation as a “melting pot”, is also the site of much racial disharmony owing to its complicated colonial history (Moniz & Spickard, 2006).

The public school teacher is a member of a public school system, and is expected to work within a curriculum that acculturates students into an organized system of Western knowledge, an epistemology that is dependent upon objectivism or the notion that “quarks, trees, llamas, and sex all have meaning independent of their ascription by human beings and their cultural systems” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 14). This state of affairs tends to severely limit the possibilities for a classroom discourse that might embrace multiple ways of viewing the world, and the teacher becomes confined to the reproduction of a curriculum that represents, putatively, the apex of knowledge, which suggests to the children that every fact presented, and every skill that was learned, was gained through science, and honed through patient investigation, discovery, and research.

Since these claims are the basis for the school work that the children must perform, they become familiar with their social and intellectual expression being limited
to a conditioned representation of knowledge that is “embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns of general behavior, in form for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 200).

The children, despite any doubts that they might have, are not given the opportunity to question the source of the teacher’s claims or the processes by which these essential truths were produced, and are inculcated into a discourse where facts are considered immutable and their acquisition, an inevitability. The teacher’s positivistic truth claim is reinforced by a teaching methodology that hinges upon the notion that learning objectives and observable student outcomes form an indubitable basis for the evaluation of a learning experience’s effectiveness and quality, and that children must conform accordingly. In his review of the aims and objectives movement in curriculum design, A.V. Kelly (2004) observes that:

What we must note here is that to adopt this model for all educational planning is to be committed to the idea of education as the modification of pupil behavior, whether one defines what one means by ‘objectives’ in behavioral terms or not. (p. 60)

As children study objects, they become the objects of study. Kelly adds that an additional failing of this particular application of a scientific curriculum is that it “leads to a loss, rather than an enhancement, of freedom for both teacher and pupil” (p. 59), particularly since this version of education brings with it the biases of the dominant culture’s worldview and an effacement of the interests that a minority culture might wish to include. Often, a version of multicultural education, derived from basic notions of teaching tolerance, is used as a substitute for engagement with these issues, and is habitually
conceptualized and presented to children, as Sonia Nieto (1992) observes, as
essentializing “lessons in human relations, units about ethnic holidays, education in
inner-city schools, or multicultural food festivals” (p. 207).

After his mother is shot, Barbar the elephant wanders into town. A wealthy old
woman buys him a suit, gives him a place to live, teaches him how to drive, and arranges
for his education. Soon he is a member of high society and is representative of an elite
class of elephants who “have as their mission the civilizing of the others” (O’Harrow,
1999, p. 96). He eventually returns to the wild elephants and they crown him their new
king. Popular and powerful, Babar civilizes his cousin, marries her, and then flies off into
the heavens with his bride in a hot air balloon. Now I’m caught in the wind, reverse my
position, and heedlessly descend into a space in which a totalizing discourse of
“American” education, no matter how contrived, can ground my critique.

As a public school teacher, I was colonized, viewed myself as a member of
mainstream American culture, and looked down upon the world. My desire for Whiteness
entailed filtering my cultural points of reference, and blocking signifiers of local and
Hawaiian culture before, they could enter my classroom practice. My power resided in
the reading of Western literature, the speaking of proper American English, and the
expression of what I thought of as rational and eloquent ideas. I taught character
education using Hawaiian words such as pono or haʻahaʻa, without having an inkling of
what they meant in context of Hawaiian culture, what kind of damage I was doing, what
issues I glossed over, or what opportunities for inquiry I was missing. At my worst,
especially during Black History Month or May Day, my classroom became a version of
the infamous *It’s a Small World* ride at Disneyland in which robot children were dressed
in costumes and placed on display as the sole representatives their kind. This brand of teaching—of thinking—relies upon the assumption that it is possible to represent races and cultures, (and in the case of children: age groups) from within categories that are fixed in time and space; this is a practice that reenacts the colonial strategy of blithely traveling upstream and scientifically dividing people into races as they are passed on the riverbank; it is a justification for the subjugation and utilization of said races through the casual application of positivist authority and brute force. It is a social studies unit.

In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon (1967) applies psychoanalysis to issues of racism and the anxiety of the colonized. Fanon writes about being considered at once a Black man and a member of intellectual French society. A simple line near the conclusion of his text—that stands unadorned between paragraphs and serves as a nexus for his frustration—reads “Me, nothing but me.” (p. 212) As I read the line, I feel something reach up and bury its claws in my gut, and the sensation is (deep breath), reasonably contextualized through the lens of social history: I am the grandchild of Chinese immigrants and grew up within a particular middle class, so-called local Hawaiian milieu, in which the drive to attain privileges identical to those afforded to white Americans was normalized by a community that was mostly comprised of the descendants of plantation workers. I overheard uncles and aunties telling stories of growing up on a plantation and their narrative helped to condition my desire for material goods and a well paying job. However, I think this insufficiently explains my internal desire for Whiteness. When I am shaken awake, and confronted with racial bias against my person, I find that there is me, no one but me, and like Fanon, I will continuously:
…Try to read admiration in the eyes of the other, and if, unluckily, those eyes show me an unpleasant reflection, I find that mirror flawed: Unquestionably that other one is a fool. I do not try to be naked in the sight of the object. The object is denied in terms of individuality and liberty. (p. 212)

My feelings are conflicted because, like a child without a mother or father, I cry for approval, but I also desire freedom from the subjectivity that makes me dependent upon another’s caring and controlling gaze.

Me, nothing but me: the anxiety that I experienced as a young man going to the “mainland” for the first time is embodied by that line, but in a more metonymic fashion, it serves as an axiom for dilemma: as an educator, I frequently experienced a feeling of being caught between two projects, one which was concerned with interrogating Hawai‘i’s colonial narrative for the benefit of my students, and one that consists of my attempt to better my ability to act and think like the colonizer. As livelihood. More often than not, I taught my first graders to be White Americans through the language and curriculum that I employed and the images of life on the mainland that I surrounded them with on the classroom walls—even while asking them to think for themselves, and think critically.

Caught between, he struggles to keep space OPEN.

I felt, at one time, that a politicized and problematized version of the emergent curriculum model, of the sort used in some early childhood centers in which “something that fascinates children emerges from ongoing activities, often in an unplanned way” (Riley & Roach, 2006, p. 364), allowed room for productive uncertainty, because I noticed that when I stepped back and watched children play, they often demonstrated the
raucous impossible in the normally staid and scripted classroom environment. It was at those moments that I thought I overheard the solution to mysteries. Guided, provoked, not taught, the students declaimed their interests before their identity—she is a surfer, a drummer, a brilliant conversationalist, and Samoan sometimes, maybe at home, when she is with her dad, she said. Developmental issues of self-esteem be damned, this first grade child desires my affection, but names the terms of the relationship!

What is important, perhaps, is to make space for more than merely the survival of the embodied ideals of education; beyond my field of vision lie notions of individuality and empowerment for children, social justice, merged spaces, creative inquiry, community-based schooling, narrative research, democratic questions, poetry, art, and alternative life-worlds. They appear and disappear, and that might be enough.

Have you noticed that authoritarianism and an adherence to capitalist values, upon which so many public schools seem to depend, are easily destabilized by the speech of a child?

I could premise a decolonized curriculum upon the confluence of non-programmatic experiences that promote an interrogation of an educational discourse that, as Ashcroft et al. (2006) explains, presupposes that knowledge has its origins in Cartesian philosophy, that sublimely Western way of thinking which assumes that dichotomies must exist between the mind and body, the inside and the outside, and the self and the other. Leela Gandi (1998) explains that Cartesian thinking defines intellect and rationality—or for our purposes, learning—as the process of “ordering or taming the wild profusion of things formally” (p. 36); when we formulate the child’s schooling as the process of collecting, classifying, and answering questions about the social and natural world, we give credence
to the belief that all things are ultimately understandable in relation to each other, and ourselves, in equivalent fashion. Although it has been said that Foucault has ignored the impact of colonialism in his analysis of power and knowledge circulation (Loomba, 2005, p. 49), I believe that it can clearly be seen that, as students and teachers in Hawai‘i, we can draw from his notion that we gain knowledge and credibility for our own interests by engaging in projects that subject the other to our gaze, even while participating in a discourse that reinforces the idea that we represent the racialized other to ourselves. Foucault (1977c) claims that we haven’t much of a choice in this matter, since we are born into a world,

In which it is truth that makes the laws, that produces the true discourses which, at least partially, decides, transmits and itself extends upon the effects of power. In the end we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of specific effects of power. (p. 94)

I think that the Fanon of Black Skin, White Masks would agree with Foucault, his fellow French intellectual, but only up to a point. Fanon concludes his book by writing: “At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness” (p. 232). Then he shouts: “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!”

Here’s a memory story I wrote about finding the right questions to ask. When the No Child Left Behind act was beginning to exert pressure on my grade level, I began to get bored. A friend of mine, who was a professor, advised me to take some courses, learn
something new, and revitalize myself. He suggested something called “postcolonial” issues in education. I had no idea what the term meant, but I didn’t think being new to the material mattered much—articulating theory from the standpoint of an experienced teacher was second nature to me, so I usually felt pretty confident when attending graduate seminars.

At the first meeting, the professor asked us to take turns explaining our research interests, and why we were taking the class. Because I had arrived late, and because of the way we had arranged ourselves around the table, I happened to have the last turn. This was fortunate, because as the students began to share genealogies and histories, and as I heard stories told in the Hawaiian language, I recognized that my usual spiel about student-centered education, democracy, and charter schools did not represent much more than a willingness to exercise authority over an academic discourse. I realized, at that moment, that I had always understood postcolonialism, but only from the lived experience of being the grandchild of immigrants who sympathized, and sought to become, the colonizer. Seen from above, the table became the face of a clock, and as it counted down student by student, and as the woman next to me finished telling us a story about being punished as a child for speaking Hawaiian, all confidence left me. I had precious little share with my classmates. When my turn came, my new friends looked at me politely and waited. My thoughts twirled. I was Chinese, yet yearned to be white; I lived in Hawai‘i, yet was wholly ignorant of Hawaiian culture; I coveted privilege, said I wanted to serve my community, yet shirked my responsibilities during my time off; I had never interrogated my choices because I never needed to ask myself questions about my own identity. So I grinned, and happily riding disequilibrium, blurted out, “This is the
coolest class I have ever been in. If anyone is interested in doing a project together, let me know!” I know I sounded foolish, but I meant every word.

I collaborated on a project with Pililani, an indigenous scholar and preschool director. She had an interest in producing age-appropriate books for Hawaiian children, and told me that there was no reason that these books couldn’t be written by Hawaiians, read by Hawaiians to Hawaiian children, and used in preschools to perpetuate cultural values and indigenous literacies. I pick up my copy of *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which at that time, filled my eyes with sparks. Discussing the indigenous scholar’s utilization of theory Linda Smith (1999) writes:

> We live simultaneously within such (normalized academic) views while needing to pose, contest, and struggle for the legitimacy of oppositional or alternative histories, theories and ways of writing (or teaching). At some points there is, there has to be, dialogue across the boundaries of oppositions. This has to be because we constantly collide with dominant views while are attempting to transform our lives on a larger scale than our own localized circumstances. This means struggling to make sense of our own world while also attempting to transform what counts as important in the world of the powerful. (p. 39)

I was inspired by Pililani, and wanted to undertake a reading project focused upon the point of representation, as well. When the children in my class shuffled into the classroom from recess, a month or so later, I received my opportunity.

Paul, a gentle and very well-read first grader, is showing a group of friends the booklet that came with a *Lilo and Stitch* (Sanders & DeBlois, 2002) DVD. This animated movie’s main character, Lilo, was portrayed as a Hawaiian girl whose parents were killed in a car accident. Lilo displays inappropriate social behavior after her parents’ death, and becomes an outsider, and the object of derision to the other children. Forlorn and frustrated, she adopts a small alien, thinking he is a dog, and names him Stitch. Unbeknownst to Lilo, Stitch was bred in a laboratory in outer space to be an
indestructible, horrifying weapon. Adventure ensues on the island of Kaua‘i as Lilo helps Stitch escape the intergalactic police force that was sent to recapture him. Eventually, Stitch demonstrates compassion and empathy and is allowed to stay on Kaua‘i as a part of Lilo’s family, and the film concludes with the type of sweet ending we associate with Walt Disney Studios.

The movie is so popular, that even a DVD booklet holds the children’s attention. Clustering around Paul, conversing and panting excitedly, the group ignores me as I play my tambourine signal over and over. I begin to raise my voice, but then stop myself and say earnestly, “Hey, hey, Paul. Let’s talk about Lilo and Stitch, then.”

Paul looks at me with curiosity, folds up his booklet, and sits down on the floor. The children follow his lead and look at me attentively. This was my chance, but I didn’t have much of a plan. “Okay, I know sometimes we argue about whether characters are real or not, but today I want to talk about Lilo.” Many of the children giggled excitedly at the mere mention of the name. Paul hands me the Lilo and Stitch booklet and I show it to the class.

“I think this story is supposed to take place in Hawai‘i, right? I wonder if we like her so much because she looks like us. Maybe that doesn’t happen so much around here, and I wonder why. Guys, here’s your first job. Can you find books in the room that have characters that look like you?”

I have hundreds of books in the room, so browsing through the collection is not a simple matter; most of them have been squeezed into swollen cardboard boxes or crumpled into the back of our old wooden shelves. Still, the kids are undaunted, and enthusiastically spill dozens of books unto the floor, as if digging for treasure. “Oh!” I
shout, as they tear the room apart, “Don’t forget if you can’t find a book that matches you—that tells us something, too!”

Some of the children go straight for books that they know and love. Sakura, who is a Japanese national, picks up a copy of Madeline (2000), by Ludwig Bedelman. It is her favorite story. On the other side of the room, Alika and Andrew argue over who should claim the biography of King Kamehameha (Crowe, 2003), while Pua, who speaks fluent pidgin, calmly plucks out a book that illustrates Disney’s film version of Pocahontas (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995). Pua is Hawaiian, and bless her; she looks almost exactly like the way Pocahontas is drawn in that cartoon.

Many of the first graders pick out books that depict characters that, to my eyes, look wildly different than they do, and I consider taking out little hand mirrors, so that they can get a good look at their own image…but then make a mental note to let them re-draw the pictures in the books, instead. “We need to stay on the right side of this thing”, I remind myself over and over. I remember my training in teacher methodology and try to forget what it represents. I struggle to see my intended learning outcome as the deployment of resistance, and the interruption of my classroom’s usual discourse.

Even in a first grade classroom, there are many discourses for the student to learn, many hegemonic devices to examine, and all of them should be viewed by the learner in relationship to his or her control over identity and localized discourse. I guess kids should know standard English and important facts (whatever that might means), but I also think that those are constructs that can be presented in the classroom as what they are—as the politically-biased representations of knowledge used by the powerful. Pam Green (2001) writes, that in practice:
Such approaches to literacy offer potential for students to understand how language works, the ways in which various individuals and groups use literacy to their own ends, and the reasons behind such use. Furthermore, educators have the potential to critically examine what counts as literacy, the way texts are used, and the literacy demands made on students. In this way a critical approach to literacy has potential for the student and for educators. However, whether or not such potential is realized depends on the complexities involved in the context in which literacy occurs. (p.10)

The children bring their books back to the rug and we have a short discussion. Here, two very different strands of inquiry emerge, and I conflate them while speaking, often to my own confusion and consternation. One states that Hawai‘i wasn’t always what it is now, while the other strand asks where the books in the classroom came from originally. Lucky for me, it doesn’t take much facilitation to have a rich dialogue with this group of first graders, and they help me to remember that it is perfectly fine to not know all the answers, to not lead.

At one point the children talk very enthusiastically about living in Hawai‘i, but wonder why the world around them looks so different than the paintings of “Old Hawai‘i” that they see in shops and museums; and slowly we begin to conclude in a rather vague fashion—but with no assistance from encyclopedias—that Americans must have took over land from the Hawaiians, and that this effects what we have in the classroom, and how we learn in school.
We are just at the cusp of forming a generality that I can write on the board when Samuel loses his patience. “Th—there’s no such thing as Lilo and Stitch, it has to be like a Cartoon Network! The news is real!” he shouts.

David, who went to the Bishop Museum to look at artifacts over the weekend, sputters, “Samuel! Samuel! You don’t understand the point! We’re not trying to talk about what’s real and what’s fake, were trying to talk—did, did it have the Hawaiian culture! We’re not talking about T.V!”

Most of the time our classroom is quiet and boring, so it is a great pleasure to hear the passion of these kids! But as the lunch period rapidly approaches, I reluctantly try to broker some peace. Holding up Paul’s DVD insert, I calmly say, “I agree this is fiction. But I don’t think she’s supposed to be totally made up. I think when I saw the movie I understood that she was supposed to be Hawaiian. Let’s take a vote. How many people think that Lilo and Stitch was made in Hawai‘i and that Hawaiian people helped make it?”

