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# Steps Toward Evaluation as Decluttering: Learnings from Hawaiian Epistemology

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**Background:** As evaluations become more responsive to the recent focus on issues of diversity, equity, Indigeneity, accessibility, and inclusion, we believe that scholarship and practice of evaluation can be strengthened by engagement with fields such as Hawaiian epistemology.

**Purpose:** This paper explores the implications of Hawaiian epistemology in guiding a decolonizing approach in evaluation practice.

**Setting:** Not applicable.

**Intervention:** Not applicable.

**Research Design:** Not applicable.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** The paper utilizes multiple sources of information: The writings of a leading Hawaiian epistemologist Manulani Aluli Meyer; our personal experiences in evaluation in varied settings; a webinar we conducted with former students from the Doctor of Education program at the University of Hawaii; and our experiences using the example of evaluations we conducted of a Drop-in center serving homeless and marginally housed individuals in Toronto, Canada.

**Findings:** We identify the following themes from Hawaiian epistemology as being relevant to evaluation practice: (1) embracing heterogeneity and diversity—moving away from homogeneous standardized approaches; (2) understanding identity, cultural context, and knowledge; (3) *‘aina* and a sense of place; (4) valuing relationships; (5) causation and complexity; and (6) aesthetics and valuing.

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**Keywords:** *decolonizing; decluttering; evaluation practice; Hawaiian epistemology; diversity; Indigenous; client voices*

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## Introduction

This paper takes as its jumping-off point one of the more contemporary challenges in development: lots of good ideas from well-meaning outsiders and insiders that can sometimes end up cluttering both the physical and mental spaces of development and community. “Indigenous” implies people of a place; for reasons we explain below, we turn to Hawaiian epistemology (Aluli Meyer, 2001, 2013) to look into insights for clarity on how one can negotiate the space of well-intentioned interventions that in their totality can end up cluttering the place and depleting the identity of people, communities, and their culture. We believe that evaluation as a field can help in bringing greater recognition of the need for models and principles of development and learning that respect the importance of decluttering.

Working in both global and community health, we have been acutely aware of how much of what constitutes evidence is often evidence only for a project or program in a specific setting with a specific population. The absence of information on the ecology/system within a community is often startling. How that evidence will play out in other settings is often unclear; evidence-based programs are often implemented by multiple funders entering the same space, ignoring information on the specificity, uniqueness, and individuality—and the ecology of needs/strengths—of the community. In our experience, while the intentions are good, often the result, as the complex interplay of different well-meaning ideas plays out, is one in which individuals’ and community identities can sometimes get lost.

In Hawaii, this manifestation is also evident in the history of colonization, which also involved a number of different actors, with sometimes well-meaning and in many cases less-than-good intentions, who ended up impacting the identity of the people.

Much of the focus of our work is on incorporating heterogeneities in populations (Davidoff, 2017) in our evaluation frameworks. In our journey as evaluators, we have been concerned that well-meaning, distant thinkers often start with an assumption of homogeneity/uniformity without critically reflecting on the implications of such an assumption. How often does one see a theory of change that respects and incorporates heterogeneous perspectives? How does one incorporate the multiple types of contexts / heterogeneities of needs into the design of programs?

As we seek to address the above questions, we believe that there are lessons to learn from Hawaiian epistemology on multiple fronts to improve our collective work as a field. As described by Aluli Meyer:

Epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge. It is a way of asking the questions, What is knowledge, How do we know, What is worth knowing? It is another way of saying “Indigenous ways of knowing.” I use epistemology instead of “Hawaiian ways of knowing” because it is a word and idea that barbers within the currency of mainstream academia. (2001, p. 146)

In an early draft of this paper, we explored two themes relating to colonization—and we borrow the following definition: “Colonization: The action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area. The action of appropriating a place or domain for one’s own use” (CalArts, n.d.).

One theme was how colonization strips people of their identity, and often, even in the best of cases, to be a colonizer is to have limited recognition of /awareness of / interest in incorporating what communities want, and lack of engagement with communities. A second theme was a role for evaluation in helping declutter and bring a sense of identity, perhaps through stakeholder engagement and incorporating room for heterogeneous voices in what might work. We are grateful to that early draft’s two reviewers, who both encouraged us to move away from such grand themes and focus on our personal experiences in evaluation in multiple settings—using self-narratives / personal experiences / autoethnography to provide an initial exploratory paper on how evaluations can help with decluttering.

This paper provides our initial reflections on possible learnings for the field of evaluation from Hawaiian epistemology to take some gentle steps in decluttering a crowded space of externally imposed ideas. A more detailed, authoritative research paper still needs to be written.

We demonstrate the utility of Hawaiian epistemology as it helps us rethink evaluations of complex interventions, using as an example an evaluation we conducted of a drop-in center /shelter (which we often simply call a/the drop-in) run by Margaret’s Housing and Community Support Services in Toronto. We worked for multiple years exploring how the drop-in makes a difference in the lives of individuals who experience homelessness, deep poverty, and co-occurring poor

health conditions. Our original evaluation was framed as a summative evaluation, but as we delved more deeply into the evaluation it became obvious that our theories of change and our methods for understanding change were highly insufficient. Understanding causation in critical, complex problems such as homelessness requires deeper engagement with stakeholders/clients than what most evaluation practice tends to do. We have written a recent paper based on our experience with Margaret's clients, titled "Nothing About Me Without Me" (Sridharan et al., 2023). What we learned was that the understanding of both problems and solutions should be driven not just by deep understanding of clients' <sup>1</sup> expectations, but also by incorporating the possibility of heterogeneous "baskets of solutions" that address the needs of different clients. A second claim we make in this paper is that evaluation has the potential of decluttering the space of solutions by more centrally incorporating clients' voices.

