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Cultivating Justice in Higher Education: Simplicity as a Decolonial Philosophy and Practice of Liberation

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Cultivating Justice in Higher Education:
Simplicity as a Decolonial Philosophy and Practice of Liberation

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Anthony Steve Tróchez

2019
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Cultivating Justice in Higher Education:
Simplicity as a Decolonial Philosophy and Practice of Liberation

by

Anthony Steve Tróchez
Doctor of Philosophy in Education
University of California, Los Angeles, 2019
Professor Daniel G. Solórzano, Chair

My dissertation puts forward a decolonial philosophy and practice of education rooted in simplicity. It explores how simplicity offers a philosophical way forward for those attempting to think, act and live in ways that transcend violence and oppression. The goal of this work is to create a path for students and lifelong learners to embody a life justice ethic (an ethic guided by love and social/environmental justice). Simplicity allows for conditions in which students can think, act and live differently. In doing so, we can actively work to create alternative forms of existence that value the sacred connections we have, not only with one another, but all the other living beings we share home with. I show how cultivating a philosophy and practice of education rooted in simplicity helps us re/learn how to live in, and with, the Earth.

I suggest that through choosing to think, act and live differently, other ways of existing become possible. It is education that helps us make the philosophical and material shifts necessary to
bring about these new possibilities; it is education that helps us cultivate ways of living that align much more with the rhythms and essence of life. In my work, the elements of the Earth are what guide the philosophy and practice of education. The elements are our teachers. They teach us of the cyclical and profound truths found in nature—and in us.

In this work, each element represents a specific aspect in the process of decolonizing: (a) Tierra/Earth teaches us to be clear and ground each other in the deep dilemmas inherent in colonization and oppression so we can (b) begin to see/understand ourselves in the conditions of a problematic dominant worldview (Agua/Water). By understanding the ways in which we may be complicit in maintaining these structures and systems of inequality and suffering, we then (c) free ourselves to envision a world not based on systematic exploitation and enslavement (Viento/Wind). By consistently engaging and reflecting on these areas of focus, we can (d) move towards these new visions in tangible ways without reenacting the colonial projects that have trapped us in this iteration of what it means to be “human” in a more than human world (Fuego/Fire). What is at the center and holds all of this present is the spirit, which moves through all in one.

Together, these elemental teachings form a cyclical path towards decolonization. They help us understand, reflect, dream and act other paradigms into existence. Simplicity creates space and time to engage with the decolonial teachings of the Earth; and, in doing so, allows us to overgrow systems predicated on domination and oppression.
The dissertation of Anthony Steve Tróchez is approved.

Walter R. Allen

Dolores Delgado Bernal

Tyrone C. Howard

Daniel G. Solórzano, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the Earth. Thank you for teaching me how to live. Most importantly, thank you for teaching me what kind of life is worth living.

I dedicate this work to all who will be born in the wake of civilization. May you yearn for true love, freedom and interdependence.

I dedicate this to all those who have helped, and continue to help me grow.
THE PATH THAT GUIDES US

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To my chosen family
past and present
and to my chosen family
I have yet to know

These words are for you.

This dissertation has been a long time in the making. These words and ideas reflect many years of trying to understand what lies beneath “what we know to be true.” All throughout this process, I have been inspired by your courageous and fearless spirits; you helped create a path in the wilderness of my mind. In this deeply personal journey, your writings, words, actions, and beliefs have inspired me to forge my own path in search of how to live in alignment with my values, morals, and ethics—how to live a life of purpose and meaningful actions. In this journey, you all have helped me tend to these seeds of possibilities. It is because of you that I feel the courage to cultivate justice in (and through) education.

The words you are about to read are my soul on paper. It is a rekindling of ancient wisdoms stripped from us long ago. However, long before I gained clarity and cohesive thought, there were people in my life who allowed me to fly and I would like to thank them personally.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my equal, my love, my binary star. Thank you for choosing to journey with me beyond the sun. Thank you for teaching me the wisdom in slowing down and enjoying the present. Above all, thank you for being my best friend and believing in me, even when I did not believe in myself. You, more than anyone, helped birth these ideas into existence. I would not have reached this milestone without you.

In Lak'Ech. Tú eres mi otro yo. You are my other me.

Unbuntu. Yo soy porque tú eres. I am because you are.
To my parents, family, ancestors, and kin. Every part of who I am grows from the complexities of you. Mom, thank you for loving all of me and showing me how to be positive, gentle and compassionate. Dad, gracias por enseñarme a ver más allá de mi propia nariz (thank you for teaching me to see beyond my own nose). To my sister, thank you for loving and encouraging me, especially in my hardest moments; you always know just what to say. To my brother, thank you for teaching me to follow my heart (no matter the obstacles).

To my inner-circle, my village, my tribe: thank you all from the bottom of my heart for being here with me every step of the way. I have grown tremendously with you, and because of you, over the years! Thank you for accepting me as family and loving me. I love you all dearly!

Thank you to my committee members—Walter R. Allen, Dolores Delgado Bernal, Tyrone C. Howard, and Daniel G. Solórzano. As educators and scholars, you helped water and nurture these ideas. From the beginning you motivated me to dig deeper and supported my ambitious dreams and visions of this work. To Jordan Beltran Gonzales: Thank you so much for your wisdom and constructive support in this monumental process. You have been a part of my academic journey from day one—thank you for being a loving mentor and friend.

I also want to thank all of those who tried to make me feel crazy, scared, skeptical, powerless and indifferent. There have been many times in my life when I felt that I hit bottom and began to question the meaning and purpose of life. It was through these experiences that I realized that the problem is not life, but the way we live “it.” It was then that I truly awoke.

What came was a philosophy and practice of education that grew from the wisdom and teachings of the Earth and of our ancestors. It was through this re/connection that I came to understand what it means to be human in a more than human world—love, commitment, community, cooperation, creativity, contribution, dedication, family, and joy.
This moment is in honor of all of you, for believing that radical love is possible and necessary!

With all my love,

Anthony Tróchez
Anthony Tróchez is an educator and scholar who studies how simplicity can be a decolonial path towards liberation. He proposes that cultivating a philosophy and practice of education rooted in simplicity creates restorative paths towards re/learning how to live in, and with, the Earth. By intersecting race, gender, class and nature in this work, Anthony speaks to the essence of what ails humanity—namely, what he calls, an ethic and premise of domination and oppression. He is inspired by educators and scholar/activists who envision a world where education heals the traumas of imperialism, colonization, and consumer-capitalist patriarchy.

His teaching and research interests gravitate towards the ways in which education (our philosophies, epistemologies, theories and practices) can help us grow in our understandings of past and present while compassionately guiding how we move into the future. His interests center around alternative ways of thinking and living that embody social/environmental justice work.

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2005 – 2015  **GATES MILLENNIUM SCHOLAR**
OPENING INVOCATION

... it is time for [people] to grow out of the short pants of barbarism, of settling things by violence, and at least to get into the knee breeches of honestly seeking and trying ways more fitted to [our] state as a human ... I think it a higher purpose to live in a creatively oriented relationship than to adopt a slavish attitude toward rules and regulations...If it seems that the purpose of the united action is to create misery, then I must decline my part in the performance. In order for [women and] men to live together, it seems efficient for them to work out bodies of regulations. But efficiency can in no way supplant morality. I think it the worst part of folly to be so enamored of acting in unison that [we are] herded into acting inhumanly. (Juanita Nelson, A Matter of Freedom)

... among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression ... I simply do not believe that one aspect of myself can possibly profit from the oppression of any other part of my identity... I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination, wherever they appear to destroy me. And when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long before they appear to destroy you ... (Audre Lorde, There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions)

My aim is simple. I want to leave the Earth better\(^1\) than when I was born into this community. My aim guides my life and my life-ethic: what is good for us must be good for the Earth, and what is good for the Earth must be good for us. These pages are an offering of this purpose. They are a call to rekindle our spirits and remember what we have always known.

Mi oración: may we have the courage to question and see beyond gates that imprison our minds and keep our bodies complacent so that we may truly envision and enact a life ethic worthy of tomorrow.

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1 Juanita Nelson was a civil rights activist, war tax resister and farmer who actively resisted war and oppression through the act of living. As a Black woman who embraced simple living as an act of resistance, her story is rarely told. However, the way she decided to live her life guides and inspires me as I write this dissertation. Juanita Nelson passed away at the age of 91 on March 9, 2015.

2 Better socially, culturally, ecologically, spiritually, and epistemologically.
GLOSSARY: CREATING A COMMON TONGUE

The English language stifles me. There are no words to express my relations to, and with, the source of all life, the source of all time. Our tongues have been severed and mashed into one homogenous ontological way of being (like ground beef). I engaged this process, to find my way back to the source of all existence. Although they have tried to uproot and kill our spirit, they cannot kill what always was, what always is, and what always will be. This small glossary is my offering to connect with you and create a common tongue which expresses morals, ethics, values, understandings and, ultimately, ways of living which transcend the toxic language of dominion and control.

Decolonization

Decolonization is the personal and political act of becoming free. It is an ongoing and on-growing attempt to move beyond a way of life established and maintained by brute force and subjection. Decolonization asks, “How can I grow with?” instead of “How can I dominate over?” It is an attempt to free our minds, bodies and spirits from a way of life that centers “Whiteness” and “the Human” over all other beings and ways of being.

Diversity

Diversity is life. Life is diversity. However, the contemporary understanding of diversity is often the inclusion of difference—different races, different genders, different classes, etc. Differences are crucial, but by only focusing on the inclusion of difference, diversity falls short. From the perspective of difference, diversity is confined to add-ons. Imagine if we only thought of our diversity as the toppings on a colonial meal that has already been made, a meal that has been marinating and cooking for centuries in a pot of dominion and control. Let’s now add a sprinkle color, a dash of gender, a side of class, a helping of dis(ability). What significance does this have on this gigantic meal? Does the main course change course? No, it doesn’t.
However, if we understand diversity as a necessity of life—the actual, literal definition of what it means to be alive—diversity becomes a powerful organizing belief for all that relates us; the manifestation of our interdependence. Diversity is, among others, Ontological, Epistemological, Pedagogical, Ecological, Biological, Physical, Spiritual, and Cultural. Our human diversity should be understood and appreciated within, and amongst, the dynamic wonders of the nonhuman world. Diversity is measured in the ability to have one’s life to support another.

Earth

“Earth” and “World” are not synonyms; I use the term “Earth” to describe our home which we share with all the wondrous, living, breathing, feeling beings we share place with. When I say “Earth” I am attempting to recognize other species as people, as teachers—the ways all our ancestors did and continue to do. They teach us about interdependence and coexistence, they teach us about rhythms and seasons. The Earth is not an “it.” To refer to the Earth as an it is an ontological, epistemic and grammatical error which robs the Earth of selfhood and kinship.

Education

Education is a process of becoming. It is the seeking of truth, of purpose, of meaning. Education is not physical or rigid like a school; it transcends locations, peoples, perspectives and, most importantly, conformity. Education is the yearning to receive the wisdom of the ages and give it forward, freely and with love. Education connects and, therefore, cannot divide. It is the fluid threads that connect us to each other.

Simplicity

Simplicity aligns us with the forces of nature. It allows us to move with the rhythms of the Earth and overgrow the traps of modernity. Simplicity is to be present in the world as it really is, not the world as it has been constructed to be.
Truth

Truth cannot be created or destroyed; it is ever-present and exists in every moment. We do not create or discover the truth; we grow close to it by having the patience and willingness to be present in the now while holding the wisdoms of the past. In these ways the truth is an encounter, an experience. It is what we see, feel, and understand as we grow closer in our awareness of, and relationships to, all matter. Truth is understanding while (at the same time) not allowing ourselves to believe that there is nothing left to be understood.

World

“World” and “Earth” are not synonyms; the term “world” is a social construct commonly used to describe an earthly state of existence or the system of created things. As such, I use the “world” to describe the ideological understandings of where we live and how we might want to live in these places. Because the world is a socially constructed idea, it is often a reflection of a deeply imbedded belief of white, male, human supremacy. This need not be the case. The world is created and therefore can change.

Worldviews

By extension, a worldview is a comprehensive conception and cognitive orientation of an individual or society encompassing the whole of that person’s (or persons’) knowledge and specific points of view—or the understandings and beliefs a society has about the nature of things. Worldviews underpin a peoples’ philosophy, values, emotions, and ethics. The problem is that these understandings and beliefs are violently controlled by a system of beliefs that benefit human whiteness over all else (see my definition for world). Often, we conflate the world and worldview with the natural laws or elemental truths of the living Earth; we wrongly think world is a synonym for Earth. It
isn’t. In actuality, the world and our worldviews are contextual and fluid. We do not need to be
controlled in this way. We can choose different. We can choose our own world/views.

In my own cosmology, Earth is my source; the mother of all creation. This comes from my
ancestral lineage of being both African and Latinx. When I speak of the Earth as she/her, I am
attempting to invoke ancient and indigenous cosmologies of the Earth as mother, for it is she who
makes possible the existence of all life. That said, I am fully aware of how the conception of Earth as
woman has been abused and exploited through patriarchal, gendered and sexist language that
reinforces stereotypes and hierarchies. Men, like me, have a vital role to play; not to oppress, subjugate
or dominate, but to honor and rekindle the sacred, matriarchal nature of life.
To most scholars in the field of higher education, simplicity may seem like a very foreign concept. After reading my title, you may be wondering, “What could he be talking about?” “What is simplicity?” “Simplicity in what context?” “What does simplicity have to do with decolonizing higher education?” These are all very important questions that I will address in the chapters to come. But, for now, I will walk you through what I perceive to be the problems with the dominant philosophy of higher education, and why I believe that we need to engage in radically different ways of understanding and acting in the world in order to move forward in a meaningful way. As such, there are some important things for you to know about how I currently theorize simplicity upfront.

**A Working Definition of Simplicity**

Simplicity is a difficult concept to define because it means something different to each person. That said, however, there are some key aspects that tend to characterize this worldview across this diverse spectrum of definitions and beliefs.

What I call “simplicity” is often referred to by other names. Scholars and ordinary people alike often use simplicity interchangeably and synonymously. Voluntary simplicity (Elgin, 2010; Gregg, 1936; Maniates, 2002), simple living (hooks, 1999; Nelson, 1988), living light (Johnson, 2011), and minimalism (Jay, 2010; Millburn & Nicodemus, 2011, 2014) are among other ways writers describe this belief. At its core, though, all of these expressions embrace the notion that acquiring more material goods will not make our lives better, happier, and more fulfilled (Burch, 1995). To that end, many scholars believe that the essence of simplicity is living in ways that are outwardly simple and inwardly rich. It is often characterized as a way of life that embraces mindful and minimal material

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3 In these pages, I created a living philosophy—a philosophy of life—for myself and others which allows us to question, understand, resist and grow alternative paradigms.
consumption and a strong sense of environmental urgency. (Andrews, 1997; Elgin, 2010; Merkel, 2003). Often, there is an expressed desire to live in community with others by re/creating “human-scale” living and working environments which encourage small, intimate, and intentional relationships.

While some simplify their lives to find personal fulfillment (Jay, 2010; Millburn & Nicodemus, 2011) others practice it as a way to embrace human dignity, environmental consciousness, and the preciousness of life (Andrews, 1997; Elgin, 2010; hooks, 1999; Merkel, 2003; Segal, 1999). These different ways of articulating simplicity (and the reasons why one chooses to simplify) are not mutually exclusive. Often, these phrases are used interchangeably by authors to describe a specific aspect of the practice they wish to emphasize. Likewise, people who engage the process often do so for more than one reason.

I use the term simplicity because it is about increasing the well-being of all living beings through minimizing consumption and having intentional, reflective actions. In this way simplicity connects mind, body, spirit and action towards achieving specific aims; it helps cultivate a conscious heart that is in tune, attuned and in harmony with all. The most common term used beside simplicity is “minimalism,” but minimalism has historically been defined as a design or style in which the simplest and fewest elements are used to create the maximum effect. In a personal context, minimalism is literally how to edit, streamline, and declutter one’s life for maximum efficiency. Minimalism is the practice, the how, and simplicity is the larger why—I define simplicity as a living framework for why we choose to be more intentional with our lives. In this way, simplicity is a philosophical reason and state of being, while minimalism is the practice of how to get rid of everything that is non-essential or superfluous to our lives. They work together. They need each other.
Because I am focused on the practice as a whole, I choose to use the word “simplicity” to capture and describe the educational philosophy and practice I intend to put forth. I also use the word simplicity because, for me, simplicity is a state of being that embodies more than personal acts or learning how to “live a simple life.” Yes, that is part of the praxis, but my contemplations about simplicity extend beyond the material and physical realm. Therefore, it is important to note that (while I agree that it is important to drastically scale back the amount we consume) I do not place the onus and responsibility of change squarely on individuals and their choices. Rather, I focus on the large systems of control that actively seek to govern and mediate our actions in everyday life.

Individual actions are not the overwhelming problem. The problem is a culture of exploitation, oppression, and endless growth that is actively fueled by corporations and our government. By some accounts, even if every person in the United States did drastically reduce their consumption and, therefore, their total carbon emissions, CO₂ levels would fall by only an estimated 22 percent instead of the 75+ percent needed to significantly curb climate change (Jensen, 2009). Those who practice and write about simplicity often glorify the significance of reducing one’s personal consumption without equally expressing the need to challenge and resist against corporate control and endless growth that is so heavily promoted in our economy.

“Part of the problem,” as Derrick Jensen (2009) writes, “is that we’ve been victims of a campaign of systematic misdirection. Consumer culture and the capitalist mindset have taught us to substitute acts of personal consumption (or enlightenment) for organized political resistance” (p. 15).

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I gravitate towards the word simplicity over others because I think it best captures the social, environmental, spiritual and political dimensions that I experience in the process.
What this means is that personal acts like changing light bulbs, composting, buying solar panels, and taking shorter showers often become the end practice to creating a sustainable planet.\(^5\)

Many scholars who write about simplicity do so from a place of privilege that embraces Euro/Western-centric belief systems that are seldom questioned in their writing. As a scholar of color, I feel that simple living advocates rarely account for the systemic and overt ways that the United States promotes policies and practices that are predicated on the oppression of people of color and marginalized people. As a result, the idea of a “return to the good life” that many of these scholars envision does not encompass people on the margins of society (and often comes at our expense). What does a return to the good life mean when that good life is often at the expense of people of color? In this way, the good life continues to be an elusive dream that is systematically stacked against many people around the world.

I am not trying to put up fences or build walls between how others define and/or come to simplicity and the way I do. As I stated, there is much more here that unites us than divides us. For example, many of the people who choose to engage in radical acts of simplicity do so out of a love for the Earth, a love for other people, and/or a pursuit of financial freedom. However, that said, I need to clearly state that I am speaking and theorizing from a different place. This is important because we need to see how this society of excess and indulgence is made possible through enslaving folks that

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\(^5\) A good example of this is Derrick Jensen’s (2009) articulation of why people taking shorter showers is not the answer: “We so often hear that the world is running out of water. People are dying from lack of water. Rivers are dewatered from lack of water. Because of this we need to take shorter showers. See the disconnect? Because I take showers, I’m responsible for drawing down aquifers? Well, no. More than 90 percent of the water used by humans is used by agriculture and industry. The remaining 10 percent is split between municipalities and actual living breathing individual humans. Collectively, municipal golf courses use as much water as municipal human beings. People (both human people and fish people) aren’t dying because the world is running out of water. They’re dying because the water is being stolen.”
look just like me. Qualitatively then, my ideas of history, narrative, and stories of inspiration will look and feel different. For example, I do not start the origins of simple living with Henry David Thoreau or John Muir. As much as I enjoyed reading their writings and reflections on the power of nature in Thoreau’s *Walden* or Muir’s collection of writings from 1888 to 1918, these two White men understood their life from a specific point of view that (although highly critical of the technologies being spawned through the Industrial Revolution and their willingness to embrace and promote the need to reconnect humans with nature) missed a critical understanding of the role that white, male patriarchy played in furthering the oppression and violence of communities of color, women, and non-human communities.

When I speak of “simplicity,” my working definition is that it is a decolonial philosophy and practice of living that encourages us to be mindful of the thoughts and actions we take as we work out how to live a *just* life. Additionally, simplicity also offers us a way to transcend our current misguided educational paradigm by directly challenging the epistemic foundations of a higher education in crisis. In these ways, simplicity offers us a way to rekindle a love and passion for holistic justice in higher education—rekindling our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits.

**How I Grew Close to Simplicity**

I have spent years trying to understand the origins of our current social and ecological crises. What I keep coming back to is that the fundamental principles and values which guide our society are steeped in an ethic and premise of domination and oppression.\(^6\) Greed, hierarchy, competition, and a thirst to consume dominate how our society is structured, educated, and functions in everyday life (Andrew, 1997; Elgin, 2010; hooks, 1999; Merkel, 2003). To add salt to the wound, we are habitually

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\(^6\) I arrived at simplicity in my pursuit of finding a nexus between the injustices committed against people and the injustices committed against planet.
miseducated—or, in most cases, not educated at all—to think critically and compassionately about *why we live the way we live*. When I first began to realize this, I fell into a deep depression. What was I to do?

As I grappled with this question, I started studying what social and environmental justice groups were doing to improve the condition of the world, but I found myself growing increasingly frustrated. Social justice and environmental justice scholars, organizations and movements seemed to live on their own separate islands. They rarely intersected. Most social justice scholars do not understand the plight of the non-human world and environmental justice scholars do not understand the oppression of marginalized communities (which they, themselves, often perpetuate). Environmentalists often operate from a privileged, Euro/Western epistemology that only perpetuates problematic tropes of race, class and gender.

Furthermore, I grew increasingly disheartened by mainstream environmental movements that focus on small consumer-based capitalist “solutions”—like buying biodegradable utensils, CFL light bulbs, organic food, solar panels and electric vehicles—as the basis for “saving the planet.” Those are band-aid solutions that do not truly address the root causes of environmental destruction. If we, as a society, only engaged in these types of solutions, we would not be questioning, understanding, critiquing, or challenging the very system that is predicated on the violence and oppression that gave rise to these devastating conditions in the first place. It is what simplicity philosopher Duane Elgin (2010) articulates as superficial attempts to “cover over deep defects in our modern ways of living by giving the appearance of meaningful change” (p. 8). Engaging in these band-aid solutions only serves to create a false sense of security because, implicitly, society is led to believe that small, incremental steps will be enough.

I yearn for an educational praxis that understands social and environment justice as one. I yearn for something that allows me to move, act and think in ways that furthers my goal of an
education for liberation. Throughout my educational journey, I have come across people who are simplifying their lives as a way to create space for things that fill them with clarity, purpose, and joy. I have also begun to simplify my own life in hopes that I also find clarity; that I find a way to unify these multiple sides of my identity and move forward with my own sense of what is right and just for an Earth in chaos. Although I will explore my path to simplicity more deeply in my dissertation process, it is important to know that my journey has become a form of activism—a way for me to not only find clarity, but to actively resist against my own oppression and my oppression of others. Simplicity gives me the space to reflect and meditate on the personal and political significance of my thoughts and actions. In that way, it is a catalyst that allows me to engage with the world and directly challenge the ethic and premise of dominion and oppression perpetuated by imperialism, White supremacy, and consumer-capitalist patriarchy (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1999; Levins Morales, 1998). Simplicity allows me to challenge capitalism itself and, in doing so, to spark a radical creative imaginary of an educational worldview needing to exist.