It is a close vote, though I was not sure what I was trying to prove; I think I just wanted to buy some time. Eleven children out of eighteen agree that the film was made in Hawai‘i. They explained their thinking: first there was the setting, full of coconut trees and beaches, and quiet roads that led to what appeared to be the kind of small towns that tourists like to visit. Then there were the characters themselves, some of whom spoke pidgin and used Hawaiian words. Finally, the characters in *Lilo and Stitch* just looked Hawaiian, and had, as one astute girl puts it, “silky hair”.

Lori raises her hand and disagrees with this line of thinking. She grins, and with a quiet and firm voice, declares, “Lilo and Stitch was made on the mainland because
sometimes it doesn’t mean that the cultures are the same place. It could be made somewhere else.” It is a strong argument. No one argues with Lori when she has an opinion. Besides, her mom is our room mother.

With five minutes left before lunchtime I solicit one last opinion. Andrew’s dad is the school’s Kumu, the Hawaiian Studies teacher. “What do you think Andrew? Was Lilo and Stitch made in Hawai‘i by Hawaiian people?”

Andrew tends to talk slowly. He knows three languages: Korean, Hawaiian, and English. He shifts his weight, and with a knee pressing onto the Kamehameha story says carefully, “No, because the character, the author, they’re not Hawaiian, they don’t speak Hawaiian. They just use the Hawaiian.”

I am very pleased by Andrew’s elucidation and I try to comment with equal relevance, if not equal authority. “They just use the Hawaiian, don’t they?” I pick up the *Lilo and Stitch* book, open it, and point to the title page. “You see these tiny words over here? It says where the book was made. Inside here it says Disney Enterprises, printed in New York and Canada.”

Andrew looks at his friends and states emphatically, “It’s not Hawai‘i.” Of course, this was taking the notion of the text, as the object of examination, a bit too literally. All I did was point out where the book was published.

Walter Benjamin speaks to the propensity of artists to create radical forms of art that entertain, but do not contribute, to revolutionary causes. His argument is very apropos to the teacher interested in liberatory education. Benjamin (1986) writes in *The Author As Producer* that:
The best political tendency is wrong if it does not demonstrate the attitude with which it is to be followed. And this attitude the writer can only demonstrate in his particular activity: that is in writing. A political tendency is the necessary, never the sufficient condition of the organizing function of a work. This further requires a directing, instructing stance on the part of the writer. And today this is to be demanded more than ever before. An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one. What matters therefore is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, that is, readers or spectators into collaborators. (p. 306)

I do so desire to teach my students to question the world, as much as I desire them to read and think mathematically. However, I do have doubts about whether my self-proclaimed identity as a critical educator is really inspiring to the children, for I know I teach very clumsily when I try to adopt that role. Still, awkward lessons have the advantage of being open-ended and participatory, and these kids have no problem taking charge. The children improve the apparatus.

I spend most of my lunch break chatting with Chan-Juan Moy, who has a classroom across the courtyard. She has been teaching for almost twenty years and is my grade level chair. Chan-Juan mentored me during my first couple of years at the charter school and is always curious about what I am doing in the classroom. When I describe my Lilo and Stitch project to her I simplify it and made it sound like a Hawaiian history lesson. I often hedge (Gee, 2001) when describing my lessons to other teachers, and
usually talk about everything but the political dimension of the work that led to its inception in the first place. I am not sure what I am so scared of revealing.

After lunch, safe again on my side of the courtyard, I ask the children directly, “You said you might be in the books, and that you might not. You said the problem was the books were from the mainland. If you aren’t in the books, guess whose fault it is?”

“It’s Mrs. Moy’s fault!” Claire yells. She is often scolded by Chan-Juan on the playground.

“No, it’s not her responsibility.” I reply crisply.

“It’s the principal’s fault!”

“Nope.” I answer, “she doesn’t tell me what to put in this classroom.”

“Is it Mrs. Au’s fault?” Pua asks, who knows how to provoke a reaction in an adult. I don’t respond to that one. Instead, I pause dramatically for effect. I feel a bit like a villain in a movie, about to reveal his secret plan.

“No, no! Guess what? If you don’t like the books that are in here…it’s me, it’s my fault.”

The children groan in unison and I laugh and laugh. Those swirling thoughts about my desire to be an authority figure, a teacher, to be more White, to be more mainland—and my unspoken desire for students in my class to aspire to those same foggy conception of identity—lined themselves up and fell on their faces. Perhaps now they could become the subject of inquiry in our first grade classroom. I regret the way I took up the subject of identity earlier, but at least the children now had an inkling of my thought process, of the in-between quality of life in Hawai‘i, of which I had only recently
become conscious, and I couldn’t think of a better way to start asking questions and becoming more responsible than that.

It is a couple of weeks later. Pua decides to stay in from recess and play with our huge collection of shells that we keep in a jar. She pours them onto a piece of drawing paper on the round table, and sorts them into long lines, based on color and size. When the recess bell rings again, the other children start to drift into the classroom. Samuel points at one long row of tiny caramel-colored shells and says, “Get plenny, eh?”


It was nice to hear some pidgin in the classroom, especially after our Lilo and Stitch project and I began to chuckle. “Yeah, choke,” I say to both of them, trying to sound local and decolonized.

David looks up at me very seriously and says, “My dad says that we aren’t supposed to speak pidgin. Especially in school.”

Irritated, I start to lecture a six-year old. “David! That’s how people from all over the world—”

“Communicated,” Pua says.

“…Talked to each other when they came here, not everyone could speak—”

“American,” Pua says, without looking up from her work.

“Oh. I didn’t know that,” David says apologetically.

I smile at him and step away as he joins Samuel and Pua at the button table. Teaching had become so much more interesting and fun again, lately. And we have plenty of time.

When I was a kid, my friends and I spoke pidgin whenever the teachers were not
around. Pidgin originated amongst the thousands of immigrants from all over the world who were hired to work on plantations in the eighteen forties, and arose from the necessity of workers to communicate with each other and their employers. It is a mixture of English and Hawaiian, as well as languages from China, Japan, Portugal and the Philippines. Pidgin is still widely spoken in Hawai‘i today but is often denigrated, even by its own practitioners, as sounding ignorant, and it is rarely taught in schools (Scanlan, 2009). Additionally, Pidgin is regularly used by locals when outside of institutional and professional contexts to signify a cultural membership that stands in opposition to what is perceived as a “Haole” or a White position of privilege (Marlow & Giles, 2008).

My mother didn’t approve of Pidgin, disliked the way the consonants broke against the bobbing vowels, and didn’t allow me to speak it; perhaps she believed my chances of success were greater if I spoke in standard American English. I tried not to speak it at home, but found this difficult, since I fell into pidgin whenever I felt relaxed or excited. One night, my brother and sisters joined us to eat what I had named, when I was four, “stringy meat”. It was my mother’s special pot roast. I was thrilled to have my favorite meal and to see all of my grownup siblings at once, and being in a silly, happy mood, I decided to entertain everyone at the table with jokes I heard on the playground.

“Wat do shu call Batman and Robin afta de get ron ova by da batmobile?”

“I give up, Oskie, what?” said my sister.


“Who’s there?” my brother obliged, grinning.

“Ashh!”
“Ashe, who?”

“Oh! You wen sneeze! Geh-zoon-hiiiiiiiiit!” I yelled. I laughed uproariously, and my brother encouraged me to tell another one. I didn’t know any more jokes, so I turned to an old riddle to try to keep the flow going. “K brah, wi deed da shiken cros da road, den?”

“I don’t know, Chris, why?”

“To git to da udda sid! Ev’rybodee nos dat! Ha-ha-ha-ha!” Everyone laughed when I laughed, except for my mother.

“Christopher, you always speak in pidgin, now,” she said, as the laughter died down. Her choice of tone signaled that I was in trouble, but I was having too much fun, and was receiving too much attention, to care.

“Nah!”

“You are, Christopher. Please stop it.”

I answered in a very exaggerated way that I knew would drive her crazy. “Dis ain’t peeshun, bot! Dats wun berd, eh?”

I thought I was hilarious, and watching my siblings trying to control their snickering made it all worthwhile. She frowned and sent me to bed. In my room, I pressed my ear against the wall; I could hear mumbled words, as if the family were having a serious conference. I figured it was about my brother’s job at the construction site. But that stuff didn’t matter to me. I sank into my pillow, a smile stretched onto my face, feeling quite loved.

I completely forgot about this dinner, until my mother brought it up again, while helping me to dress. “You are learning too much pidgin at school. You are going to begin
speech therapy,” she declared in a surprisingly tranquil voice. “I told them you say SH instead of CH, and have trouble with the R sound.”

This was a troubling. Therapy sounded very scary, like a doctor’s visit. I wondered if they would attach pieces of metal to my teeth to make me talk a certain way, like braces. So when a woman appeared at the door to my classroom and called my name, I ignored her and went back to my book. She said my name again, walked in confidently, and put her hand gently on my shoulder.

“It’s your turn, Christopher,” she said. She had blonde hair and was much younger than most of the teachers at the school. This was encouraging; I didn’t like the older teachers, who were very mean and grumpy. I followed her to the teacher’s lounge. It was a small building that I saw every day but had never entered. My friends and I had theories about what went on inside of it, and I imagined it was like a restaurant, with couches instead of chairs, and a perhaps a large TV for the teachers to watch while they were relaxing. I was disappointed to enter the “lounge” and discover a bare table with a paper cutter on it and towers made out of ugly, cardboard boxes. The teachers had the same terrible room conditions as the kids, but they did enjoy air conditioning. This was comfortable at first, but after a few minutes I felt so cold, that I began to sniffle.

Miss Laura led me into a small room in the back of the lounge, then around a tall bulletin board on wheels, and had me sit down next to her at a desk. It was her own little classroom. My feet dangled above the floor. It was dimly lit and quiet. She handed me a tissue to wipe my nose.

“Look at this picture,” she said in a soothing voice. “What is it?”

“A roosta.” I answered. This seemed stupid.
“What does a rooster say?”

“What does a rooster say?” I replied. Really, really stupid.

“Have you ever heard one? They use the /r/ sound, and go R-R-RRR-RRRR!”

She sounded exactly like a rooster! Now I was intrigued, and I imitated her call slowly and precisely. When I sped up, it did sound like a real rooster.

“But don’t say ‘ar’, say /r/. Say it smoothly.”

She wrote a series of neat R’s around the rooster. “Take this picture. At home, practice your rooster sound everyday. Next week I want to hear you can wake me up like a real rooster again, OK?”

With the help of Miss Laura, I learned to say my /r/ sound correctly, and in the proper part of the word. This inhibited my pronunciation of particular words in pidgin, such as “mo” and “fo”, since as a language it drops the /r/ sound after vowels. Eventually I moved through all of the sounds that were important in my version of pidgin but were troubling to my version of English, including the /s/ and the blends of /ch/ and /sh/. Pete Wong began looking at me quizzically whenever he heard me sorting my sounds, but my mother was pleased.

The therapy, when combined with my love of reading, produced an attraction in me towards proper English, and school became, in some ways, easier and more
interesting. But I did change with my language, and every meeting with Miss Laura
became not only a step away from my friends, but also movement away from a place that
mattered to me, but could not name.

As an adult, it was not uncommon for someone that I had just met to ask me if I
recently moved to O‘ahu from the mainland. This embarrassed me, so some of my friends
at the university helped me to practice and reclaim some simple pidgin phrases, so that I
could begin to remember a childhood version of my self, and perhaps fit a little better
into the community I was trying to serve. I wrote the following poem as means to express
that process.

🌟

Doge/ball

No ball gon steng me

i jus tun sidewayz

an da ball reeps pas my reebs

an wen i no can doge i jus

mak won run fo kyle

da best playa in da school

hees fas lik da roadrunna cartoon

michael felix mean but

he jus rase his hands an

da ball appeah inside jus lik magic

an mistah kurushige da pee ee
teechah green an say *out* just li dat
onreel but i stay wotching mike
so i no wen he gon shoot
he always mov his hed li won snake
wen da target not wotching eh
den one crack an dat guy *out* too

eddie almos cry wen it wen happen to heem
fo reel kine anbarasing wen u cry
in da secun grade evry tim
we get shave ice aftah scool
me an eddie talk stink about da kine
he tinks hees so toff an alwas try fo beef me

won tim he jus sta ponching me fo nahting
on da sidewalk an da door to da room wuz open
an no teechah lik come out an see
so i jus shame an run away to da batchroom
befo any won wen see me cry

i no foget dat day
an jus won time i lik shame heem
i gon geev da bugga won crack toda bot
i laff he sta on da ota sid an me an kyle all das lef
den we gon keek his ass

i keek awa won ball on da court
an at da sam tim i hea wun ka-lang!
an won supah had trow mak da fense seeng
ka-lang! agen an den pleny loos balls pleny yeleng
den I spok eddie an da oddah guyz bi da fense
goeng trow trow trow!
I wak op too lat

i li be won hero but too lat awredy
i wen get mi weesh an now
ownlee tree guyz on da court
fo won spleet secon an den kyle go out!
an i da las won mike felix an me
he sta tak hees tim he lik sho off das wi

jus drebol drebol steah at mi
da foking guy
den i tink mebbe if i mak heem an
mista kurushige laff i git awa
an no mo shame
so i tro da ball funny kine from my knees
strat up to da sky bot i hea mi frens gron

an mista kurushige laff but laff weezy laff
slow kine cos he lik see me cry agen
da focking teecha ready fo blo da whistle
but onlee aftah i get beened
lik he wont mike freitas fo keel me
lik he wont mi fo be sham agen an agen
This is the fear that I have learned to share.

I am surprised to discover that the meeting has already started. My fellow teachers
nod as Chan-Juan describes a new approach to teaching reading. Afraid that I have
missed an important discussion, I sit down hastily.

“It’s very quick.” Chan-Juan was saying. “The teacher segmented the word, just
stretched it out and pointed to the letters, and the children were quiet and listened. Then
she lifted her hand and that meant they needed to get their mouths ready, and then she
squeezed this cute little metal cricket—that was the cue—when it chirped, that was the
cue, and then the kids copied her sounds exactly.”

I smirk at the description of the cricket and Chan-Juan turns to me. “It’s only
fifteen minutes a day, Chris.”

“What is only fifteen minutes?”

With a charming smile she says, “It’s called direct instruction. We decided
without you.” She laughs as if she is drinking a glass of wine at a dinner party, but her eyes possess a hard gleam. She pushes a thick black binder towards me. It contains a patchwork of excerpts from journal articles, introductions to what appear to be two completely separate reading programs, and several pages of step-by-step directions for teachers. She flips to a page that depicts a disembodied hand and a four-step procedure for performing an exercise.

Teacher points to the page about an inch to the left of the first letter in the word. “Get Ready”. The signal for the first sound: Teacher looks at the students to see if they are attending, then quickly touches under the m. Teacher holds finger under m for about 1-1-1/2 seconds. The signal for the second sound: teacher *quickly* makes a loop, moving his finger from the first letter to the second letter, a and holds his finger under a for about 1 to 1 ½ seconds. The signal for the third sound: Teacher loops quickly from a to d and instantly removes his finger from the page. When signaling for the students to say a stop sound, the teacher touches under the letter for an instant and then moves his hand quickly away from the letter.

(Carnine, 2005)

The precise language, more suited to an instruction booklet for assembling furniture than a curriculum guide, would have amused me had I not known Chan-Juan was serious. I was hurt by the blunt suggestion that I didn’t know how to teach reading and that the decision to implement “direct instruction” needed to be made without my vote. But I understood the maneuver. Chan-Juan predicted, rightly, that I would have questioned her hodgepodge collection of source material, and an apparent reliance on scripts and rote learning; she also knew that I would have invoked the charter school’s
philosophy in relation to writing workshop and student-led reading conferences, and request that the group table the decision until we did more research. But this way, I entered the meeting knowing that the majority of my colleagues favored the program, and could say nothing against it without seeming uncooperative and obstructionist. I listen to Chan-Juan’s good-natured laughter fade. If you close your eyes, a laugh and a cry are indistinguishable.

I try to grin. “Sounds good,” I squeak, “but it might be hard for me to learn the routine”. Heat tingles on my cheeks and forehead. I turn the pages in the binder, avoid eye contact for the rest of the meeting, and wondered what my friends had said about me before my arrival. It was my first experience with teacher-proof curricular design and deprofessionalization (Milner, 2013) and it was mixed with feelings of personal regret and loss; at one time, Chan-Juan and I were very close and she treated me like a son.

Her demeanor softens after the meeting, and she demonstrates the exercises to some invisible children that sit before us on the carpet. It is both comical and depressing to see that she is able to give instructions and demonstrate teaching skills on demand. It was like watching a street magician. Hurt feelings or not, I didn’t want to lash out at Chan-Juan; I knew she had no desire to “mindlessly train children to mindlessly perform” (Garan, 2002, p. 31) and she certainly wasn’t suggesting that we abandon our student-centered ways; perhaps against the orderly backdrop of the new standards based movement she was simply conjuring, as Susan Ohanian puts it, “not a theory, but a mood” (Ohanian, 1994, p. 197) and a desire to recapture a feeling of teaching as a steady, sure, and uncontested activity.