This paper is an initial step toward a vision of evaluation as decluttering. *We reiterate that this paper is a personal essay that reflects on our journey as evaluators, instead of a full-fledged review of the literature of either Hawaiian epistemology or the potential purposes of different evaluation approaches. We believe even such a personal reflection will help evaluators better understand the potential of Hawaiian epistemology in thinking about evaluating complex interventions in richer ways.*

## Positionality

We, the authors, have worked together for close to 15 years on a number of evaluation projects in which we have been interested in issues of contexts and place. Much of our work also has focused on inequities and sustainability. We both have connections to Hawaii. April grew up in Hawaii, is of Native Hawaiian (family going back to ancient Hawaii), Okinawan, Scottish (via Canada), Portuguese, English and Chinese (via Australia) descent. Sanjeev's family heritage is from Kerala, India, but he was born in northern India. Sanjeev taught largely Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander Indigenous educators in the EdD program at the University of Hawaii for several years and recently accepted a full-time position at the University of Hawaii. Sanjeev's initial question in evaluation was how one could move away from

models of "best practices" for programs, given the incredible diversity of the different regions, states, and cultures of India. It made little sense to speak of programs as though they operated outside of any specific geographical or cultural context. April has been deeply interested in Hawaiian culture and how issues of identity and history are central to Indigenous thinking.

Our observation is that remnants of the mindset that made colonization possible several hundred years ago are still embedded in our society today, even in our own thinking. We contend that much of our thinking and values are influenced by colonizers, and even Indigenous people who were made to feel like second-class citizens by colonizers have unwittingly adopted some of the colonial mindset and practices that were used to justify taking control of Indigenous land and resources.

We have been interested in the problems of how programs work and the role of evaluation in helping to change systems. We have worked on numerous evaluative problems, including evaluations related to maternal health, nutrition, the organization Dancing with Parkinson's, and homelessness, to name a few. As we have worked on a range of problems, one thing has become clear in our work: Many evaluations continue to take a mechanical approach to bean-counting the "value" of interventions. There is often limited understanding of the mechanisms by which programs work, and often a very mechanical perspective on those mechanisms. In our experience, sometimes evaluations neither explore nor interrogate the assumptions of how programs work.

As noted earlier, our interest in this paper is to discuss how evaluation practice can benefit from more deeply incorporating the ideas of complexity and causation that are characteristic of Hawaiian epistemology. Much of our thinking has benefited from engagement with the works of Manulani Aluli Meyer, one of the leaders in helping clarify Hawaiian epistemology. We both have worked in a Hawaiian context, and our choice of exploring Hawaiian epistemology benefits from our personal interactions in a Hawaiian context.

## Our Interests in Realist Evaluation

We both identify as realist evaluators (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). We are drawn to realist evaluation as

are more than a little condescending, but we are hard-pressed to use another term at this time.

<sup>1</sup> By "clients," we mean individuals who use a particular service or for whom the service was intended. We think that the words "client" and "beneficiary" in themselves

an approach that recognizes that across diverse contexts, different individuals will respond differently to the same intervention. Pawson and Tilley (2004) define program mechanisms as

... what it is about programmes and interventions that bring about any effects. Mechanisms are often hidden, rather as the workings of a clock cannot be seen but drive the patterned movements of the hands. This realist concept tries to break the lazy linguistic habit of basing evaluation on the question of whether “programmes work”. In fact, it is not programmes that work but the resources they offer to enable their subjects to make them work. (p. 5)

What’s important in this definition is the stakeholders’ reasoning about what an intervention provides, as well as the resources provided by an intervention for individuals to make changes. How stakeholders respond to such resources is critical in the realist evaluation framework. Additionally, realist evaluators also focus on different contexts, including the infrastructural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual. In our own work on inequities we also focus on intersectionalities—on the intersections of contexts. For example, in Sanjeev’s work on maternal health in India, he was interested in the relationship—the interaction—between the community’s focus on gender empowerment / women’s rights and individual attributes, such as age at marriage. In April’s work on evaluating the organization Dancing with Parkinson’s, she has been interested in how different dance approaches might work for different Parkinson’s patients.

As we have engaged more with problems like homelessness as well as learned more about Hawaiian epistemology, we think realist evaluation can benefit from a deeper focus on historical contexts, both of places and of individuals. We also think there is the potential to rethink the nature of mechanisms by more carefully considering a more holistic sense of how stakeholders reason about interventions, including by considering ways in which feeling and thinking cannot be easily separated; this insight about avoiding clear distinctions between thinking and feeling is explicit in Hawaiian epistemology.