**A Few Working Principles about Simplicity**

- Simplicity is not an “answer” nor is it a dogma. It is a way of living—a process—that is guided by philosophy and practice.
- Simplicity is not a passive act; it is a call to put our beliefs into practice.
- Simplicity allows for inner/outer works of resistance and healing.
- Simplicity enables us to resist against the layers of oppression and violence enacted in the name of “progress” and “civility.”
- Simplicity cannot be coerced or forced onto people; simplicity is something that each person has to willfully want for themselves.
• Simplicity makes it possible to understand and confront the world as it is while simultaneously envisioning and working towards a world that should be.

• Simplicity is not a synonym for easy. Those who choose to walk a path of simplicity often are making difficult, life-altering decisions to align what they know is right to actually doing right. Simplicity is a process of peeling back the layers of exploitation and oppression intrinsic in our U.S. way of life and having the will and courage to (un)learn and move ourselves in radically different ways.

My Aim

My aim is to make clear why we need a new way of educating people in the United States. My work is anchored in the premise that we have never critically dealt with the legacy of colonization and oppression in this country. As a result, the types of values, beliefs, and morals we are taught continue to perpetuate many grave injustices. This is because the dominant models of higher education that exist today in the United States stem from one prevailing way of thinking, acting, and being—one that places Whiteness as the center of a “universal” way of knowing and the human species as superior to all others we share the Earth with. It is this dominant philosophy of education that breeds competition, dominance, greed, envy, ego, dissatisfaction, and even hate.

As a society, it is crucial to understand the moment that we are in; to be able to understand and contextualize the ways in which we are all still colonial subjects. In the United States, we are born in a paradigm where the essence of who we are is understood through a Western imperial state of mind. Because of this, I maintain that our collective consciousness continues to lay dormant as each day we wake to an absent narrative of the traumatic legacy of colonization and oppression.7

7 For more information on the persistence of the legacy of colonization and oppression within our very thinking, I have listed a few key readings to guide your journey: Wynter’s (2003) “Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument,”
Within our educational settings, the historical narratives of marginalized peoples are often simply not taught and are either omitted or distorted. What this has done is create a populous that is uneducated and, in many cases, miseducated about our collective past. As a result, many of us craft a life based on the only values and norms we know—that of the United States as an “exceptional” nation, “the land of milk and honey” whose manifest destiny is to govern the world and spread “democracy” throughout the globe. While seemingly honorable, the undertone of this belief is that we are in some way superior than the rest. We are not taught to question the savage nature that makes our so-called prosperity, prestige, and wealth possible.

Simply put, we live in a society educated and governed by a toxic master/slave dichotomy—one which is deeply imbedded in all aspects of Western civilization. This idea of master/slave is so normal that it lives within our education, our households, our economy, our values, and our politics as though it were second nature. For example, even the act of writing a dissertation (like this one) is commonly understand as a performance of “mastery.” How well does a student master education? How well does s/he master the subject? However, the dichotomy between master and slave, oppressor and oppressed, subject and object is not innate, hardwired, or natural—it is learned and nurtured through education. As a consequence, we (through the very act of living) continue to perpetuate vicious cycles of violence and oppression in order to sustain our way of life through force and subjugation.


Read, for example, Carter G. Woodson’s (1933) The Mis-Education of the Negro.
This twisted sensibility is what has led scholar/activists like bell hooks (1981, 1994, 1999, 2000), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Audre Lorde (1984), and James Baldwin (1985) to confront the world as it is while, simultaneously, being committed to creating a new way to live. These scholars embody a radical imaginary (Kelley, 2002) which allows them to create a space where oppressed peoples can resist against a world constructed against us while at the same time envisioning a world that could support all of us. My scholarship grows from their legacy and teachings and is my commitment to (un)learn what was instilled in me. As such, my dissertation is a journey into what I understand as the problem of higher education and what I feel is a way forward for anyone seeking a world not based on a hierarchy of oppression.

**Chapter Breakdown**

Before I can begin to imagine what this new way of education will look like, my proposal will first make clear why a decolonial philosophy of education is necessary to understand the social and ecological problems that are present in the world today. For this reason, Chapter Two will explain the problems with the dominant philosophy of higher education, the purpose of my project and guiding research questions that I address. Chapter Two will also provide you with an explanation of the deep environmental and ecological problems of human activity today. Given that many educators are often unaware of environmental science, my goal is to paint a backdrop of how we continue to impact the Earth. I will mainly highlight our exponential growth in population, hyper-consumption and the effects of industrial agriculture. Chapter Three is my working methodology in which I explain why I chose to anchor my work in a methodology of Writing the Self as a critical and decolonial praxis. Chapter Four is my working theoretical framework that guides the ways in which I approach this work; this theoretical understanding is something that I have been slowly creating over the past three years.
I believe that to cultivate an educational philosophy based on principles of simplicity would be a powerful way forward that does not yet exist. Simplicity, as I perceive it, is a decolonial philosophy and practice that offers ways to transcend our current misguided educational paradigm. My main objective is to explore how simplicity can help rekindle a love and passion for holistic justice in higher education—rekindling our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits. What my dissertation ultimately hopes to achieve is a new paradigm of higher education. A paradigm where the philosophy and practice of our education allows us to critically and compassionately question how we engage heavy subjects like race, class, gender, materialism, capitalism, speciesism, and oppression.
Today, as I walked around campus, I was fixated on the trees, how they tower over all of us with their majestic, life-giving beauty. I wondered about everything they have seen, felt, and heard happen on campus in the past 88 years that UCLA has been in the Westwood area. I thought about how these trees were eyewitnesses to almost a century of struggle and resistance.

The concrete washing four major rivers beginning in 1927
Martin Luther King speaks, April 27, 1965
The assassination of Black Panthers Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter and John Higgins, January 17, 1969
Angela Davis speaks, October 8, 1969
Angela Davis fired, June of 1970
Hunger Strike protest for Chicana/o Studies 1993
My own arrest on November 18, 2011 for trying to create a space of liberation and healing amidst the intellectual slumber (Suh, Torossian, & Clark, 2013)

In that moment, how I wanted to talk to the trees and listen to what they saw. I walked over and gently put one of my hands on an old pine as I stared up at its branches swaying in the wind. As my fingers slipped in and out of the aged/wise bark, I closed my eyes and tried to connect to the soul of this tree. After about a minute, I put my head down and slowly opened my eyes. I saw cigarette butts and used napkins sprinkled around the base of the tree like the flowers on a tombstone marking the death of not only this tree but the life-affirming struggles of resistance. All these moments above stood for life and all are cast into the shadows with the murderous rhythm of the promised fruits of justice and equality.

I hungered to recover the sacred moments of my past; I hungered to awaken the sacred moments of our now, present/future. I tapped my hand on the tree. “I haven’t forgotten...” I said as I turned and made my way to class.

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9 University of California, Los Angeles

10 The West Arroyo, Foothill Stream, Stone Canyon Creek and East Arroyo were four waterways that ran through the UCLA campus. They all began north from the Santa Monica Mountains and ran down south eventually towards Ballona Creek. All but one has been buried to make way for more buildings and parking lots: http://militantangeleno.blogspot.com/2011/08/river-ran-through-it-in-search-rivers.html

11 For backstory see AAUP Bulletin (1971).
All day I thought about race and nature, how both people and wilderness have been brutalized in the name of “progress” and the “pursuit of profits.” That thought weighs heavy on my heart, like when I first learned the term *dehumanization* as an undergrad in Ethnic Studies. Dehumanization is the act of legally, physically, mentally and spiritually labeling peoples as non-human, as less than human and, therefore, some *thing* that needs to be controlled. But what is so wrong about being non-human? We are educated to think that we are divinely superior to whatever “we” label “it.” Our society acts as if the millions of other beings we share this Earth with don’t feel and are inherently slaves of our production and desires. I thought deeply about a poem by Marilou Awiakta (1988) entitled “When Earth becomes an ‘It.’”

*When the people call Earth “Mother,”*
they take with love
and with love give back
so that all may live.
*When the people call Earth “it”*
they use her
consume her strength.
Then the people die.
Already the sun is hot
out of season.
Our mother’s breast
is going dry.
She is taking all green
into her heart
and will not turn back
until we call her
by her name.

I wonder if people understand and care about where we are heading. Do they know the severity of our ills onto each other and onto life on Earth?

What’s next?
I chose to pursue a Ph.D. in higher education because I truly believe in the transformational change that can take root within educational spaces. The physical locations of colleges and universities—whether big or small, rural or urban, research-focused or arts-focused—make it possible to have a place and time to be fully immersed in the condition/s of the world. Such a moment is not possible in the same ways when we enter the work force full-time.

Higher education (at least in theory) gives us the ability to take pause and be fully present with the long arc of history. Institutions of higher education are places where the past can resonate with us today and guide how we meet the struggles and tensions of a society struggling to connect—connect with one another y con nuestra pachamama (and with our Mother Earth). In theory, higher education should move us to live in better ways. Colleges and universities are places where people are shaped and shape others. Within these microcosms of society, values are created, recreated, perpetuated and rearticulated based on people’s understandings and interpretations of the world. Historically, institutions of higher education have been considered “beacons of civilization.”

Colleges and universities have cultivated religion, art, language and philosophy and have centered around the idea of a “civil society.” A society based on the principles of morality and public service (Cohen, 2010; Thelin, 2004). There is also a strong belief that higher education continues to help develop broad social consciousness, social responsibility, and motivation toward a betterment of the human condition (Bowen & Clecak, 1977). This strong, perceived, sense of purpose immediately becomes clear when reading any mission statement, or statement of values in higher education; the idea of motivating people towards a better human condition is often seen as a testament to the possibility of profound personal changes in knowledge, values, attitudes, motives, and competencies.

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12 A “beacon of civilization” historically rooted in Whiteness and European expansionists who were actively engaged in remaking the Native American landscape and who used education as way to subjugate the way of life of indigenous communities (Thaman, 2013).
On the surface, higher education has some great traits, and many see it as the birthplace of rhyme and reason. For years, I have engaged with the academy because I believed that thinking critically and compassionately about the knowledge we cultivate was at the center of its purpose (and, indeed, so it is written).

I specifically decided to enroll in the Higher Education and Organizational Change program (HEOC) at UCLA because I thought that it understood the urgency of educational change and institutional transformation that this country needs. I yearned to be a spark in that fire of change; I still yearn to contribute to an educational philosophy, pedagogy and practice that embraces the sacredness of life as we continue to learn how to live and love ethically with comprehension, compassion and justice. However, in my time here, I have come to understand that what we learn and how we think is often intended to uphold and perpetuate oppressive systems of power and privilege, instead of working to transcend them.

We are living in unprecedented times in the story of humanity. Never before has the social, physical, chemical, biological and climatic nature of our being changed so fast because of our actions. Yet, we largely continue to think from within the same bureaucratic boxes that only obstruct us from seeing the world as it truly is. Over the past five years of being in graduate school, for example, people who claim to be working towards justice have often shunned and criticized my thoughts and visions for transformative education. In class after class, I was often outcast by professors and peers for my need to speak truth to power and encourage everyone to question the purpose of the knowledge we were gaining. I would often be told that what I envision was absurd because “we need a world of haves and have nots,” and that my ideas were “dangerous” because it was fundamentally anti-capitalist and therefore a threat. These reactions and comments cut me deeply—I even had a professor tell me to “tone it down” because I should think of “my academic future and job
prospects.” The fire I once thought fueled the program for change turned out to be the fire that constantly tried to burn me and, for a time, this dissonance made me literally fantasize about burning the department to the ground. But one fire will never extinguish another. In order to create transformational change, love, equality, and justice through education, we cannot base our knowledge, wisdom, and understandings in ideas and actions rooted in oppressive beginnings. We need an educational philosophy and practice centered on love, resistance, embrace, joy, and the intra/interconnections between us. We need to cultivate a materially conscious, decolonial education that does not yet exist.

Setting up the Problem

As I began to peel back the layers in my program and higher education as a whole, I began to see, feel and understand the ways in which our education today is steeped in power, privilege, status and the need for all of us to conform to the established set of rules that govern the university and our society. A clear example of this exists in our HEOC mission statement that reads:

The Higher Education and Organizational Change (HEOC) Division is committed to advancing the scholarship, research, and practice of higher education and organizational transformation in the United States and abroad. HEOC represents the School’s commitment to excellence, equity, and social justice within higher education. In the M.A. and Ph.D. programs, students gain an understanding of the historical, political, social, and philosophical elements that have shaped and continue to affect higher education. (HEOC Mission Statement, 2016, emphasis added)

Although the rhetoric is about transformation and justice, the reality is more an exercise in career-advancement and academic professionalization, instead of educational resistance to transcend violence and oppression. Most of the time, my program and the education department as a whole feel heartbreakingly-complacent. The education we receive here is not concerned about transforming the institution, but rather uploading it. I am getting a Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in higher education from the “number one” higher education program in the U.S. and yet we do not have to take not one philosophy course. Sadly, most of my peers do not even know the origins or
significance of the word “Ph.D.” because we don’t have courses on the philosophy of education in the department nor are we required to take a philosophy course elsewhere. How can a scholar guide the direction of the future when s/he is not given the time and place to explore, or come to understand, the history of their own knowledge formation and ideology? The word Ph.D. (Doctorate of Philosophy) originates from the Greek Philosophiae Doctor, which means the “love of wisdom.” Wisdom is an aspiration higher than what could ever be taught; wisdom is cultivated through a deep understanding and closeness to the rhythms of life. Imbued within are questions of purpose, place and power that seldom get asked in higher education; collectively, we are more concerned with job security than seeking and speaking truth to power.

“Organizational Change” is in our name, and yet the very idea and concept of “organizational change” is seen as a mockery among us, and is often the butt of many running jokes: “What organization change?” students say, “Doesn’t the ‘OC’ in HEOC stand for the OC?” referring to the TV show set in Orange County, a place in Southern California often associated with being incredibly conservative, close-minded, materialistic, and rather hostile towards people of color. Ironically, these four adjectives—conservative, close-minded, materialistic, and hostile—had been intended as a joke, but actually echo the very real and current campus climate as mapped by the 2013 Moreno Report and the 2014 UCLA Campus Climate Survey. It has become clear to me that our program’s name merely pays lip service rather than acting as a call to think/act beyond the walls that trap us. I have come to understand that the idea of “justice” that my program promotes is a small boat of hopeful rhetoric aimlessly floating on the surface of a sea of crooked educational morals, values, and ethics.

HEOC, and UCLA as a whole, likes to portray itself as the “leader” in social justice education (see, for example, the ways in which UCLA memorializes itself and its past).13 Yet, UCLA

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13 For UCLA’s own historical narrative account, see http://www.ucla.edu/about/history
does not see how, more often than not, its actions perpetuate injustice. We are not taught to think outside the box—in fact, in many cases, we are actively told not to. For example, in the Spring of 2012 I tried to confide in a faculty member about feeling a sense of hypocrisy and alienation early on in the program, and this is what he told me: “Anthony, we like things to fit into neat categories here. We like our students, and their studies, to be clearly definable and measurable. You are constantly choosing to question convention, and that upsets people who are invested in things as they are.”

His comments highlight how embodied resistance is not welcome in academic spaces, and he highlights a disconnect between theory and practice. Scholarship promoting abstract notions of justice is welcome but embodied practice of that articulated justice is often shunned and silenced.

There are tons of scholarly articles that have been written over the years, with “clear” and “measurable” statements about the problem, purpose, and research questions their work seeks to address. Many of these articles even have “sound” theory and methodology guiding their work; however, in most cases, the research process as a whole is not questioned. And for the scholars who actively question and think deeply about their work as embodied forms of justice, equality, freedom, liberation and praxis—like Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), bell hooks (1981, 1994, 2000), Audre Lorde (1984), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Aurora Levins Morales (1998), Juanita Nelson (1988), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Tara Yosso (2005), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), Enrique Dussel (2013), Ramon Grosfoguel (2013), and Sylvia Wynter (2003), and Nelson Maldonado Torres (2007) to name a few—their powerful body of knowledge carries trivial weight in actual practices, policies, and day-to-day decisions of systems of higher education. At best, our work makes it into the curriculum; however, more often than not these crucial meditations on life, purpose, and meaning are out there collecting dust in a library—waiting until someone has the
courage to engage these subversive, subaltern ways of understanding and articulating the world. As I stated in the beginning, theoretically, institutions of higher education are (and should be) places where critical, thoughtful discourse happens about the politics, actions and general beliefs that permeate society at large (Altbach, Berdahl, & Gumport, 1999; Cohen, 2010; Thelin, 2004). However, as education scholars like Emma Pérez (1999, 2010), Daniel Solórzano (1998), Solórzano and Tara Yosso (2012), Dolores Delgado Bernal (2002), Delgado Bernal, Rebeca Burciaga, and Judith Flores Carmona (2012), Ramon Grosfoguel (2012), Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), Vandana Shiva (2005, 2011), and others have pointed out, higher education has marginalized alternative ways of thinking, theorizing and researching.

To further complicate the situation, our current system of higher education not only marginalizes alternative epistemologies and ontologies; we are often wedded to the very social conditions that are actively turning mainstream thoughts into commodities. This process is often referred to as the academic industrial complex—that is, a system of higher education where scholars and academics are actively participating and willing to commodify their knowledge for economic gains (Bowley, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). What this is doing is creating a model of education that works to justify and actively sustain capitalism as opposed to critically thinking and acting beyond it. Like the painfully truthful cliché—“Everybody wants to change the world, but nobody wants to change”—especially in higher education where, historically, change has been slow and compartmentalized.\footnote{For more on this phenomenon in organizational behavior and practice, see Bess and Dee (2008).} Colleges and universities are so steeped in consumer-capitalism and neoliberal ideology that their practices reflect a thirst for prestige and exclusivity that is antithetical to their often vague commitment/s to “public service,” “social justice,” “sustainability,” “equality,” and “transformation.” Instead, in such turbulent economic times, institutions of higher education
operate from a survival-of-the-fittest paradigm where they seek to control, keep and expand their power and privilege regardless of how those actions perpetuate global injustice (Kahn, 2008, 2010; Shiva, 2011). This is made visible in how willing and complicit colleges and universities are in silencing anyone who challenges the ideas and practices that justify their existence—and UCLA is no exception.

Colleges and universities are intended to help students ascend the ladder of the social, political, and economic status quo rather than to encourage students to wrestle with, question, understand, and ultimately change the long arc of oppression and violence that these revered institutions are steeped in.

I am not trying to suggest that there are no pockets of “transformational resistance” present on college campuses. In fact, I suggest, that the social, political, and economic status quo is actively being questioned and confronted because wherever oppression exists, resistance is always present. Resistance is visible and tangible in student protests and actions, in specific courses and curricula, and even in specific majors like Asian American Studies, Black Studies, Chicana/o Studies, and Ethnic Studies. However, if (and when) these forms of resistance become legally permissible and sanctioned by those in power, without changing the underlying causes of oppression, these forms of resistance become co-opted and stripped of their power to create meaningful change within the system. All these disciplines have been incorporated within a system upholding a racist, sexist, degenerative, consumer-capitalist paradigm. For survival, even the most radical disciplines end up conforming to sanctioned modes of resistance. This is a huge problem.

The links between higher education and hegemonic forms of power are not new. In fact, the mainstream forms of higher education, the actual systems themselves, are completely invested in and dependent on an ethic and premise of domination upheld by the embrace of a Cartesian Philosophy of higher education that places “the human” at the center of the universe. From inception, the dominant
models of higher education continuously privilege and reflect one type of consciousness. Cartesian philosophy is based on the philosophy of René Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician and scientist who is often referred to as the “father of modern western philosophy.” He is credited as a pioneer of reason; by disassociating mind and spirit, he planted the seeds of reason over faith—“I think, therefore I am” he famously wrote (Descartes, 1637). In shifting the debate from “What is true?” to “Of what can I be certain?,” Descartes shifted the authority to define truth away from God and instead placed the power of definition in humanity. But what was considered to be “human” in the seventeenth century, in the midst of an indigenous genocide and Trans-Atlantic slave trade? To be “human” was to be White, but really it was to be white and male. What Descartes’ ideas did is plant the belief that human beings (specifically White men) are the center of this dynamic and diverse world where humans were, and still are, understood to be intrinsically more valuable than non-Whites and the hundreds of thousands of non-human species; his thoughts were seeds that were later expanded on by philosophers like Thomas Hobbes (1651/1980), Baruch De Spinoza (De Spinoza, 1670 and 1677/2001; Nadler, 2006), and John Locke (1690) who collectively laid the foundation for the Enlightenment and scientific revolution. All this well over 100 years before John Chavis became the first Black person who would attend college for the first time in 1799 (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2016).

Fast forward to higher education in the twenty-first century and you witness tensions that have long been brewing along lines of race, class, and gender. Students of Color and Faculty of Color alike continue to feel unwelcome across college campuses. However, when scholars who address campus climate document and frame such events, they often do so by centering on individual experiences as opposed to situating these individual experiences with campus climate within the looming legacy of
white supremacy in the academy (Brayboy, 2005; Gillborn, 2005). The 2013 Moreno Report\(^\text{15}\) and the 2014 UCLA Campus Climate Survey are good examples of reports that highlight the extent to which students and faculty of color feel marginalized in their social, academic and work environments. Reading these documents, it becomes clear how scholars are attempting to gain access and equity in ways that do not challenge the very nature of supremacy embedded in campus climate discourse. The language in these reports, and reports like them, often articulate a “chilling” effect on campus/es. However, I suggest that campus climate is more than just a “chill.” Articulating it as such is an understatement. To me, these “hostile and chilling” environments stem from a deeper and, frankly, more disturbing place. They stem from and are rooted in the psychological trauma of colonization and imperialism—namely, the ethic and premise of domination. This disturbing legacy of oppression and dominance is why I see the campus as a toxic environment as opposed to a chilled one.

**Stating the Problem**

The problem is that the dominant philosophy of higher education that exists today stems from one prevailing way of thinking, acting and being\(^\text{16}\)—one that places whiteness as the center of a “universal” way of knowing and the human species as superior to all others we share the Earth with. It is this dominant philosophy of education that breeds competition, dominance, greed, envy, ego, dissatisfaction, and even hate. Through coercion, suppression, and bloodshed, Euro/Western centric notions of reality, purpose and reason continue to root themselves in our academic and social constructions.

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\(^{15}\) This report is named after the honorary chair of the study: Carlos Roberto Moreno (a retired Mexican-American Jurist who was the Associate Justice of California’s Supreme Court).