With a secretive tone, she explains that if we learn the program’s methods, our
grade level will be situated advantageously when direct instruction is implemented statewide. “It’s coming,” Chan-Juan says knowingly. “It’s coming.”

So that was it. Abandoning philosophical arguments, I repeat that I was going to have a very difficult time remembering the cues and the sequencing of the lessons. Chan-Juan waved away my objections.

“It’s only fifteen minutes a day, Chris,” she says. “You can do it at morning message.” There was nothing more to say and, as Benjamin (1978) wrote, it felt:

As if one were trapped in a theater and had to follow the events on the stage whether one wanted to or not, had to make them again and again, willingly or unwillingly, the subject of one’s thought and speech.” (p. 74)

It actually takes thirty minutes the first day, because I am continuously looking at the script in my lap. It’s like learning to dance with shoes that cause tweaks of pain. I wait for the children to look at me, clumsily stretch my arm out in front of the board, point to the letters, and lift my tin cricket. The children gulp huge breaths of air in anticipation. I click the cricket and they roar phonemes back at me like drunks at a rock concert. I correct their overly enthusiastic response and try again.

By the end of the second week my delivery is more confident and I can indeed do the exercise in a span of about fifteen minutes, provided that the children behave and there are no interruptions from the office. During the third week, Chan-Juan gives me more exercises to perform and suggests a word game using flash cards. I realize belatedly that I was lied to—the main exercise might take fifteen minutes but when the associated activities are added, direct instruction takes up the entire morning.

The children respond with a slight deadening around the eyes as we move into
week four. The novelty has waned and the interactions are forced and brittle. Growing like gloomy stalactites, lists of onsets and rimes made from index cards dangle sadly from the ceiling. One morning, as we telescope words, Brooke looks up at with a level gaze, but ignores my clicks and prompts. She is usually very cooperative. “What do you think, Brooke?” I ask, grinning hopefully.

“I already know how to read that,” she answers.

The next day, following Brooke’s admonishment, I release the kids who are at level five and above to independent reading. This leaves seven struggling readers sitting before me, in front a list of word families, to say sounds and listen to me click my tin cricket. Employing tedium as an expression of concern comes easily to me now.

“OK guys, get your lips ready… /b/, /b/, /b/egin!” I thought myself quite clever. Kekoa moves his lips in an exaggerated way as we chant phonograms together; he certainly wants me to notice that he is obediently performing the exercise. Still, with his brows arched, his neck tensed, and his dark eyes pleading, he looked like he was enduring a series of injections.

Abruptly, my arm begins to hurt, and as my childhood asthma starts to affirm itself, I find that I can barely say the necessary sounds without coughing and laughing nervously. I raise my palms to stop the exercise, and tell the children to pick out some books to read by themselves. “I’ll come around and visit you, like we used to do, OK?”

Kekoa quickly retrieves an old reader about two ants at a picnic from a hiding place deep within his desk. Its pages are falling apart at the spine. “I’m first, Mr. Au,” he says, as he begins to clamber up my legs.
As a male teacher, I was told to never allow a child to sit in my lap. “Let’s go to your desk, Koa,” I say, standing up quickly. Crammed at the back of his desk were most of the classroom library’s missing books. I pretend not to notice.

“Rod is a red ant. Bill is a b-l-ack ant.”

I nod and began scribbling “BL” in his reading assessment folder; it was an attempt to perform a running record of his miscues for later analysis. Koa stops reading, looks at the notation, and turns his eyes to me with another pained, pleading expression.

“Oh, that just means you got it right.” I tell him, circling the consonant blend on his form. “Do you have a favorite ant, Kekoa?” It is a ludicrous attempt to inject a comprehension assessment into the reading time. He squishes his finger down on the red ant, and wiggles a little closer to me so that his shoulder touches my arm, then he continues to read in a very soft voice.

“The ant par…ty is in the dirt. Rod and Bill run up to see it.” The primer is boring, but his voice contains a wisp of music that I had almost forgotten, and I allow myself to relax into my seat until our foreheads almost touch. I can feel him exhale as he laboriously pronounces the next few words, and I exhale those words silently in unison with him; I am struck by how warm they feel.

I think about how I read with my son in the early evening. I will sit with a beer placed absently just out of reach and hold my son around the tummy while he balances a box of juice on his knee. Then he will curl up in my lap clutching whatever happens to catch his interest at the time. It could be a book, but more often than not it is a less conventional form of literature: a DVD cover, a comic book, or a fantasy game playing card, but no matter what it is, he will try to read and look and think and talk about it, as if
it holds the secrets of the universe. It’s teaching, but it doesn’t really look like it. While we read, he giggles and sings, points to words and pictures, stutters and asks questions and whispers and we snuggle, time lost, until the skies darken into stars, and the smell of dinner beckons to us from the kitchen.

If I gave him the time, if I invited Koa to sit next to me or on my lap, upon the broken old classroom couch with his collection of hidden books, I’m sure he would learn very quickly. But this image can never be realized. The school’s discourse, now more than ever, constructs the child as a passive receiver of educative functions, and my body, disgustingly, as an organ that must direct the child’s the progress through the school’s system; it locks us both into a relationship that is comprised of nominal verbal exchange, a specific program of study, and regulated periods of productivity. My breathing is constricted, I want to write a note on the sail of a paper boat, blow it towards Kekoa, and let him play with it, as long as he wishes, through an eddy of experience.

I don’t write any more distracting, cryptic marks on my paper, and draw line of little ants on his reading folder as he finishes, instead. Kekoa laughs, and we close the leaves of our respective folios at the same time. “The other day I was bitten by an ant, but it was a black one,” I tell him.

“It must have been a red one, Mr. Au, the black ones are tame. Except the crazy ants.”

“The ones by the water fountain, you mean. The ones that swarm and run all over the place.”

“Yeah! Those are crazy ants, they crawl up your leg! It’s itchy, but they don’t bite.”
Sometimes, I am lucky enough to find my words intermingling with the child’s, and can provoke a strengthening of self-knowledge through literacy if the conversation is reciprocal, multifarious, and branching enough. To this end, I had recently become attracted to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome (1980), as it was an image that I thought might help the children and myself to scurry amongst ideas attentively and continually. The rhizome was conceived as an extension of the tree of knowledge that comprises Western science that, instead of growing majestically upwards from the central trunk that represents Truth, pushes itself downwards and gleefully divides and crosses and re-crosses itself at unexpected locations. Tangling about itself, the rhizome grows until it has no beginning and no end, suggesting that the middle, the ground that is both in between and inconclusive, might best allow for unrestrained movement during the construction of critical questions and the molding of curricular theory. In my mind’s eye, I saw us climbing, darting, moving like crazy ants, finding new paths, communicating to each other on the run, and making discoveries that were tasty and unexpected.

Teaching critical literacy at the public charter school, not being sure of what will happen, and attempting to make meaning, always had the potential to become a rhizomatic undertaking. Of particular interest to me, as a teacher of first graders, was the prospect of what movement along twisting and branching pathways might reveal, and I suspected that our curriculum, which so often called for the repetition of predictable and linear learning outcomes, might better fit the children’s learning if it was seen as simply one strand within a more complex network. I sent a prayer to an education god for an interruption of repetitious patterns, and hoped that if I did find a way to present a lesson as part of a larger, ever-expanding and unpredictable text, that the children’s might help
me find the courage I needed to forfeit my authority over their waking hours, and change
the “sedentary, partitioned and designated spaces of the dominant culture’s
(adult/teacher’s) classroom” (Leafgren, 2008, p. 335) into a space where stories might be
repositioned and reconceptualized as tools for inquiry. But I am an atheist, and pray badly.

Before excusing the children for recess I ask, in a happily exaggerated voice,
“What is it called when family and friends come together and eat and have fun?”

“A celebration!” the children yell, with practiced enthusiasm. This homily was
carrying us thematically into the holiday season, and like a greeting card, seemed to
convey much more thoughtfulness than it actually contained. Unlike other units of study,
in which concepts such as “change” or “interdependence” were ambitiously explored
through research questions and collaborative projects, the requirements for the
celebrations unit were deliberately relaxed, and consisted of a rather loose collection of
read-alouds, craft projects, and parties. The first graders did have the opportunity to learn
a bit about the background of Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa, and
reflect upon family traditions, but the same learning outcomes could probably be
achieved by visiting the shopping mall down the street. In the teacher’s lounge, we told
each other that this was the best way to meet the excitability and short attention spans of
kids during the holidays, and considered the unit a gift to ourselves at a busy time of year.

I trot to the office during my break to check my mail and run into my mentor,
Mary Seki. “What are you going to do for your professional development project this
year?” she asks suddenly.

“I don’t know…the phonemic awareness or direct instruction stuff, I guess.”

She looks at me with a direct and even gaze. “Your grade level’s doing that for
accountability! Wat you gon do?” Mary says, falling into pidgin, signaling that she was speaking as a mentor. I shrug in reply.

“Crit..eh…cal…literacy,” she says to me softly, and turns to look at some binders that were sticking out of her mailbox. I really like the way term sounds with her slight plantation girl inflection, as if a tattered haole book was found on the beach in Oama and taped back together.

“I like to do da kine…but I’m not ready. There’s so much to research before you can do a critical literacy project. Like if you know a book is racist, you need to know how it should’ve represented people better. And it comes down to building complexity in the classroom discussion. That takes time with the little kids, you know.” She opens one of the binders and ignores me.

Back at the classroom, I run my thumb across the spine of *The Pilgrims’ First Thanksgiving* by Anne McGovern (1973), and decide right there and then, to use it for a critical literacy project. I know very little about the actual history of the Thanksgiving holiday, but I figure that I could at least see if young children could question, and free themselves, from the canonicity of an “important” cultural text, and make connections to real-world issues and look at things from different points of view simultaneously.

Despite having been passed from class to class each November, for the last five years or so, this particular copy was holding up quite well. There were newer, more historically accurate books about Thanksgiving that we could read to our first graders, but as Peter McLaren notes, “dominant educational discourses determine what books we may use” (McLaren, 2003, p. 84) and my grade level liked this particular book because we wanted to instill an appreciation of family and hard work in the children—values that this
slim tome delivered in a simple and powerful way.

I previewed the book. The cohesiveness and work ethic of the Pilgrim community seemed to receive more emphasis than their struggle to survive. Also on display was an account of the differences between the daily experiences of the English children and the lives of contemporary children:

The Pilgrim children learned to work hard—just as hard as the grown ups. They had to watch the cornfield and shoo away birds and animals. They had to make the big roasts and turkeys. They sat near the hot fire and turned the stick that turned the roast. That job took most of the day. (p. 20)

Passages like this seemed aimed at promoting a simple compare and contrast discussion; but it will always be teachers, like myself, who provide the guilt curriculum, to go along with the words.

Recess ends and I imagine a rhizome flitting about like a little ghost. Unofficiated, its knowledge of the what-is and what-can-be leaps from child to child, a jovial microorganism. I see hints of infection in secret gestures, like the way Miguel strokes Allison’s knee as he sits down next to her on the carpet, and in the hairbrushes that appear in the hands of the girls as they prepare to braid each other’s hair. Tanner has a cookie in his shirt pocket that Erin, who had just put away the remains of her fruit roll-up, was trying not to envy. I catch the whispered denunciation of a teacher in second grade and hear a giggle in reply. Kanani stares at the back of Maui’s head like she was trying to bore right through it, the manifestation of lingering acrimony. Henry Dale, who spends recess looking for bugs, stands in the doorway and squints at the mud and grass on the side of his shoe, seemingly oblivious to the children who are pushing past him. A part of
me envies the child’s ability to play upon another’s attention, to turn and twist through the intrapersonal and interpersonal with apparent freedom, and I watch in fascination as each first grader shifted without self-consciousness from one project to another. I want to join them in play, but this is a moment I was trained to conquer.

“Sit down, criss-cross apple sauce. Put that away, please. Stop talking.” I try to smile benignly, but my voice is shaped by a low, authoritative timbre. I worked so hard to get it to sound that way, that it comes out even when I’m trying to sound friendly. “Today we are going to read the thanksgiving story. This happened a long time ago. It’s what the grown ups call history.” Two of the children clap their hands with excitement.

Although antecedents for Thanksgiving in the United States included ancient Roman and Celtic harvest festivals as well as “Days of Thanksgiving” that the Puritans observed during the English reformation of the 16th century (Grace & Bruchac, 2004; Sigal, 1999), our little book gives us a folkloric version of history, and allows us to infer that our contemporary Thanksgiving holiday descends directly from the experiences of the English who settled in Plymouth in 1620. In order to express the themes of community and collective effort, it reduces and obscures conflicts between the indigenous population and the colonists. The Wampanoag are referred to simply as “Indians” and are characterized as benign woodsmen who want and need nothing for themselves. I especially dislike the way the Indians are represented but while I felt uncomfortable about the book’s treatment of a culture, the story still affected me emotionally; I’ve always found its tale of perseverance, family, and friendship quite moving. Knowing this, I take a moment’s pause, and in the grandest of voices read:
A long time ago, some men and women, boys and girls, two dogs and a cat, sailed on a ship across the sea. They left their old country because they could not pray the way they wanted. The people were called Pilgrims. The ship was called the Mayflower. (p. 1)

Now some ancient memory stirs, and as I recount the tale of giants, the children grow quiet. Here are courageous, humble folk who, with pluck and courage, bore a voyage over seas in cramped and putrid quarters, survived a landing on a killing winter’s shore, claimed a rough and wild land, befriended a native people, overcame hardship, and flourished.

“And that is why we have thanksgiving!” Pua intones, signaling another round of applause from the class.

“Are you crying Mr. Au?” asks Koa.

Reaching up, I find a tear on my cheek. I want my family back, I want my dad to drive up in a sea green sedan and eat dinner with us. “I am. That story touched my heart,” I say, using a phrase I picked up at a language arts workshop. “Now we’re going to retell the story with watercolors!”

The rest of the lesson continues in a predictable fashion. The first graders paint watercolor images that mimic the book and copy out captions to retell the story. Since I measured the paper carefully, we ended up with a series of paintings that fit perfectly onto a five-foot length of cork. I take the orange and brown cardstock turkeys that Henry Dale’s mom had given us off of the bulletin board, and staple the paintings into their place.
I take a few steps back. I can see the structure of the book summarized through stripes of shifting color. First there is blue for the ocean voyage, than a winter’s white, followed by the green of a productive spring and summer. At the end of the display, to signify the celebrated autumnal feast, everything melts into a dark brown. The kids worked hard, but the final product doesn’t look like much. It reminds me of the time Phil found one of my assessment rubrics on the floor and colored in all of the squares.

It is the next morning. I open the door to the classroom and receive many positive comments about the bulletin board from my parents. It is especially gratifying to see Romulo, a quite little boy who had just moved to Hawai‘i from the Philippines, pull his mother by the hand so that she could see his painting. She thanks me, and I feel pleased with myself, until I wonder if she was also grateful for the cultural capital I had provided her son (Spring, 2008).

Perhaps it was time to interrogate that process. Unceremoniously, I invite the children to look at The Pilgrim's First Thanksgiving from a stance that includes “repositioning students as researchers of language, respecting minority culture literacy practices, and problematizing classroom and public texts” (Green, 2001, p. 7). My mind races through questions the children might ask about the depiction of history, culture, race, and gender, but thinking about how rhizomes must flourish without impediment, I become averse towards guiding the questions too obviously towards my own interests.

“Let’s ask questions of the book,” I say, with a bit of a stammer. “I’m just not sure what this book is showing me, what the author meant to say, or even if this is all really true.” I take a breath so I will stop talking quite so fast. “I’ll write down what you ask on the board.” It is a terrible introduction, and I have no idea if the kids understand
what I mean. It is a thrilling and scary feeling that I haven’t experienced since my first year of teaching.

“Do you have a question, Sakura?” I ask.

“Why does that boy have long hair?”

“That’s an Indian boy,” Pua declares.

“Yeah, it’s his culture, you know?” I look at the cover of the book again. The Pilgrim men are wearing tall hats with buckles on them, and the Indian men have deerskin jackets and feathers in their hair. I had assumed it was not a very accurate portrayal, but being wholly ignorant of the cultural practices that are represented, I nod my head, write down her words, and hesitantly add, “Oh, and I think we should say Native American, it’s a better name.”

“But…he looks like a potato.” Sakura says, deflating me.

The kids laugh and I realize that she is more concerned with the peculiarity of the drawings. Since English is not Sakura’s first language, she has a visual approach to reading, and I can see why she wants to solve the story’s illustrations. Each page features figures that are plump and misshapen, and standing upon a ground that looks like it can turn sideways and fling the figures off of the page, like bugs on a billowing sheet. The visual perspective and the cultural perspective are both skewed.