## Methods

As noted, we are inspired by the work of Hawaiian Studies scholar Manulani Aluli Meyer. Her paper “Our Own Liberation: Reflections on Hawaiian

Epistemology” (2001) especially spoke to our thinking on this topic. Rather than conduct a literature review on Hawaiian epistemology, we take a more modest but focused approach: We highlight relevant themes from “Our Own Liberation,” because we believe there are important ideas in Aluli Meyer’s work that need to be considered seriously by evaluators. There is a literature emerging on Hawaiian epistemology, but we have chosen not to do a full-fledged review, as we think the ideas in Aluli Meyer’s paper itself need reflection and dialogue among evaluators.

Aluli Meyer’s paper “Our Own Liberation” highlights and synthesizes the feedback and ideas of 20 Hawaiian educational leaders. These leaders’ voices form the cornerstone of the paper’s presentation of aspects of Hawaiian epistemology. Aluli Meyer (2001) does not claim to be the definitive voice of Hawaiian epistemology; rather, her paper synthesizes multiple perspectives on what is important to Hawaiian epistemology, as seen by the educational leaders she interviewed.

We also conducted a webinar with former students and colleagues from the Doctor of Education program at the University of Hawaii (Sanjeev used to teach in this program; the students had all completed their degrees a few years prior) to discuss the ideas we are presenting here. While the original idea of colonization as clutter appealed to some of the participants, there were others who felt that this metaphor did not capture the negative intensity and consequences of colonization. We concur with this sentiment. The deeper problems of traumatization and culpability and discussions on reparations and restorative justice are critical parts of the dialogue on colonization, even though they are not the focus of this paper.

Our discussions on Hawaiian epistemology are further highlighted by a recent evaluation of Margaret’s Toronto East Drop-In Centre, which provides a continuum of housing and community support services in the Dundas-Sherbourne community of Toronto. Table 1 describes some of the key services offered by the center and the principles underlying their service delivery. The evaluation was commissioned as part of Ontario’s local poverty reduction strategy. While the focus of the original evaluation was primarily summative, over time our partnership with Margaret’s evolved and we subsequently conducted a developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011). As we worked on the developmental evaluation while navigating the uncertainties of the pandemic, many of the questions that emerged (see Table 2) intersected with issues that arose from a consideration of Hawaiian epistemology, including issues of identity, non-linear and contextually situated

changes, and the importance of culture and spirit in theorizing change.

Table 1. Margaret's Toronto East Drop-In Centre: Context, Principles, Services

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The individuals that Margaret's serves typically experience complex intersections of the root causes of poverty, such as racism, stigma, mental illness, addiction, and disabilities. These conditions can greatly impede individuals from overcoming poverty as evidenced by pockets of generational poverty and the creation of a spatial multi-level poverty trap in this neighbourhood.

Margaret's drop-in centre employs a low barrier philosophy to work with vulnerable clients who may otherwise be turned away by traditional service providers.

The drop-in works with the drivers of marginalization to meet clients where they are through anti-oppressive, trauma informed care.

Margaret's also respects autonomy and personal freedom, which is important for the clients to feel valued and respected.

On a broader level, Margaret's is involved in systems-level advocacy efforts around, for example, addressing employment barriers for individuals with a criminal record stemming from mental illness-related incidents. Margaret's is better able to serve its clients' needs through a partnership-based approach.

Clients who visit the drop-in centre are provided with many different services. As a community hub, Margaret's offers a nonjudgmental and safe space where individuals can access daily meals, clothing, crisis beds, crisis intervention, nursing care, harm reduction, diabetic clinic, chiropodist, monthly psychiatrist, weekly medical doctor, mental health and justice workers, women and senior's programming, a social enterprise endeavor, expressive arts therapy, and wellness speakers.

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*Note.* Adapted from "Nothing About Me Without Me: The Central Role of Program Beneficiaries in Developing Theories of Change," by S. Sridharan, A. Nakaima, & R. Gibson, *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 2023.

Table 2. Questions That Surfaced During the Developmental Evaluation of Margaret's Toronto East Drop-In Centre

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- How does the evaluation help surface issues of identity?
  - How is the *place* being operationalized in the planning of the intervention?
  - How can the theory of change incorporate the presence of culture and spirit?
  - Does the measurement and analytical framework acknowledge that the causal story might not be linear? Is there a recognition that non-linear changes are possible?
  - Is the causation contextually situated?
  - Are the anticipated theoretical mechanisms purely functional? Is there a role for aesthetics in such a theory of change?
  - How are contexts conceptualized in the theory of change? Operationalized in the measurement framework?
  - How are historical contexts considered in the conceptual and measurement framework?
  - Is there a recognition that historical trauma can impede the success of any intervention?
  - How did the heterogeneity of lived experiences inform the development of the theory of change?
  - By what evaluation criteria will the intervention be judged? Are individuals with lived experience involved in defining such criteria?
  - What roles do relationships with actors outside the control of the intervention play in the success of the intervention? Is there an explicit plan to build such relationships?
  - Are individuals considered to be rational individualistic actors in the change process, or is there a clear model of interdependence between actors?
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## Learnings from Hawaiian Epistemology

The broad scope of Hawaiian epistemology, as described by Aluli Meyer (2001), was synthesized from twenty interviews Aluli Meyer conducted with Hawaiian educational leaders/mentors. While the focus of the interviews was on teacher education, there are lessons more broadly for valuing and learning. As Aluli Meyer describes, "Epistemology is an idea that holds up all others. It questions what we value with regard to intelligence, and it shapes how we view teaching and learning" (Aluli Meyer, 2001, p. 139). Aluli Meyer (2001) arrives at seven key themes that can be considered as the cornerstone of Hawaiian epistemology:

1. Cultural context of knowledge;
2. Physical place and knowing;
3. Cultural nature of the senses;
4. Relationship and knowledge;
5. Utility and knowledge;
6. Causality in language and thought;
7. The body-mind connection.