\(^{16}\) For more, see Grosfoguel (2012) and Tamdgidi (2012).
In higher education, the ethic and premise of domination can be seen in the emphasis of classroom competition (e.g., grading on the curve or portraying only “A” students as the best), the celebration of elitism (e.g., the history of colleges as places for only privileged White men, or the importance of college ranking), and the proliferation of a dominant discourse of education that is both politically and historically decontextualized. For example, intellectual disciplines like Engineering, Chemistry, Biology, History, Anthropology, and Philosophy have been and, to a large extent, continue to be fields dominated by privileged White men who attempt to understand and ascribe meaning to the world from a very narrow and incomplete point of view that delegitimizes other ways of being and understanding.\(^\text{17}\) It can also be seen through the promotion of “discovering,” “developing” and ultimately “engineering” non-natural, artificial and synthetic solutions to our First-World problems.

This domination is no longer the realm of just white people, but of anyone seeking to build a world steeped in the colonial and imperial trauma of white privilege. For example, in 1996 the former University of California regent, Wardell Anthony “Ward” Connerly—a Black man—was the driving force behind passing California’s Proposition 209 which did away with Affirmative Action in our state.\(^\text{18}\) As a person of color, Connerly not only helped do away with the consideration of race and gender in the college admissions process, he placed the blame of educational failure on the very

\(^{17}\) A few simple illustrations of this historically can be understood through the idea of nature as property or that women should only study home economics or that Native Americans were uncivil, Blacks as non-human, or the disregard or the spirit and internal intuition.

\(^{18}\) Proposition 209 resulted in severe drops in the enrollment of Black, Chicana/o, Latina/o, and Native American students at the University of California’s top universities and graduate programs. In the Fall of 2003, for example, only 315 Black students (3.6%), 771 Chicana/o students (8.8%), 262 Latinx students (3.0%), and 51 Native American students (0.6%) were admitted to UC Berkeley. However, before Affirmative Action ended in the Fall of 1995 there were 623 Black students (7.1%), 1172 Chicana/o students (13.3%), 338 Latina/o students (3.8%), and 142 Native American students (1.6%) admitted (UC Berkeley Office of Student Research).
communities that have been systematically kept from access to quality education. Why would any person of color engage in this type of self-hating ideology? Because Black or White, gay or straight, woman or man, we have all been conditioned to understand the world from a heterosexual, White male point of view, which is all too often associated with power, privilege and dominance. Because those of us who exist on the margins have (by definition) less power, we are often criminalized for simply being who we are. As a result, many of us end up emulating the worldview and practices of White supremacy as a tool to survive.

People like Ward Connerly are systematically taught next to nothing about their/our own origins and importance while, simultaneously, taught to love, cherish and glorify the narratives of those who attempt to enslave and erase our minds, bodies, and spirits. You cannot love a person that you do not know exists. That is why many people of color and White folks alike adopt and expand a way of being that is rooted in a logic of inherent inequality, dehumanization, and selfishness. This is what many decolonial scholars term “the coloniality of being.” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Wynter, 2003). Even though we are no longer engaged in “overt” colonization projects, there is a colonial legacy (or coloniality) that lives on through our thoughts and actions within the academy. The problem is one of erasure, dominance, and an endless thirst of hyper-consumption.

**Understanding the Stakes: The Deep Environmental and Ecological Imperatives**

In order to understand the crux of my work, it is crucial to situate the trauma of coloniality within a global social and environmental matrix—a matrix that is, in large part, made possible because of the educational values, beliefs, and norms that have been promoted over the centuries. While my work is about the decolonial imperative of higher education, this “education” does not exist in a vacuum, it lives within a dynamic ecosystem. However, seldom do higher education scholars and/or higher education literature address the importance of situating our knowledge formation within a
larger environmental landscape. Therefore, it is very important to me to articulate what is happening right now and explain why it is pivotal in establishing a new vision of education.

We are currently living in a moment of great social, environmental, and economic strife. In the span of under 300 years, humans have radically altered the social, chemical and biological composition of the planet more than the last 200,000 years of our existence (Hemingway, 2009; Jensen, 2006). Collectively, we have misused reason, science and technology to exploit people of color and the Earth as the “disposable material and labor” in the name of progress, civility and future prosperity.

There are three social/environmental issues that are affecting this moment and, yet, few people understand the consequences which loom in its presence. Global population, hyper consumption and industrial agriculture are three issues that are causing the climate to change at an alarming rate. This is critical because, as I stated previously, never before has our human activity changed our climate so much in such a short amount of time. What is at stake is our ability to access what we need to live—food, water, and shelter. Droughts, floods, earthquakes, rising sea levels, sudden changes in temperature, acidification of the oceans are all symptoms of larger, toxic environmental conditions we continue to create.

Global Population

As of July 2019, the total human population is estimated to be between 7,678,817,400 (The World Counts, 2019) and 7,584,201,600 (U.S. Census, 2019); yet, for the vast majority of human existence, the human population has been between 150 and 200 million.19 What happened? Since the

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19 By the year 1000, it is estimated that between 250 and 300 million of us roamed the earth—growing at a rate of about .1 percent (.001) per year for the next seven to eight centuries. (For more detailed statistics see: United Nations Population Division, Population Reference Bureau).
beginning of the Industrial Revolution in 1760, there has been an exponential spike in human population growth (see Figure 1 below).

![Figure 1. World Population (billions). Source: World human population (est.) from 10,000 BC–2000 AD from the US Census Bureau](image)

According to Eric McLamb of the Ecology Global Network:

In only 100 years after the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the world population would grow 100 percent to two billion people in 1927 (about 1.6 billion by 1900). During the 20th century, the world population would take on exponential proportions, growing to six billion people just before the start of the 21st century. That’s a 400 percent population increase in a single century. (McLamb, 2011, n.p.)

The US Census Bureau echoes these findings in its world population milestone chart (see Table 1 shown below). Since the 250 years from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution to today, the world human population has increased by six billion people.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World Population Milestones</th>
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<td>Population (in billions)</td>
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<td>Years Lapsed</td>
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These population statistics are significant for two important reasons:

- Ecologically, the Earth cannot continue to support all of us at our current rate of consumption (which I will address shortly).

- Socially, although many marvel at and take great pride in our creative potential to engineer as a species, it is important to understand that this potential has been a byproduct of oppression. The feats that were achieved in the Industrial Revolution, Age of Enlightenment and that we continue to engineer today are made possible through the master/slave dichotomy I explained earlier.

Table 1 highlights the exponential growth that has come to define the “civilized world.” The Trans-Atlantic slave trade made it possible for white people to free up hours that they would have otherwise spent working the land in order to subsist. I maintain that slavery created an environment in which white colonists gained ‘leisure time’ through the social, economic and sustenance capital produced by slave labor. This tangible, physical freedom from having to work the land allowed white people to dedicate their time to other endeavors and technologies that began the cycle of development and, ultimately, unchecked growth through control and dominion. I suggest that this new-found reality enabled whites the time to expand their worldview and purpose (albeit, at the crack of the whip). Through the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution, White people figured out how to, not only exhaust human slave labor, but also mechanize and standardize ways to extract, process and sell Earth slave labor. It was a freedom through violence which created the time and space to figure out how to mass produce food, medicine and shelter. The lure of invisible labor materialized their wildest
dreams and it continues as the ethos of our conscious being. In doing so, we have created a culture predicated on endless consumption that continues to compound the problems more over time.

**Consumption**

The United States is the most consumptive group of people alive today (as evidenced by Figure 2 below). If the world could live as we do, we would need another nine planets to sustain us which might be the reason NASA is looking for life on Mars. To add salt to the wound, western hegemony has many in other nations wanting to live as we do and embracing the idea that we have whatever we want, whenever we want it (even when most of it is on borrowed time).

![Footprint by Region](image)

**Figure 2. Footprint by Region.**

The United States, less than 5% of the global population, uses about a quarter of the world’s fossil fuel resources—burning up nearly 25% of the coal, 26% of the oil, and 27% of the world’s natural gas. As of 2003, the U.S. had more private cars than licensed drivers, and gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles were among the best-selling vehicles.\(^\text{20}\)

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\(^{20}\) More statistics: New houses in the U.S. were 38% bigger in 2002 than in 1975, despite having fewer people per household on average (Worldwatch, 2011). The average home in the US went from 983 square feet in 1950 to 2,349 square feet in 2004 (an increase of 140%). And everything about
Today’s human economies are designed with little attention to the residual, long lasting, impacts of our hyper-consumptive lifestyle in the U.S. Air quality, water pollution, landscape degradation and the incredible amounts of food we waste are among the most visible consequences of a system guided by money and greed. Nearly all the world’s ecosystems are shrinking to make way for people and our homes, farms, malls, factories and warehouses. The World Wildlife Fund’s Living Planet Index (LPI) (2014), which measures the health of forests, oceans, freshwater, and other natural systems, shows a 52% percent decline in Earth’s ecological health since 1970—the animal populations are roughly half the size they were 40 years ago. Moreover, the biggest recorded threat to biodiversity globally comes from the combined impacts of habitat loss and degradation, driven by unsustainable human consumption. The impacts of climate change are of increasing concern.

![Figure 3: The global LPI shows a 52% decline between 1970 and 2010. The white line shows the index values and the shaded areas represent the 95% confidence intervals surrounding the trend. (World Wildlife Fund, 2014)](image)

them is bigger, from their three- and four-car garages to the professional-grade stoves and refrigerators. In 2004, 43% of new homes had 9-foot ceilings, up from less than 15% in the 1980s.
Figure 4: Primary threats to populations in the LPI. Information on threats has been identified for 3,430 populations in the LPI and assigned to seven categories. Other populations are either not threatened or lack information on threats. (World Wildlife Fund, 2014)

What this means is that, quite literally, we are actively engaged in reshaping the social, chemical and biological composition of the Earth for our own wants and desires. So much so that it has led some scholars to liken us to a cancer to the planet (Hern, 1993). Others like Elizabeth Kolbert (2014), have documented how, by her account, we are in the midst of the sixth great mass extinction.

**Industrial Agriculture**

Many factors contribute to climate change, but of all sectors of production, the industrial food system has been identified as the largest emitter of Greenhouse Gases (GHGs)\(^\text{21}\) (Pollan, 2006). In addition, the industrial food system uses significant amounts of non-renewable resources including water and fossil fuels in the production and distribution of food (Kahn, 2008; Shiva, 2005, 2011). To make matters worse, in order to create the mainstream, commercial foods that we consume, corporations are clear-cutting massive amounts of once diversely rich lands, polluting our

\(^{21}\) “The global food system, from fertilizer manufacture to food storage and packaging, is responsible for up to one-third of all human-caused greenhouse-gas emissions, according to the latest figures from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), a partnership of 15 research centres around the world” (Gilbert, 2012).
communal water supply with toxins, chemicals and waste. In addition, due to the increased scale of food production, typical working conditions are terrible and individuals are not afforded healthcare or retirement benefits. Sadly, it does not end there. In this system, it is not enough to try to own the land and the labor, corporations are even trying to lay claim and ownership over the genetic makeup of cells and living organisms from seeds, the essence of what life is (as is the case with Monsanto) (Bensen, 2012). This happens because industrial food production is dominated by large corporations who see “food”\textsuperscript{22} as a commodity that can be financially exploited for profit. Liu and Apollon (2011) state, “The food chain is incorporated in the world capitalist system, where crops are grown in the global or domestic south, often in fields of monoculture crops, using bioengineered seeds and subjected to harsh pesticides; then the products are packaged and shipped to the end consumer” (p. 2). As a result, this process has devastating effects on the people and the planet including deforestation, forced labor, monocropping, waste, and the extermination of species.

In these times of great social and environmental shift and uncertainty, countries and governments around the world are looking to education to help “fix” and “solve” what many scholars and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) clearly identify as one of the greatest challenges the human race has ever faced. Many higher education scholars have articulated this intentional gathering of the minds as a “microcosm of society,” a “living laboratory,” and even a type of “ecosystem” where people come together in various ways to create a community.

The problem is so great and so imminent that even President Barack Obama, the leader of one of the most consumptive countries the world has ever known, admitted that “no challenge poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change” during the 2015 State of the Union Address.

\textsuperscript{22} I put food in quotes because industrial food has none of the nutrients, taste or essence of real, whole food.
In the U.S., we make up less than 5% of the global population and, yet, we use about a quarter of the world’s fossil fuel resources—burning up nearly 25% of the coal, 26% of the oil, and 27% of the world’s natural gas (Worldwatch Institute, 2011). The Global Footprint Network estimates that if everyone on Earth consumed as we do, we would need 4 planets to sustain us (Living Planet Report, 2014). That is an incredible off-shoot and a completely unsustainable way to live. The ominous threat of climate change has gotten so critical that even people completely invested in an extractive, exploitive, hyper-consumptive way of living are now putting their faith in institutions of higher education to be the catalysts which will see us through. Because “higher education produces the professionals who develop, lead, manage, teach, work in, and influence society’s institutions” (HESA Briefing, 2007), colleges and universities are being charged with building the knowledge-base of “sustainable development.”

In 2007, the Federal Government passed the Higher Education Sustainability Act (HESA) to provide $50 million annually in grants to help support between 25 and 200 sustainability projects at higher education institutions and consortia/associations (HESA Briefing, 2007). In California, specifically, the University of California (UC) passed a Sustainable Practices Policy in 2004 which declares that all ten campuses should be “living laboratories” for sustainability that contribute to the research and educational mission of the university (UCOP Sustainable Practices Policy, 2018).

There is an incredible promise in being college educated in the twenty-first century. Higher education scholars often articulate these promises as the “positive externalities” inherent in going to college: things like lowering crime rates, increasing wealth in communities, bettering the economy

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23 It is important to note that there are crucial differences between “sustainable development” and “sustainability.” Governments and institutions will typically use them interchangeably but these terms have profoundly different implications, implications I will discuss in greater detail.

24 It is assumed that those who attend college will get paid more.
and a whole host of other perceived benefits to society at large (McMamon, 2009). One such benefit of higher education are its supposed contributions to sustainability. Specifically, there is the claim that institutions of higher education seek to encourage students to incorporate principles of environmental responsibility and personal consumptive practices (Emanuel & Adams, 2011; Kagawa, 2007). For at least the last 20 years, institutions of higher education have invested millions of dollars in sustainability initiatives aimed at operations, teaching and research with the hopes of making both campuses and the cities where they are geographically-based, more ecologically and environmentally friendly places to live (Clarke, 2006; Sharp, 2009; van Weeden, 2000). Within this subject, there are at least two distinct groups of researchers attempting to quantify and qualify the impacts that post-secondary education is having on students: one focusing on curriculum, teaching methodology and pedagogy with respect to sustainability (Barth, Godemann, Rieckmann, & Stoltenberg, 2007; Carew & Mitchell, 2002; Gadotti, 2010; McMillan, Wright, & Beazley, 2004; Zsóka, Szerényi, Széchy, & Kocsis, 2013) and the other focusing on the impacts of the actual programs, policies and procedures of the institutions themselves (Dickerson, Thibodeau, Aronson, & Miller, 1992; Hansen, Bucki, & Lee, 2011; Kahn, 2010; Pike, Kuh, & Gonyea, 2003). In both cases, researchers make the case that students are gaining a deeper understanding of sustainability and putting that knowledge to practice. However, as Ethan D. Schoolman, Mike Shriberg, Sarah Schwimmer and Marie Tysman (2014) explain in their article, *Green cities and ivory towers: how do higher education sustainability initiatives shape millennials’ consumption practices?*, even though millennials are broadly supportive of sustainable initiatives like public transportation, recycling, conserving energy and water, there is little evidence that students are more committed to sustainability because of their time on campus. In fact, this study shows that students left the university “much less interested in incorporating environmental concerns into decisions about food and in actively reducing their consumption” (n.p).
Environmental Conclusion

It is clear that the Earth we live in and share is badly hurt and is, understandably, pushing back on all the ways we continue to wrong her. When the wealthiest 25% of the world’s population consumes 85% of the world’s natural resources and produces 90% of the world’s waste, you know something is terribly off. We are feeling this push-back through huge disruptions of nature and life itself. Because of this, many scientists all over the world are speaking out about climate change. It is estimated that our global use of resources has passed our carry capacity (Living Planet Report, 2014; Norgard, 2009). However, the roots of climate change are hundreds, if not thousands of years older, rooted in a culture of domination that has been normalized in our societies.

As the consequences of environmental degradation become more and more serious, institutions of higher education, like UCLA, are adopting policies, practices and procedures that try to encourage people to be more aware of their energy use, waste, and overall footprint. However, these measures are incomplete and fall short because they do not simultaneously address or question the ways in which the university itself is complicit in propagating the ideologies and behaviors that cause the destruction of our social and natural world. Colleges and universities constantly engage in the virtues of having, owning, and controlling more (Alvesson, 2013; Cohen, 2010) without ever really stepping back and questioning what that means or what those ideas do to our spirit. For many, higher education is not about philosophies, values or the origin of thoughts and practices, but rather a means to an economic end. In fact, even for the institution itself, the driving force is often its own economic viability, expansion and growth (Bess & Dee, 2008). What is our knowledge worth, if we can’t, won’t, don’t align our morals, ethics and values to reflect what we know?

The term sustainability is a highly political concept that does not exist in a vacuum and, sadly, it is one that many people do not understand or question. Environmental justice scholars like Toby Hemenway (2010), Richard Kahn (2008, 2010) and Vandana Shiva (2005, 2011) have lectured and
written extensively about how our collective understanding of ‘sustainability’ stems from a desire to protect our current material way of life by minimizing our collective impacts. However, that way of life—a society ruled by oppression, control, domination, patriarchy hierarchies, consumerism, privatization, and a monetary system which actively attempts to exploits, commodifies and distorts our natural world—is not questioned, but rather assumed as the standard. In other words, “sustainability” attempts to mitigate the degenerative and destructive aspects of our society, without significantly reflecting on the moral/ethical consciousness that gave rise to such pervasively destructive behavior in our society, namely: racism, sexism, classism, violence, domination, coercion, and selfishness. As social/environmental activist Vandana Shiva says, “Biodiversity and cultural diversity go hand-in-hand. When culture is eroded, biodiversity is eroded... Whatever happens to seed affects the web of life” (Shiva, 2011). This is why I write about simplicity instead of sustainability.

In a world of seemingly endless knowledge, facts, figures and statistics, we have come to learn, calculate and quantify much about the world. However, just because we know does not means we understand. For example, we know peak oil exists and yet we keep building. We know there is a surplus of all kinds of material goods and, yet, we keep manufacturing new ones. We are far less happy, and we are more over-weight, over-worked, over-stressed and can’t seem to ever just be.

While this may sound very scary and even apocalyptic, these scholars do not take into account the restorative and regenerative forces in both nature and human agency. There is another way and there is time to make it right, but we can no longer continue to educate as though this is the only way, as though supremacy and scarcity is synonymous with what it means to be human, as though our thoughts and ideas are only as good as how much money they generate. There is more to life.

Purpose

The deeply troubled state of the world is the reflection and culmination of deeply held beliefs, values and moralities that have been taught to us about what it means to be human within a
more-than-human world. The dominant philosophy of higher education that exists today stems from the belief in one prevailing way of thinking, acting and being—a monoculture of the mind which places whiteness as the center of a ‘universal’ way of knowing and the human species as superior to all others we share the Earth with. In these ways the dominant philosophy of higher education is toxic.

This legacy of colonization and oppression has led to the systematic eradication of other ways of knowing and existing and even speaking in the world. The once highly-diverse, biologically-rich and geographical-intimate education and consciousness of our ancestors has been whittled down to a twisted singularity of being (in many cases through outright bloodshed). For centuries, institutions of higher education have been complicit in this erasure of our collective memories and in distorting our true sense of self through the unabashed embrace of white male philosophies, epistemologies, ontologies and practices as the standard of truth and civility (Pérez, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

This is No Way to Live

Maya Angelou (1993) once said, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again. Lift up your eyes upon the day breaking for you. Give birth again to the dream. Women, children, men, take it into the palms of your hands, mold it into the shape of your most private need. Sculpt it into the image of your most public self. Lift up your hearts, each new hour holds new chances for new beginnings.” A philosophy and practice of simplicity can be that chance at new beginnings.

As a social/environmental justice scholar of higher education, my work is deeply concerned with how people understand intersections of social and environmental justice. There is a tremendous possibility to foster critical consciousness within higher education; types of consciousness that actively work towards a holistic ethic of life through the profound and personal changes in knowledge, values,
attitudes, motives, and competencies that can happen within these spaces. This idea is what Paulo Freire (1970) articulates as “critical self-discovery.” It is the power to make present how we have been socialized in the world and informs the actions we take because of it. Because higher education plays an important role in socializing society, my overall aim is to reconceptualize what higher education can be as a way of offering an exploration of a different kind of world—a world not based on a culture of exploitation, suffering or denigration but, instead, of attention, tenderness and healing (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; hooks, 1994, 2000). Through this journey, I want to reinterpret and re-express the social, environmental and political possibilities of the university. In doing so, I hope to provide a living framework to help understand and continue to detox from the colonial legacy that keeps us sick by living and acting in ways that only continue to harm ourselves and each other.

Ultimately, I seek to disrupt learned colonial mindsets and practices in order to imagine places that educate with a deeper sense of self and the moral and ethical imperatives of reflection, courage, love, justice, and compassion. I long for an educational philosophy and practice that allows us to critically and compassionately question how we engage heavy subjects like race, class, gender, materialism, capitalism, speciesism, and oppression.

I believe that cultivating an ethic of simplicity can be a decolonial philosophy and practice that offers ways to transcend this current misguided educational paradigm and co-create different ways of living and inter/acting with ourselves and Mother Earth. As such, my dissertation is dedicated to the continued cultivation of a non-oppressive, non-hierarchical, decolonial moral/ethical philosophy and practice of education for liberation—an education that is not afraid to intimately deal

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25 Living framework is my way of expressing a theoretical understanding based in conscious actions and movement like simple living, or naming injustice, speaking out your truth with love and being courageous enough to listen and understand other people’s truths to build positive communities together.
with historical traumas of our past and present in order to build new ways forward. My purpose is to explore how simplicity can serve as that way forward and help rekindle a love and passion for holistic justice in higher education in our hearts, minds, bodies and spirits. In doing so, this work is a contribution to an educational consciousness that gets us in touch with the deeper spirit of life that sustains us (Andrews, 1997).

**Research Questions**

My dissertation is a journey guided by these main philosophical questions:

What is the dominant philosophy and practice of higher education?

What could\(^{26}\) a philosophy and practice of higher education rooted in simplicity look like?

These two main guiding questions are simple yet highly complex as they speak to the essence of our collective reason/s for pursuing ‘higher’ forms of understandings and wisdom. By asking these questions, my dissertation evokes the need to reflect on the principles and ethics that guide our thoughts and our actions. As I have mentioned, decolonization and liberation are at the heart of my social/environmental philosophy and practice and these questions are a reflection of my praxis. My first question: what is the dominant philosophy and practice of higher education, seeks to unpack the roots of our current model of higher education in the United States and, in doing so, highlight the ways in which these institutions of higher education have historically been carved out of one mold—one singular way of being—that has been forced as the “truth” in our conscious sense of reality. Underlying this question is the need to make explicit what is inherently wrong and oppressive about the evolution of a mono-cultured, singular and narrow educational ideology and practice.