Phil, who is a quiet and a struggling reader, and whose parents often ask me if I thought he was dyslexic, gazes at the cover. He asks with great seriousness, “Did the Pilgrim’s kill the Indians?”
“Yeah. They did.” Pua replies. I raise my hand to stop Pua as she begins to lecture, but it is this question, and Pua’s answer, that pierces the skin, and I find myself, marker in hand, struggling to keep up with an outpouring of the questions.

“Why did the Pilgrims hunt animals?”

“How did the Native Americans make friends with the Pilgrims?”

“How come we don’t know more about the Native Americans?”

To buy myself time I reply, “Well, I guess it depends on whose point of view the story is from, huh?” This response is not inadequate, and I make a mental note to look for books that might illuminate these issues for the first graders, the next time we visit the school library. Fairness is very important to them, and many of the children voice concern for the well being of the kids in the story. Telling me to turn to the page that shows the children standing up and silently eating, Pua asks, “How can the kids ask the grownups questions, if they can’t talk unless spoken too?”

“I wonder if any of the Pilgrim children died?” asks Ross, with a look of genuine concern around his eyes.

“Do bad things happen in history?” adds Naia. This is another area that teachers shy away from, as we are terribly nervous about portraying the world as anything other than safe and happy. It is very difficult for me not to offer a response to this question.

Paul, whose mother works full time as the school’s music teacher, asks quietly, “Why do the women do all the cooking?”

The first graders nod, but Lori, who is very sensible, gets onto her knees and says, “Maybe they just want to do it.”
Nora shakes out her hair, crosses her arms defensively, and mutters “It’s not fair,” under her breath, but before anything else can be said on the subject, Sakura, staring at the image of the first Thanksgiving feast, raises her hand.

“Yeah, Sakura, what do you think?”

“Where are all the Thanksgiving decorations?” she asks.

While the kids are at recess, I copy the children’s favorite pages. At one point, the machine shakes violently, cancels gray scale mode, and pushes out stacks of degraded black and white images that look like gloomy parodies of the book’s warm, inviting colors. It reminds me of The Garden of Earthly Delights (Bosch, 1504). The dominant cultural message, that is so dependent upon a clear delineation between Pilgrim and Indian, civilized and savage, male and female, and adult and child, appeared blurred and inconsequential, creating a world without rules.

Thinking of Sakura, I save the settings, make a copy of the cover, and following Kathy Acker, try to “… see what I see immediately” (Acker, 1984, p. 33) without reliance on dominant cultural signifiers. Since I had manipulated the copy so that it read My Questions about The Pilgrim’s First Thanksgiving, it is these letters that I see first, floating in front of a cloud of black leaves. All of the people have lumpy, skeletal faces. A trio of men stand under the trees. The one with his back to me is drawn in such a way that the tassels on his sleeve and the knife at his belt became one shape; he has a wing for an arm and a boney spike coming out of it at the elbow. Two angry men face him, frowning, arms crossed. One of the men who is frowning has a slight smile. He’s mad and he is smiling, like I do if a kid utters the wrong remark at the wrong time. He’s mad at the winged man. On the right side of the picture, six men press against one another on
a bench that tilts and spins. They look as if they are being punished. Their bodies are bent, and look bloated, and soft and vulnerable, as if they could be deflated by a sharp twig. They need to be careful. Two of the men stare at their laps and begin to cry. Their legs are disappearing. On the opposite side of the bench, two men look at each other and are holding hands, they love each other even through the pain. In the foreground some small women, shaped like nesting dolls, stare in fascination at a cauldron that floats magically in the air beneath three sticks. These women are squashed and ghostly. Are they waiting for a magic potion to be ready? Will this make everyone happy again?

Children are continuously moving into new and unpredictable regions, and the image of the rhizome helps me appreciate their role as the heralds of unexpected juxtapositions and multiple perspectives. My foray into the beastly leaves me refreshed, and any lingering sentimentality I felt towards the text has vanished, and I hope the children will feel that way, too.

“So here is what I want you to do. Remember the questions we had about the Pilgrims’ First Thanksgiving? I have a picture here of the Pilgrim girls cooking all day during the Thanksgiving feast, and the boys and men playing. Man, that makes me mad! I would draw this again to show the boys cooking and the girls playing!”

Wing’s hand goes up in front of my face. “That would still not be fair, Mr. Au!”

“Yeah,” Nora says. “The girls…and…the boys should be playing.” The rest of the children cheer this sentiment.

“Oh, yes. I agree with Wing and Nora. All of the children should be playing,” I say, abashed. Despite my intentions, I have made the mistake of assuming that the
children would want to confront social inequity like a playground bully. I have been
taught a lesson about my own perspective.

The first graders pull black and white images from the stack, and begin to create
foul reproductions of the original text. Because this project was presented as a very open-ended undertaking, many of the first graders feel comfortable responding in ways that
deviated from the stated assignment, and use past experiences with reading lessons as a
guide to analyze the story according to their own interests. Some students choose to retell
the story, some report on their favorite part, and some make personal connections to the
text.

Phil shows me a picture of a little boy standing on a straight line. “I didn’t get a
chance to say goodbye to Kacie. She moved away,” he says, without elaboration. Phil,
and the other students who are making personal connections to the text, take ownership
of the lesson in a way that reflects their experiences with travel, distance, and loss, and
this makes me very glad that I did not insist on regulating anyone’s response.

Gender inequity is by far the most popular topic amongst the first graders, and the
passage that read “the men and the boys played games and had jumping and running and
racing contests. The women and the girls spent most of their time cooking and serving”
(McGovern, 1973, p. 29) elicits a great deal of commentary. Nora, Max, Dana and Claire
run to me as one, and show me how they each redrew a picture so that everyone, whether
male or female, child or adult, Native American or English, were tending fires, cooking,
or setting the table. Dana, remembering my previous faux pas, explains that, “after
everybody helps cook, they can eat and then they can play! Together!”
Another page celebrates the sacrifice and labor that the colonists put into their new home:

Everyone worked harder than they ever worked before. They worked from morning to night. But no one wanted to give up and go back. And when the Mayflower sailed back to England in April, there was not a single Pilgrim on board (McGovern, 1973, p. 22).

In response, Andrew draws a figure, with a wretched, angry face, standing on a zigzag shore. “The Indians,” he wrote, “wanted to see a new land too.” Andrew, a Native Hawaiian, knows that “even the simplest of children’s stories carry messages of various kinds, reflecting in conscious and unconscious ways the background, biases, and culture of the author and illustrator” (Hanzl, 2001, p. 84). I realize, a bit squeamishly, that his drawing repeats a common narrative in the Islands in which “Haoles are often derogated because of the colonial economic superstructure they represent” (Marlow & Giles, 2008, p. 54).

I once asked Chan-Juan how she assessed the children’s comprehension of a story, when the kids didn’t write anything down. She explained that it was a matter of observation. The low readers reacted impulsively to whatever was on a page and ignored the story as a whole. If story took place in a zoo, the low reader would say she liked elephants. The kids who were meeting the learning goal for comprehension tended to retell the story just because they liked it, and would use the names of the characters to describe the plot. Occasionally a high reader, with an accomplished six-year old mind, would explain the author’s message without prompting, and while responding critically to the book, make connections to her life, and express a personal opinion that was in
opposition to that of the author. That was very rare, Chan-Juan explained, and that kind of kid usually skipped a grade anyway.

I winced when I read that “for both teacher and student, whether or not answers ‘work’ and are found adequate within the ongoing discourse is the key to determining whether or not the student is learning to read, or learning to read properly” (C. D. Baker & Freebody, 2001, p. 69). I tended to react enthusiastically towards comments that brought a reading discussion closer to my desired learning outcome, but minimized, and sometimes even ignored, any contribution that didn’t fit into my plan. But here, finally, through the Thanksgiving story, was an opportunity to plow the surface and see if anything living could be found underneath. If only I could get rid of this habitual teacher talk.

“OK, so you all said something about the book, or asked a question. Why are questions important? What good are they?”

“Questions help us learn,” says Claire.

“They make us smarter and help us write and think,” adds Wing.

Reminded of her sister in fourth grade, Shayla raises her hand neatly. “They can help us at the bigger schools,” she adds proudly.

The children ask for my approval as they offer me responses. I record their answers, but as if ashamed of my own voice write, ‘why did we ask questions about the book?’

“We were curious!”

“Yeah, we wanted to know what else happened.” Phil offers, even though he couldn’t decode my writing.
David nods. “You want to learn about the story and think more,” he says.

“And do you guys think the author knows everything?”

Pua sneers at this question, setting a tone. “No. She wasn’t there and she was not a Pilgrim or an Indian!” I love her response, and feeling my usual dissonant combination of power and guilt towards identity, write down exactly what Pua says while changing the word from “Indian” into “Native American”. I don’t know why I am stuck on that. Perhaps it reflects my own racist tendencies.

“She might have forgotten something,” Paul says. “Like an important fact!”

“Yeah, she wrote it her way of seeing things!”

“But is the Pilgrims’ First Thanksgiving fiction or nonfiction?” Nora asks. I take a deep breath so that I don’t feel tempted to speak. She is right on the verge of noting that texts can be constructed as truth.

“It’s like Captain Cook,” David explains excitedly. “It’s your way of seeing things!”

Before I can respond, the lunch bell clangs on the wall outside of our room. Without waiting for my signal, the children grab their lunchboxes and cafeteria tickets and climb over each to get into line on the sidewalk. Still sitting in my rocking chair, I signal the leader to start walking. Before following them, I look down at the haphazard pile of student work, laying before me like stepping stones, and think about this odd American holiday based on a story of a story.

This rambling attempt at critical literacy invited a rhizoanalytic comparison of the aforementioned tracing and map. The tracing existed within the standards-based curriculum that delivered a narrow conception of reading to the students and branched
into two paths, one called decoding, and one that consisted of comprehending text, and just as the first grader’s alphabetic experiences were limited by texts that range from short “c-v-c” words to words with more complicated and tricky phonics like diagraphs and diphthongs, the teaching of literary comprehension in my class tended to begin with the simple identification of characters and events and ended with the description of plot. Not much actual thinking was involved. Of course I read books with meaningful ideas to the children, but I usually expected them to receive the author’s message—which was actually my interpretation of the author’s intent—as the singular reason for the text’s inclusion in our curriculum; often, in a little classroom of twenty children, who depend upon the teacher for emotional and physical growth, these can messages blossom easily into a central truth.

The organized tree of knowledge and truth, as described by Deleuze and Guattari (1980), grows in a predictable, incremental direction, and is used

To describe a de facto state, to maintain balance in intersubjective relationships, or to explore an unconscious that was already there from the start…it consists of tracing, on the basis of an overcoding structure or supporting axis, something that comes ready-made. The tree articulates and hierarchizes tracings: tracings are like the leaves of a tree. (p. 13)

Rhizoanalysis, in comparison, is more akin to working with a map rather than a tracing, as tracings tend to always branch forward towards viewable outcomes and ordered conclusions. The map, writes Delueze and Guattari:

Is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind
of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation. It can be
drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action, or
as a meditation. (p. 13)
Alvermann (2000) adds that in order:
To avoid the kind of dualistic thinking that Rhizomatous images are meant to
counter—that is good maps, bad tracings—Deleuze and Guattari recommend that
once we have drawn a map, it is important to put the tracing back on the map. By
inspecting the breaks and ruptures that become visible when the more stable
tracing is laid upon the always becoming map, we are in a position to construct
new knowledge, rather than merely propagate the old (p.117)

The map, which I unfolded through the Thanksgiving project, led to a landscape
that suggested that young children are aware of the relationship between the reality
constructed for them in school, and the social complexity that they inhabit once outside
of its walls, and are eager to enhance the exploration of both through critical inquiry. This
is evidenced by questions about the relationships between cultures, and the desire to lead
the men, women and children in the story towards a more joyful and equitable condition.
Perhaps less surprisingly, this map also makes it obvious that all children, even those
with low decoding skills, can engage in the manipulation of ideas that “enables them to
view the constructedness of the world and of text, and gives them the power to think that
both could be otherwise” (Fisher, 2008, p. 26).

The rhizoanalysis confirms that critical literacy can be a way for children to study
overlapping texts, while placing the Hawai‘i State Reading Standards, and the teacher’s
unit plans, under the children’s control. I wanted to share what happened in our project
with the parents, so in the classroom newsletter, I wrote: “Thanksgiving is here, and we have been exploring the history and traditions of the holiday from many angles. After reading The Pilgrim’s First Thanksgiving by Ann McGovern we worked together to retell the story. After learning the “official” history, we also asked questions like why did the women do all the cooking on the first Thanksgiving while the men got to play games? Did the Native Americans get to see new lands like the Pilgrims? Why did the children have to eat standing up? Most of these questions have to do with fairness, an issue very important to First Graders, and we had many thoughtful conversations during this study about point of view and treating people with respect. Approaching a book in this way can really open up a child’s higher-order thinking and eventually help a child to read critically. Who knows? Maybe it’s even a way for a kid to develop a social conscience!”

Unlike the Thanksgiving mural, I didn’t hear a single word back from the parents in response; I suppose it just seemed like another one of Mr. Au’s indulgences. The parents couldn’t know how much it meant to me, that within the context of our curriculum, the project represented a problematizing learning apparatus, a precious educational moment in which children and a teacher could interact peculiarly, a thirddspace.

Homi K. Bhabha, who is credited with originating the notion of thirddspace, refers to thirdding as a postcolonial process that offers agency to the subjugated through an acknowledgement of ambivalence. In the Location of Culture (1994), he theorizes that a destabilization of the colonial text, and an openness towards identity and culture, can occur as a condition of colonization itself; here, the colonizer exerts authority over the colonized through discourses that categorize the minds, bodies, and spirit of the colonized as inferior and irrational, while establishing institutions intended to transform individuals
into people that will think, move, and worship like himself in an effort to circulate, and eventually normalize, his power and identity; thus missions convert natives to Christianity while first grade teachers, like myself, guide children towards adult values, behaviors, and particular ways of knowing the world. However, since both the colonizer and the colonized are not fixed in time or space, their utterances and received meanings are subject to interpretative fluctuation, and this may beget a productive slippage.

Cultures are borne by individuals whose relationship to society, history, and spatiality resist essentialization, and just as Barthes (1977) observed the improper registration that occurs both between signifier and signified via interactions between the speaker and receiver of language, and between the author and reader, and the author and his own textual representation, Bhabha (1994) notes that the firstspace tools the colonizer employs while attempting to classify and control the colonized make complete transformation of the colonized impossible, insofar as

The production of meaning requires that two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious” (p.53).

Thus the ever-expanding, cultural worlds of the colonizer and colonized, are “mutually dependent in constructing a shared culture” (Yazdiha, 2010, p. 31)

Bhabha notes that this state will always require maintenance of conceptual space between the two parties; otherwise, the colonizer and the colonized would become indistinguishable (there would be no one left to do the heavy lifting, and no one to teach to read and behave). As such, the colonized might assert himself through mimicry, in an
attempt to become as much like the colonizer as possible, even as the discourse that enables the colonizer’s power creates a space in between himself and his efforts to become that which holds the desired identity in its grasp. The colonized, always aware that he is subject to a colonizing gaze that produces difference, can only aspire to replicating an imprecise, incomplete version of the colonizer whose authority he covets.

Bhabha (1994) comments upon this process, writing that:

The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. (p. 122)

The colonizer, in turn, is plagued by the need to maintain a discourse that threatens a dissolution of his own powerful identity, and may continue to invent more cultural, racial, and ethnic othering to counteract the slippage that occurred as a consequence of authority. However, the methods that re-classify and further denigrate the colonized will continue to sustain ambivalence and point once again to the intimate relationship between colonizer and colonized, producing anxiety and imbalance (Huddart, 2006). If recognized as such, Bhabha’s notion of ambivalence theoretically leads to the formation of a useful rupture in the discourse, as a form of resistance on behalf of the colonized or as:

A place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new neither the one or the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. (p. 37)
Thirdspace, as described by Soja and Bhabha, gestures toward the production of discourses that are unfamiliar, transformative and liberating. Here, I read productive ambivalence into the curricular space I share with the children, knowing that they will give me more than can I ever return.

Thirdspace is subject to criticism. Soja’s work can be interpreted broadly and one might consider his conception as “an all-encompassing Gods’-eye view of everything” (Price, 1999, p. 342) that, whilst acknowledging difference and marginality, also threatens to “smooth out the multiple voices of…theorists and mold them into his unified conception of Thirdspace” (Aitken, 1998, p. 148). And, while Soja’s geographic thirdspace surges outwards, Bhabha’s thirdspace, like the anxiety described in Fanon’s (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*, can seem to be turned mostly inward and appear more of a “characteristic of his inner life…but not of his positioning” (Loomba, 2005, p. 150). For as David Huddart (2006) explains, “the question of the colonized’s agency or free will cannot be clearly resolved” (p.61) in this matter and without the colonizer’s anxiety and the deliberate mimicry of the colonized, Bhabha’s condition of mimicry and ambivalence cannot occur as a function of transformative discourse.