### *Our Approach*

Rather than discuss the details of the features of Hawaiian epistemology, we discuss why thinking about Hawaiian epistemology can guide work in evaluation and also help move us toward a

decolonizing approach in evaluation. To be clear, the themes that emerge in describing the contours of Hawaiian epistemology are vast, and we only explore a few relevant themes as they relate to our recent evaluation of Margaret's. A more expansive exploration of the relevance of Hawaiian epistemology to evaluation still needs to be done.

### *Embracing Heterogeneity and Diversity: Moving Away From Homogeneous, Standardized Approaches*

One of the most illuminating aspects of "Our Own Liberation" is its emphasis on the importance of considering heterogeneous solutions for the needs of the populations served. Consider Aluli Meyer's (2001) description of the consequences of standardization/homogeneity:

Fashion yourself in this manner, and you will begin to see where the delay of our Hawaiian understanding exists—it is in our own understanding! We are still in the dungeons of standardized tests, intelligence quotients, classroom management techniques, homogeneous age groupings, and fifty-minute class periods. We still believe that literacy is the best indicator of intelligence. We are dulled by the guessing game of another culture. (p. 124)

In our work, we have argued for the importance of considering heterogeneous solutions for diverse needs. In a recent paper on Margaret's clients we have argued for the need to be open to incorporating heterogeneities of client expectations, needs, and experiences into theories of change:

Another learning for us was that our initial theory of change, while informed by multiple differential mechanisms of how a drop-in might work, still assumed a broad set of homogeneous clients. One of the learnings from this evaluation was the need for evaluators to tussle, up front, with the heterogeneities of what clients expect from an organization or an intervention (Davidoff, 2017). We have come to recognize that it is the mindset of the evaluator or the funder that imposes an improvement paradigm regarding what attracts clients to an intervention. Many of the clients did not attend the drop-in to improve any specific outcome; they simply appreciated a space to hang out. Further, connected to heterogeneities, interventions that seek to address issues of inequities must also more clearly recognize that segments of populations have disproportionate needs. We think there is value in more clearly surfacing heterogeneities of wants/desires/what is hoped for, as part of the theorizing exercise/process. (Sridharan et al., 2023, p. 6)

In our experience, the field of evaluation often suffers from a focus on homogeneity—standardized performance measures, homogeneous theories of change that do not recognize that different population segments have different mechanisms of change, and that focus on average impacts rather than a distribution of impacts. Davidoff (2017) describes the price we pay because of what he terms “the heterogeneity blindness”:

A major reason for this self-imposed “heterogeneity blindness” is the legitimate concern that information about heterogeneity is a kind of statistical “noise,” which can interfere with the detection of the valuable “signals” that a treatment actually works. The price we pay for this appropriate methodological caution is the default—but manifestly faulty—inference from trials that an effective treatment provides equal benefit to everyone who receives it. (p. 141)

We have experienced such examples of heterogeneity blindness when we have worked on global and community health issues in which the diverse needs of the community are often not considered. Our experience concurs with Aluli Meyer's description of what she has termed “hermeneutic hazing”:

The hermeneutic hazing has begun. It is a strange world indeed, to wake up and realize that everything I have learned in school, everything I have read in books, every vocabulary test and jumping jack, every seating arrangement and response expectation—absolutely everything—has not been shaped by a Hawaiian mind. (2001, p. 124)

### *Understanding Identity: Cultural Context and Knowledge*

One key concept that emerges from an exploration of “Our Own Liberation” is of identity and the potential cultural roots of identity. Aluli Meyer argues poignantly and forcefully about the lack of understanding by colonizers of the cultural roots of identity:

The truth is, Hawaiians were never like the people who colonized us. If we wish to understand what is unique and special about who we are as cultural people, we will see that our building blocks of understanding, our epistemology, and thus our empirical relationship to experience are fundamentally different. We simply see, hear, feel, taste, and smell the world differently. As I shall show in this essay, these differences are neither subtle nor imaginary, but large and enduring. It continues to amaze me that we have survived the carbon monocultural poisoning of our back seat schooling vehicle. Enter the discussion of epistemology. It is not a new discussion but because of the political times, it has become the hotbed of academic discourse. It is the sword against anthropological arrogance and the shield against philosophical universalisms. (2001, p. 125)

As noted earlier, both authors of this paper have experienced similar intellectual arrogance and belief in “universalism” in a number of settings in the United Kingdom, Canada, and India. For example, interventions often are planned without really understanding the values of the individuals for whom the interventions are intended.