\(^{26}\) I say “could” because I do not wish to dismiss other valid ways of being that could positively alter the educational landscape and texture of colleges and universities. Como dice el dicho Zapatista: “El mundo que queremos es uno donde quepan muchos mundos.” “We seek a world in which there is room for many worlds.” However, that said, I believe that there are shared values, morals and ethics that should guide these unique, creative, community-based visions of higher education.
Between my first and second question exists a profound third: Is there another way? There is! It has taken me my entire life to finally realize this revelation; we do not need to continue to feed into, perpetuate and mindlessly participate in oppressive ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. We can choose a different way. In my work, I will explain how simplicity can serve as a decolonial philosophy and practice that can help rekindle a love and passion for justice in higher education. I will show how simplicity is a praxis that creates moments of deep contemplation where knowledge, compassion and a constant state of reflection can flourish. I believe that it is through this kind of education that we can remove the veil of control and oppression and awaken our sense of connection and relation to ourselves and the Earth at large. As such, this project is a search for new paths and new ways to live and, in doing so, I will help cultivate a new philosophy of life in education.

My dissertation is a call for transcendence and freedom. It is a call to think, act and breathe beyond the narrow confines of current higher education discourse. By envisioning the possibilities of an education not bound by institutional bureaucracy and consumer capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1999), I work towards a holistic education that is of (and for) justice and liberation. Education is like soil; it is the vital foundation upon which we grow our society. Like soil, education can be a depleted, lifeless substance but it can also be a rich, biodiverse living organism. We need ways to educate that aspire to higher forms of consciousness; ones that are life-affirming, diverse, restorative, resilient and adaptive in order to transform the political, social and environmental crises we face.

The garden allows for working with the Earth, learning to care for the fabric of life; perceiving the Earth through the Earth; seeing the seed assume the form of the plant and the plant assume the form of food, the food that gives us life. [The garden] teaches us patience and careful handling of the Earth between sowing and harvesting. In gardening, we learn that things are not born readymade; that they need to be cultivated and cared for. We also learn that the world is not ready made, it is being made, it is making us; that building it demands persistence, hopeful patience of the seed, which at some moment will sprout and flower, and will be fruit. (Moacir Gadotti, 2010, p. 208)

We are living in unprecedented times in the story of humanity. Now more than ever we
need ways of thinking and being that move beyond the traps and traumas of colonization and oppression; we need philosophies and practices that help us see past the colonial cages of today and rekindle and awaken the hearts and minds that will gather tomorrow. Tomorrow exists today if we give ourselves to the process of letting go. This work is my offering and commitment to letting go and moving beyond the ideological cages of oppression so that we can create the worlds we wish to see.
WRITING THE SELF: CRITICAL SELF REFLECTION AND ARCHIVES AS PRAXIS

We write against. And by writing we create alternative spaces of healing. Spaces that soothe our hearts from the toxicity of the world around us. A world created from the excessive indulgence of our imaginations and desires. We write against a world that tells us we are only one and find a world where we are many, where we are community. By writing against oppression, we affirm our existence and choose a world of light and love.
(Anthony Tróchez, April 29, 2013)

In this chapter I offer an explanation of my working methodology, methods and practice. This discussion continues from epistemic problems I identify with the dominant philosophy of higher education and explains the process of my work. My goal is to introduce you to my methodological approach, give you a sense of my positionality and relationship to place, and finally lay out the specific methods I plan to employ moving forward.

My project creates a philosophy and practice of education guided by simplicity. Simplicity is not a new concept but, I did not learn about simplicity in school. People are drawn to simplicity for many different reasons. People simplify their lives to get out of debt, find happiness, work less, and to have more time with family and friends. As a graduate student, I initially came to simplicity for many of these reasons but I am also drawn to the practice because of deep social and environmental concerns I have about the state of the world. Because the practice of simplicity is often the practice of letting go of material possessions and desires, I feel an agency and control over the types of material practices I choose to engage. Simplifying allows me to be mindful of the things I bring into my life and, in doing so, make space and time for meaningful experiences rather than spending time, money and energy on searching for meaning in material things.

Initially, simplicity was just practical for me. How could I train my mind and body to want less in order to free up time, money and have less stress? However, the more I practiced the more I started feeling a much deeper connection. I found myself trying to understand the essence of my life and, in that pursuit, I learned many precious lessons of what living is truly about.
Why Write the Self?

Above I describe my initial connection to simplicity because it highlights how this whole process is incredibly personal for me. As such, I am choosing to unfold my journey as a critical engagement with myself because it is my journey of coming into being. It is my journey of trying to see and understand the world from an alternative epistemological and ontological point of view.

Methodologically, Writing the Self is my approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand the world (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010; Graham, 1991; Holman Jones, 2005). This approach challenges traditional ways of knowing by doing research in a way that understands research as a political act (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

Scholars who choose to write critical, reflective and philosophical work do so because they seek to critique dominant ideas and assumptions about what research is and how research should be done (Ellis et al., 2010). By situating myself in the research process, I engage in a process of critical self-reflection which will allow me to present my own story and personal narrative as a way to disrupt and question politics, culture and identity (Marshall & Rossman, 2014) while moving myself to transcend our current reality. In this way, Writing the Self helps create “meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience” in order to “sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence” (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 274).

My choice to engage in Writing the Self is also to make explicit the countless ways our personal experiences as researchers influence the research process. I am thinking here of Sofia Villenas’ (1996) seminal article “The Colonizer/Colonized Chicana Ethnographer: Identity, Marginalization, and Co-optation in the Field,” where she recounts her struggle to research the educational experiences of Latina mothers who were recent immigrants in a small rural community in North Carolina as a first-generation Chicana researcher from Los Angeles. Even though Villenas (1996) went in with the best
intentions, she learned that there was an expectation that her research (as someone with the same ethnicity of the subject matter) would help explain the “Latino Problem” of that area. What Villenas’ critical introspection taught me is that we as researchers must always be mindful of the ways in which our research affects communities. For me, a part of that mindfulness is being very clear and explicit about how we approach our work in the first place.

For example, as researchers, we decide who, what, when, where, and how to research. As Ellis et al. (2010) suggest:

These decisions can be tied to institutional requirements (e.g., Institutional Review Boards), resources (e.g., funding), and personal circumstance (e.g., a researcher studying cancer because of personal experience with cancer) … Even though some researchers still assume that research can be done from a neutral, impersonal, and objective stance (Atkinson, 1997; Buzard, 2003; Delamont, 2009) most now recognize that such an assumption is not tenable (Bochner, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Rorty, 1982). Consequently, autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist. (p. 274)

Allowing myself to speak through my research is necessary as it creates an intimate and familial quality to how I attempt to process the world. As Indigenous and Environmental Scholars Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie (2015) explain, this is a crucial time to write about place “because we write from and into the overlapping contexts of globalization and neoliberalism, settler colonialism, and environmental degradation” (xiv).

My dissertation is both personal and political. What we do in our interpersonal lives ripples out to affect the larger society (and vice versa). Scholar/activists like Juanita Nelson (1988), bell hooks (1999), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), Vandana Shiva (2011), Gandhi, and Paulo Freire (1970) have all taught me that you make the path by walking. For me, cultivating and living out an educational philosophy of simplicity is the path I have chosen. My journey is rooted in decolonial methodologies and practices (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Sandoval, 2000; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Tuhiwai
Smith, 1999). The decolonial work of the scholars of color I cite understand that knowledge formation is a mode of resistance and, as such, they give voice to a narrative inquiry that traditional methodological approaches cannot capture.

**Positionality**

I write in honor of all my displaced African sisters, brothers, ancestors and kin who struggle to find a place to call home

May our resilient, loving hearts be our guiding light through the darkness

I write in honor of the Tongva Nation a people of the earth\(^{27}\) whose spirits cared for each other and this land for thousands of years this land which we now call “Los Ángeles.”
The place where I was born
the place where I call home

May my being serve to rekindle our ancient wisdoms.

As a first-generation Afrolatino born in Los Angeles, I often feel like a native outsider. Am I home or am I trespassing on the ancestral home of the Tongva peoples? It is a complicated question, but one necessary to contemplate. Our positionalities are the critical foundations from which we grow our narratives. As critical race theorists understand very well, a central tenet to upholding a critical race framework is the author’s willingness to also be explicit about her or his own positionality in order to fully engage in transformational resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Villenas, 1996). But what does that mean in the twenty-first century when many of us who have committed our lives to transformational resistance don’t know where we come from? We are all native of somewhere; we all have roots in some place. But we live in an era in which knowledge about where we come from, what

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our ancestral stories are, where our roots lie is fuzzy at best. For people of color and marginalized peoples, our narrative in many cases has been systematically erased from memory: mothers and fathers taken from their children, women raped in front of the people they love, an entire system of ‘education’ crafted to “Christianize,” “tame” and eliminate the “savage” from within (Thaman, 2003; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Across history there are countless moments where our roots, our stories were intentionally distorted, broken, erased and made criminal for us to even remember.

For at least the last century, scholars of color and scholars of consciousness have spoken and written out against these injustices—namely the domination of thoughts, languages, and ideas. My aim is to have the courage to not see the world through the lenses of coloniality. Instead, I want to move my mind, body, and spirit to live, create, and recreate an educational paradigm of love and justice. I want to think from another reality—one based in love, courage, compassion and sacrifice and struggle. The will to move my mind, body and spirit towards a living framework\(^{28}\) of simplicity is at the heart of my dissertation process. Simplicity creates a path for us to peel away the layers of socialization that keep us trapped in a worldview that we did not create nor that we agree with.

As a student of color, my racial position is inextricably linked to my environmental one; the same types of supremacist ideologies that allow for the dehumanization of people of color are the same type of supremacist ideologies that allow for the oppression of all non-human beings (Cronon, 1983; MacKenzie, 1997; Jensen, 2006; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). As such, Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) have had an unparalleled impact on my ability to understand my racial and

\(^{28}\) Living framework is my way of expressing a theoretical understanding based in conscious actions and movement like simple living, or naming injustice, speaking out your truth with love and being courageous enough to listen to and understand other people’s truths to build positive communities together.
cultural positionality in the context of environmental justice. This is why I have chosen to question, critique, and challenge the manner and methods in which race, class, power, nature, and privilege shape the ways in which people decide to live (Freire, 2004; Gadotti, 2010; Kosek, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009).

Decolonization is possible and it is incredibly necessary. To decolonize is to work from the inside out. For me, this means a constant interplay between self, community and home. I am actively and intentionally speaking from place and with purpose as a tangible way of bringing the conversation home. I draw on Delgado Bernal’s (2001) “pedagogies of home” and place-based indigenous epistemologies as a source for understanding the need to speak and act from where I am and not generalize on where I am not. Even though Delgado Bernal is speaking specifically about Chicana students, her conceptualization of “pedagogies of the home” resonates with me because she explores the tools and strategies Chicana students use “for daily survival” within an educational system that often excludes and silences them. Delgado Bernal explains:

> The communication, practices and learning that occur in the home and community, what I call pedagogies of the home, often serve as a cultural knowledge base that helps Chicana college students negotiate the daily experiences of sexist, racist, and classist microaggressions. Pedagogies of the home provide strategies of resistance that challenge the educational norms of higher education and the dominant perceptions held about Chicana students. (p. 624)

As I previously mentioned, critical, decolonial, love-centered knowledge creation does exist in the margins of higher education discourse, namely in fields and disciplines like Ethnic Studies, Black Studies, Native American Studies, Chicano Studies, Asian American Studies, Gender & Women’s Studies, “Dis”ability Studies (Wendell, 1989).²⁹

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²⁹ I put “dis”ability in quotes because, as Susan Wendell (1989) states, to label someone “disabled” is an act of “Othering.” Wendell suggests that “we need a theory of disability. It should be a social and political theory, because disability is largely socially-constructed, but it has to be more than that; any
Additionally, Critical Food Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Critical Peace & Conflict Studies, Critical Geography and so on push back against dominant forms of oppression and actively question the ways in which the institutions of higher education at large actively participate in unjust practices. These marginalized disciplines provide us with needed forms of thinking, theorizing and understanding the world. Often, it is because of their marginality that these academic disciplines question ‘conventional’ wisdom, unpack power and privilege, and provide alternative ways of contextualizing our his-and her-stories. For instance, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and U.S. system of slavery is a part of K-12 curriculum in the U.S., however, rarely are students given the tools to understand the lasting psychological effects of U.S. chattel slavery, especially on people of color. If it were not for these disciplines, there would be little to no mention of how slavery was, and continues to be, part and parcel of U.S. oppression and domination.

**Students of Color as Holders and Creators of Knowledge**

Educators and intellectuals of color dialogue and grapple a great deal with the “credibility” of our work, pedagogical styles, cultural references, content material, and curriculum. Dolores Delgado Bernal (2002) explains, “Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings” (p. 106). As scholars of color, our very being in the academy is deep understanding of disability must include thinking about the ethical, psychological and epistemic issues of living with disability . . . Encouraging everyone to acknowledge, accommodate and identify with a wide range of physical conditions is ultimately the road to self-acceptance as well as the road to liberating those who are disabled now. Ultimately, we might eliminate the category of ‘the disabled’ altogether, and simply talk about individuals’ physical abilities in their social context. For the present, although ‘the disabled’ is a category of ‘the other’ to the able-bodied, for that very reason it is also a politically useful and socially meaningful category to those who are in it. Disabled people share forms of social oppression, and the most important measures to relieve that oppression have been initiated by disabled people themselves. Social oppression may be the only thing the disabled have in common; our struggles with our bodies are extremely diverse” (pp. 105–108).
political. Our sense of self and articulation of the world around us is often contested and dismissed as something that ‘does not belong to the academy’ (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Implicitly and explicitly, we are often taught to accept dominant ideologies which have historically subjugated and marginalized students of color.

When students of color speak, talk, write, read, we often do so feeling the weight of our oppression and the violence that has been enacted against us. When I think, I do so feeling my own subjectivity and I choose now to not run from it. Paulo Freire (1970) asserts: “Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle” (p. 24). Because people of color know oppression intimately, we are in a unique position to imagine a world beyond the violence we endure, or what Freire articulates as a “fuller humanity.”

Radical transformation is born of the struggle for a fuller humanity—one that not only loves and respects the human in others, but one that also loves and respects the non-human world as part of our humanity. We must actively disrupt the ways in which we are conditioned to think and act because, if we do not, then we become complicit in our oppression and in the oppression of others (Stovall, 2016). This personal journey for an educational philosophy and practice that embraces a fuller humanity is the reason why I approach this work as a critical philosophical exploration. Engaging in this specific form of qualitative research enables me to embrace methods that move my research forward.

**Methods that Move Me Forward**

So far, I have identified seven approaches that guide my research process: (a) archival, narrative and text analysis, (b) storywork, personal narratives and testimonios, (c) resistance, (d) critical
self-reflection, (e) intuition, (f) place-based epistemology and placemaking, and (g) art and poetry. Each of these methodologies help guide my cultivation of a philosophy and practice rooted in simplicity. All of these approaches do not exist alone or in isolation; they are part of a greater whole that informs my thoughts and actions. While they may each have distinctive attributes, these methodological practices and modes of inquiry are not mutually exclusive—they are all pieces of a larger puzzle.

(a) Archival, Narrative and Text Analysis

So much has been documented in the struggle for liberation, justice, and freedom; yet, much of this work remains in the shadows of dominant discourse and ideology within higher education. Through archives, narrative, and text analysis I unearth sources of information that tell a different story about how to understand liberation, justice, and freedom. I intend to study and analyze primary and secondary sources that relate to simplicity, philosophy, decoloniality, education, and practice as a way for me to hold them together and cultivate a new path forward.

(b) Storywork, Narratives, and Testimonios

Storywork, narratives, and testimonios are methodological approaches that give voice to people and experiences that are often omitted from the research process (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). It is the narrative of storytelling as a way to redefine what the world is and guide your life by that new understanding. As Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona (2012) outline, testimonios serve as both methodology and product. Giving testimony is a form of “oral history [where] participants critically reflect on their personal experience” (p. 634). However, testimonios also calls the researcher to “challenge objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression or resistance” (p. 363). What this does is create a space of alternative possibility for me as the researcher, a space to define my story and work to remap the geopolitics of knowledge in this country.
(c) Resistance

As I mentioned in the introduction, simplicity allows for inner/outer works of resistance and healing. In my attempt to be mindful of the thoughts and actions I take, I plan to engage in resistance through mindful material consumption and reflection. A part of that mindfulness is learning to let go. Every material possession we have in our lives has a story—it came from somewhere; it was made by someone. Who made it? Where did it come from? What has it taken in order for us to have it? As we question, we begin to see how each and every thing we have is a reflection of our participation in the world around us. By releasing the things that do not align with our morals or principles we are actively resisting what we do not condone.

Simplicity is a personal and political commitment to resist against the many, and often invisible, forms of oppression. Forms of oppression which are largely rooted in how we live. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the water we drink, the organizations, companies and/or corporations we support, all speak to larger values we condone. I strive to achieve (and embody) simplicity in mind, body and spirit as a way to commit myself to the daily acts of resistance and affirmation. It is a symbiotic, organic set of principles and conscious decisions that I make to leave this Earth better than I was born into it. I will resist by abstaining, speaking out and moving against the tide of materially-driven, consumer capitalist economies that often abuse and enslave people and planet in order to make profit. Resistance, by nature, is very difficult—especially when it goes against an ingrained sense that that we can consume and create without limits, without consideration of the non-human, without thinking of a restorative ecology of our thoughts and action. On the other hand, simplicity is an affirmation that gives us the power to consciously choose what we do with our resources (time, money, talents, expertise and so on).
(d) Critical Self-Reflection

Critical self-reflection is my commitment to constantly question my own assumptions, beliefs and ways I create meaning out of situations (Dewey, 1933). Since radical transformation involves being able to understand where (and how) someone moves from one idea to another, critical self-reflection is an important skill for facilitating transitions by allowing myself to re/assess or alter existing life structures. Critical self-reflection is different from other types of reflection because the person needs to understand the assumptions that govern their actions and actively question what that means in order to create alternative ways of thinking and acting.

In the context of simplicity, engaging in critical self-reflection will help me step back from the formal learning experience I gained through school and engage in deeper and more meaningful learning opportunities. By reflecting critically on the roots of my thoughts and actions, I commit to constantly challenging myself—my assumptions, positionality, feelings and actions.

(e) Intuition

In 1998, Dolores Delgado Bernal sought to challenge “epistemological racism” in educational research by critiquing conventional notions of objectivity and universal foundations of knowledge for erasing the specific intersectionality and location of Chicana experiences. Although I am not a Chicana, Delgado Bernal (1998) put forth an ideal she termed “cultural intuition” as a way to name a complex process that acknowledges the unique viewpoints that, in this case, many Chicana scholars bring to the research process. For me, it is the unique perspective that I bring as an AfroLatino born in Los Angeles who constantly thinks about the nexus between social and environmental justice in the context of education. Delgado Bernal (1998) maintains that cultural intuition is a “complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic” (p. 567). She goes on to explain that cultural intuition can be achieved and nurtured through our personal experiences that are
influenced by ancestral wisdom, community memory, and intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994).

As I move to create my own path in educational discourse. My footing rest on the intuitive nature of our being that Dolores Delgado Bernal so poignantly described in 1998. In this way, I seek to continue that work with a specific focus on simplicity as a decolonial philosophy and practice that also challenges epistemic forms of oppression of both the human and non-human.

**(f) Place-based Epistemology and Place-making**

Place-based epistemology and place-making is a methodology that encourages a deep curiosity of where you are. As I mentioned above, notions of home are central to how I think about justice; however, “home” is a contentious issue. Where is my home? Do I belong here? If so, what is my responsibility to my community and kin? Place-making is a methodological approach that is deeply concerned with the geography and spatiality of a specific location. Place-making helps unpack how we make sense of “What happened here?” instead of looking at “What happened then?” (Deloria, 2003, p. 121). In this way, place-making is an act of re-storying, re-mapping, and re-imagining multiple stories and possibilities (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

I focus on UCLA because Los Angeles is my home and I have been in graduate school at UCLA since 2011. Situating myself in this place allows me to address how the complex, and often traumatic, legacy of colonization persists. By drawing on critical works on the margins, I want to help create and re/imagine the possibilities of a decolonial philosophy and practice of higher education. As I shared earlier, what draws me to the work I do is the belief in the transformative qualities of higher education. However, those qualities are rare given they only exist within the margins of higher education discourse. UCLA, and universities in general, are commonly understood as the intellectual bases for our society but, as I have already stated, this “intellect” is built on a sinking foundation. A great deal of the campus today is built of bricks. All the bricks are the same, and in their sameness
symbolize the genealogy of campus. Each monotonous red brick is emblematic of the homogenous thought guiding our university system today. The university as a place is often made ahistorical, so that students forget and do not question the problematic circumstances that continue to re/create the university in the land of the rising sun.

**Art and Poetry**

It is my belief that there is something deeply spiritual in the ascetics, rhythms and vibrations. Often in my life it was a poem, a painting, a song or a dance that could express my deepest feelings (in a way that academic rationalization and reasoning often failed to capture). I am not trying to imply that academic work is not art but, rather, that most scholars and academics do not view themselves as artists or allow what they create to be full expressions of their soul. There is a simple complexity that surfaces when we choose to tap into the essence of our existence; the beauty, pain, love and struggle to hold onto that which we hold most dear.

Being able to express my own emotions and convictions in a clear and compelling way is my art as a scholar. I consider my craft poetic prose. Through my words, I assert my own humanity in the way I move the pen and the pen moves me.

I start to think and then I sink
Into the paper like I was ink
When I’m writing, I’m trapped in between the lines,
I escape when I finish the rhyme
I got soul
(Eric B. & Rakim, 1987; Mos Def, 1999)

In this exploration, I seek to re/story and unpack why our dominant way of educating, thinking, theorizing and acting must change. As issues like climate change, drought, racism, sexism and classism and materialism continue to grip our psyche, the need to critically examine the toxic legacy of colonization and oppression within our educational landscapes grows greater and greater.
I breathe in
the toxicity of a world that seeks to define us as tools of empire
I breathe out
the strength and resilience of my existence

Like the trees
I breathe back oxygen
I breathe back life.

Critical, Decolonial, Revolutionary, Planetary Love (CDRPL)

In this chapter I offer an explanation of my working theoretical framework. My theory is connected to my methods and methodology. This chapter exists to provide more specific clarity on how I visualize the intersections of social and environmental justice issues. My goal is to introduce you to my working theoretical approach and give you a sense of my worldview.