My mother, now in her eighties, sits in a brown leather chair with a small dog sleeping on her lap. Though the tiny, mundane facts that mark an individual’s movement through time sometimes escape, my mother can see and speak about her childhood with great clarity. As for myself, I am in the midst of change, and have decided to leave the children and abandon teaching. The guilt haunts me day and night. I can’t sleep without the aide of a bottle, and strange kernels of tissue have formed in the skin of my thumb
that I scratch at relentlessly. As my present roils and shifts, I ask my mother about her childhood, hoping that it will anchor us both and protect us, for at least a few minutes, against cascading time.

“What was it like growing up on the plantation?” I ask.

“No, we didn’t grow up on the plantation. Why do you think that?”

For a moment I think she is falling into distress. “Just what you and Aunty Pearl talk about, when you were kids.”

“We grew up next to the plantation, but we weren’t indentured servants,” she says, sounding offended. “My father had a store and sold dry goods to the workers of the sugar cane fields.”

“But I thought he had just moved to Hawai‘i? He wouldn’t have had enough time to come here and work, and save enough money to open a store.”

She looked down at her dog tenderly. Its ears were drawn back and its teeth were clenched as if running with a pack of wolves. Then she looked back at me with without changing expression. “The story is that your grandfather was the son of a concubine. He lost his position as eldest son after the birth of the family’s legitimate heir, but he was Hakka, right? We travel and migrate all over. So his father gave him money and he came to America.”

“Did he land in Maui?” I asked. I was used to flying from island to island, and used the wrong words.

“He arrived in Uula, on the Big Island. That is where there were lots of Hakka, already. He had a connection to a man who was a tailor, so your grandfather’s first job
was as an apprentice, sewing. He tried to earn a living as a tailor, but it wasn’t for him. Clumsy, maybe.

Then he quit and moved to Maui to become a cook. He served the workers on the plantation. Maybe that’s where you got confused.”

“Then he was the owner of a dry goods store? But I thought that was something he did in his later years.”

“He sold the men who worked on the plantation household necessities and lots of cigarettes. You know your grandfather could speak Hawaiian fluently.”

This surprises me; I didn’t know the family had any meaningful connection with the native community; perhaps I didn’t need to feel like a tourist in my own body any longer.

“I still remember seeing your grandfather sitting on the floor sewing a Hawaiian quilt,” she says wistfully. She loves the soft, bumpy texture of the cloth and ornate pattern of the quilt that he holds in his hands, but even as she admires his skill, she notices that his movement is imprecise and that he has difficulty bringing the lines of the cloth together; then the needle slips from his grasp. Now she is a little girl helping him scoop poi out of a large barrel. Together, they stir and pour the luscious grey silk slowly into a row of small bowls.

“I don’t remember how much a bowl cost. The customers took the bowls of poi home. It was like fast food,” she says, smiling. The solidity of my constructed identity, tied to this time and this lifetime, dissolves, and I inhale these scenes, these moments, greedily.
But my data collection, my analysis, and my powers of detection operate with painful slowness, and it is ten minutes into the conversation that I realize that my grandfather never felt oppressed and was a part of what my mother jokingly calls the merchant class.

“We were poor,” she told me, “but we didn’t need to scratch for a living.” I guess my friends, of mostly Japanese and Filipino heritage, were justified in teasing me for attending a private high school and for having a privileged background.

As I heard my mother tell me the tale of my grandfather, I vehemently resisted the production of my new identity as a member of Hawai‘i’s Asian elite, and reflected upon what my friend, a director of a preschool, once confessed to me. “Being White,” he said, “is feeling guilty all the time.” It was foolish to assume that there was not enough guilt to be shared, and certainly the Asian settler has done more than his share of harm to the indigenous population.

(Please remember that is not a tale of redemption.)

Once, when I was a teenager, I sat on the lanai with my aunt. Her house looked over the cane fields of Hahalalu. The tops of the plants waved lazily in the sun below the purple rise of Haleakala, the extinct volcano that dominated the landscape of central Maui. A wash of turquoise emanated from the stalks into the hazy afternoon air. The field would soon be burned. Seeking the pastoral, I asked what life was like on the plantation and received a collection of generalized statements in reply, as if had raised my hand during high school history, right before the bell.

“It was hard work,” she told me. “The men had to get up real early. They came home with sore backs and cut hands. Education was the key to leaving the plantation.
That’s why your mother studied to be a medical technician. In those days, girls became a tech or a teacher.” Conversation with my mother clarifies this incident; although our family shared a social and economic connection to the plantation, we didn’t work it. I realize that I received a superficial, second-hand account, because my auntie thought I asked for one.

Like the story of my father, the stories amassed in my imagination about being an immigrant were misheard and misunderstood. It seems that I had translated the images of massive pigs, vegetable gardens, torn pants, slamming screen doors, and beheaded fowl into a narrative congruent with an American fantasy of local Chinese escaping poverty. I took the misheard stories and built a heroic identity. We climbed to the top of the Gum Shan, or the golden mountain. I rubbed the belly of the Budai for luck and prosperity on my way to my job as a public school teacher. I practiced Orientalism (Said, 1979).

Perhaps these stories, these images, evidence of successful assimilation, are treasures belonging to a family that has moved from the country into the city and then into an elite strata; they were signifiers boxed for a journey into an American milieu.

Then my mother begins to speak tenderly, and with great detail, about my popo, who emigrated from China in 1885 when she was only fourteen years old; apparently, her father was working in Hawai‘i at the time and sent for his daughter. I remember my grandmother with great fondness; she enjoyed collecting little toys and puzzles that challenged her eye-hand coordination. I loved trying to solve the little metal and plastic puzzles, and we would shake and bend them while passing them back and forth. Because she spoke very little English, she and I would communicate to each other through the language of play. When she died, I asked my mother if I could have the miniature trolley
car that Popo kept by her chair. That knick-knack, that souvenir of a trip to San Francisco that she experienced decades before I was born, represents everything I loved about her and is a perfect remembrance. Sometimes I enclose it in my hand; it always feels cool and unexpectedly heavy. I often wonder what memories, what historical-personal space it held for my grandmother, and I am reminded of a passage In The Search of Lost Time, where Proust (1992) writes:

Perhaps it is not-being that is the true state, and all our dream of life is inexistent; but if so, we feel that these phrases of music, these conceptions which exist in relation to our dream, must be nothing either. We shall perish, but we have as hostages these divine captives, who will follow and share our fate. And death in their company is somehow less bitter, less inglorious, perhaps even less probable.” (p. 498)

My mother and I have given each other little phrases of music today, and I know we will always lovingly serve each other’s memory and identity, though neither can ever be particularly complete. Then I think about the first graders I will soon leave behind. They have lent my memory cacophonies upon which I will cheerfully subsist as I travel into the future; I just hope I have lent something of substance to theirs.
Chapter Six: On Becoming, Teacher Education

If I feel overwhelmed emotionally, my eyes become very sensitive to the surface detail, the subtleties of color, and the play of light and shadow in my immediate surroundings. I think it is an attempt to slow down time and delay the onset of unpleasant experiences; it happens in the most mundane of environments. This day was no exception; I was returning to childhood, to my elementary school after twenty years, and was hypnotized by the august physicality of the site. I had a new job here, but didn’t feel like I belonged.

Walking on the cracked grey and black surface of the parking lot was like bouncing on the moon, like being somewhere both imagined and real and only tenuously desired. On the way to the tiny library I notice that the school’s exterior walls have been repainted several times; the paint is built up sloppily over every surface imperfection and forms an undulating, bubbling surface. The last coat of paint occupies a position somewhere between pink and tan, and as I reach out towards the wall, I expect it to contract away from my touch like the skin of a living thing. I wonder how many layers I would find if I cut out a sample of the paint, and which layer would correspond with my life at this school as a child. My eyes trace the shadow of a palm tree on the walkway to the shiny doors of the library. Since the school year has not yet begun, its steel and glass doors are immaculate. Readying myself for the social gauntlet to come, I pause for a moment, take a deep breath, and contemplate my reflection. I see a skinny Chinese boy, with a flattened face, who is squinting his eyes and breathing through his mouth. I know that my face turns into a stereotypical drawing of an oriental whenever I focus my gaze, and I once again secretly wish I was—if not a haole—at least a member of better looking
ethnicity, like a hapa haole, a hybrid with larger eyes, a straighter nose, smaller front teeth, and a lighter coloration to my eyes and hair. I meet my image and push. The door opens and my fingers leave a smudge on the polished glass. The smudge turns into a tiny white oval as the door silently shuts itself behind me. I have left my first mark upon the school as an adult.

Inside, a group that is sitting tightly around a small round table reminds me of the business at hand. It is time to act confident and professional. My old friend Douglas, a lanky and good-natured P.E. teacher, signals me to join him with a wave of his chin, local style. This puts me at ease and I smile and pretend to prick my finger on his tall, spikey hair. Then my new supervisor stops speaking, stands up, and shakes my hand stiffly. There is something familiar about the supervisor’s body language, and I want to ask if we have already met, but before I can say anything, he introduces me to the rest of the team. I meet Sensei, a middle-aged woman who will be teaching the children Japanese, and Faith, who looks even younger than me, who will be teaching music.

The supervisor passes out the schedules. “Chris, I know art takes a lot of prep work and clean up, so unlike the other specialists, I gave you the students for an hour and half each day so that they can help you clean up the art room.” He hints that this is request that has come from within the custodial department, but I am barely listening. Management has never been one of my strengths, and now I not only have the problem of figuring out how to teach art to kids, but I need to motivate them to clean up the room everyday, too! Part of me feels like running back to the day care center, where expectations are so much more relaxed, where I can just throw the books in a box and soak plastic toys in a bleach solution before going home, but I glance at Doug, who is so
tall that he barely fits in his chair. He is grinning with a natural enthusiasm for what he does, and approaches his job as if he is the most important teacher at the school. I should begin to accept where I am in the process of learning to be a teacher. I may be unschooled, and my position may only be part-time, but I need be confident, and stop thinking of myself as unqualified. Perhaps this will be fun.

The supervisor holds up a complicated diagram he has been working on, that demonstrates how my work can still be equal to the other teachers in terms of class rotation and the number of hours spent teaching. “It’s seventeen hours a week for everyone,” he declares proudly. “And you are all earning the maximum for a PTT, we made sure of that.”

Doug looks unconvinced. “What is that, eighty bucks a day?”

“A little less, as you are only paid for contact time,” the supervisor explains, with a kind and patient expression on his face.

Douglas squints at the diagram in the supervisor’s hand, then back to own lesson plan. I know what he’s thinking. He has another job leading the afterschool program at Umi Elementary, but it is also part-time, so now he will essentially work ten hours a day for six hours of pay, with a stretch of two and a half hours down time in the middle.

I try to cheer him up and by using my own version of pidgin. “Eh, dats all right, Dougie. You get paid by the hour ova hea, so all you need do is show up wit da ball at eight fifteen! You make more money that way!”

“Yup, just roll it out into the field and sit under the tree,” Douglas replies in the booming voice of a coach, “what, you cannot do dat wit art?”
“Have you seen that bus up art room? I’m losing money with all that prep every day,” I laugh.

Faith, who up until now has been very quiet, says with a twinkle in her eye, “Chris, why organize it? Just open the paint and stand back. It’s process over product, remember? That’s what they get for twenty four dollars an hour!” Sensei smiles, and the rest of us laugh. Our supervisor blinks and changes color. I see a blue vein pop out of his forehead.

His voice becomes dry and quick, and his clipped tone leaves no room for question or interruption. “This is a new program, but that doesn’t mean we can do what we want! You are each paid to teach the specialty and to teach it means contact time. You will not be paid for any of your prep work. The school can’t afford it. You will be ready to teach when the kids arrive. If you are not ready for the kids and make the teachers late to articulation, the school will not be able to develop the new assessments and we will lose the grant and then you will be out of a job!” Singling me out, he stares at me for a few seconds with a steady, implacable gaze.

“Christopher, Mrs. Okayama tells me you were pencil fighting after lunch instead of sitting nicely. When it is time to sit, you sit and be good! If Mrs. Okayama has to remind you how to behave, just one time, just one time, then you are not being a good boy. She said she had to tell you three times! What do you have to say for yourself?”

I hope that the principal doesn’t call my mom. She will be really mad if he does, and I fear a scolding, careening journey home.

“Christopher, what do you have to say?” the principal asks again, slowly this time, with an intense, almost whispy tone. I stare at him. I have no idea what a principal does,
but doesn’t he have important work to do? Doesn’t he have anything better to do than sit
behind his big desk in his tiny office and waits for a kid to cry? I want to say that I am
sorry but my voice doesn’t work. I don’t want to cry, but I know that tears are welling up
in my eyes. He pushes a box of tissues towards me. His face stops changing color and he
relaxes; he has accomplished his goal. He gets up and opens the door.

“Go back to your classroom.”

I know who my supervisor is now. Funny, he doesn’t look that old. As he begins
to compose himself, I study him. Anger is percolating just under his skin and words are
captured in his throat, and the struggle for mastery of his voice makes his coloration shift
unevenly from his face to his neck, like an octopus being chased from its puka. A pale
pinkish strip highlights the vein over his brow. The fluorescent lighting emphasizes the
lines around his mouth, which are set deeply. As I am watching him, I forget to be
discreet, and he returns my gaze. The blinking, angry, watchful eyes are perfectly fitted to
a man who is used to giving orders, being in charge, and not apologizing. He holds me
with a stare.

“You are getting paid the maximum amount, it’s part of the contract, it’s good
pay, and I won’t allow anyone to take advantage of the schedule! I hired you guys to
provide a service and you will teach what you are assigned and if you need to do all of
the preparation required on your own time, you will do it on your own time.” He twitches
the back of his hand, almost as if shooing away flies, and tries to dismiss us.

Douglas ignored him, looked down at his copy of the schedule and drew a couple
of arrows with a red marker. “No, for real, Chris” Douglas says. “Even with that long
block, how you gon’ set up for all the different grades? Some days you get upper before kindergarten”

“Good question. I don’t know, man.” I reply sheepishly. The supervisor began to gather papers into a little leather briefcase. Sensei nods respectfully with a little smile as he stands and leaves the table. Faith’s expression is relaxed and cooperative but her eyes tell me that she has chosen an enemy. I know what I look like; I am grateful to Douglas for bringing up the issue, and trying to communicate our concerns, but like a little boy getting a scolding, I am more interested in getting away.

“If you don’t like it, see me in April so I know to look for another PTT for the fall,” the supervisor says to a stack of books, as he walks towards the back of the library. He picks up a newspaper and sits down as if we no longer exist, but there is something unnatural about the way he holds and reads it. He looks at each page for the same amount of time, and the way he rustles the paper is both rhythmic and subdued. I shudder slightly as I realize that he is practicing the type of surveillance and intimidation that only an administrator can affect.

I exhale sharply when we are outside of the library. “What was that about?” I ask Douglas.

Doug laughs mischievously, pulls a spike of hair upwards, and shrugs his shoulders. “I dunno brah, but I need this job.” I admire his confident loping stride as he walks away. Alone, I examine the building more carefully. Except for some minor differences, like the color of the walls and the addition of some flowerbeds, it looks the same as it did when I was a boy, and as I walk the length of the B building I find myself reaching out and touching the concrete as if to prove to myself that the walls of my
childhood are still standing; I had thought that by now they might have been demolished and replaced with a more modern open design, not because I believed the school might have fallen into disrepair, but because the building’s old, silent and imposing presence, that had intimidated and impressed me so much as a child, retained a quality I wanted removed from my present. As a novice teacher my imagination delights in the prospect of being with kids, and though I want to educate and enlighten young minds through knowledge and creativity, I am reluctant to wield a teacher’s power and represent the adult world. I am not ready to merge myself with the school’s formidable completeness and “socialize children and into knowing their place in the particular segment of the social order made available to them” (O’loughlin, 2001a, p. 219). My memories of being a child at the school, of sitting quietly and learning more about the drudgery of work than the life of the mind, remains loathsome to me.

I know that a part of this fantasy, this desire for freedom without responsibility, the diffusing of shadows before light, is informed by a life of privilege. I had graduated, just barely, from a private school on O‘ahu that stood among seventy acres of springtime at the mouth of Kanakolu Valley; with an almost European compulsion to conspicuously layer its history and affluence, the private school’s sparkling facilities were new and old at the same time, with facades that invoked a colonial splendor. These buildings held spacious interiors that bespoke a liberal approach to education that I was unused to inhabiting. Eventually, I became acclimated to seeing faculty ambling between these buildings into open, grassy areas, to watching children playing in an unrestricted environment, to being prepared—somehow—for a moment of ascendancy. Like many schools that served the elite, the environment of the private school seemed complete and
eternal in a markedly different way from my the elementary school’s staid and heavy presence, and it was interesting to now realize that time affects the physicality of a private school differently, for while a public school is maintained, a private school is improved.