In our work at Margaret's, it became clear that to understand chronic homelessness, we had to understand how individuals struggle with definitions of identity. While we did measure constructs such as individuals' employment status, income, life stresses, and family situations, we felt that understanding the constructs of identity as well as the disruptions of their sense of self was important. This was also related to the idea of comfort that Aluli Meyer discusses:

The idea of "comfort" is part of this discussion of intelligence, as if knowing something had to be embedded in feeling that it was okay. This is where mentors spoke in graphic and simple terms. If it did not feel right, it was not proper to proceed, or that knowledge was something to cast aside. Thus extends the discussion of how culture shapes sensory cues and how these cues shape how mentors develop rapport within their world. (2001, p. 141)

Aluli Meyer argues that knowledge itself equated with feeling comfortable. A critical question in our work in evaluating the drop-in was to better understand in what ways the intervention made the clients feel comfortable in the sense that one Hawaiian leader in Aluli Meyer's study described: as a sense of "coming together of knowledge and emotion in my gut when it merges, and I'm altogether comfortable" (2001, p. 142).

One of the implications is that we need to more deeply understand how clients themselves rationalize the utility of interventions. It is important not to make a clean division between thinking and feeling (as often evaluations, especially of the academic variety, tend to make). Aluli Meyer's description of understanding the complexities of feeling also resonated with our experience of evaluating Margaret's:

Feeling something was not strictly emotional. For the Kanahale, feelings reflected an instinctual sense. This distinction fine-tunes how feelings shape epistemology and bring us back into our senses, our "basic perceptions," and how they shape how and what we know. Knowledge is not carved from anger or joy. Knowing something is feeling something, and it is at the core of our embodied knowledge system. Knowing something, however, is metaphorically housed in our stomach region because that is also the site of our emotions, our wisdom, as if knowledge also shapes how we emote. Perhaps then, feelings precede emotions, then wisdom develops. (2001, p. 142)

Here is a description of the gut feeling from one of the respondents in Aluli Meyer's sample:

For me, the na'au is gut feeling. Na'au and when you put [the letters] ao, na'auao [learned, enlightened, intelligent, wise], okay, that's knowledge. It's connecting you to your knowledge as up here [in] your head, because your feelings start from gut, here, then it comes up here. That's the Hawaiian way of interpretation. When you get that na'au, you know when you get that feeling, gut feelings, that you want to do it, you're gonna do it, it's not only slang, it is real. And then you feel the power, you know, the mana is with you, you get that feeling coming from here and coming up and coming out, see? It has to start coming from here [points to stomach]. (2001, p. 14)

We think it is important to understand such "gut feelings" in evaluation as we seek to understand the mechanisms by which people bring about changes in their own lives. We often impose or assume a more sterile structure on individuals' reasoning processes. We believe understanding why people choose to belong to some interventions and not to others goes well beyond reasoning and rationalizations; the whole person needs to be explored. In Aluli Meyer's study she brings to fore the idea of *'ike*, which means both "to see" and "to know." Fundamental to understanding mechanisms is understanding how clients experience the world:

Each body-centric description links with how one engages in experiencing the world. It is obvious that Hawaiians shape an epistemology from predictable empirical sources. What is interesting with regard to this idea is how the specificity of culture informs how these empirical sources behave, both literally and metaphorically, in knowledge acquisition. The fact that *'ike* means "to see" and also "to know" shows how vision educates, how looking teaches, how watching informs. The importance of how we see the world cannot be understated. How, then, is this "seeing" mediated via place, experience, and expectations of culture? (2001, p. 131)

### *'Aina and a Sense of Place*

A related concept is *'aina* and a sense of place. One of the key building blocks of Hawaiian epistemology is the notion of *'aina* ("land," could

also mean “mother” or “origin”). Most interventions are located in specific places, yet in most evaluations we do not explore the context of place, its historical context, and its relationship to other aspects of place. Even if context is mentioned in evaluations, it’s often mentioned in superficial ways. We think a more serious consideration of ‘*aina* can lead to more profound and situated evaluations. In our evaluation of Margaret’s we had initially thought of the drop-in as a place in which people congregated to get access to meals and hot coffee and to be protected from the elements; yet, it became clear that the interaction that individuals had with that place included considerably more than basic needs being met. While it was not a home to any, the value of the space in providing what we term “spiritual relief” from the multiple disruptions caused by economic, psychological, and social upheavals was most telling. Some spoke of it as a place of healing; some spoke of it as a space to be, to exist, to be seen, to hang out; others spoke of it as a sacred space and a place to experience episodic moments of joy, where one could get “a touch of God,” as expressed by one drop-in user.

In a majority of the sample, the stakeholders’ own reasoning of what Margaret’s offered could not be clearly isolated from the feelings that experiences in Margaret’s inspired. Much of the reason people came there was that they were respected and felt whole. In our initial theory of change, we thought that people attended the drop-in primarily to receive services (for meals, to be connected to nursing care and housing, etc.), but many clients mentioned that they frequented the drop-in because of interactions with staff members—a motivation that we eventually termed the “Leon effect” (named after the most frequently mentioned staff member).