I come to this work from a place of love; a place that sees the university as a complex microcosm of larger, macro relations between people, politics and nature. The way many of us have learned to live our lives is often deeply woven in an oppressive, colonial fabric that attempts to create separation and hatred of one another. As such, our educational process is complicit in helping foster moral, ethical, spiritual, political, economic, environmental, biological, material practices that often keep us yearning for, and investing in, a world that is divisive, cold and lonely. This chapter is a cultivation of a theory that has the potential to transcend an ideology of self over others. In doing so, I aim to expand on the work and love of those who came before me to move towards an ideology that

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30 This is my “theory” which is inspired by the embodied theory/practice/spirit of Malidoma Patrice Somé in his heartfelt autobiography Of Water and the Spirit (1995).

31 Trees have the ability to breathe in carbon-dioxide—the leading cause of climate change—and transform carbon-dioxide into the life and oxygen we breathe. In this way, my work aspires to be like the trees.
understands the self in others, others in self, self as others, and others as self. Cultivating a decolonial philosophy and practice of simplicity is an on-growing will to understand that “I am, because you are” and you are because I am.” It is what my African ancestors know as “Ubuntu” and what my Mayan ancestors know as “In La’ech.” Tú eres mi otro yo [You are my other me] (Anzaldúa, 1999; Swanson, 2007, 2015; Valdez, 1990).

As a person who cares deeply about the actions that happen within (and radiate from) the university, I have a deep love and concern for how higher education chooses to engage in social, political and environmental issues. With that said, however, I fully understand that this engagement stems from the seeds of selfishness and superiority. Historically, universities have been exclusionary geopolitical sites where the knowledge and wisdom of our African and Indigenous ancestors was systematically erased and dismissed as backwards and hedonistic. However, there has also been active resistance to this way of thinking and being.

My ancestors, my elders and kin shed blood, sweat and tears to bring in, validate, and give credence to all the oppressed of the world. Like Assata Shakur (1987) testified in her autobiography, “…where there is oppression, there will be resistance” (p. 184). And it was in higher education that I came to understand my place in this resistance. Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley opened my eyes for the first time to the legacy of those who struggled for liberation and freedom before me. That experience of coming into consciousness forever changed me. I needed to find a way to exist that challenged oppression while simultaneously working to end the way in which I oppressed others. This is how I ultimately came to align with simplicity as a decolonial philosophy and practice of liberation. In both my inner-personal and political life, simplicity encourages and enables me to embody a life ethic of justice and equality. I believe that cultivating an education based in the teachings of our ancestors can
be a source of growth, transcendence and liberation for us all. However, since this is not what the university is, this dissonance fundamentally changed my perception of the university.

Colleges and universities are places that exist within the colonial residue of oppression. Our intellectual soil is severely depleted. No matter how hard we try to sow seeds of transformational resistance (if we continue to ignore the health of the Earth that our intellect derives from) we will be unable to bare fruits of change and r/evolution because the very epistemic foundations of our reality are not (themselves) questioned. We need to work and tend to the soil—that which cocoons our seeds of resistance—in order to cultivate places where justice, equality and transformation can take root. The following is my own adaptation of Pablo Neruda’s (1960) “Sonnet XVII” to explain why:

I do not love the university as the answer to my prayers
or as a breath of fresh air
I love the university as certain dark things are to be loved,
out loud, between the embers of the sun and the soul.

I love higher education as a plant waiting to bloom
but carries in it the light of hidden flowers.

I love knowing
how and when and from where
never being afraid to ask why

I love with a straightforward simplicity
because I know that
where oppressed living beings exist,
a truly just liberating place cannot.
(Tróchez, 2016)

The only way to heal the deep ancestral wounds of our past is to acknowledge and work through them with deep critical love and compassion.

I have spent the last ten years of my life trying to change educational institutions from within, but they are institutions and, as such, will never be able to cultivate the seeds of liberation because their very being is to serve power through oppression—a vision which is antithetical to the aims of
liberation (Césaire, 1972; Fanon, 1967; Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2008). As you attempt to incite change from within, what we see is that the educational system coopts and commodifies the struggle for freedom instead of allowing it to take root and flourish on its own. What we need is a way of educating that transcends the oppressive roots of higher education and enables a decolonial philosophy and consciousness. To me, what this means is having the courage to let go. Let go of oppressive belief systems, let go of convention, let go of norms and protocol and, instead, rest on our intuition of what is right and just. Simplicity allows us to nurture this type of life ethic, to approach the many chasms of the world with love, and to choose to walk a different path.

As such, it is necessary for me to create a philosophical paradigm that can help guide the day-to-day art of living, while encouraging us to strive to understand the significance of the intimate and collective decisions that we make. Do our decisions affirm life or work against it? Do they build community or enslave others? Once we begin to question, reflect in the nature around us, and listen to our bodies, the way forward becomes clearer.

Simplicity is a decolonial philosophy and practice of love; it is an expression of the synergy between the sacred teachings of the inter/intra connections between the deserts, forests, mountains, rivers, trees birds, insects, microorganisms and humanity. Simplicity is about getting to the essence of what brings purpose, fulfillment and happiness into our lives. We are all connected and our actions are powerful enough to re/define our experiences on Earth if we choose to act as conduits of social/environmental change. However, for far too long, our thoughts and actions have been governed by a monoculture of being. We have been trapped by a dominant worldview that willfully proclaims dominion over the Earth and systematically erases the knowledges of marginalized peoples of color around the world. What we are left with is a narrow definition of what it means to be human in the twenty first century. We are taught (implicitly and explicitly) to value a way of being that is not
our own. In this worldview, “value” is measured through money, material wealth and high levels of consumption (McKibben, 2007). Historically, more is always better and better is always more. There never seems to be enough and we seem unaware or unconcerned with the ‘external cost’ of our values, moralities and overall lifestyles. Slave labor, child labor, clear cutting, mineral depletion, nuclear proliferation and the existence of perpetual war are rarely a consideration of the masses because our very belief system is predicated on the existence of these destructive forces.

Beverly Tatum (1997) explains so poetically:

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of [oppression] as a moving walkway at the airport. Active [oppressive] behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt… Passive [oppressive] behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active [oppression] ahead of them, and choose to turn around… But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively [anti-oppressive]—they will find themselves carried along with the others. (p. 12)

We are the people on Tatum’s proverbial moving walkway and we have choices to make. We cannot continue to think, act and participate in society in the same way that got us to where we are, and that is taking us to where we are inevitably headed. We need to overgrow the systems of oppression that govern our day-to-day lives and actively work to shine light into the darkest corners of our collective narrative. It starts with slowing down and paying attention to where we are and what we fundamentally value. This is the call of understanding simplicity as a decolonial philosophy and practice of liberation.

Though the social and environmental fabric of society may often seem to be hopelessly unraveling before us, our opportunity to live in honor of those which we love is not. We can collectively peel back the layers of injustice and the heart-breaks of our past and present by invoking a wisdom which, in many ways, has been largely forgotten by modernity—we need to invoke the wisdom of the elements.
The Wisdom of the Elements

In 1993, scholar, author, activist and ecofeminist, Starhawk wrote a novel entitled *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. Her story, although fiction, is based in deeply philosophical questions about morality and purpose which face us today. She opens her novel with a declaration of “the four sacred things.” This declaration is a powerful and poetic articulation of the elements which are at the heart of how I ground my own educational philosophy and practice. Starhawk writes:

The earth is a living, conscious being. In company with cultures of many different times and places, we name these things as sacred: air, fire, water, and earth.

Whether we see them as the breath, energy, blood, and body of the Mother, or as the blessed gifts of a Creator, or as symbols of the interconnected systems that sustain life, we know that nothing can live without them.

To call these things sacred is to say that they have a value beyond their usefulness for human ends, that they themselves become the standards by which our acts, our economics, our laws, our purposes must be judged. No one has the right to appropriate them or profit from them at the expense of others. Any government that fails to protect them forfeits its legitimacy.

All people, all living things, are part of the earth life, and so are sacred. No one of us stands higher or lower than any other. Only justice can assure balance: only ecological balance can sustain freedom. Only in freedom can that fifth sacred thing that we call spirit flourish in its full diversity.

To honor the sacred is to create conditions in which nourishment, sustenance, habitat, knowledge, freedom and beauty can thrive. To honor the sacred is to make love possible.

To this we dedicate our curiosity, our will, our courage, our silences, and our voices. To this we dedicate our lives. (n.p.)

In a similar way, my educational philosophy grows from the natural complexity of all matter. Earth, water, wind and fire are the four elements that are the essence and creation of life. They have been recognized and honored for thousands of years by many different peoples from all over the world as the source of our existence (MacAuley, 2010). The ancient civilizations of the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, China, India, and Tibet, all invoked these elements in their own unique ways of understanding the significance and sacredness of life’s most precious gift. Even though they may be
honored differently, one belief is present in all communities: Earth, water, wind, and fire serve as a grounding force connecting us all to the sacred rhythms of life.

If we are ever to develop a way of knowing that transcends the hierarchies of oppression which rule our everyday lives, it needs to be based in the understanding that we are all interconnected. It is a wisdom that is shared by many different peoples from around the world. For example, the Bantu peoples of South Africa have a philosophy of humanity and the universal connections we share. It’s called Ubuntu, which means “I am, because you are.” Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2012) explains:

Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human…You share what you have. It is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong in a bundle of life. We say, “A person is a person through other persons.” It is not, “I think therefore I am.” It says rather: “I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.” A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 31)

In this manner, Ubuntu is a philosophical orientation toward the whole, instead of towards the individual. Many indigenous philosophies have this orientation and greater understanding. Lilla Watson is an example of that collective consciousness. Watson is a Murri woman who is indigenous of what we now think of as present-day Australia. She is often credited with saying, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (Spoken at the 1985 UN Decade for Women Conference in Nairobi). It is a way of being that contradicts the Cartesian philosophies I critiqued in the introduction.

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32 Lilla Watson spoke these words but she remains uncomfortable being credited for something that she believes had been born of a collective struggle of the Aboriginal Activists group that she was a part of in Queensland, Australia in the 1970s.
My educational philosophy reflects the wisdom of human/nature— inseparable and yet distinct, diverse and yet connected. Invoking the elements of the Earth as my theoretical bases is my own attempt to rekindle the sacred parts of our learning that have been erased by an arrogant supposition that we were ever greater than each other or the Earth which sustains us (Shahjahan, Wagner, & Wane, 2009). As such, my philosophy is grounded in the simplicity of human/nature as a way to glean from the sacred teachings of life and, ultimately, transcend the culture of domination and oppression that has gripped us all for so long. When we understand ourselves through the four elements, we actively align our spirit, our fifth sacred essence, with the spirit of life.

**Path to Transformational Resistance**

In thinking about how I was going to organize this project, I reflected on the linear ways in which scholars often choose to organize and articulate their work. There is a constant emphasis on measure and replicability. The truth is often measured through formulas and algorithms like linear regressions. Often empirical research is ahistorical and largely operates in silos based on discipline of training. Because of this, the end result tends to be research that omits and/or generalizes the past and is not in conversation with other fields doing similar work. Our collective realities are governed by narrow, incomplete and (often) misleading ideas about how we should live our lives and which direction to take. As Cecile Andrews (1997) puts it, “[These] conventional routes have led us to a barren landscape” (xix). I yearned for ways to express the cyclical nature of life. I yearned for a way to express the lessons of times forgotten to inform what is to be the way forward. What kept recurring

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33 Human/nature is my way of explaining a worldview that sees the wisdom of humanity and the wisdom of nature as one. I do not see our consciousness as people of this earth as separate from the consciousness of the earth itself. That is to say—I see a profound interplay and communion between the human/nature continuum.
to me was the four elements—Earth, water, wind and fire—as a way to theorize transformational resistance. The simple clarity that they embody can help us make sense of our lives.

**The Elements of My Philosophy**

I envision my philosophy as a gathering. Each circle represents a specific element. Circles represent the unity of place, space and time; they also represent the cyclical nature of life which has no beginning or end. Circles represent my vision of higher education as a gathering of spirits, as equals trying to piece together the meanings which move us to think, act, and love in better ways. Each intersecting circle represents a different element which, to me, represents the different phases of how people come into consciousness and move into action. I moved away from the symbol of life as a journey to a symbol of life as a gathering. Below is how I visualize my working theoretical framework:

![Diagram of the Elements of My Philosophy](image)

Figure 5. Philosophical & Theoretical Framework.
First is **Tierra (the Earth)** which represents deeply held beliefs that we share about the ways of the world. Earth is my way of grounding the deep-rooted dilemmas of colonization and oppression. It is in the Earth that we can tangibly see, feel and, ultimately, strive to understand the ways in which the legacy of colonization and oppression continues to ripple in our thoughts, beliefs and actions.

As we grow closer in our understandings of history, we invoke **Agua (the Water)** as a way to place ourselves within the long arc of human history and it represents the reflection of our personal life within a larger political context. The process of critical self-reflection and contemplation brings about clarity and vision for the world that could be. In the water we are able to see our own reflection in the mirror of life. We are able to ask ourselves to what extent do our beliefs align with our actions and to what extent are we complicit in maintaining systems of inequality. These are all questions that the water encourages us to ask.

The more that we engage in a process of critical self-reflection, the more we are able to have a clearer vision for the future we wish to see. **Viento (the Wind)** represents the clouds of our deepest imaginations. The wind carries in it the spirit of the world our hearts know is possible; it is an expression of the radical imaginary that inspires and excites us as we continue to build a world of love and justice. The wind defies logic and convention because it is a vision of a world yet to exist. As energy the wind embodies an excitement and joy in figuring out how to make these thoughts a reality. As such, the wind creates an inner spark in our soul.

As we actively create these radical visions, our beings begin to move to the beat of a different rhythm. We are no longer herded towards mindlessly embracing a worldview that does not reflect that which we yearn for. Although, we continue to live in society, we do so with greater clarity, conviction and purpose. This feeling gives us **Fuego (the Fire)** that moves us into action. The fire, then,
represents the power to transform our social conditions and relations through conscious acts. The fire is movement and dance. As our flame burns, we shine light for others. As this process unfolds, we undoubtedly become attracted to the fire in others—and so the fire grows.

What brings these four elements together (the dot in the middle of the four intersecting circles) is the *Espíritu (the Spirit)*. The spirit of life is what brings the clarity, focus and purpose that allow us to think and act in ways that cultivate justice.

In these ways my working theoretical framework is also my personal commitment to a lifelong process of decolonization. These elements are five sacred aspects of my being that intersect, overlap, and converse between each other in ways that are constantly evolving. They are how I choose to actively make sense (and meaning) of the world around me. In the process of dissertating, la Tierra, Agua, Espíritu, Viento y Fuego will guide how I move to co-create an educational paradigm that sows seeds of life.

My work is an act of resistance. It is an embodied reflection of a long legacy of scholar/activists, past and present, who have written and live(d) their lives challenging the Euro/Western-centric domination of land, water, body and soul. My work draws its strength from those who struggle for liberation and justice. Simplicity is at the center of my resistance. In mind, body and spirit simplicity for me has become a process of liberation. Through the art, philosophy and practice of simplicity we actively re(connect) with all that affirms life in our own way. Simplicity is not dogma; it is a set of moral/ethical principles which help guide the practice of living a resilient and restorative life. It is a way to align *what we know and understand* with *how we live with (and in) the world*. Simplicity is an embodied form of decolonial resistance; one that acts against all forms of oppression and injustice through careful attention, empathy and care.
My philosophy and practice of simplicity is grounded in these sacred elements. Each one is a teacher of life and is given a chapter of its own. Tierra gives way to Agua; Agua gives way to Viento; and Viento gives way to Fuego in the great circle of knowing.

Figure 6. Duality of Forces.

The circles and cyclical nature of this diagram also highlight the ways in which these elements are mirror opposites of one another; they are a duality of forces that are opposites. Together, however, they create balance and harmony. I dissected my philosophical depiction in the above diagram to help illustrate this point. Tierra, the Earth and the Ground, is opposite the Viento, the Wind and the Sky. In the same way, the Agua, the Water, the Fluid is opposite the Fuego, the Fire, the Catalyst. They are forces pulling in the opposite direction and only create balance where they meet. Transcendent visions of the future that exist in the Wind, require a deep understanding of past and memory that exists in the Earth. Likewise, if we yearn for our actions to be the Fire and light that moves our values, we need the reflective nature of the Water that offers us a window into who we are.

The chapters to come all delve into the sacred teachings of the Earth. Each represents a vital lesson in the process of becoming. Like the seasons, each of us experience all of these lessons. Earth to Water; Water to Wind; Wind to Fire. The Fire leads back to Earth. My hope is that we engage them all with the respect they deserve.
TIERRA | EARTH

With that from the Earth
beauty I will create.
With that beauty
my soul I will give.
(Peña, 1982)

planting seeds of domination only grows plants of inequality
deply rooted in a forgotten past.

to cultivate an educational philosophy and practice rooted in love and justice
we must toil with the human condition
because
it is the only way to create fertile soil

like the Earth
we must with care uproot deep rooted ideas
about who we are and why we’re here
we must dig and break
the compacted fragments of foreign, controlled narratives
to make place for the fullness
that
we embody
that
we inhabit

like the Earth
we must turn up
the more we turn up
the more life seeps in from the cracks

making way for life to begin anew
sprouting consciousness
that will help
overgrow the system

(Tróchez, 2014)

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34 Amado Peña is an Artisan of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Arizona.
BETWEEN BEASTS AND BUTTERFLIES: THE DECOLONIAL IMPERATIVE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE END OF EMPIRE

La Tierra, the Earth, represents deeply held beliefs that we share about the ways of the world. Earth is my way of grounding the deep-rooted dilemmas of colonization and oppression. In theory, higher education gives us the ability to take pause and be fully present with the long arc of history; it gives us places (and moments in time) where we can sit with and contemplate the past, allowing it to resonate with us today. It creates an environment where we can think, question, critique, and challenge ideologies and belief systems that harm and, I suggest, actively seek to control/enslave the non-white, non-human world. Higher education allows us to understand ourselves in relation to all else and moves us to live in better ways. However, as many critical and decolonial scholars have shown, the dominant purpose of higher education is largely about how we fit, or assimilate, into the larger society. Education has become more a quest for power and privilege and less a process of critical/compassionate acknowledgements, reflections, epiphanies, growths, and transformations. As such, the full possibilities and beauty of a decolonizing, consciousness-raising education cannot be realized within this paradigm (Grosfoguel, 2012; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2012; Quijano, 2000, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). We need ways of relating—of communing, of gathering, of filling our spirit with life—and these ways grow from the Earth.

As a reminder, my ultimate aim is to plant the seeds of a different way to live, breathe, and commune with the world. It is a process of becoming; of becoming something beyond the traps and traumas of imperialism, white supremacy, and consumer-capitalist patriarchy (Collins, 1990; Grosfoguel, 2007; hooks, 1999; Levis Morales, 1998; Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2008). In the Earth we can tangibly see, feel and, ultimately, strive to understand the ways in which the legacy of colonization and oppression continue to ripple in our thoughts, beliefs, and actions. I begin with the
Earth because it is my way to tangibly make present the consequences of imperialism, white supremacy, and consumer-capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1999). The Earth is the beginning—without an actual sense of what is happening, how can we reflect on our involvement (and perhaps investment) in the destructive nature of systems of control, domination, and oppression that continue to be the essence of U.S. life in the twenty-first century? If we do not understand the past, how can we craft an alternative vision for the future? How do we act, without having our actions further perpetuate colonization and oppression? We must begin with the Earth, because the Earth is our home—it is our roots, our lineage, our biology, our chemistry, our past, our present, our future. Without the Earth, we do not exist. We can give our lives towards improving the human condition, but if our “human condition” does not also serve to restore, heal, liberate, and ultimately cultivate love and interrelations with the non-human, then we will perish. What good will it be to embrace our different worldviews and belief systems if our actions poison the food we eat and the water we drink? What good will it be to strive for social harmony or utopia, if the air becomes so polluted that we cannot breathe? As our ancestors wisely warned in a Cree Proverb, “Only when the last tree has died, and the last river has been poisoned, and the last fish has been caught, will we realize that we cannot eat money.” The Earth is my way of grounding both the ideological and material consequences of the all-consuming dominant power structures that alter our moralities and actions.

**Guía de la Tierra**

This chapter is dedicated to the Earth. As such, it lays out the deep-rooted and complex dilemma that exists within higher education. I explore this dilemma by tackling both the dark and light within education. Because this chapter unpacks the roots, legacy, and lineage that continue to affect higher education discourse, I propose a different way of understanding the educational dilemma of higher education in the U.S. However, given that this chapter is a historical analysis of higher education, I will not fully get into a deep analysis of the role simplicity can play in thinking about a
philosophical way forward. As I conceive it, simplicity is a meditative response to the ethic and premise of domination and oppression that our society is based on. As such, simplicity will be the crux of the second half of this project—in Viento y Fuego—in the visions of the wind and action of the fire. This chapter’s purpose is twofold: to (a) steep us in the philosophical problem of higher education, and (b) decolonize education in order to overgrow a system of beliefs and worldviews that keep us trapped in toxic ways of living. This work is a commitment to a life-affirming, life-proliferating process stunted by the lust and arrogances of control, greed, and power.

La Tierra, the Earth, is the starting place. The Earth invites us to unpack, acknowledge, sit with, and understand the ways in which domination and oppression continue to be embodied through the very teachings of the Earth. Without laying bare how higher education is intimately implicated in colonial/imperial ideological expansion, we will be unable to think and act in ways that transcend this paradigm. As Marcus Garvey (1923) stated, “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” In order to cultivate a new educational philosophy that does not replicate the traps and traumas of the past, we must dig, break and tend to our soil; we must continue to unearth a haunting legacy that is made ever-present by the unwillingness to move beyond what currently exists.

We must be willing to listen; we must be willing to hear; we must be willing to engage the stories that live in the shadows of empire. Every day, marginalized voices make visible the countless ways control, exploitation, loss and (ultimately) death plague our communities (Jensen 2006; Perez, 1999; Shiva, 2005). Yet, we do not educate our society to recognize, deal with, or change the colonial legacy (our coloniality) that lives on through our thoughts and actions within the academy (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Wynter, 2003). As a society, we are caught in what many scholars term a “cultural amnesia” (Huyssen, 2000; Mills, 2015; Tejeda, Espinoza, & Gutierrez, 2003; Tuck & Yang,
2012; Young & Braziel, 2006)—unable to see the past, understand the present or change the future because our stories are perpetually erased from dominant discourse. We are caught between savage reinventions of oppression and the wondrous beauty of transformational resistance and consciousness. We are caught between beasts and butterflies.

**Grounding Tierra**

Beasts is my way to speak to the deep-rooted dilemmas of colonization and oppression that are embedded within the academy. I begin this chapter here because without an understanding of this history, an alternative educational paradigm cannot flourish. Therefore, we must intimately know, what I call, the nature of the beast in order to explain, define, and then explore the ways in which our educational system is a living manifestation of this beast.

The chapter then transitions to the butterfly because education itself is neither good nor bad, neither positive nor negative. Rather, I maintain that the beast exists only because our minds have been conditioned by white male sensibilities. Standardized schooling has forced, encouraged, and conditioned us to accept a narrow, incomplete, and singular narrative about the world and the purpose we should derive from our time here. As a result, any who live outside this narrative are systemically marginalized because our free spirit does not conform to a predetermined way of life that is toxic to the vast majority of us that live, breathe, drink, eat, and die in this world. That said, this does not need to be the case; education can be a source for powerful and positive metamorphosis and revolution of the spirit. The nature of the beast does not need to dominate us, and it cannot continue.