I look at the stairwell that leads to the second floor. It has been worn down by thousands of little feet, and a visible depression, a slight curve in negative space, can be observed above the surface of each concrete step; the accumulated movement of children over the years has left an irremovable impression upon the schools’ ancient and petrified arteries. The children who first traipsed eagerly down these stairs to recess, and then plodded reluctantly back up these stairs to their classrooms, are now adults in old age, and I wonder if through some strange concomitancy their memories of childhood, if not their bodies, have been shaped by the building’s stretched paths and stony walls. For myself, I know that the school has long ago initiated some stiff uncertainty upon my person, for as I walk upwards, I can hear, in the creak of a knee, voices telling me to go faster, and others telling me to slow down.

On the second floor, I am surprised to discover that the metal safety railing, meant to keep children from falling to the courtyard below, is mounted quite low from an adult’s point of view. If I wish, with just a little effort, I could flip myself out into space and onto the hard grassy ground below. Would my bones break? Would I suffer paralysis? As an adult such an irrational action is inconceivable, and I understand at that moment that the railings existed not to prevent adults from falling prey to their impulses, but to remind teachers to remind those with undisciplined bodies, to restrain themselves.
A discourse that produces a fear of the imaginary helped build these exteriors and how we inhabit them.

I glance across the courtyard. The sun is lighting the south wall of my third grade classroom. I can see Ross’ face as he argues with me over how to hide the tater tots we had smuggled out of the cafeteria and I felt, after clumsily getting in his way, Jim Machado’s powerful elbow pushing me painfully into a doorjamb. I called him stupid under my breath and he threatened to beat me up after school. Almost ten year later I saw his picture in the paper in a story about the repair of potholes, pretending, in his job of street maintenance, to inspect a cracked piece of asphalt on the highway. He had an amused look on his face as he posed for the photographer, and my resentment towards him dissolved when I realized that in that tiny frozen moment, he appeared grown up and happy.

I try to amble casually past B5, my fourth grade classroom, the last classroom I attended before my transfer to the private school, but Mrs. Tamura’s voice stops me. “Christopher, since when does nine times three equal twenty four?” I hated the tedious multiplication of three digit numbers, so I copied my answers from Barry, the boy who sat in front of me; he was short, and that made it easy for me to see past his shoulder, but between glances I filled in the wrong numbers on the wrong lines. I paid for my mistake. The scolding was short, but very public. As Mrs. Tamura accosted me with her maternal, disappointed, and biting tone of voice, I trembled. I heard the girls behind me giggle approvingly. Fourth graders did not cry, and I had to be especially careful to look away from my best friend Roy, so that he did not see my face. Fortunately my shamed and
reddened face was enough to satisfy Mrs. Tamura that day and I didn’t need to stay after school and repeat the quiz.

I was convinced that Mrs. Tamura hated me, so it was very surprising to learn, a few weeks later, that at some point she had selected me to be a Junior Police Officer for the following year. Only a handful of fifth graders could be a J.P.O’s and we considered it the epitome of coolness. Perhaps it was the hardhat and orange safety vest, the symbols of authority, which we coveted. I played it cool, didn’t tell my mother that I had the position, and tried to act uncaring when the other kids talked about it, but of course I was secretly thrilled. I silently prayed that I would move up the ranks of the JPO and become a captain. I visualized myself blowing the whistle, issuing commands, and directing the kids to cross the street on cue. I began to wait for my mother to pick me up within sight of the corner where the JPOs worked so that I could study their routine. They always marched in a formation while wearing their vests, and I admired their precision and confidence. They looked like roman soldiers from a picture book and didn’t act like children.

One day I came out of the classroom to find my mother already parked and waiting for me. This was a very unusual event. As I got in the car, I struggled to untangle my safety belt and pull it across my waist. Instead of helping, she told me, with barely repressed excitement, that I had passed the admissions test for Private School—the school that my brother and sisters had attended. The Private School had helped them get into Brown University and Yale, but I could barely hear her over the familiar pounding in my ears and the distracting flutter in my chest. I felt hollow, but pulled the belt as hard as
I could, clicked the buckle, and smiled. The Dodge Dart gave a sudden lurch, and she took me to Baskin Robbin’s Ice Cream to celebrate.

These childhood memories, released from their matrix, were free to merge with the present, and I study their movement as I pass through familiar and startling spaces. I walk down the stairs, finally ready to open the door to my new classroom, the art room. Along the back wall I see a large bulletin board covered with burlap and adorned with dozens of multicolored pushpins. I want to display the masterpieces of children alongside reproductions of famous paintings. But then, thinking of the teachers I grew up with, I decide, right there and then, to be more, to become a part of something greater: a regular classroom teacher. I wanted, like the teachers from my childhood, to have influence, make a difference, and bring joy and learning to children; I just didn’t want to continue their tradition of cruelty.

My approach to autoethnography originates from my interest in the teaching of language arts to children; as such, I structure my research as storytelling, and think of this thesis as a personal narrative, a novel. My writing fixates itself upon the topics, images, and questions that concerned me as a first grade teacher, and this preoccupation creates a frame that informs, opens, and delineates an inquiry. This in turn is filtered through emotional responses to experiences that I hope is analyzed, or at least re-presented, in a way that will be helpful to you as a student teacher.

You will no doubt find, throughout this autoethnography, hopes and wishes for you, alongside a palpable sadness, a wistful prose drawn from being absent from the classroom for so long. I truly envy the adventure that lays before you, and most of all, the
presence of children that is in your future. Embrace it; try not to pay attention to the
hostility your mentor seems to have towards the principal, the conditions of the
profession, or the mischievous children in her class. She is lucky to have it, all of it, as a
part of her day-to-day experience.

I’ve suffered years of mental and physical duress as a result of this gap, this puka,
this longing—so when you ask me if I miss teaching—I laugh. The answer is in my
gestures and the strain of my voice. When I visit your field classroom, you see me enter
eagerly, waving and smiling at kids like a clown at a birthday party, before catching
myself and remembering my role as that of a detached evaluator. My presentations in
class, ostensibly lectures about language or visual arts education, turn into reminiscence
as soon as photos of the children’s faces come into view. As my wife so often reminds
me, these children are gone and no longer exist, but thankfully some trace stays with me,
always, and that offers some comfort to me as I travel about the island in my obscure
position as a field supervisor. I know it was foolish of me to leave teaching, but perhaps it
was inevitable, and this way I at least get to see the kids. Please remember that this did
not come about as a fall from grace, that I chose to forsake the classroom; the reason for
me leaving has become, hopefully, apparent as you read this autoethnography.

In many of my stories you will read criticism of the No Child Left Behind Act and
the discourse it established in our schools; this is more than merely literature review; I
want you to hear it shuffling in the background as I struggle to make decisions that are
student centered, and feel it constrict the intellectual space of the classroom as I try to
create critical educational spaces in both the past and the present. This piece of legislation
pushed me out of teaching, and its effect can still be seen and felt quite vividly. Think of
NCLB as being emblematic of what you need to defend the children against, because you will confront it, or one of its descendants, in your own career as an educator.

It started, at least for me, when *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This report condemned the state of public education and found inadequacies in almost every aspect of schooling at the time. In no uncertain terms, it described teachers as being inadequately prepared for their jobs and characterized the school as an institution that failed to stimulate or support the growth of its students. Unless educational institutions immediately raised expectations and provided a more rigorous curriculum, the report claimed, the United States would soon lose its status as a leader in the global economy. In alarmist language, the introduction to *A Nation At Risk* (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) stated that:

> The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (p. 7)

It was within this somewhat anxious atmosphere that Ray Budde, a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who specialized in educational reorganization, made an intriguing suggestion. In a booklet entitled *Education by Charter* (1988) he proposed that school boards be allowed to “charter” teams of teachers for a three to five year period to develop innovative curricular programs that could later be disseminated to other schools in a state or district (Budde, 1996; Nathan, 1996). He envisioned these groups of teachers as having the freedom to design and implement curriculum without interference from any governing body, and challenged administrators to “build and
maintain a school district organization within which teachers own the function of instruction” (Budde, 1988, p. 123). Later that year, Albert Shankar, president of the American Federation of Teachers, built upon Budde’s idea and proposed that entire public schools be granted long-term charters and autonomy within existing school facilities (Saks, 1997). Although the shift to chartering entire schools surprised Budde, he recognized potential in the concept, and the idea soon gained support from citizen groups, educators, and politicians, including the governor of Minnesota, Rudy Perpich, who believed that greater educational opportunity for low-income and minority students could be achieved through support of the charter school model (Nathan, 1996). The first charter school legislation in the United States was signed into law in Minnesota in 1991 and within seven years, 1,129 charter schools were operating in 27 states nation-wide (Northeast and Islands Regional Education Lab At Brown University, 1999).

When I first joined the charter school project in the mid nineties, it was like diving into a stream of water after drought. It was exciting; and unlike what I tend to see in schools now, the teachers were empowered: strong in organization, forceful in opinion, and skillful enough to back up their claims with evidence. There was a strong sense of academic freedom among them, and to top it all off the charter school’s board, wanting to retain quality educators, made certain that their faculty was amongst the highest paid in the state.

I was allowed to fulfill my student teaching requirement while I was teaching art as a part-time hire. I joined a first grade classroom taught by Mary Seki, who had been teaching for almost twenty years. She was actually one of the charter’s founders, and she acculturated me into the philosophy and practices of the school.
I was her apprentice, and listened eagerly. I wanted to be a part of this think-tank, this hotbed of ideas. First, Mary explained, there was governance; the school’s board was made up of the stakeholders of the school and included members of each role group: there were parents, community leaders, teachers, and even one student, who met every month. “It’s stupid really, there should be more than one student on the board,” she said, then added with a smirk, “and that student shouldn’t be the son of a board member.”

The board gave general direction to the administration. Since the administrative power was shared, the principal was known, wryly, as the CEO or Chief Educational Officer, and her primary role was to facilitate the decision-making processes that occurred within and between the role groups. This left the teachers with the responsibility of managing the educational direction of the school. As such, the grade level chairs were in the process of reorganizing the curriculum, and for producing a program that was more student-centered and authentic than any conventional, or as Mary put it, traditional, elementary program that existed in Hawai‘i’s public schools at the time. She explained that public schools relied too much on worksheets, textbooks, and tests to determine whether the students were passing or failing, and that all of this rote learning resulted in the loss of meaning and essential content. At the charter school, the core subject areas were opportunities for teaching towards more complex and foundational processes. Thus, reading focused on the study of one’s self through a measured response to literature, writing emphasized the reconstitution of experience, and mathematics brought logic and problem solving to everyday life. These constructivist approaches encouraged the kids to rely less on memory and more on building heuristic thinking processes and making connections to the world outside. Mary spoke of being a facilitator for the children’s
discussions and intellectual pursuits, and she was so convincing that it wasn’t long before I thought of myself as a facilitator, too.

She uttered the phrase “assessment drives instruction” repeatedly, and this strange homily became the rationale for sharing the assessment process with the children; each first grader selected and entered work into personalized evidence-based portfolios, and demonstrated learning through the jointure of artifact and commentary; this amazed me, for as you know, though portfolio assessment can be a very empowering enterprise, it is also extremely time consuming when applied to the work of young children in a collaborative way. Mrs. Seki overcame this hurdle by trying to honor each child’s choices and ownership during selection time, and smiled, even when Tristan entered a crayon scribble into his portfolio. She reminded me, over and over, what a privilege it was to be able to work with kids that way. I once asked her what the difference was—in the long term—between giving grades and using the portfolios, and she looked at me with amazement.

“It takes away the judgment! Besides, do you think an ‘A’ actually means anything?”

“I dunno, I guess it means the teacher likes you.” I answered.

“It means the teacher likes something about you, but that could be an accident of birth,” she said. Whether in conversation or print, she always got the last, caustic word.

Mary was very patriotic, so it seemed fitting that she worked at a school that fancied itself a part of America’s great social experiment. Its mission was democratic and its vision, at least on paper, was to prepare well-rounded, socially responsible individuals, who appreciated creativity and collaboration, for a productive life in the twenty-first
century. However, since we lived and worked in the shadow of the twentieth century, it was apparently difficult to convince every teacher to embrace the charter school’s philosophy and practices. The relationship that the teachers had to the mission and vision of the school ranged wildly amongst individuals and this led to the school’s great failing, for while the teachers were empowered to govern and make decisions, a subculture of traditionalism emerged that used that very same power to resist the principles around which the charter school was organized. Mary charmingly referred to teachers who behaved like this as “sticks in the mud”, and I learned to share her disdain for individuals who gleaned the benefits of working at a charter school while assuming little responsibility for its sustenance; still, she told me that if it wasn’t for opposition at the school, important issues would never be surfaced. She liked the confrontation, the unease, and inspired me towards courage.

Mary helped me get a job as a long-term substitute in first grade for Mrs. Levy, a teacher who was going on personal leave. Terribly excited, I parked my mother’s car on the side of the road and locked it even though the street was deserted. Against the dull roar of the freeway I heard a lawnmower, then the slam of a screen door somewhere in the distance. A couple of cars briefly appeared at the corner and swished their way towards the upscale shopping mall three blocks away. I let myself in quietly through the gate of the kindergarten courtyard, and winced at its creaking complaint. The charter school was enjoying a summer’s hibernation and I didn’t wish to wake it.

I had been summoned to the school office to complete a series of forms and obtain my room key, and even though it was for a substitute position, it was my first step into what I hoped would be a long and fulfilling career. Desiring that this errand be of
some significance, and hoping that the principal would notice my professionalism, I had costumed myself in the style of the bankers who work in Honolulu and wore a colorful aloha shirt with a floral print. I quickened my pace and tried to ignore the play equipment wrapped in yellow plastic tape. The tape was woven around and through the entire climbing structure, as if to forcefully make children who could not read the word CAUTION that was stamped on it, to slip off of its metal bars. Seeing a play structure in restraint was distressing, and I was sure there must have been a reasonable explanation.

I walked past some sea creatures clinging to the wall of the teacher’s lounge. Over the summer, I had taught an art class at the school, sort of a last hurrah as a student teacher, and with the help of a guest ceramicist, the children had learned to pinch and pull clay into the shape of turtles, sharks, dolphins and fish. The ceramicist cleverly limited the number of glazes the children used so that the mural displayed a tonal harmony, then mounted each little sculpt onto large clay tablets of blue and green. I thought that the animals had actually looked their best sitting on newspaper, drying in the classroom window with the sound of children chatting over them, but had to admit that this creation, with its cultivated, adult aesthetic, best served the school’s exterior.

The school’s walls can never look friendly or inviting, but they are durable, and they have, over time, become something of a landmark in the neighborhood, and perhaps deserve the adornment. This was, after all, one of the oldest schools on the island, and according to a kupuna I met walking with her grandchild, was originally built upon swampy grassland where wild pigs rooted and ‘alae ‘ula stalked water snails.

On rainy days, the school, sitting on stilts, became a little ark of children, and the kids were scared that it would float away. As the community grew, the site was drained
and scars were cut into the ground to control the spill that gushed down the hillside. The original wooden buildings were demolished about forty years ago, and in their place the state constructed a heavy, sprawling creature with a flat roof supported by walls of cinderblock and exposed beams, and interconnected covered walkways on steel poles. Almost every school in Hawai‘i had this same architecture and whether it was on the shore or in the mountains, schools were recognizable for containing kids within these strong, safe, and ugly walls. They always looked like prisons to me.

The grandma was happy that there was going to be another male teacher at the school. She remembered me from my student teaching and told me she liked me, but this made me uncomfortable, so I excused myself, and trotted around the corner until I reached the center of campus. I took a moment to pause in front of the cafeteria and let the sloping earth lead my gaze to the ocean. I could see a tiny bit of beach, but most of it was hidden by a stripe of homes owned by wealthy families.

Pen in hand, I jogged into the office, ready to sign my name. I assumed it would be some sort of contract, but instead I was presented with a couple of slips of paper confirming my room number and a list of rules that governed classroom inventory. Every piece of furniture in my classroom had a serial number, and I was reminded that this meant that every desk, table, and chair present on the first day of school, needed to be in my room on the last. This upset my plans, as I wanted to get rid of most of the furniture, and organize the classroom around projects and learning centers, minimize clutter, and give the children a lot of free space in which to work.

Still, I signed my name and took the keys eagerly. The clattering tags read “C15” and “teacher’s lounge”. Clutching the key ring tightly, I headed back through the school
grounds to inspect my new room, more conscious than ever that I was now a member of an adult elite. I was looking forward to being wrapped within the school’s embrace.

The buildings stretched into four directions. Aside from the cafeteria, that stood on its own in center of the school, and the kindergarten, that resembled a nature preserve on the northwest corner of campus, all of the spaces—whether dedicated to instruction, administration, or physical plant—shared proximity and load bearing walls. These walls, these vectors, spanned the campus from east to west, forcing classrooms to face each other. The rooms were sometimes strung together in pairs and sometimes in triples, and were adjoined to administrative spaces arranged from mauka to makai, or north to south. I thought about this configuration. It kept groups of children isolated, but also in close proximity to each other. This enabled efficiency, but also allowed teachers to monitor each other’s activities. Here was first space, edging into my cautious mind as a second.