We don’t want to overstate the connections between Hawaiian epistemology and our experiences of Margaret’s, because in the end a drop-in only has potentially a small amount of leverage in reversing deeply disruptive social, economic, and psychological upheavals. Yet even within this intervention of small leverage, we were struck by issues of identity, the spiritual dimensions of place, and the aesthetics that individuals sought in this place.

### *Valuing Relationships*

Another dimension that Margaret’s highlighted is the vital importance of relationships—as demonstrated by the Leon effect. Relationships are fundamental in Hawaiian epistemology:

Relationship as the “cornerstone of Hawaiian experience which shaped knowledge” is also a key component for all Hawaiian educators. They acknowledged the idea that relationships mattered in profound ways. Relationships or interdependence offered Hawaiians opportunities to practice reciprocity, exhibit balance, develop harmony with land, and generosity with others. Mentors described the vital force of relationship in myriad forms and with clear vocabulary and imagery. (Aluli Meyer, 2001 p. 131)

We think many evaluation frameworks do not explicitly explore the multiple dimensions of relationships that programs might generate and precipitate.

### *Causation and Complexity*

The idea of complex causation is another important theme in Aluli Meyer’s work. Quite central to the Hawaiian epistemology is the recognition that the world is more deeply and mysteriously causal than what would be imagined in a more mechanical view of causation. Evaluation depends strongly on understanding how programs and other interventions cause changes in outcomes. Even among Western observers there is a recognition that models of research and evaluation have not incorporated pluralistic views of causation (Cartwright, 2007; Lieberson & Lynn, 2002). Aluli Meyer conveys:

In one particular interview, however, the idea of words and causality were clearly defined. Florence Like Kumukahi gave a vivid story of how words linked with causality, and it serves as one example for this category: “We were always told, you put plenty love into it. Don’t grumble, you’re doing it with love, your *kaukau* [meal] will come out delicious, but if you grumble, then everything will sour, you know? Okay, you give an assignment to a family. Maybe to that family you’d say: “You cook the long rice and chicken.” Come that night it starts to bubble, then you would know they grumbled, they didn’t put their heart and soul in making this, so you can find out who grumbled, I mean, by the taste.” (Florence Like Kumukahi, January 22, 1997). (2001, p. 140).

What was clear was that we had to revise our thinking about how programs work as we better understood issues of complex causation and how individuals themselves constructed meaning about

what drew them to the drop-in, what they hoped to change, and the timelines of anticipated change. Originally, our thinking was that individuals came there for functional and basic needs, but soon we understood that the causation by which Margaret's worked was considerably more complex and heterogeneous. Different individuals came there for slightly different reasons. Causal agents were not just mechanical. For example, one client (who had housing) who spent several hours every day at the drop-in said he did not know what it was about the drop-in but it helped him to avoid overconsumption of alcohol (he thought perhaps by occupying his time and keeping his mind off of his troubles), lessened the extreme highs and lows he otherwise tended to experience, and had a stabilizing effect on him.

### *Aesthetics and Valuing*

Hawaiian epistemology also brings forth a focus on beauty and the utility of aesthetics.

This point does not belittle notions of aesthetic appreciation, rather it brings beauty into the realm of utilitarian expectation, which is shaped by cultural nuance and needs. "I try to do things purposefully. No more enough time to do things unpurposefully" (Calvin Hoe, May 28, 1997). (Aluli Meyer, 2001, p. 138)

In our experience, and in most evaluations of homelessness interventions, we believe that we have not fully incorporated the importance of beauty and aesthetics into our frameworks. Individuals were drawn to Margaret's because of multiple aesthetic elements: music played almost always over the sound system; artwork, mostly large paintings by clients, decorated the walls; art therapy sessions were offered weekly; and drumming circles were held. The Margaret's leadership also put an emphasis on keeping the place clean (beyond what was necessary for hygienic and public health standards), which contributed to the aesthetic sense of the space and appeared to satisfy the aesthetic sensibilities of many clients who mentioned such cleanliness. Many individuals came to Margaret's because they felt comfortable there, and it felt beautiful to them. As one client explained, "[I] just want to refresh and flow like, start drinking wine and cake and just have ... a moment of silence where in you feel comfortable and happy and you get a touch of God and then whatever..."

### *In Summary*

Our main learning from the Margaret's evaluation is that our basic initial ideas of why people came to the drop-in were at a minimum incomplete and in many ways not insightful. We did not fully anticipate the critical spiritual dimensions of the place, the way people viewed the place's potential, or how many people congregated and worked there as part of their healing process. For a number of people, it was not simply a place for temporary respite, despite the limited leverage of the drop-in. We had to revise our thinking about how Margaret's could bring value, and also measure such improvement.

### *Implications for Evaluation Practice*

In this section, we take the lessons learned from our learnings about Hawaiian epistemology and from the evaluation of Margaret's drop-in and return to how evaluations could be rethought to reduce the clutter of "solutions." In our original conceptualization of clutter, in addition to colonization being a process of adding deep trauma, it also is a process of adding to the clutter that interferes with people's identities. This section takes a more focused stance toward the role of evaluation and suggests some small steps in how evaluations can help reduce the clutter. Evaluation is a large field with very diverse approaches and philosophies, so we are by no means suggesting the ideas in this paper are relevant for all evaluators. Instead we identify areas in the field of evaluation that intersect with the concerns raised by this paper.