In contrast to beasts, butterflies represent beauty, growth, and wondrous transformations. Just as every butterfly was once a caterpillar, we too can evolve from one state of being to the next. A movement towards using education for liberation and justice is manifested in the wings of a being who, in the beginning, could not fly.
Many scholars have written about how higher education is often caught in between promise and peril (Altbach et al., 1999; Bowen & Cleck, 1977; Cohen, 2010; Thelin, 2004). While I understand the framing, I do not believe in its fundamental premise and assumption. Choosing to frame the dilemma as a matter of an institution’s ability to live up to its promises or not, can address only the “what?,” “how?,” and “to what extent?” What have institutions promised to do? What are they doing or teaching? How are they achieving what they said they would achieve? And, to what extent did these promises materialize? These types of questions, though descriptively helpful, are predicated on the unquestioned assumptions of “Why?” In doing so, we can never question, challenge, interrogate, or disrupt the cycle of violence underpinning the dominant philosophy of higher education in the United States.

As many decolonial and indigenous scholars seek to do, we must constantly question, challenge, interrogate, and disrupt why the ontological bases for our way of life consists solely of the thoughts and opinions of mostly white males (Grosfoguel, 2012). Why is it that heteropatriarchy, control, subjection, white supremacy—and by extension human supremacy—are such pillars of “democracy” and “freedom”? It is because this nation was born from the existence of all these things. Indigenous genocide, slavery, the transformation of natural ecosystems into raw materials, erasure, and miseducation were all fundamental in the creation of what we now call the United States of America (Jensen, 2006, 2011, 2016; Nelson, 1988; Smith, 2006). From the beginning, those in power have determined, defined, and remade the world after their imaginations. James Baldwin (1985) poetically articulates the dangers of embracing a dominant national imaginary like this in his essay “White Man’s Guilt”:

People who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves or the world. This is the place in which, it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is
mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence. (pp. 410–11)

The self-deception Baldwin describes is spread through the way we educate ourselves—especially in higher education, where much of our knowledge is born of the superiority complex that Baldwin explains. Because of this complex, we do not engage in ways of knowing, understanding, relating, acting, and existing beyond racist consumer-capitalist patriarchy. Every time we cloud and distort the past, we do so much harm to our present and future because the very thoughts that guide our actions are based in white supremacy. Therefore, the implicit expectation is that we—the non-male, non-white, non-human among us—assimilate and conform to a white standard of being to gain and maintain legitimacy. Because of this, I prefer to think of education as a medium suffering and stunted by a moral, ontological, and epistemological dilemma—a dilemma of the perspectives and unquestioned assumptions that systematically govern our lives.

Higher education today is not caught between promise and peril; it is caught between beasts and butterflies. Beasts engender feelings of fear, violence, cruelty, and barbarity while butterflies engender the beautiful, the complex and the transformational wonder of nature. But in all senses, what we choose to label “beast” or “butterfly” is often derived from a human-centric place of understanding. Can a beast not have beauty? Can a butterfly not be brutal? They can. This is not to say that we should now conflate cruelty and violence with beauty and wonder. Rather, it is a call to understand the subjective realities we often write and speak into existence and to be clear about them. The common articulations of what constitutes beasts and butterflies are so embedded in our society yet they only reflect our own dominant ontological gaze. By mainstream definitions, beasts are “animals.”

To me no animal is born a beast; the word beast is often imposed on whatever most frightens us—whatever we are most scared by. This fear then leads us to desperately find ways to justify the
“control of the beast.” After all, they are, by definition, below human. In our gaze, we are never the “beast,” the “violent,” the “afflicted,” or “that which must be extinguished.”

But what if we are the beasts?

Are we any less human?

Are we incapable of change?

The Nature of the Beast

Los envidio a ustedes. Ustedes norteamericanos tienen mucha suerte, ustedes están luchando la lucha más importante de todas—ustedes viven en el corazón de la bestia.

[I envy you. You North Americans are very lucky. You are fighting the most important fight of all—you live in the heart of the beast.] (Guevara, 1964)

In 1964, Ernesto Che Guevara came to the United States and met with a group of activists who admired and were envious of the 1959 Cuban Revolution which successful overthrew the right-wing dictatorship of then Presidente Fulgencio Batista and turned Cuba into a Socialist Democracy. But instead of taking praise for what Cubans had accomplished, Che said, “It is I who envy you. You North Americans are very lucky. You are fighting the most important fight of all—you live in the belly of the beast.” He said this because he knew and understood that the origins of the oppression felt on the island of Cuba stemmed from the colonial expansion of the United States. Batista was backed and funded by the U.S. to keep Cuba a subservient exporter of sugar cane to North America. Furthermore, Che understood well that the geopolitical roots of the imperial-disease lay in the psyche of a way of life based on greed and control.

It has been over 50 years since Che said those words and the U.S. continues to lust for control, greed, and power. As a result, we are living in unprecedented times in the story of humanity. Never before has the social, physical, chemical, biological, and climatic nature of our being changed so fast because of our actions. Yet, we largely continue to think from within the same bureaucratic, hegemonic boxes that only obstruct us from seeing and understanding the ramifications of our
actions. Many of us are stuck engaging with the world in ways that perpetuate only violence and oppression because we often cannot see past the cages in our mind.

As I have stated in previous chapters, the dominant philosophy of higher education that exists today stems from a belief that places whiteness as the center of a “universal” way of knowing and the human species as superior to all others we share the Earth with. What this is doing is continuing an ontological foundation based in the suppression, control, and ultimate eradication of every person, tree, plant, animal, insect, fungi, bacteria, and more that does not fit into this paradigm. Just by paying attention to what is happening socially, educationally, ecologically, economically, it becomes clear that this way of life is impossible.

The ethic and premise of dominion and oppression that exists within the United States is a problem, but it is one that many of us cannot (or choose not) to see. We are the terrorist, the menace, the abusive global force trying to control and micromanage the world’s “resources.” Yet, we do not admit it, address it, or educate ourselves to reckon with what we’ve become. Again, I find that James Baldwin aptly highlights the inner-workings of this terror, and how our collective notions, senses of realities and overall systems of reality are greatly distorted in this country (especially for people of color). This is what he testified in a debate titled “The American Dream and the American Negro” in 1965:

The Mississippi or Alabama sheriff, who really does believe, when he’s facing a Negro boy or girl, that this woman, this man, this child must be insane to attack the system to which he owes his entire identity. Of course, for such a person, [the American Dream is not at the expense of the American Negro]. And on the other hand, I have to speak as one of the people who’ve been most attacked by…the Western or European system of reality, what we call white supremacy…Now, what happens when that happens? Leaving aside all the physical facts that one can quote. Leaving aside, rape or murder. Leaving aside the bloody catalog of oppression, which we are in one way too familiar with already, what this does to the subjugated, the most private, the most serious thing this does to the subjugated, is to destroy his sense of reality…

It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, or 6, or 7, to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, when you were
rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians were you. It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and your identity, has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you…

By the time you are thirty, you have been through a certain kind of mill. And the most serious effect of the mill you’ve been through is, again, not the catalog of disaster, the policemen, the taxi drivers, the waiters, the landlady, the landlord, the banks, the insurance companies, the millions of details, twenty four hours of every day, which spell out to you that you are a worthless human being. It is not that. It’s by that time that you’ve begun to see it happening, in your daughter or your son, or your niece or your nephew.

You are thirty by now and nothing you have done has helped to escape the trap.35

What James Baldwin makes vividly clear is the endemic and widespread nature of how violence, fear and ignorance breaks apart our sense of reality. Through education, we are conditioned and socialized to adopt a belief system about life that only reinforces the cages in our minds and stops us from resisting a system seeking to have control and mastery over our lives. Baldwin describes the logical conclusion of Willy Lynch’s (1712) theory of “The Making of a Slave.” That after “breaking the beasts” consistently and systematically along as many lines of divisions as possible, they will become “inevitably” self-policing. This politics of divide and conquer also exist in our educational system—and it continues to thrive by virtue of the origins of how and for whom we educate. It is made visible in the political/ideological genealogies of thoughts of westernized universities. These universities only encompass the ontological worldview of White men from a few European countries. I will discuss this point with greater detail in the next section entitled “A Monoculture of Being in the Academy.”

The nature of the beast is as insidious as that which Aimé Césaire (1955, 1972) describes in Discourse on Colonialism. Colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, “to brutalize [them] in the true

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35 This was a historic debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr. at Cambridge University about the underpinnings of the so-called “American Dream” where they both debated this question: “Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?”
sense of the word, to degrade [them], to awaken [them] to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism” (p. 35). The nature of the beast is that by trying to tame, pacify and dominate the “other,” we only show the brutality in ourselves as we are unable to allow others to exist free. What am I getting at? I am getting at the same point that Césaire (1955, 1972) arrived at, which is that “no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization that is morally diseased” (p. 39). The nature of the beast is that it lurks in the shadows of our minds. It distorts our sense of what is possible because all that can exist is destruction and despair as colonization attempts to drain the living from their dignity and relationships, and turn them into material commodities and instruments of production.

A Monoculture of Being in the Academy

“Science” (knowledge and wisdom) cannot be detached from language; languages are not just ‘cultural’ phenomena in which people find their ‘identity’; they are also the location where knowledge is inscribed. And, since languages are not something human beings have but rather something of what human beings are, coloniality of power and of knowledge engendered the coloniality of being [colonialidad del ser]. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242)

Most institutions of higher education in the U.S. around the world are striving to achieve some measure of “progress.” However, such progress has come to be defined through research and development; this “R&D” is commonly understood as the engine that drives much of the research agendas, campus-community engagements, funding streams and commercial activities within universities (Nocella, Best, & McLaren, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Universities have become physical sites that foster and support the intellectual foundations that make global development possible. However, very little research explores the moral/ethical implications of development. Terms like “progress,” “development,” “modern,” and “high tech” are common, colloquial, and incredibly widespread in the academy as they are assumed to signal success and prosperity. Yet these terms allude to a material life fueled by deforestation, the burning of oil and coal, and the
marginalization of the majority of the world’s population. Because institutions of higher education promote and create knowledge that furthers these notions of progress, the academy actively contributes to a worldview that seeks dominion of people, plants, and animals. In short, this type of education reinforces the global restructuring of life on Earth.

Dominant models of higher education in the twenty-first century have been (and remain) both producers and consumers of this dominant paradigm of consumer-capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1999). Therefore, this intellectual process called “progress” is inextricably linked to power and violence by those who have set out to mold the world in their image. It is important to also note that, historically, these same universities have served as the primary arbiters of truth by only allowing and fostering their own ideologies and rationalities. These days it is rare to see communities and/or nations that engage in ways of living that are not centered in the selling and buying of unnecessary material goods. What has evolved is a global political, economic, and social monoculture of being that is constantly evolving and perfected in the academy. This link between higher education and hegemonic forms of power are not new, though. In fact, the mainstream forms of higher education are completely invested in and dependent on seeking and maintaining power (Bess & Dee, 2008). From René Descartes (1637), to Thomas Hobbes (1651/1980), to Baruch De Spinoza (De Spinoza, 1670 and 1677/2001; Nadler, 2006), to John Locke (1690), a specific type of “enlightenment” and “scientific revolution” took root. Ideas that are powerful indeed, yet ideas that disregard and claim dominion over alternative ways of knowing, articulating, and existing with the world. As I stated in previous chapters, in the search for discovery and meaning, a fundamental shift began to be expressed through language which placed reason and rational over the spirit and intuition. In these (and other) white, male philosophers an ego-

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36 It is important to note that I am specifically talking about the universities that took root in the United States—these institutions whose bones rest in the soil of medieval Europe and cry in monocultural blandness the hymn of white, Euro/Western-centric ways of thinking and being.
self-centered belief became firmly planted—they believed that science could explain the world, and that, therefore, humans could master nature.

In this sense, higher education came to be defined by the thinking and knowledge production of white men. The intellectual bases for Westernized universities came to be set by the thoughts, theories, and opinions of white men from Italy, France, Germany, England and the United States of America (roughly six percent of the global population) (Grosfoguel, 2013). How could this be? In essence, this ideology became widespread due to the colonial expansion and conquest of Europeans beginning in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Latin American philosopher and decolonial theorist Ramón Grosfoguel (2013) offers a narrative that is incredibly helpful for unpacking the epistemological foundations of the Westernized Universities. Grosfoguel (2013) maintains that the overwhelming majority of institutions of higher education in the twenty-first century are reading, theorizing, and learning to apply the thinking of men from these five countries everywhere. He notes that there are exceptions, but they are very few and far between. The social/historical experiences that define what we have come to know as social theory, critical theory, philosophy, social scientific theory, and even progressive forms of thinking like critical race theory are founded, largely on the bases of exclusions—exclusion of women and men who think, act and live outside of Western knowledge and conventions (Dussel, 2013; Grosfoguel, 2013; Wynter, 2003).

A good example of this is the ongoing tension I experience in graduate school. As a graduate

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37 The complete story of the colonial expansion, conquest and subsequent indoctrination of Euro/Western epistemology is too vast, too complex to fully address here. There have also been several seminal works that have explained this colonial legacy in proper detail. For more information please see: Fredrickson (2003), Wynter (2003), and Maldonado-Torres (2007).

38 Grosfoguel uses the term “Westernized University” to talk about a global structure of power rooted in Euro/Western-centric notions of reality. Westernized University come from the foundations of Western University, meaning universities physically based in the U.S. or Europe, but have become global through colonization and exploitation. It is a world problem today.
student at a “Research I University,” many professors, teachers, and students try to teach methodological objectivity and distance in the research we, as scholars, conduct. We teach objectivity as though knowledge could ever truly exist outside ourselves. Since I first began graduate school in 2011, there has been sustained pushback on how I choose to form questions, write, and in what language I write in.

In colleges and universities, it generally does not matter if students or professors develop critical epistemologies and theories that transcend beyond the Euro/Western-centric monoculture of thought. Generally, we are not encouraged to speak to our own truth informed by our own specific social/historical experiences. What matters is learning the positions, arguments, and rationales of these white male philosophers and learning to apply them elsewhere. In mainstream society, it is necessary to learn their epistemologies and theories and apply them in every scenario. Regardless of where we go in the Westernized world economy, science, rationality, philosophy, sociology all have origin stories that privilege whiteness as the universal way of knowing. Grosfoguel (2013) maintains that by privileging and constantly representing the thinking and theorizing of solely these few scholars, we create a false representation of “truth” wherein some people (white men) are seemingly the only ones “truly” able to understand the world and produce universal theory. In contrast, everyone else is ostensibly not capable of thinking or theorizing in such profound and meaningful ways. In doing so, a global/hegemonic system of (higher) education has been created which is fraught with power, privilege, and control.

I maintain that because of this prevailing worldview, there have been epistemic and ecological fractures in our understandings of what it means to be human (hooks, 1999; Jensen, 2004, 2011, 2017; McKittrick, 2014). Collectively, we have gone through incredible reductions in our understandings of our selves within community and our community within ourselves. It appears that as Westernized forms
of knowing and understandings grew, so too did our separation from all other living beings. We began to see ourselves as something other than animal—as something above animal. Erroneously, and often cohesively, we taught people to adopt and adapt a singular, dominant narrative, story, belief system—a Westernized monoculture of being—that disrupted the need for diversity in all senses. Over the centuries, the diversity of our cultures, languages, customs, religions, ceremonies, rituals, rites of passage, and indeed our biology continue to be whittled down due to this ethic and premise of domination. Now, in the twenty-first century, we are mostly monolingual, monopolitical, and monoeconomical. We have become a monocrop/culture. This means that the ways of being and understanding for the majority of living organisms on Earth are systematically reduced and suppressed by the dominant power structure.

In the twenty-first century, our social, political, economic, and even environmental lives continue to be marked by a philosophical ethic and premise of domination and oppression spread through racist, consumer-capitalist patriarchy (Elgin, 2010; hooks, 1999; Miles, 1998). This investment cannot be sustained or continue to grow because it is based in monoculture. And like the millions of acres of genetically modified singular crops, our society is weak, highly prone to disease, and in a state of rapid decay. Life needs diversity. Life is diversity. Yet, in our quest to “master” life, we destroy the very essence of what life is and, so too, destroy ourselves.

We are so well adjusted to injustice and well adapted to indifference39 that we do not see the harm all around us. Our society is literally built on objectification, subjugation, and consumption. As the feminist/animal rights activist Carol J. Adams (2016) writes, “Objectification allows an oppressor to view another being as an object” and, therefore, “violate this being” (p. 284) because they are deemed some thing other than human. We turn both marginalized/oppressed peoples and the natural

39 I borrow this phrase from Dr. Cornel West.
world into inanimate objects. We strip them of their intrinsic worth which allows the oppressor to butcher, maim, dismember, and ultimately consume that which is being objectified. It is a process of turning what was once living and breathing into lifeless objects. In dominant society, our food, clothes, building, homes, transportation, technology are all part of this cycle. Consumer-capitalism has designed a world based on exponential consumption.

The identity of society as “consumers” also marks a shift in our collective worth in relation to the social, political, and economic system in the U.S. because it affects the way we act within the system (Miles, 1998). If we understand ourselves as only consumers, our forms of protest and activism become limited. We choose whether or not to consume based on our values and beliefs. However, if, as McBay, Keith, and Jensen (2011) note, we understand ourselves as citizens, we can engage in many other forms of activism. We can question, challenge, debate, educate, and disobey to seek justice. By reducing our collective worth to consumers, we further take away from the complexity and multidimensionality of our story—of who we are and why we exist. We are not simply colonial subjects or consumers, we are living beings who need love, family, time, and community.

As the world decays in the name of “progress,” “civility,” “growth,” “excess,” and “desire,” we need a philosophy of education that is guided by another vision. By a vision of love, courage and compassion for life—in all our wonder. A philosophy of education guided by life, love, courage and compassion is a decolonial philosophy. It is a philosophy that transcends the violence by being mindful and intentional with every waking breath and every walking step.

**Why We Must Decolonize**

People get used to anything. The less you think about your oppression, the more your tolerance for it grows. After a while, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave.

No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true [s]heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free.
We must decolonize because, if not, our very thoughts are stunted by the absence of truth. We do not have a complete picture and so our responses, feelings, and attitudes towards what something “is” becomes mostly a reflection of the source of that knowledge. Take UCLA for example. Many people who live, study, teach, and research at this renowned institution often do so from an ahistorical and one-dimensional place where rankings, career prospects, sports records, and learning how to better assimilate into society are the expressed values. In this campus of red bricks, most people mirror what they see without questioning or yearning to understand the many layered stories of UCLA’s existence. In this way, each red brick is all the same and builds on one dominant train of thought that does not question the problematic circumstances that continue to re/create this university that exists on the land of the rising sun.

**A Brief (Re)storying of What Is Now Known as “UCLA”**

For thousands of years, the land which UCLA now sits on was home to the Kuruvanga peoples of the Tongva Nation (Sutímív-Pa’lat, 2008). The Tongva peoples were a semi-nomadic coastal hunter-gatherer tribe that spanned nearly 4,000 miles including both of the offshore islands now known as Santa Catalina and San Clemente, part of Orange County, and most of modern-day Los Angeles County. These lands in turn provided food and shelter for a population of nearly 5,000 people. Ninety percent of the mainland Tongva territory lay in the extremely rich Sonoran life zone. According to C. Merriam Hart (1889), the Sonoran life zone consisted of high desert woodland and chaparral where abundant food resources included acorn, pine nut, small game, deer and quail. The Tongva traveled among other tribes on foot and also by canoes, called ti’ats, which could hold 15

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40 Assata Olugbala Shakur is a political activist living in exile. Her name means “she who struggles,” “for the people,” and “the thankful one.” The first quote is from her first book *Assata: An Autobiography* she published while living in exile in Cuba.
people and were specially designed and crafted by their artisans out of large wooden planks. The canoes allowed them to enjoy a rich variety of sea resources such as fish, shellfish, and sea mammals and to offer the resources in trade to their inland neighbors.” However, beginning in the sixteenth century, European explorers and expansionists began to lay claim to this region of the Americas as well—first by Spain and later by colonies of the United States.

In 1542, European explorer Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo claimed this region in the name of the Spanish Empire by right of discovery when he explored the Pacific Coast of North America (Eldredge, Molera, Ayala, & San Carlos, 1909). Cabrillo claimed the land to be Spanish even though it had been inhabited by Indigenous peoples of the Americas for thousands of years since the great migrations that crossed the Bering Strait from Asia around 16,500 years ago. Cabrillo (just as all European colonists at that time) travelled the world with a divine arrogance that only he and other explorers were the rightful rulers of the world. See, colonial rule does not care about what was, it only cares about what the people in power want it to be. And how sad an irony because that idea of rule and dominion of people, land and sea, is a poisonous ethic that has led to this current climatic state.

Though Cabrillo and his crew proclaimed the Pacific Coast as Spanish Territory, it was not until 227 years, in 1769, that Spain began an expedition to explore and settle what they would call, Alta California. This expedition was known as the Portolá Expedition of 1769-1770.41 It was named after Gaspar de Portolá, the then governor of Las Californias, who led and commanded the voyage; it was the first recorded land entry and exploration by any Europeans of the present-day state of California.

41 José de Gálvez, el Visitador del Virreinato de Nueva España (the Inspector General for the Viceroyalty of New Spain) was the mind behind this expedition. With the consent of King Carlos, III he worked with Junípero Serra, Carlos Francisco de Croix and Gaspar de Portolá to make the expedition happen. For more detailed information, please see Teggart (1909).
Under the banner of imperialism, the place where UCLA now sits was cleansed of its ancestral ties. The land eventually became known as Rancho San Jose de Buenos Ayres in part because of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). It was owned by José Máximo Alanis who utilized the land as a ranch until he sold it to Benjamin “Don Benito” Wilson in 1858 (Report of the Surveyor-General of the State of California 1884-1886). Wilson then sold most of the ranch to John Wolfskill in 1884 for $10 an acre. Wolfskill called his property the “Old Wolfskill Rancho.” In 1919 Wolfskill sold it to Arthur Letts. Mr. Letts’ daughter, Gladys Letts, married Harold Janss (second generation) of the Janss Investment Company. They began to subdivide the land and in 1925 began to work out a deal with Ernest Carroll Moore, the first President of the University of California, Southern Branch (now called UCLA). Construction began on September 27, 1927 and two years later the initial phase of construction was complete.

It is through a complete engagement with the weight of history that we can come to understand the world from a decolonial perspective. Without it our understandings and, therefore, responses will continue to fall short and incomplete. We need to actively question everything, especially those things we assume as “truths” to unearth the truth.