A letter of the alphabet named each of the three buildings, and the classrooms within them were numbered according to their relationship to the school’s main entrance, where an American flag, raised by JPOs every morning, drooped at the top of a tall pole. The older children were taught in Building A while the younger kids attended school in building C. I stopped before the pink door of room C15. It wasn’t the furthest room from the office, but it was about a five minute walk with adult legs, which I thought of as a fairly long distance for a six-year old.

Classrooms are like ships in a fleet, and each room is synonymous with the captain who sailed her. I was thrilled, even if it was not a permanent position, to have been assigned the room of the popular Mrs. Levy. I switched on the light, and as my eyes adjusted to the gloom a jumble of furniture met them. The desks were piled atop each
other, their metal legs jabbing into the air. All of the shelving was pushed against the walls and turned the wrong way. The bulletin boards were stripped bare, and the storybooks and art supplies were missing. A roll of carpet leaned against the wall amongst large, unlabeled cardboard boxes. If everything I saw needed to stay in the room, preparing for the first day of school was largely a matter of unpacking materials, stuffing supplies onto shelves, and sliding desks into position. It would take a lot of sweat to prepare for the first day of school, but very little of it would depend upon my methodological choices.

Mrs. Levy visited with the kids on the first day of school to show them her baby. I worked as a long-term substitute for eight weeks, and then was told that Mrs. Levy wasn’t going to return. This meant I had to submit another application and interview for the position I already had assumed, but given my previous experience with job hunting, it was a joyful process.

I was hired officially a few days after the interview. I thanked Mary profusely for helping me enter a tenure line, but she denied any involvement whatsoever. I was ecstatic, and could barely believe that after so much work I was no longer part-timer, or an aide or a specialist, but a member of the regular faculty, a real teacher. My head was filled with a golden vision of children smiling, laughing, and learning in my classroom. I wanted to have a reputation like Mrs. Levy’s some day; I wanted to feel like my work mattered. I sighed. I knew what I really wanted was to feel loved.

I click a key into place, turn the door handle and push the shiny kick plate with my foot, dreamily. “OK guys, come to circle,” I excitedly say, as the children come in
from recess. “I have an announcement.” I sit on the floor and wait for them to join me. I have rehearsed a little speech. I am going to tell them that I will be staying on, and that their teacher will not change. I figured I would tell them that the routines and rules would stay the same, and that I could stay and watch them grow into second graders. The kids will be thrilled, they’ll probably cheer, and afterwards we could go play some games outside to celebrate.

Eleven children flop down on the carpet, but a small cluster of girls linger in the doorway, drinking from their water bottles and chatting as if they are employees on a coffee break. I gently call them from across the room. “Girls, recess is over, come in here please!”

They ignore me, so I go right next to the children, screw my brow up like my mentor once showed me, lean over, and say in my firm teacher’s voice, “I said, get in here right now!” The girls scurry into the classroom and I wait until everyone is seated before I resume my place on the carpet.

“What is it? Is it something good?” Zoe asks, her eyes going wide. I give myself a moment to drink in the presence of my smart, loving, and wonderful kids. I want to remember them this way forever, as my first class.

“Yes, very good.” I take a deep breath. “The principal just told me that I’m going to be your teacher for the rest of the year!” I begin to clap, in an effort to start some funny applause, but I am the only one cheering. The first graders stare at me, stunned.


I gulp. This is not the reaction I expected. “She decided to stay at home and take care of her new baby, to be a mommy.”
“Why?”

“Yeah, she can still come here!”

“Mrs. Bonham used to bring her baby!” Drew says loudly. Drew always was a troublemaker.

“Well. That’s what she wanted to do…” I say. I try not to let my emotions show, but I can feel my eyes tear up. I try to comfort myself. Their reaction isn’t a statement about my teaching. The kids aren’t being callous or unloving; they had just built up Mrs. Levy in their minds. Children always idealize the absent parent. I swallow hard, compose my features, and give them a writing assignment. “Why don’t we make some cards to send to Mrs. Levy? We can tell her good luck with the baby and you can all say how much you miss her.” At this, the class cheers. “What are some sentences that we could write on her card?” I ask, as I reach for a red marker.

❖

I become a member of the faculty, and Mary continues to be my mentor, and as a team, we fight for the charter school’s vision, in sometimes subtle and sometimes overt ways. This is a tiring battle, and as the standards movement inevitably seeps into our work with children, I see Mary’s body change. One day, while the kids are at lunch, she squeezes her eyes shut and sags in her chair, as if in great pain. I watch her worriedly, but don’t want to stare, so my eyes flit about the room. Around us are the signifiers of a reified discourse: a box that contains a scripted math program, a shelf full of dull and colorless primers, a laminated poster that catalogs the standards for first grade, and a schedule on the wall that lists the time that each subject must be taught. Mary has alluded
to being ill in the past, but has never told me about it explicitly, and respecting her privacy, I’ve never asked. But perhaps now is the time.

“Are you OK, Mary? I’m worried about you.”

“I’m worried about me too,” she answers, trying to smile. I sense what is coming.

The three generations of uncles and aunts, the sons and daughters of immigrants, who lived on islands and faraway lands, who bridged the gap between the dusty, splintered past and a time of Cadillacs and Tupperware, aged rapidly in my eyes. In the early hours, through the thin walls of my bedroom, I might wake to fragments of strained, stuttered sentences and muffled sobs, but if I ventured into the kitchen I would find breakfast sizzling amidst a puzzling normalcy. Death existed for me as a silly, sleeping bird, the irreversible fate of a fairy tale princess, and as an uncle missed at Christmas and never mentioned again, until it culminated one night in screaming. I ran into my mother’s arms.

“I was dreaming of when Aunty Brenda dies, and you die, and I die,” I cry. My mother squeezes me with all the strength in her thin arms, my tears drenching her shoulders. “I don’t want anyone to die, I want everyone to live forever!”

But suddenly a thought of something I heard on public television rears itself, and I look at my mother and manage to gasp, “But that would be overpopulation, yah?”

My mother loves this story, and repeats it to me with laugh while petting the dog on her lap. She doesn’t know her child still aches from trying to make sense of death alone.

Decades later, I’m watching a student teacher weaken as she struggles to read a story without mentioning the demise of one of its characters. She tries to change the words as she reads and says, “…and then the witch… made him… fall asleep?” The
mentor teacher and the children sit quietly and politely, but we all know that the story makes absolutely no sense if the characters cannot die, and the hero cannot mourn. At our debrief I tell her to read stories correctly and to trust the text, but she works in a store that sells Hello Kitty merchandise, and believes that children should not be exposed to death and bereavement, and dismisses my advice. She eventually leaves the teacher education program, and takes her happy, sanitized storytelling skills elsewhere.

The truth is that in schools, death is everywhere.

I begin teaching art at the charter school, and the first friend I make introduces himself as a part-time teacher like myself, and as a man with a terminal disease. He tells me, very simply, “I won’t live long.” I go to his show, full of glorious paintings of fish escaping a tumultuous storm by plunging deep into a sea’s great stillness. A summer passes and he doesn’t come back to work, and then another part-time teacher appears. It bothers me that my friend’s passing is marked with a short blurb in the school newsletter, as if it was an announcement about fundraising; it seems so inadequate, so insulting.

Now I have my own classroom, and meet a room cleaner named Francisco, who cleans the carpet and polishes every surface that can withstand a damp sponge. He pushes the vacuum along the floor next to my desk and switches it off, then snaps it into the next electrical outlet, all in one fluid motion. As he skillfully whips the wire out of the way and shifts his attention to the other side of the room, he tells me about himself. This job is the best one he has ever had, and he likes the way he is treated here. He is going to take some adult classes so he can learn maintenance. There is good money in fixing machines on state property. I nod politely and try to encourage him while I look down at my papers and send emails to the office. It is a pleasant enough way to spend an afternoon.
Then Francisco stops coming to work. Two weeks pass and a substitute cleaner tells me she was hired because the guy who had the job before her had died. She obviously wants to ask me about full-time employment at the school but is unsure about how to bring it up. I feel incredibly guilty about how I had treated Francisco. The principal tells me later that the condition was chronic. This means Francisco was ill while he was working; he might have even have told me about his health at one point, but since I largely ignored him, it was difficult to be certain what he had said.

There is no mention of his death at the faculty meeting or in the newsletter, no assembly is called, and his picture does not appear on any bulletin board. He didn’t make enough of an impact on the school community to earn recognition. He was just a guy who cleaned some rooms after school.

We line up in order of our importance, with those who had the strongest relationship to Mary at the back of the line. Even here, in this beeping, brightly lit hospital room, we line up. She would laugh at our sense of order and reserve. I am the last teacher in line, and the family members are standing behind me; I consider it a place of honor. I glance at Mary’s relatives. The odd part is that I barely knew Mary on a personal level. Her deathbed is the first time that I meet her sister and brother-in-law. Her daughter, Loretta, stands apart from everyone else.

Mary’s face still has a line of pain at the brow. I reach out and stroke her temple, a gesture I inherited from my father. I thought my touch would ease her pain, but that is an image in storybooks we tell to kids. This is the first time I ever touched someone right after death; she doesn’t feel cold to the touch, she feels absolutely frigid. I bend down and
whisper very softly, “I promise to watch after the kids. No, I promise to fight for them every day, like you did.”

I am determined to honor Mary’s memory by teaching. By not only teaching, but advocating for kids, and getting those sticks in the mud to move somehow.

I still miss her terribly. She was dedicated to the charter school’s potential for innovation, was a fearless defender of children’s independent thinking, and supported my interest in decolonizing the classroom and teaching critical literacy unconditionally. She was also tough and argumentative and kept the rights of the young child in mind at all times. Many teachers were wary of her because of her outspoken nature, but she also had a vulnerable side that came to the fore, for some reason, through writing. She once wrote to me, saying “Yo, Mr. Au, thanks for sticking up for me in faculty meeting. I’m sorry I walked out and left you alone. The other grades think I am being difficult when I ask questions. But I am trying to get people to think. You know, I really do want to be liked, all my life, that’s all I’ve ever wanted. But the children need the teachers to hear them and we can’t, so I need to keep making trouble. Still with me? Yo.”

Her death is a huge shock to my system, but of course, I don’t take much time off from work to mourn. I tell myself that my emotional condition is stable and that I can still teach. I also explain, to anyone who asks, that I didn’t want the kids to think that their teachers can just disappear.

The truth is that I am scared and that I want, no—need—to be with my first graders. I need their love, but wasn’t sure how to ask for it. When we sit down for our weekly government meeting, three days after Mary’s death, I have nothing on my mind and nothing to say; I have no lecture prepared about being good, and no silly joke to
“C15 government is now in session,” announces the class leader with pride. She waits for someone to start speaking, but since I don’t make eye contact with anyone, no one says a word. The children wait for at least a minute, which is a very long time in first grade.

Finally, Pedro—who I usually think of as bouncy and silly and mischievous—asks me gently, “Do you still miss Mrs. Seki?”

Gradually, I float up towards the blue swirling surface, lift my head, and take in two big gulps of air. I didn’t know that I had been under that long. Eyes watering, I nod at Pedro, and all the other children, completely silent, solemnly nod with me. This is teacher education.

It is four weeks later, and I receive an email message stating that that a popular newscaster wanted permission to do a story about Mary for the evening news. Mary’s kids had spent the last three weeks collecting little toys—like the kind you get with a children’s meal at a fast food restaurant—for kids in a war zone, but since Mary died before the project was completed, the toys languished in a box under her desk. The reporter intended to invite a soldier that was leaving for the war zone, to receive the toys on camera, and then take them to one of the schools overseas personally. The children and myself would be interviewed and we would be shown giving the toys to the soldier for delivery.

A part of me thought that this could be a nice way to honor Mary’s memory. Still, she never did like the idea of putting kids on stage and felt that events like this exploited what she called the children’s “cute factor”. Mary’s style was to shy away from attention.
and project personal dignity and independence, and she expected the children in her class to carry themselves with equal self-respect. I look at her picture tacked above my desk. She is smiling slyly and her eyes are twinkling in her tanned, round cheeks. She’s holding our pet turtle under her chin with two hands. The ridiculousness of the pose belied her intelligence and courage; Mary could always reason her way towards what was most meaningful and joke through pain, and now the last thing I wanted to do was abuse her memory or cause her family additional hurt.

As I deliberated, Loretta glides into my room. Unlike her mother, she is tall and thin. She is twenty years old. She usually let her long, black hair fall across her shoulders, but lately she had taken to hastily tying it into a tight ponytail. Gently, I ask her what she thought about her mother’s death becoming a story on the television news.

“She was a pretty private person,” she answers simply. That was good enough for me. I sent an email to the office explaining that Loretta and I believed that television coverage was inappropriate at this time, but to please thank the reporter for her sympathy and support of the toy project.

I receive another email. The reporter and her cameraman will arrive at twelve o’clock on Friday afternoon. “Because you value privacy”, the message said, “nothing will be shot in your or Mary’s classroom.” Instead, the kids are going to be interviewed in the two classrooms across the courtyard. The principal loves publicity.

My fellow first grade teachers were apparently told to keep this information from me until the last moment. I am angry at first, but when I see Courtney nervously walk across the grass to talk to me, the feeling fades into amusement. Courtney and Heidi are new teachers and just moved here from the mainland. They are still on probation, still
trying to make sense out of the local school culture, and had little choice but to comply with the principal’s instructions.

Courtney runs her fingers through her short brown hair in an exaggerated, worried gesture. “I’m sorry Mr. Au,” she says in high-pitched voice. “But we are having a party in our rooms tomorrow and you are not invited.” Her imitation of a child whose guilt forced her to apologize is perfect.

I laugh. “I didn’t want to go to your dumb party anyway”, I say, waving away the rest of her confession.

“Chris, we really are having a party. The reporter is bringing food and balloons and games. On a Friday afternoon!” Generally, teachers dislike activities that over-stimulate the children; Courtney knew that after the television crew left, the kids would remain with her in an excitable, loud, and unmanageable state for at least another forty minutes.

“I’ll send my kids over to your side, but leave my doors open. If a kid looks like they are going nuts, send ‘em here to do art and have quiet time. I’ll have craypas and watercolors out.” Courtney looks at me gratefully, and rushes back to tell Heidi that I’m not mad at them.

On Friday our government circle is interrupted by a series of cheers from across the courtyard. My class clusters inside the doorways and behind the louvers and watches in fascination as two “army guys”, who are dressed in fatigues, amble confidently up the sidewalk. Behind them scampers a reporter, who is known locally for his good looks, dressed in a light brown aloha shirt. The reporter is carrying a box; another man follows
him with a camera on his shoulder. Keeping at least one eye in his viewfinder at all times, the cameraman toddles like a robot, then disappears into Courtney’s room.

Christian starts to beg. “Can we go? Can we go Mr. Au?”

“OK, line up and we’ll go over. You can have fun and play, but remember we are doing this to honor Mrs. Seki.”

“But she died, Mr. Au,” Aisa says, getting up from the floor.

I answer in a brusque tone that I can’t control. “Yeah, but Mrs. Seki wanted to help the kids in the warzone get toys. Remember how we brought her our little toys? Well…the army guys are going to help the toys get to the warzone.” My response is inadequate, terrible, and I want to go back in time and say something else to Aisa, something gentle and understanding about life and death, or something didactic about how channel seven is actually writing a nonfiction story about our community, but that’s impossible, it’s school, and we are always moving kids away from one truth and into another.

When I arrive at the threshold my kids leave me to join the shifting mass of little bodies pulsating like a single-celled organism; children circulate from the table with pepperoni pizza and fruit punch, to a beanbag toss, to the soldiers who are signing autographs, and back to the pizza again. Heidi is wiping up some spilled juice. She smiles but I know she is displeased. She likes to keep her classroom in an immaculate state. Meanwhile the reporter, microphone in hand, is chasing down children for interviews. When one evades him, he spins about and chases another.

Kupono agrees to be interviewed, and is gleefully pressed towards a picture of Mary that is installed on a desk, in a place of honor, in the corner of the room next to the
old overhead projector that is never used. The frame of the photo is encircled by an orchid and carnation lei, and to its right is a large box decorated with glitter, that is filled to the top with little toys. The cameraman, bent under the weight of his technological burden, carefully frames the shot so that the image of adult and child can be properly preserved.

“Why do you miss Mrs. Seki?”

Kupono beams into the camera like a professional. “She was so nice. I loved her. She was a great teacher,” he says. A balloon floats a little too close, and though the cameraman bats it away with one hand, he looks up and wordlessly asks for another take. The interview is conducted again and Kupono repeats himself word for word.