Key learnings from Aluli Meyer's work and our evaluation of Margaret's drop-in include:

*People Are More Complex and More Heterogeneous Than Evaluations Assume.* Individuals think in complex ways, and, as noted by Aluli Meyer, even distinguishing between thinking and feeling is difficult. Individuals have an instinctive way (na'au) of sizing up settings, and our evaluations need to more clearly come to terms with how individuals think/feel. Based on our limited understanding of what motivates individuals, forcing a narrow "rational" model of how individuals think limits our understanding of what motivates individuals—and this also perhaps inadvertently adds to the clutter of the solutions we arrive at for individuals we have labeled as marginalized. Individuals have heterogeneous needs and tastes. Our proposed solutions need to address such heterogeneity. In our experience,

many interventions are planned without meaningful understanding of client needs and values, and without understanding the capacity of the system to deliver on unmet needs. We think discussions of the heterogeneity of unmet needs can be better informed with the recognition of the system's capacity to deliver on the diversity of unmet needs. Thinking explicitly about the capacity of systems as well as the ecology of unmet needs will help planners to think more systematically about bringing in greater coherence to the ecology of services offered. Pretending that people have homogeneous needs and then simplifying the system's capacity to deliver on such needs without a critical examination of heterogeneity of needs, unmet needs, and system capacity can add to the clutter.

*Evaluators and Planners Need to Be More Explicit About Their Own Uncertainties and Document How They Navigated Such Uncertainties Over the Course of the Evaluation.* What comes through in Aluli Meyer's critique of colonization is the certainty and the intellectual arrogance with which solutions were offered. In our experience, we evaluators, too, tend to be too certain about our theories of change as well as our findings. Greater humility in practice will require us to acknowledge and document areas in which we are uncertain.

*Rethinking Evaluation Criteria.* One important implication of this paper is what serious reflection on Hawaiian epistemology would imply for evaluation criteria. We think that even the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's development assistance criteria's (DAC's) revised focus (OECD, n.d.) on efficiency, effectiveness, impacts, relevance, sustainability and coherence, is too limited. For one, given the centrality of inequities in addressing sustainable development goals, the DAC's focus does not bring a clearer systems-level focus on unmet need, what places and communities might need, or the importance of community voice, nor does it bring a clear focus to issues of inequities. We think a richer discussion that pays attention to the epistemological issues of establishing value is much needed.

*Issues of Identity.* What comes through loud and clear in the above discussions of Hawaiian epistemology is the deep importance of identity to people and the relationship of culture to identity. The bad habit of starting with the intervention (for example, developing a theory of the intervention before engaging with the diversity of clients—and

we emphasize the *diversity* of clients) is in our experience an example of a potentially poor evaluation practice. The implication from the above discussion goes beyond clients' needs and expectations; it goes towards understanding client identities and, in some cases, points in the direction of understanding clients' histories (through longitudinal narratives). In recent papers, we have argued for the importance of client impact journeys (Sridharan, Nakaima and Pereira, 2023) that pay attention to the individual-level contexts before we develop theories of change for interventions.

*Getting Real About Contexts.* It is remarkable that despite a focus on contexts in evaluation approaches such as realist evaluation (Pawson et al., 2004; Pawson, 2008), studies that have deeply explored the multiple dimensions of contexts are few and far between. A number of points in the earlier section on Hawaiian epistemology discuss the importance of contexts in individuals' lives. Such contexts go beyond the usual focus on infrastructural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual. For example, what comes through with a consideration of Hawaiian epistemology is the importance of the sacredness of a place as context.

*Historical Context and Individuals' Histories Matter.* Many of our interventions seek to reverse decades, if not centuries, of neglect of communities or address decades/centuries of oppression and inequities. We believe that a majority of interventions neither conceptualize nor operationalize their responses to the nature of such trauma; most interventions do not acknowledge that the contexts created by such traumatic histories will make it difficult for interventions to provide quick solutions both at the community and individual levels. History and, more broadly, time need to be more carefully considered. An explicit focus on time has implications for what we anticipate as the timeline of impacts of interventions, as well as what the trajectory of success would look like. We believe that unreasonable expectations of what constitutes success can lead to perverse practices in social programming—for example, serving only the needs of individuals who have less complex problems, a practice that adds tremendously to the clutter by pushing the harder-to-address problems away from the gaze of social response and measurement.

*Evaluator Competencies.* We are both interested in how evaluators are trained. How does the training of evaluators incorporate the insights that come from Hawaiian epistemology? How can evaluator's

training promote an understanding of the importance of contexts, relationships, community? How can evaluators be more sensitive to issues of discontinuities (e.g. lessons from the pandemic), inequities, and sustainability? Dialogues that address such questions can be enriched with a deeper engagement with Hawaiian epistemology.

*Solutions Are Situated Within Communities.* Another challenge with evaluation practice is that we are often tasked with evaluating interventions/organizations. In our experience, we have seen evaluations often give lip service to the community context as we explore the impact of interventions. We think that, as a field, more can be done in being explicit about the connections between an intervention, the community structures and contexts, and the connections to other interventions within the community. The same program might not work the same way everywhere. There is a need to focus on how the “local” matters in shaping the implementation of programs. Some evaluation questions might include: What structures and processes promote resilience at the local level? Does the intervention promote resilience at a local level?