**How Decolonization Entered My Life**

It was not until I was an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley that I came to learn about decolonization for the first time. At first, I was rather confused. Why were we talking about decolonization in the twenty-first century? To my knowledge then, colonial rule was a thing of the past. Something that happened hundreds of years ago before the U.S. gained its independence from British control. As I came to learn, however, colonization has as much to do with our present, everyday realities as it does with our past. Historically, decolonization is the process of undoing or
freeing nations and/or territories from overt colonial rule. In the context of the U.S., July 4, 1776 is generally believed to be our day of “decolonization” and “independence.” It is said to be the official day when the Declaration of Independence was signed declaring the independence of the 13 colonies from the colonial rule of Great Britain. Decolonization and Independence are intentionally in quotes so we can question these concepts: Decolonization of what? Independence for who? At what costs? For what purpose? The national narrative of independence in the U.S. is frequently evoked as a source of pride, s/heroism and bravery, however, it is not experienced or re-lived in the same way by indigenous, marginalized and oppressed peoples of North America who understand the U.S. nation-state as a continuation and intensification of the ruthless colonial fabric first sown by Europeans. The fact that we are not commonly taught to question or interrogate what independence truly means is incredibly telling.

For many critical decolonial scholars, 1492 is a pivotal moment deeply imbedded in the colonial story of the Americas (Mignolo, 2011; Grosfoguel, Maldonado-Torres, & Saldivar, 2015; Quijano, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Tuuva Smith, 1999). There are entire bodies of work like David Stannard’s (1992) *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* and Ward Churchill’s (1997) *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* that capture the ways in which (and the extent to which) indigenous ways of knowing, living, and acting have been under direct attack since Cristóbal Colón voyaged across the Atlantic. Both Stannard (1992) and Churchill (1997) chronicled how the indigenous genocide was a brutal cleansing of a people’s history, narrative, languages, cultures, customs, and relationships to the land. More specifically, though, the

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42 Colonial Rule is when a nation establishes and maintains its domination over dependent territories.

43 There is a scholarly debate as to exactly when the Declaration of Independence was signed, but the overwhelming consensus is July 4th. For more, see Warren (1945) and Ritz (1986).
genocide of the thousands of different tribes, villages, and nations was premised on the notion that those who had inhabited this continent (now known as “the Americas”) for thousands of years were savage, backwards, fundamentally uncivil, and did not know or understand how to leverage their abundant natural resources (Smith, 1999).

The problem is that the dominant philosophy that guides higher education today does not question, challenge, critique or disrupt this dehumanizing legacy—this overbearing hegemony. Rather, I contend, that it is a direct extension of these colonial practices. This is why the dominant philosophy of higher education continues to stem and be understood from only one prevailing way of thinking, acting and being. In a continuous flurry of direct and indirect ways, contemporary twenty-first century thought needs to justify, explain, and excuse whiteness as the center of a “universal” way of knowing and the human species as superior to all others we share the Earth with. This type of education breeds competition, dominance, greed, envy, ego, dissatisfaction and even hate in our society today. In this way, higher education continues to invoke and make present a legacy of exploitation, domination and oppression. We pride ourselves in “being the best of the best” even when our “best” often means being actively complicit in systems of hierarchy meant to displace and prevent others from being where we are. And where is that place exactly? Where are we? Where would we like to be? Rich? Comfortable? Out of debt? Trying to “make a difference”? Being in a position where we can financially afford not to make a difference? Why exactly are we going through this educational process?

These are all personal questions of deep significance. As we strive to develop our intellect, we should actively remind ourselves that our education is not simply our own nor does it exist in a vacuum. Our education is contextual and situated within (and between) the social fabric that weaves us all together. This makes the education we receive inherently political.
As Assata Shakur’s quotes remind us, education can be a source of liberation, but it can also be a source of oppression and control. The processes by which we come to know and understand the world are simultaneously defining reality. Therein lies the problem. For the last 500 plus years “reality” has been defined through the gaze of whiteness; through the gaze of privilege; through the gaze of men.

The act of thinking and theorizing is at the core of our communal existence as human beings on Earth. It is often said that our ability to think critically, rationalize, be compassionate, and use our consciousness are what separates us (humans) from the rest (animals) (Freire, 1973; Nibert, 2002). While I do not believe that humans are the only ones who are capable of consciousness (Jensen, 2017), the fact that we (humans) have the potential to be conscious speaks to the real, tangible power of our thoughts and the way we choose to educate one another about the essence of what it means to be humans living amidst a more than human world. To this end, there are many leaders, writers, scholars who have attested to the power of education. For example, Nelson Mandela was famously quoted for saying that “education is the most powerful weapon in the world.” Others like Stephen Bantu Biko, have written that “the most dangerous weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the minds of the oppressed.”

In order to grapple with the fundamental (and often overlooked) issues that plague the academy, we need to understand how mainstream higher education is entangled and implicated in violent, hedonistic assumptions and understandings that are centered on expansion, control and domination. The best way to unpack and detangle the long arc of oppression is to resist dominant narratives of what is ‘true’ and live knowing that diversity (ontological, epistemological, pedagogical, biological, physical, and spiritual) is a fundamental aspect of cultivating and enriching life. In other words, just as the natural world thrives on complex intersections and interrelations between millions of
biologically diverse plant, animal, tree and fungi species, so too do we humans thrive because of our own diversities. As such, I suggest (as do many scholar/activists who have come before me) that decolonizing higher education is a necessary process for all to undertake in order to understand, acknowledge, mend and, ultimately, heal from this psychological trauma of coloniality (Caulfield, 1974; Chakrabarty, 2009; Grosfoguel, Maldonado-Torres, & Saldivar, 2015; Isasi-Díaz & Mendieta, 2012). Decolonization as a process and form of resistance is not new; it lives in the blood of all our ancestors who resisted and continue resisting against colonial oppression. Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us that “decolonization is not a metaphor.” It is an act of love, resistance, truth and justice for all those existing on the margins of society.

If, as scholar activists, we are committed to social change, and I believe we are, then what are we to do? I want to answer that question by turning to the importance of decolonization . . . Today, we face a new level of ideological battles. A far more sophisticated backlash is being waged against women, gays and lesbians, African Americans, Chicana/os, American Indians, Asian Americans, and animal and environmental advocates than those waged against the civil rights fought for and won in the 1960s and 1970s. (Pérez, 2010, p. 365)

Decolonization is a lifelong commitment, process and struggle against the traumatic legacy of colonization and oppression. Not just against physical, overt and outright colonization projects, but the insidious and toxic colonization of our consciousness, our thoughts, our hearts, our actions, and our ways of being. The “sophisticated backlash” that Emma Pérez (2010) calls our attention to in this quote is, what she articulates as, the “colonial mindset” or “a system of domination and violent coercion that conquering people use to govern those they have subjugated” (p. 365). Even though many countries and territories “escaped” formal colonial rule by gaining independence after World War II, the legacy of colonization remains ingrained in the culture, languages, politics, privileges of different regions, places, cities and so on. It has done so through the intentional and intimate control of our narrative, language, definitions, and expressions.

Maori scholar and indigenous activist Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) explains how research
continues to be sites of colonization for indigenous and marginalized communities the world over. Scientific and technological advances are still searching for the “elixir of life.” Tuhiwai Smith explains how the mix of science, cultural arrogance and political power presents a serious threat because it, quite literally, “suppresses and destroys” other ways of being—specifically indigenous alternatives to modernity which understand the Earth as a living entity. She writes, “Attempts by governments and companies to flood territories in order to build hydroelectric dams, to destroy the rain forests in order to mine the lands beneath, to poison the land, the waterways and the air bring indigenous groups into direct confrontation with a wide range of Western power blocs which include scientific communities, environmental organizations, local and national governments and their bureaucracies, rich country alliances, multinational corporations and the media” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, pp. 99–100). Embedded within the justification for such violence and take over is the dominance of an arrogant Euro/Western ideology and knowledge-base that fails to consider other epistemologies. Vandana Shiva (1993) echoes the dangers inherent in having only one dominant philosophical and ontological worldview in Monocultures of the Mind. Shiva writes: “Over and above rendering local knowledge invisible and declaring it non-existent or illegitimate, the dominant system also makes alternatives disappear by erasing and destroying the reality which they attempt to represent” (p. 12).

By intentionally and conveniently omitting and erasing those on the margins, those controlling the narrative remain the central standard by which all other ways of knowing are measured. If this is done long enough, other ways of knowing vanish as the people who carry that knowledge are taken from this Earth and/or rendered so irrelevant that their ideas, customs, and connections to land, water, air, and fire become a drum beat to deaf ears. In the U.S., for example, we are not critically taught about our own oppression and domination. Why? Because our country was founded on, and continues to be based in, the domination of whiteness overall all else. Whiteness defines and governs
what is “civil” through laws, policies, and the spread of a specific belief system. Systematic violence, slavery, war, and aggression are used against all those who are said to pose a threat to the Westernized world and mainstream higher education is part and parcel of this dominant belief system that portrays this as normal, natural, and good.

Decolonization is the process of becoming; it’s often painful at first because we feel the extent of our oppression. A professor once told me that to engage in a decolonial process is like peeling off layer after layer of an onion; it is very painful to sit there and peel back the layers of coloniality (and it may make you cry). But as we keep peeling, we adjust more and more until we reach the center—the truth—and realize that it is the sweetest taste we have ever known. For the first time, we are able to taste the true essence of our life—past, present and future. We are able to see ourselves in others because we have come to intimately know, feel, touch, taste the depth of our oppression. We understand the pain in others because we have allowed ourselves to understand our own pain. We are in rhythm, in tune, with the Earth and all existence. We seek to share with our community this awakening of our spirit. We yearn to show others the path as we continue on our own. It is these personal and political acts of resistance which have the power to grow another consciousness, to transition us into resilient communities of healing.

to decolonize education is to decolonize the self.
for as beings with an understanding of self
with an understanding of others
we align ourselves with the rhythms of the earth
we become expressions of love

no longer chained to world constructed against us against life

we are not invisible
we are not disposable
we are no less living

we must choose different
we must go through a metamorphosis of the soul
The Complex Simplicity of the Butterfly

The caterpillar is a prisoner to the streets that conceived it
Its only job is to eat or consume everything around it, in order to protect itself from this mad city
While consuming its environment the caterpillar begins to notice ways to survive
One thing it noticed is how much the world shuns [him/her], but praises the butterfly
The butterfly represents the talent, the thoughtfulness, and the beauty within the caterpillar
But having a harsh outlook on life the caterpillar sees the butterfly as weak
And figures out a way to pimp it to [his/her] own benefits
Already surrounded by this mad city
The caterpillar goes to work on the cocoon which institutionalizes [him/her]
He can no longer see past [his/her] own thoughts
[S/he’s] trapped
When trapped inside these walls certain ideas start to take roots
Such as going home, and bringing back new concepts to this mad city
The result?
Wings begin to emerge, breaking the cycle of feeling stagnant
Finally free, the butterfly sheds light on situations
That the caterpillar never considered, ending the eternal struggle
Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different
They are one and the same.
(Anonymous, 2015)\(^4^4\)

Once we decide to leave the beast, we actively choose life. We open ourselves up to an infinite world of possibilities that are no longer predicated on domination and oppression. We free ourselves in mind, body and spirit allowing us to grow to a higher state of consciousness. This is the beauty, the butterfly, in education. The untitled poem above conveys a deep truth about the complex simplicity of education—that within us lies the ability and capability to liberate ourselves from a worldview which is anti-life and anti-love. Simply choosing to ask “why?” and not taking answers at face value, we begin our journeys for the truth, our truth, our reason for being. These journeys have the power to alter our

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\(^4^4\) Poem written by a good friend of Kendrick Lamar and appears on the track “Mortal Man” on the album To Pimp a Butterfly.
perceptions and definitions; and, in doing so, allow us to move and create differently. To seed, water, tend, and ultimately harvest a different reality.

Like the caterpillar, each of us face choices. We cannot help the toxicity of the world that we were born into and we often do not see the unquestioned philosophical cages that control our reality. Exhausted by what we don’t understand, we grow hungry and begin to eat and consume the environment around us for survival. The more we consume the more our toxicity grows as, with each bite, we steadily become that which conceived us. Along the way, we begin to notice that the violence and stresses in our life do not match the beauty of what we are told life is (or should be). The butterfly is a metaphor for our purist aspirations—love, kindness, compassion. However, because we are systematically kept in the dark, our most meaningful selves lay dormant. So, we lash out and try to pimp this butterfly in our heart. We try to commodify virtues of goodness as we continue to live a life of chaos and destruction. We tell ourselves that “we are good people” and “doing the best we can” all the while the moral fabric of our lives erodes all around us. In an attempt to “get ours” we try to game and manipulate life for our own benefit. We go to work on our cocoon, our education, to create a nest for an uncertain future—after all this is what all the other caterpillars are doing to try to get ahead. In the beginning our cocooned education only reinforces the cages in our minds; it only reinforces and teaches us how to exist within a world that shuns us, a world that we did not choose. Clouded by this dissonance, we can no longer see past our own thoughts. In short, we are trapped.

Although we are trapped inside the walls of our own doing, our cocoon—our education—can also shelter us from the storm of a world in decay if we let it. But we must choose this path. Our education can hold us through space and time, allowing alternative ideas about life and purpose to take root. In this incubation, sparks the desire to end the toxicity we feel in the world around us; to bring new philosophical concepts back to our home, our communities. The result? Wings of courage begin
to emerge and we are able to break the vicious cycle of feeling stagnant and complacent. Ready, we break free from an education trying to cage our soul. We rise to a higher consciousness and realize that we are the butterfly. We are the living incarnations of the virtues of living a just life. Finally free, we are now able to shed light on situations that our former selves never considered. In doing so, we transcend the eternal struggle of our oppression and misery. We are finally able to be light in a world of darkness.

Although the butterfly and caterpillar are completely different, they are one and the same. The only thing that separates them is the process of decolonization. By choosing to enter the process of decolonization, we choose to peel off layers of the onion. Though often scary and painful, we are transformed from the inside out in a simultaneous process of resistance and liberation. As we experience this feeling of truth, purpose, and meaning, moreover, we are moved to awaken the spirit in others.

It is us the whole time—the fullness and richness of who we were, of who we thought we were, of who we are, of who we want to be and who we are becoming. With a decolonial education, each of us has the potential to transform our lives and how we choose to navigate through it. We have the power to go through a metamorphosis—each day working more and more to grow closer to the essence and beauty of life and, in the process, shed toxic beliefs that sought dominion over our lives. Simplicity offers a living framework, a philosophy that, like the anonymous butterfly poem, invites us to look deep within and gravitate towards what we know is right and just. Simplicity allows us to take pause and be fully present with the long arc of history; it is a philosophical theory and practice that allows us to work with the Earth instead of against it.

**Conclusion**

As I have stated throughout, there are moments in higher education that can be transformative and ultimately help us transcend the monoculture of being within the academy.
Moments where the past can resonate with us today and guide how we meet the struggles and tensions of a society in decay. Although higher education should move us to live in ways that seek justice, affirm life and our interdependence with all beings, we do not educate these essential truths. We do not educate our society to recognize, deal with, or change the human-centered colonial legacy of our past. Because of this, as a society we unable to see past our own thoughts; we do not tend to the stories that made us and, therefore, cannot fully understand the present or change the future. We need an educational philosophy that derives from the living Earth. We need a philosophy that is literally rooted in the principles and teachings of existence.

For billions of years the Earth has understood the delicate dance between life and death. As a species, we grew out of this dance. The Earth made us a home of (and through) diversity and taught us the inherent worth of all living beings. However, we steadily went astray. We need a living framework that is in tune with our ancient rhythms and connections. We need a philosophy that, like the garden, grows from connection, intimacy, and a sense of the familial. Moacir Gadotti (2010) writes:

The garden allows for working with the Earth, learning to care for the fabric of life; perceiving the Earth through the Earth; seeing the seed assume the form of the plant and the plant assume the form of food, the food that gives us life. It teaches us patience and careful handling of the Earth between sowing and harvesting. In gardening, we learn that things are not born readymade; that they need to be cultivated and cared for. We also learn that the world is not ready made, it is being made, it is making us; that building it demands persistence, hopeful patience of the seed, which at some moment will sprout and flower, and will be fruit. (p. 208)

It is in the garden that the principles and teachings of the Earth become present. Not only do we begin to see the beauty and transformative wonders of life, but we become part of a healing and restorative process. By tending to and actively working with the Earth, we cultivate alternative forms of thinking and acting in the world. We become more caring, more intentional, more aware of how our choices affect all those around us. We make space for other ways of knowing, living, breathing to
be possible—to be free.

La Tierra, the Earth, represents deeply held beliefs that we share about the world. The Earth makes visible the deep-rooted dilemmas of colonization and oppression. However, as we beginning to understand this history, we begin to see ourselves in this toxic legacy. As we begin to see ourselves more clearly (and maybe for the first time), we begin to notice the ways in which we participate in the injustices and traumas that define the constructed world around us. We begin to look deeply and critically at our values, our morals, our belief systems, our actions. Questions begin to arise from within us such as, “Who am I?” “What is my purpose?” “Why do I feel this way?” “Why do I think and act this way?” “Why is this the way of the world?” “What can I do?”

When we question our self, we invoke the spirit of Agua (the water). In the water, we see our reflection. And although that reflection seems clear, we become intimately aware of the fluid nature of its existence—and in fact its strength. Water is our inner teacher, who introspects and touches every part of our being. Out of the water we can learn when and how to be strong, but also have wisdom to know when and how to give in. Above all, water teaches us to strive to have our life serve to purify and sustain the lives of all around us.

We will now enter the water.
Each of us has our own truths. Like the rivers, streams, brooks and creeks each of us flows through the Earth in unique, distinct and different ways. But even though our waterways may be different and may follow a unique path, we all end up in the same vast ocean. The same truth of our existence—the truth of our being and our place on Earth. The water teaches us that we are all connected. Because we are connected, what we do affects the collective, and the collective affects us. We must look in our water—our reflection, our spirit, our truths—and, with love, tap into the collective consciousness and collective energy of the ocean.

like water
we must know when and how to be strong
but also have wisdom to know when and how to change.
above all
like water
we must strive to have our life serve to nourish
the lives all around us
(Tróchez, 2012)
OF WATER AND SPIRIT: TOWARDS THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF SELF

As we grow in our understandings of history, we invoke the spirit of Agua (the Water) as a way to place ourselves within the long arc of human experiences and events—to see our reflection in the mirror of life. With patience and the desire to look deep within, we can begin to understand the wisdom of this life-giving substance. In a tangible and physical sense, most of what we are is Water. There would be no life without it. Both our bodies and the Earth are mostly made up of Water.45 This similarity is not an accident; rather, it highlights the sacred connection that exists between us, our home, and the energy that moves in us and between us.

In both substance and form, Water provides a path for us to see, feel, and act more clearly. Water has memory, consciousness, and is the only substance on Earth that naturally inhabits three states of matter—as a solid, liquid or gas. This is crucial because it means that Water retains the essence of everything it comes into contact with and simultaneously transforms at the same time. Water is not an inert, random substance; it is an intelligent being that is the basis for all life on Earth (Benveniste, Ducot, & Spira, 1994; Thomas, 2007). And water will always work to flow freely. When a substance is dissolved in water, the water will carry memories of that property (even if the molecules of the added substance are no longer detectable). Within Water lies intimate and sacred teachings of learning to hold all things present—of being part of the “other,” of having the “other” be part of you—while simultaneously learning to erode, let go, and move away from all which seeks to tame, control and dominate life (Jensen, 2006).

45 An impressive 71% of the Earth is covered by water, which mirrors that of our own bodies, which is between 55% to 78% water (U.S. Geological Survey, 2019).
Guía del Agua

This chapter is dedicated to unpacking and un/learning how we should live in the world and then re/learning to live in (and with) all we share home with. In order to explain how Water can teach us to understand how we are implicated in systems of power and exploitation, this chapter will ground the importance and sacred nature inherent in Water which allows the reader to be fully immersed in the life lessons that water has to teach us. To see ourselves in the reflection of what is all around us. This understanding allows us to end and begin again. It is a rite of passage, a ceremony that moves us into a different state of being. It is in this process of becoming that we learn to let go and learn to let die by engaging constantly in reflection, meditation and tangible acts of resistance. We engage this process with love and we find ourselves being reborn. We become ready and able to envision a world of possibilities beyond the traps and traumas of our deep colonial legacy.

Agua is about reflection of self within community; it is about creating time to let the dire truth of our global situation incubate within us. In Moral Grounds: Ethical Actions for a Planet in Peril (2010), many social and environmental justice scholars and activists express the need to understand the stakes and actively move mind/body/spirit to manifest a different kind of life and reality. This chapter is about questioning the nature of why we, as a society, continue to mirror and perpetuate destruction that many would not condone or support. Therefore, it is vital to understand to what extent our daily work (e.g., our energy, time and investments) helps empower global corporate power structures.

As I have stated many times before, our home and most of the people in it are actively being poisoned every day. All over the world, scientists from all walks are monitoring the social, environmental, and biological health of the planet and by all accounts these indicators are painting a grim picture—and it is only getting worse. Hundreds of species are driven to extinction day after day to the point that many scientists believe we are in the midst of an Anthropocene extinction (the sixth mass extinction we know of) (Ceballos et al., 2015; Kolbert, 2014; Pievani, 2014).
As such, Agua teaches us holistic, critical self-reflection. It represents the reflection of our personal life within a larger political context; the process of critical self-reflection and contemplation brings clarity and vision for the world that *could be* instead of passively accepting the world as it is now. In the water, we are able to see our own reflection in the mirror of life. We are able to ask ourselves, to what extent do our beliefs align with our actions? And to what extent are we complicit in maintaining systems of inequality? Water brings clarity to the ways in which we are implicated in westernized, consumer-capitalist patriarchy by virtue of birth in this country. By being born in the U.S., we are the living manifestations of centuries of systematic domination and oppression that are expressed through beliefs, attitudes, decisions, policies, and laws dictated by white supremacy. Because of this, our present reality is a constant re-articulation—a constant expression—of the rights of these few to govern, reign, and master the many. Over centuries, this has led to entire mechanisms and systems that have extracted, enslaved, mined, raped, pillaged, and plundered the Earth. Westernized worldviews have created a way of life that necessitates a forceful manipulation of the world into landscapes and seascapes of whiteness. In turn, these very systems have created the conditions for us to exist as we do here, in what many consider “the most powerful country humans have known.”

Although we did not choose to be born into this system, we live it, we inhabit it. Because of this, it is worth our time and energy to meditate on *how* we exist within it. We need to bathe our minds, bodies, and spirits in how we fit in this tightly-woven fabric of domination and oppression. Though we may not agree with, and indeed reject, systematic violence, in many ways how we live in the world directly (and indirectly) benefits from systems of inequality and subjugation underpinning almost all of our movements and actions in this country. We must look within to begin detoxing from a way of life that is unnatural and unethical. Agua gives us the chance to immerse ourselves in this reality and choose to flow in a different direction.
Water is not just a reflection of self, it is a reflection of the self within community and community within self. What parts of us need to grow to make the Earth, our only home, a better place? How do we grow with others? How do (or can) others help us grow? These are the types of questions the water invokes. By giving ourselves time to bathe in the water, we immerse ourselves in contemplative reflection and meditation. We give ourselves the time and space to examine the ways in which our minds, thoughts, ideas are part of a colonial legacy that is literally destroying both people and planet. Water calls us to decolonize our (collective) selves through connection, compassion, and deep meditation on how we choose to live.