Kupono struts away like a celebrity on a red carpet. “Are you ready for your interview?” the reporter says brashly, catching my eye. He’s obviously used to people being mesmerized by his looks and his status as a local celebrity. I don’t move, so he takes a few brisk steps towards me, microphone in hand. He is so close that the scent of his aftershave makes me snort.

I frown, to correct the rudeness of a child, just as my mentor taught me. “No thanks, I was against all this. She was a very private person,” I say, gesturing towards Mary’s photo with a flick of my chin. The reporter abruptly looks down at his feet, chagrined.

Turning away, I notice that some of the children look exhausted, and using them as an excuse for a quick exit, take a group of them back to my room to paint. I don’t feel remorseful about the way I treated the reporter, and as we become absorbed in the
flowing watercolor and comfortable silence, I actually start to feel stronger, and more alert than I have in days. A promise had been kept.

Victor runs into the room, yelling at the top of his lungs. “Mr. Au, Mr. Au! I’m hurt!”

“What happened?” I ask suspiciously. “You look OK to me.”

“I was walking. The camera guy grabbed my lanyard and I went *ack!*” Victor stretches the cord around his neck behind him with one hand, and mimes getting pulled and choked.

I am not sure how to react. At first I fall back on the problem solving routine I learned in teachers college. “Do you want to tell him ‘I don’t like that’?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to tell him?”

Victor’s eyes widen with embarrassment. “No!”

“OK, get every Keiki Mano back here. I guess we need to meet.”

I send Heidi and Courtney’s students back with their wet paintings and the rest of my class walks in casually. They sit down in their places on the rug. Latoya is holding two cups of punch and Naomi has two slices of pizza. After they sit down, they exchange half of their loot. When the circle is settled, I ask, “Do you know why the reporter and his friends are here?”

Rose answered, “For Mrs. Seki. They wanted to remember her on the TV news.”

“Yep, that’s right.” I draw a television set on the bottom of a piece of chart paper. “It’s for the news. But how do they make the news shows?”
“They take movies of when something bad is happening, like fires.” Naomi offers between bites of pizza. “Or tidal waves.” On the top of the paper I draw a camera pointed at a scribbly tidal wave.

“Or meteors! Bloosh!”

I add the requisite flaming meteor. “Yes, that’s what the news is for, to show people what’s happening in the world. It’s supposed to be different than a fiction show, like Power Rangers or Pokemon, right?” Carey pretends to punch David, who expertly blocks the blow in slow motion.

“What did they take video of today?”

Many hands go up at once. “Us saying that Mrs. Seki loved us,” Jenna said.

“Us eating and running around.”

“Us giving the toys to the army guys.”

“Was it fiction or nonfiction?” I ask.

“It’s fake!” Victor says, raising his voice. “The reporter made all that stuff happen. It wasn’t real. They just wanted it to look like that for TV. That’s why when I walked in front of the camera guy he reached out and grabbed my lanyard!” He is still angry, but he works through it by pretending to be injured once again, and letting himself collapse onto the carpet while gasping for air. Some of the kids giggle and fall down in unison, imitating and supporting him.

I draw a bunch of stick figures in front my drawing of the camera, with smiling faces and hearts over their heads. This prompts laughter and kissing sounds. Then I draw an arrow from the stick figures to the TV screen on the bottom of the paper. “I agree with Victor. This wasn’t real. It wasn’t really news. The reporter wanted to make a fiction
story out of us. But I don’t know if people who see it on TV later will be able to tell that it isn’t real.” Victor smiles, and the children nod, except for Aisa, who looks at me shyly. I try to apologize for my earlier behavior with a joke. “And Aisa, your homework is to watch a lot of TV this weekend.” She doesn’t say anything in reply.

It is three weeks later. Loretta and I sit down to watch a copy of the reporter’s news broadcast. By now I am feeling quite cynical about the entire experience so all I see are a series of constructed images: an establishing shot of the classroom; Mary’s photo with the lei; a child talking; another child talking; soldiers talking to children; soldiers taking said box of toys from children; Heidi talking; Mary’s photo with lei; sign off. I eject the tape and hand it to Loretta.

“That was very nice. My mom would have loved that,” she says, her eyes red with tears.

With Mary gone, my memories of what the charter school once was begins to fade, and the day-to-day teaching appears more scripted and repetitive, and more charted and predictable, than ever before; the authority of the school is no longer comforting and I no longer want to be a part of it. First graders are the age I was when my parents got divorced. I distrust the principal and am reprimanded at meetings for not using the math program. I’m flying away, I’m on an airplane, and a dreamless reality covers my body. I open my eyes, look at the box of worksheets and the schedule on the wall, and realize that the kids need someone else, someone less fragile, someone who doesn’t need to fight or cry or love to feel alive, to teach them.
I walk back from the lunchroom with my class. Since they spend the last ten minutes of their lunch period sitting quietly in a row on the steps in the cafeteria, the children can’t help but experience a lightness of spirit as they enjoy the breeze and midday sunshine. After experiencing the screeching whistles and assigned seating of the cafeteria, I imagine it feels amazing to move and breathe, once again. Most of them reach out and pluck leaves from the hedges. The children at the front of the line begin to run back to the classroom, their rubber slippers making pinging sounds on the concrete. This irritates me, since these are behaviors that I have been trying to correct since the semester began, and I need to swallow my urge to yell.

Today must be different. Today, no one will get in trouble with the teacher. At the front of the line, Cade throws his lunchbox high into the air as he walks. When he rushes forward to catch it the second time, he strikes the back of Mika’s head with his outstretched hands. Mika sobs and runs away from him, and her best friend, Anela, yells at me angrily, as if the teacher did something wrong.

“Hang on, I’m coming!” I shout, as Anela begins to pull the lunchbox out of Cade’s arms. As I stop to separate Cade and Anela’s tugging match, Carter and Toby leave the sidewalk and run through the corner of the courtyard at full speed, cutting ahead of everyone else. Bits of moist dirt fly into the air as they run, pelting the kids who are still walking in line. As they near the front of the classroom, the boys deftly fold their arms in front of their faces and crash noisily into the door. The door vibrates on its hinges for several seconds. Cade and Toby look at each other in silence for a brief moment and then laugh uproariously. When I finally catch up with them, Toby widens his eyes and grins. “Did you hear that, Mr. Au?” he asks, certain that I will get the joke.
Fighting the urge to scold him, I smile tightly and unlock the door, “Circle on the floor, please,” I say to everyone. “It’s Government time. I have big news.”

Toby walks to his desk and begins to straighten up his drawings and writing workshop papers. Emily casually goes to the shelf and picks out the bee puppet. She obviously plans to play with it as we conduct the class meeting. Jai, however, is all business. He follows me to the floor, waits until I sit down, then thoughtfully positions himself to my right, so that he is near me, but not facing me. “Is it good news or bad news?” he asks warily.

“I’m afraid it’s bad news.” I say, in a voice that I hope sounds declarative. All of the children who were ignoring my instructions apprehend the unusual tone and sit down at the same time, in a perfect circle.

No one speaks, no one wiggles or whispers. Emily discreetly places the bee puppet on the floor behind her back. “You can hold the puppet during this, Em,” I say quietly. She turns a little red and shakes her head.

“What’s the announcement?” Jai asks again. I feel my pulse rising and sweat forms on my palms. This is the moment I have been dreading for the last two weeks. The next words out of my mouth will change the lives of everyone in this room. “Well, I guess I better just say it. Mr. Au is leaving the charter school. I’m not going to be your teacher anymore.”

Jai looks down so that brown curls fall over face, nods, and asks, “When are you leaving?”

His voice sounds so mature, that for a moment I trick myself into believing that the class will accept the news calmly. Then Jai raises his head, and we all see that his
eyes are shimmering. This is the second time I have ever seen him cry. The other kids see his expression and the earth trembles; I hear groans, and watch small bodies lose their balance. Sarah leans forward until her forehead touches the rug, then throws herself backwards and plays dead. Ariel and Jillian hold each other tightly. I find myself talking to Toby’s shoulder blades and the top of Pedro’s head.

“I’m not leaving today. I want you to know that. I’m not going to suddenly walk out on you guys. I will be here until Christmas break starts. Then we will say goodbye. You will have a nice vacation, and then when you come back to school in three weeks, you will have a new teacher.”

“Who is going to be our teacher?” Jai asks, with ice in his voice.

“I don’t know yet, but we will find someone really awesome, someone better than me, to be your new teacher.”

Jillian raises her hand. “Are you leaving tomorrow?”

“No, not today, not tomorrow, in about two weeks. We will have lots of time to talk about it.”

Mika looks like a jilted lover. “Do you have to leave?” she asks.

“I don’t have to, but I am choosing to.”

I want to tell her that I am very unhappy working here, and that the school no longer looks like a shining palace. I want to explain that I am gruff with my son, pick a fight with my wife whenever I am at home, and that I am losing weight and have a sore on my left thumb that will not heal. I want to tell her, worst of all, that I wake up in the morning and find beer bottles next to my bed.

Mika asks for an explanation again. “But why are you leaving?”
I try to salvage the situation by making up a story. “Well, you remember when I went to New Zealand? I did a pretty good job in my presentation over there and some of my professors said that they thought it was time for me to concentrate on getting my doctorate. They said I couldn’t finish it if I was working here all the time.”

There is nothing but sprawled bodies and stony silence in the room. The sore on my finger is burning beneath its bandage, but most of the wounds are internal; I became a teacher to redress wrongs, to care for childhood, and now it was apparent that the only childhood I ever wanted to protect was my own.

I clear my throat. “OK, I know. That wasn’t nice. But we have lots of time to talk about it. Let’s go to practice reading now.”

The kids disperse slowly. Most go to their desks, but almost no one is reading a book. It doesn’t matter anyway, I can’t leave the rocking chair. Metal spikes have been driven into my spine. Toby very pointedly walks towards me with downcast eyes, then past me to the board, lifts a magnet clip, and takes away a sheet of blue construction paper. I really should stop him; the paper has a list of inventions written on it. I wanted to use it as a prompt for our next writing project, but I guess that isn’t going to happen now. My presence is being dismantled.

He crouches down on the floor behind a row of desks where I cannot quite see him. After a couple of minutes he stands up, and I notice that he has folded the construction paper into fourths. Clutching the paper in one hand, he walks past me solemnly, and grabs some markers from our box of craft supplies. I still can’t quite make out what he is making, though I think I see a couple of dark triangular shapes. Toby returns to the floor and quietly draws and colors the square. Jai watches him work, goes
to the craft box, then joins him, quietly folding and coloring his own piece of paper with a quiet and determined focus.

The recess bell does not ring. His body uncurling like a caterpillar, Toby finally emerges, and walks towards me. He stops uncomfortably close, holding a piece of paper before his face. It is a mask. It has tears streaming down its face. Then, very slowly, he turns it around, revealing a pair of dark, cruel eyes, and the snarling and salivating teeth of a monster.

In a few seconds, Jai joins him with his own mask of anger, fear, and sorrow. They stand like horror movie icons. The recess bell rings. They place the masks on my lap, and turn and run through the door, to lose themselves in a busy place.

Peggy is the first student I ever had who is older than I am; she has a son who is a senior at the private school my own son attends, and she looks after the members of her cohort, who are all in their twenties, as if they were part of her family. She has a kind and generous personality and speaks about children with affection and respect. I know that she will become a respected teacher, if she can just learn to play the game.

One day, before class begins, Peggy asks me in a casual tone, “Is it OK if I turn my reflection paper in next week, Chris? The one about integrating literacy?”

I’m anxious to give the students the requirements for the miscue analysis assignment, but aware that the other members of the class are listening, I turn from my reflection in the window, and answer with some kindness. “Well, I don’t like to give extensions. Did something happen in field?”
Peggy shivers for a moment as if a draught of cold air just passed through the classroom. “I couldn’t teach my lesson.”

“Why? Didn’t you have that awesome integrated project with the video about visiting the lily pond, the picture book, and the frog art project?”

“I did, but my mentor didn’t like it. She hated it. She said it was too much for forty minutes.”

“So do part of it in one block and the other half in another.”

Her eyes start to water and her body stiffens. The rest of the class grows silent as they watch Peggy, their mother, fight to regain control. “She gave me a worksheet instead. I taught the lifecycle with a worksheet. I know you hate that.”

“Did you tell her you needed to do the project for your literacy class?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell her I was making you do it? I’ll be the bad guy.”

“I did. It didn’t matter. She said it was too much to do and too hard to assess.”

I can’t do anything if a mentor doesn’t want a student to perform a lesson in class. The teachers who take on our students are basically volunteers, and I have very little influence over them. I’m grateful if they respect the program and want to help a student with assignments, but if they don’t, I’m the one who makes adjustments, not the mentor.

“Well, just do what you can, I guess. Maybe you could squish parts of it into the morning business or the end of the day.”

She doesn’t answer. Instead, a tear worms its way along her cheek. Her peers, sensitive to Peggy’s feelings, start talking to each other; this gives us some much-needed privacy. “I…I don’t think I can do this anymore,” she says slowly. “I couldn’t manage
the kids when they were doing the worksheet and my mentor said if I can’t manage that, there is no way I can do the art. I…don’t think I’m cut out for teaching.”

This is a profession that makes people cry; it takes the few who want to teach, who have dreams of being with children, and conditions their ideals. When I first got this job, a friend of mine said, “Why would you want to do that? That’s a lateral move. Isn’t that a job that retired teachers do?”

“Well, that’s what I am,” I answered. “Besides, it’s the closest thing to still being in the classroom.” It was so close, in fact, that the narrow discourse of standards, the reliance upon authority to form truth, and the culture of reification that I tried to escape, caught up with me in an instant. Now Peggy begins to sob in earnest and I start to feel angry on her behalf. I raise my voice.

“But Peggy, it is really the other way around! The watercolor collage will be fun and interesting to the kindergartners, so they’ll want to do it, and they’ll listen to you. That’s what people don’t get—complex lessons are actually easier to manage! Besides, the kids obviously need it! And understanding that is what makes you an excellent teacher. Remember, you ain’t here to learn how to be a substitute! You’re here to learn to be an educator, to make life better for our kids!” She looks at me and smiles slightly.

Worried that I have gone to far, I try to soothe her feelings as if she is a child, herself. “I’m sorry, I’m not yelling at you, Peggy, I’m yelling at the situation.”

“No, you’re yelling at me.” She laughs in the back of her throat and swallows another tear. “You’re saying I need to assert myself and explain that what I’m doing is for the children. Gosh, you sure are an inspiration, Mr. Au.”
I grin at her anachronistic, slightly sarcastic speech, and suddenly find myself hugging her. “Nah, I think you’re an inspiration to me,” I say into her hair. I pull back and notice that the rest of the cohort is quietly observing us again. We must look like a couple of (old) fools.

Mackenzie bravely raises her hand. “Are we going to get the next assignment, Chris?”

I really should be getting to my lecture, but I look around at all of the open, eager faces, and change my mind. All of them look like first graders, including Peggy. “Nah, let’s do some sharing, first. Tell me a story about field.”

“Does it have to be good stuff?”

“No. Definitely not. Good or bad, it doesn’t matter. I just think we need to hear each other.”

Mackenzie closes her notebook and raises her hand. “I want to go first!” she says. “I have a story about worksheets, too!”

Several weeks go by, and I’ve become very worried about Peggy. She submitted the reflection as promised, but it consists of lessons that she intended to teach but never implemented. To make it worse, every time I ask her for copies of student work, she tells me to wait. I am losing my patience, feel guilty for doing so, and now we find ourselves at the last class meeting. I wonder if I can give her an “incomplete”.

Peggy chooses that moment to stomp into the classroom, grinning. “Here,” she says, slapping a stack of wrinkled papers on my desk. I pick up the first one and show it to the class. An arrow, drawn with green crayon, joins a little tadpole in a blue puddle to a frog with huge green feet. The new frog is flopping its way happily onto a lily pad.
“Dear Miss Peggy,” I read out loud. “The tadpole is hopping. You are the best teacher. Good bye I will miss you. Love, Michaela.”

“Awwwww!” the students sigh, in response to a child’s sweetness.

“These are part letter writing, part poem, part science,” Peggy says. “Are they good evidence?” she asks, referencing our rubric.

“What do you guys think?” I ask. The class applauds. Reluctantly leaving the letters with me, Peggy sits down at her desk, beaming. I rifflle through them during the student presentations. The children must have created these during Peggy’s last hour with them, when emotions were running high. One of the pages actually appears tear-stained. I put a sticky note on the top of the stack with the words “credit, twenty points” written on it. I return the goodbye letters to her before she leaves for the summer; Peggy still has two more semesters to survive before she can receive licensure, and she’ll need their comfort during the difficult days to come.

That is, after all, why we collect, treasure, and share our stories.
References


Lather, P. (2004). This IS your father's paradigm: Government intrusion and the case of qualitative research in education. *Qualitative Inquiry, 10*(1), 15-34.


Appendix: Additional Children’s Books

This dissertation is intended to recognize and honor the significance of children’s books in the elementary classroom. The following titles are not cited as part of the reference list, but are mentioned in dialogue.