*Giving Voice to a Diverse Population.* Another important learning is the importance of evaluations in giving voice to what clients want and also surfacing the heterogeneities of clients’ needs. This also means one needs to more thoughtfully involve clients in the construction of theories of change (“Nothing about us, without us”), in helping define the measurements that matter, and in surfacing intended and desired timelines of change.

*Funding Mechanisms Can Promote Fragmentation and Clutter.* Most evaluations are commissioned to study processes and impacts associated with individual interventions. When an evaluator or a funder says that a particular intervention is effective, what they often mean is that after controlling for other contextual factors the program still makes a meaningful contribution. In our experience, it’s entirely possible for many interventions in specific places or communities to be effective while the needs of a majority of the individuals in a community are not being met. Our measurement of progress needs to focus not only on programs but also on communities and systems. Funding mechanisms that can help shed light on such community- or system-level measures are needed.

## Steps Toward Evaluation as Decluttering: Moving Beyond Colonization as Clutter

We return to where we started in the original vision of this paper: the possibilities of evaluation as a means of decluttering, if one accepts the idea that colonization served to promote clutter in many forms. The above section discusses some potential implications of our work. However, given that these are still initial exploratory ideas, we do not have a clear change theory of how some of these ideas can lead to decluttering. But we think the above points have the potential of making our practice more real. We concede these are just fragments of ideas and still need coherence. However, given the challenges we are discussing, we are not apologetic for such fragmentary insights.

In our meetings with EdD students at the University of Hawaii we discussed and debated whether this metaphor of colonization as clutter was too benign, given the history of colonization steeped in exploitation, asymmetries of power, lack of humanity, and deep cultural disrespect. This was echoed quite strongly in the webinar by former EdD students at the University of Hawaii, who felt that given the experiences of Indigenous Hawaiians, “clutter” did not fully capture the phenomena of colonization.

One reviewer of our article gave very far-reaching feedback on our initial conceptualization of colonization as clutter:

On the other hand, colonization is still a part of the systems, structures, and infrastructure through which the social programs are designed, commissioned and implemented. Removing the colonized structures is not as easy as removing the unnecessary material. I would like to see how the authors address this dimension. Secondly, colonization (and decolonization) is an act of power. There are power hierarchies involved in the epistemological choices. The current importance of the positivist notion of evidence is due to the material and epistemological power position occupied by the Global North. Hence, the colonization is not just unwanted, unnecessary junk but an expression of power by the Global North. How would understanding colonization as cluttering address the power dimension? (Anonymous reviewer, personal communication, September 6th, 2022)

We agree completely that evaluation is unlikely to overturn the systems, structures, and infrastructures that maintain the hierarchies. Yet, we think evaluation can still take gentle steps in taking on such systems, structures, infrastructures, and power. We don't think that evaluation as a field has the leverage to overturn such power structures, but at a minimum, we believe that it has the power to be much more disruptive than it presently is. It's in this spirit of disruption that we frame the role of evaluation as decluttering.

There is utility in the framing of colonization as clutter for the following reasons: (a) It signals the potential of progress in moving toward a more decolonized reality (even if easy "solutions" are not possible); our belief is that a focus on decluttering can have both incremental and transformative benefits. (b) We also think that such a framing is not just grounded in a history of colonial empires. Colonist attitudes continue to this day, impacting individuals, communities, and larger collective groups. Colonization continues in multiple ways in the modes of daily interactions in settings as diverse as how universities sometimes treat community groups, how parents treat their kids, and how "experts" treat marginalized individuals. It finds expression in what Aluli Meyer calls "anthropological arrogance" (2001, p. 125) and "philosophical universalism" (2001, p. 125). We believe that thinking explicitly and reflectively about this dimension of ongoing colonization and cluttering of identities will have benefits, even though we appreciate it is only one small dimension of colonization. (c) More significantly, there is the dimension of colonization as historical trauma: We think there is tremendous value in calling out honestly the colonized interactions that have caused deep harm and even genocides. We did not focus on these aspects of colonization in this paper, but we acknowledge evaluation's role in movements such as Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The question of how evaluators can help in this movement still needs more explicit discussion. For example, are the recommendations of the Commission being implemented, and are they actually having benefits (and starting a process of restorative justice)? This is an important evaluative question that needs addressing. Evaluators need to be more centrally involved in the implementation table of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Additionally, given the focus of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) explicitly on creating equities, we see the role of the evaluation community to help evaluate progress toward enhancing equities. The usual focus on efficiency and effectiveness might not be enough to achieve

sustainable development goals. Put differently, asking how to get more for less might not suffice to address the inequities challenge posed by the SDGs. Also, the addition of "coherence" to the OECD's development assistance criteria, perhaps in reaction (perhaps also unconscious) to the cluttering observed in development is a welcome development.

Yet, despite these positive trends we believe that evaluators can be far more actively involved in rethinking and reshaping responses to issues of diversity, equity, Indigeneity, accessibility, and inclusion. Such rethinking and reshaping can be aided by deeper engagement with epistemologies such as Hawaiian epistemology.

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