**Immersing Agua**

This work is about holding all things present; it is about seeing the “other” in ourselves and ourselves in the “other” as we work to erode, let go, and move away from all which seeks to tame, control, and dominate life. As Moore and Nelson (2010) explain in the first “Ethical Action” section of *Moral Grounds*, “[b]eing cognizant and independently thoughtful about [our decisions] is a necessary first step. We should be making responsible decisions as consumers. We should refuse to invest in companies that profit from death or damage to the Earth. We should not choose careers in destructive industries” (p. 38). Both myself and other scholars agree that it is crucial to understand the value in reflecting and, ultimately, changing our intimate actions. However, that alone is insufficient. As Moore and Nelson (2010) go on to state:

> Of course industrial corporations would like us to blame ourselves for the global mess. But, in fact, corporate actions have gone far beyond what we authorized as consumers, investors, or employees, and it is a mistake (and perhaps a deception) to think we that we control, and thus have moral responsibility for, the acts of corporate powers. (p. 39)

Individuals are not the problem. The problem is the large complex web of entities who perpetuate (and profit immensely from) global destruction and decay. Although many do not condone, or support the structural, often corporate actions that keep people systematically enslaved, I do believe
that we as consumers, investors, and/or employees make possible (albeit often against our will) the conditions for oppression, control, and systematic violence to rule. Because of this, our personal meditations, reflections, understandings, and intentions cannot remain in a vacuum; they must exist and be connected to struggles of marginalized people, plants and animals the world over.

In this context, simplicity is, as bell hooks (1999) articulates, “an antidote to the hedonistic materialism” that grips Westernized worldviews. As I define it, simplicity helps make possible and create the conditions for which such critical self-reflection can take root. At its core, we must be willing to reflect on, understand, and make visible the ways in which our actions are implicated in systems of control and exploitation. Yet the way we educate seldom allows us the space, place, and time to sit with the colonial legacy (our coloniality) that lives on through our thoughts and actions within the academy and society as a whole (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Wynter, 2003). Many scholars believe that “educational reform” is the best way to have the biggest impact on the social and/or environmental direction in society. However, I maintain that educational reform does not address the overwhelming and interconnected systems of control that the vast majority of our colleges and universities are dependent on.

In the introduction to Decolonizing the University: Practicing Pluriversity, Muhammad H. Tamdgidi (2012) poses the question: “What if we realize that the very efforts one is making within the contextual and institutional parameters of Westernized universities contributes to the very flattening and distorting of the indigenous and alternative epistemologies we seek to internalize (or newly create) within the belly of the university system?” (xi). Though no definitive answer was given, this introduction invokes the words that Audre Lorde (1984) taught me. “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” because those tools (whatever they be) do not, and have not, existed in a vacuum. Steeped in colonization and highly fluid, these tools constantly change to hold onto power.
What Lorde makes clear is that the “tools” we use to see the world define the world we see. Therefore, if we yearn for a fundamentally different type of existence, we must change our tools.

Agua allows us the clarity to bring about a different existence. When we immerse ourselves in Water, we engage a process of seeing the world and ourselves with clear eyes. We are initiated into new life by allowing ourselves to die and be born again. Yes, it can be a painful process if we try to hold onto the fruits of empire. But if we choose to let go, we gain agency to move through the world in ways that work against suffering. It is a healing process.

In these ways, we immerse ourselves in the power of Water to wash away—to let die—what chains the subjugated and oppressed. In doing so, we are born anew, able to follow a different current.

When we are immersed in Agua, reflection, meditation, resistance, and a renewed sense of purpose become possible. I express these possibilities through death to rebirth. We live in a society that was founded, and continues to be based, on the need for widespread, systematic violence, control, and domination and oppression (Jensen, 2006; Stovall, 2016; Wilderson III, 2008, 2013). Death is my way of expressing the need to end behaviors that make such a world possible. Most of us have a hard time thinking about death. It often conjures up feelings of fear, anxiety, and is often viewed quite negatively. On the other hand, death (the decomposition and decay of matter) is a vital process in nature and plays an essential role in healthy ecosystems (Crawford, Harris, Ritz, & Young, 2005; Perry, Oren, & Hart, 2008). The process of death allows for the breakdown and recycling of matter, making it available again for new organisms to use. We are all alive because others have died—whether it’s the food we eat, the clothes we wear or the places we live—we are all here because others are not.

Our educational systems and societies are part of this process, and yet we do not educate each other to understand the sacredness of this symbiotic relationship. In fact, we largely do the complete
opposite. Many dream of immortality and preserving “our way of life” forever. This arrogance and ego is now disrupting and damaging our social and ecological system like never before. Like Water, every being transitions into other forms. Without the processes of decay, though, we quickly overflow with the remains of lifeless plants and animals and we would experience a decline in new growth, due to a shortage of nutrients that would be locked up and unavailable in these lifeless forms.\footnote{47} I believe that it is this human-centered dream of immortality and blind fetish of self\footnote{48} that continually encourage us to syphon the life-forces of other beings for the consumption of our own. This rapid consumption then leads to the overpopulation of humans and the destruction and depletion of all who are cast as subhuman in this paradigm. And it is this malnourished state of being that is causing the intensity of climate change and mass extinction events. In a sad twist of fate, this obsession with \textit{us} is killing the planet and will ultimately bring about our own demise (and the demise of all we hold dear) if we do not break from this vicious cycle (Hemenway, 2010; Jensen, 2006).

In order to liberate ourselves from the traps and traumas of colonization and oppression, we must let go of the dominant “way of life” in this country all while watering and tending to a different way of being. Oppressed beings will never be liberated if the oppressors are allowed, sanctioned, and can continue to dominate over our lives. So, I begin with death (letting go) because, without understanding how we ourselves are implicated in colonization and oppression, we will be unable to move towards a life-practice and philosophy that understands \textit{que yo soy por que tú eres, y tú eres por que yo soy} (that I am because you are and you are because I am). What we do with our lives directly impacts the system as a whole. Therefore, the questions are not simply “Who is to blame?” because no one

\footnote{47} For more you can read about Forest Ecology and the process of decomposition and decay.  
\footnote{48} This refers to our tendency to regard our colonized self as inherently more valuable than all others beings
person is her or himself responsible for a situation that has been centuries in the making. To me, the questions we must ask are: In what ways can we let go of the system? Are we willing to let go? What about our communities? Can we collectively work to exist beyond systemic oppression? Can we allow death to take what death brought? Are we going to continue to feed this raging fire\footnote{I want to make clear that fire is not inherently evil, destructive or a monolith. Fire is an energy and life-force which exists in a spectrum of positive and negative. There are also many different kinds of fires. Just as one fire can burn (and even kill) you, another fire can also keep you alive in winter and help sustain you when you’re hungry. As I will show in my last chapter, ultimately, it is fire that will give us the energy and strength to move other positive and life-affirming realities into existence.}? Or, can we see the destructiveness for what it is, and move mind/body/spirit to extinguish these flames of destruction?

Later on, I will fully explain how death leads to our rebirth. For now, however, I would like to quickly explain what being reborn means to me. Rebirth represents the transition from one form of life to another. In rebirth we move away from one dominant monoculture of our being and move towards a world of diversity in all its incarnations and expressions. Through death we are reborn and can move towards radically different visions of the future. We must be willing to immerse ourselves in the conditions of the planet, and allow the problematic elements of our contemporary life to die. Only then can we be free to radically reimagine a world where reciprocity, mutual-cooperation, and love guide the way. Once we understand how we are implicated in a paradigm predicated on dominion and oppression, we will then allow those parts of us that feed into that system to decay, wither, and die. And, in turn, that death, that decay of what we once did or how we once thought become the food that brings new life, new possibilities on Earth.

Rebirth represents the transition from one form of life to another. In rebirth we move away from one dominant monoculture of our being and move towards a world of diversity in all its
incarnations and expressions. It is through death that we are reborn and can move towards radically
different visions of the future.

Rites of Passage, Ceremony and Transition

The art of truly living is learning how to die.
(Brother Ali, 2012)

Water makes life possible and is a common substance which connects all life on Earth. Like a
baby forming in their mother’s womb, Water is constantly shaping us, nourishing us. We are all born
of water and spirit. So, if Water is about life, then why am I writing about death and rebirth? I am
writing about death and rebirth because Water is the energy, the spirits, that makes death and rebirth
possible. In many different spiritual traditions, Water is the medium by which death becomes life.
From Ifá to Dagara to Islam to Catholicism, Water is used in ceremony and rituals to bring purity and
life to those whom engage it with love and respect. However, as I spent some time explaining, we can
only understand and experience life through death. We are able to know, name, explain, and define
what is living because we have come to know death. Moreover, new life—new beginnings—can only
come when the previous ones have gone. This is the crux of why Water is so crucial in understanding
and moving through death and rebirth.

Although Death is often a topic that societies tend to stay away from and one which we
seldom educate each other about. Even though we all know it will come one day, that knowledge does
very little in how most of us live. We often assume that knowledge will affect our daily choices,
actions, and experience of living. However, if this were true, health, happiness, and wellbeing would
be the norm (Rich, 2009). Unfortunately, knowledge alone does little to move us to live in better
ways—especially with our own mortality. Death often seems distant and can stir up many painful and
difficult emotions that can be hard for many to confront. But if we do not take time to reflect on
death—the finite, the complete cycle of life—we do not allow ourselves to think about our own
mortality, our purpose, our unique reason/s for being, or meditate on the preciousness that is being truly alive. How might our lives change if we knew we only had one week to live? Many who have faced the possibility of real death describe a heightened sense of awareness and being fully present on Earth—they feel alive (Rich, 2009). Why? Because the imminent possibility of the end allows us to experience the fullness of life’s possibilities in that moment.

In *Of Water and the Spirit*, for example, Malidoma Patrice Somé (1994) brings readers to the moment he confronts his own mortality. Somé had been held captive for years as a boy in Seminary school by a Christian missionary who tried to “civilize” his spirit. He escaped only knowing that his home was East; so, he went East. While traveling alone and starving through the jungles of Burkina Faso, he had this revelation: “Fully occupied with my hunger, I had discontinued dwelling on my fate. I began to feel like it was perfectly natural to be out there in the middle of nowhere trying to go somewhere. Is this the first sweet taste of freedom?” This is a powerful moment because Somé finds meaning and purpose in the struggle for freedom itself. In realizing that he is kept against his will and is being taught to think in ways that do not uplift (or fit) the path he wants to create, he must let go. He must go.

**Learning to Let Go, Learning to Let Die**

We all hunger for something more, something that can sustain and nourish us and, although we may not know the way, something inside us moves us onward. But we do not need to wait until death to feel fully alive. Being alive is about being present and learning to let go of, to surrender, what we cannot control while remaining open to what is possible. It is then when we are free to choose our own directions and head towards what we most love with all our heart. This is why, as Brother Ali poetically wrote, “the art of truly living, is learning how to die.”

If we truly reflect on our lives, we see that most people want to live, want to be in community, want to make a difference, want to love, laugh and share experiences with family and friends...
Yet our tangible and material lives are often sedated and numbed by a system that continually changes in order to keep us trapped in a maze (Collins, 1990; Lorde, 1984). Instead of being filled with the thoughts, questions, and interactions that allow us to be fully human, many of us are systematically taught to find these deeper meanings and truths in the material world. We are not equal in this society, but the system often creates the illusion of equality through an “equal right” to buy material objects (Cohen, 2010). So, we try to buy our way into happiness, fulfillment, peace, security, a sense of belonging, instead of addressing the root of our hollowed souls. Consumption of unnecessary material goods, media, drugs and alcohol are common escapes or attempts to alter our livings conditions which make us sick. The problem is we only further harm ourselves and the ecosystem with these actions.

As a result, much of our collective understanding of “normal” daily life is often filled with behaviors that feed the system, actively destroy the planet and keep us from realizing our fullest potential. Pulitzer Prize Winning Journalist Ellen Goodman famously put it like this: “Normal is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work and driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for—in order to get to the job you need to pay for the clothes and the car, and the house you leave vacant all day so you can afford to live in it.” This is the trap. Because of oppression, control, and domination, many of us are kept in bondage and in debt to a system working to keep us in this lifeless loop. In order to escape we cannot continue to participate in the same way.

In our current Westernized philosophical worldview, the essence, meaning and purpose of living is often reduced to dollars and cents. Every day we are reminded of our “economic worth” or the “economic consequences” of all sorts of actions and inactions. From where we decide to go to college to what we want to be when we “grow up” to what lessons we deem valuable for the next generation, our relationships to each other and the Earth are often reduced to a cost/benefit analysis.
We begin and end with money even though money is only a placeholder for what society deems valuable and important and is largely detached from the real, physical, constants of the Earth.

Most believe that money can solve all problems and is the only viable exchange that can exist between us. Therein lies the problem; we, as a society, do not do the work of questioning the inherent ways we perceive the world, or how we interact with the world, or what we value and, as a consequence, we engage in a host of behaviors that are fundamentally based in self-interest and acquisition instead of health, love, and well-being. A simple example of these unquestioned values can be seen in how nations continue to measure success. National success is often viewed as economic success, and this economic success is often measured through a country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). GDP is commonly understood as the monetary value of all goods and services produced within a country’s borders. National GDP is significant because it is often seen as an indicator of the economic health of a country, and a gauge of a country’s standard of living. There is an unquestioned link between production and quality of life. It is assumed that the more we produce, the better we’ll be. This reasoning has, among many others, two major flaws: one, it does not question the nature of production and two, it assumes infinite growth on a finite planet. Societies tend to invoke GDP as an ideal standard instead of a measure of how quickly humans are turning the living planet into dead material objects that is exacerbating climate change (IPCC, 2014; Jensen, 2017). So, we continue to base our economies on this fundamentally flawed measure of success (McKibben, 2007). We are systematically taught to believe that white, male free-market capitalism is more important than life and that what we think, do, and feel is superior to that of non-humans.

This conditioning is not only destructive, but antithetical to the kind of prosperity we say we seek to gain. By engaging with each other and the world in this type of exchange over all others, we only further perpetuate suffering. In 2017, environment scholar and activist Derrick Jensen wrote a
compelling article about this problematic situation. In it, he offers a different type of exchange based more in mutual-cooperation than predatory capitalism. He writes, “…what if this is all wrong? What if life is not a game of monopoly or risk where the point is to run the board, but rather life is a symphony, where the point is to learn your proper role, and play it at the proper time? The point is not for violin players to kill the oboe players and convert them into cash, but rather to make beautiful music together.”

He suggests a way forward working in concert with one another—creating a symphony—and making music together. As the Water teaches us, we all have our own unique and special gifts in the world. I maintain that this is the ethos for creating and sustaining a new type of collective consciousness. This article goes on to pose a central question, one which many scholars (Anzaldúa, 1999; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1999; Wynter, 2003) have posed before him: Is the world a better place because you were born into it?

In theory this question is simple, but it is difficult to answer because it both necessitates letting go of what we have been systematically taught to value and also moving mind, body and spirit in reflective and meditative actions. In essence, to leave the world better than we were born into it means that we must be willing to let go of what is and be reborn in what should be.

In order for another way of knowing and acting in the world to take root, we cannot continue to participate in life in the same toxic ways that plague mainstream consumer-capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1999). At some point we must pause, see ourselves—our actions, thoughts, behaviors, tendencies, feelings, and more—as part of this colonial legacy we have been living. Then, we must move our minds, bodies, hearts and spirits in a fundamentally different direction. We must allow the current paradigm to decay; death can take what death brought so that we may orient our lives with the

50 https://dgrnewsservice.org/civilization/ecocide/habitat-loss/world-better-place-born/
rising tide. Like the tide, like the Water, we must move, dance, celebrate with the rhythms of life.

Giving and receiving the energy that allows us to flourish in complex, interwoven communities.

But for this transition to take root we must take a moment to reflect and meditate on what we want in the world.

Reflections and Meditations

Imagine yourself at the end of your life. What’s there? What’s important? What would you want by your side before you transition out of this life? Who would mean the most to have with you when you take that last breath? Chances are, when we reflect and meditate on these questions, our answers speak to our deepest values and most cherished aspects of life (Andrews, 1997; Elgin, 2010). For most of us, what makes life most meaningful is not material in nature; what we value most are qualities like time, family, friends, freedom, happiness, health and well-being, a sense of purpose, a sense of identity, and being able to have our needs meet (Alexander, 2015; Nelson, 1988). Yet, so many of us live in a constant lack of these essential aspects of life (Andrews, 1997; Elgin, 2010; Segal, 1999). Why? Because this society aims to keep us trapped believing that we can find fulfillment in the material, because it is necessary to maintain power in a global matrix defined by the commodification of people and planet—we call this commerce, production, goods and services. We are educated much more to maintain this paradigm than to stop, recognize it, and move against it.

In Cecile Andrews’s (1997) book Circle of Simplicity, she maintains that we often live our lives on autopilot and in a quiet desperation. Although Andrews’s book (and the simple living canon as a whole) does not sufficiently address how structural, embedded forms of racism, sexism, oppression, domination and control affect the choices people make and/or the choices they have (especially for people of color), I do believe she and others speak powerfully about doing what we can with the agency we currently have. Regardless of race, gender or class, most of us seldom appreciate what we have until it’s gone—we get sick, a loved one dies, we lose our job, and so on. If we understand the
sacred and precious nature of being alive, how can we begin to live more intentionally? More aware of what is at stake? Scholars like Nelson, (1988), Andrews (1997), and hooks (1999) would all suggest and agree that actively making space by choosing to live materially simple lives is a vital first step. What do we watch? Where do we go? What do we eat? Do our actions align with our values? Do our micro and macro actions affirm our will to live consciously, and lovingly, on Earth? To what extent are we complicit in maintaining global systems of violence? What are the consequences of our actions for ourselves, others and the Earth itself? There is no doubt that it is important to reflect on how systematic forms of oppression manifest in our daily lives; these questions can motivate us to leave the Earth better because we were born (hooks, 1999; Nelson, 1988).

By looking critically at where our money goes and what we have control over, we allow ourselves to question whether these things bring us a sense of fulfillment and purpose or if they are things we are doing just because others do. When we begin to ask these questions, we naturally begin to disengage, pull back, and let go of all those things that do not align with our values, moralities, ethics, and worldview. We begin to resist against the world as it is and move to define the world that we wish to see—a world where we can live more consciously and compassionately. Reflection and meditation allow us to resist. By resisting against the dominant material power structure, we give ourselves time. Time to do more of what we love and make ourselves less dependent on systems of exploitation and oppression. Only through resistance can we work towards liberation.

**Resistance**

As I have previously mentioned, my work draws its strength from those who struggle for liberation and justice and work to challenge the domination of land, water, body and soul (hooks,

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51 The Viento and Fuego chapters will delve into more detail about how to begin resisting against racist forms hedonistic consumer capitalism and forms of hyper consumption.
Simplicity is at the center of this resistance because it is not a dogma; it is a set of moral/ethical principles which help guide the practice of living a resilient and restorative life. To try and live a “simple life” in an era of hyper consumption takes commitment (and necessitates resistance). The myth of the “American Dream” teaches us that this is the “land of opportunity.” The opportunity to have what you want, when you want it. In fact, we often think that the more we have, the better we will be. The system preys on our emotions and desire for security and well-being; therefore, society tells us we need to seek control, ownership and entitlement to live a good life.

The reality is that the more we blindly give in to the system, the more we participate in the oppression and commodification of ourselves and others. When we actively participate, the more our lives become entangled in debt, slavery and destruction of ecosystems. “But if it’s not you, it will be someone else,” they want us to believe. “You need to get yours in this world or else you will not get your slice of the American Pie.”

But do we even want to eat a piece of this pie…?

What if we knew that this pie was cooked with toxic ingredients and that eating it would kill us…?

I believe then, we might resist the taste. Simplicity is about resisting the taste; to resist desires, temptations, luxuries and comforts that come to us by destructive means. It is not that we love misery or do not deserve to feel good, but rather that our pleasure grows from knowing that we are creating lives that break the toxic chains of destruction.

Simplicity is not a synonym for easy. Those who choose to walk a path of simplicity are often making difficult, life-altering decisions by choosing to align knowing what is right with also doing what is right. A part of doing right is constantly engaging in the inner/outer work of being mindful and
conscious of what we do. Part of being mindful is learning to let go. Every material possession we have in our lives has a story—it came from somewhere; it was made by someone. Who made it? Where did it come from? What has been taken in order for us to have it? As we question, we begin to see how each and every thing we have is a reflection of our participation in the world around us. By releasing the things that do not align with our morals or principles, we are actively resisting what we do not condone. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the water we drink, the organizations, companies and/or corporations we support, all speak to larger values of what we condone.

Through an embodied resistance we enact positive cycles of change. When we resist against consumer-capitalist patriarchy, we move in the opposite direction of the masses. Each and every time we find a way to abstain, we create a wedge between us and the system. This wedge, in turn, gives us more time, resources and energy to change our relationship to the larger status quo. Although Viento y Fuego will be a much more comprehensive and detailed discussion on actions we can take to simplify, I wanted to provide an example of the power of resisting. Let’s take the T.V. According to marketing research firm A.C. Nielsen Co. (2017), 99% of U.S. households have at least one T.V. in the home and every year hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on advertising to us through these devices. It is reported that the average American watches more than 5 hours of T.V. each day. This equates to more than 30 hours per week, or more than 2 months of nonstop TV-watching per year—that’s a second job working 75% time. This means that by the time we are 65 years old, we will have given over 9 years of precious life to corporate-sponsored mind control.

But what if we chose to eliminate it? If we cut out the T.V. from our lives, we gain hours, months, and years to do what we love—to be with family, walk, read, organize, and improve our quality of life. We also save tons of money on non-existent service subscriptions and energy costs to keep it plugged in. Now imagine if we focus this life gained to planning how to get out of debt, how
to spend less time commuting, and more time cooking actual food. By committing ourselves to the
daily acts of resistance, we actively affirm the world we want to see and we let death take all which is
devouring life by its existence. By abstaining, speaking out and moving against the tide of materially-
driven, consumer capitalist economies, we move to restore and heal the abuse and trauma people and
planet face in order to make a profit for the few.

Resistance, by nature, is very difficult—especially when it goes against an ingrained sense that
societies can consume and create without limits, without consideration of the non-human, without
thinking of a restorative ecology of our thoughts and action. But when we resist by living simply, we
affirm the qualities of life that matter most and simultaneously give ourselves the power to consciously
choose what we do with our resources (time, money, talents, expertise, and so on).

Rebirth

Revolution begins with the self, in the self.
(Bambara, 1970)\textsuperscript{52}

As we grow in reflection, meditation, and resistance, we give ourselves time and space to think
and see the world more clearly—the beginning of a new and positive cycle. What will we do with this
time and energy? By being in this place of contemplation, we allow our spirit to reawaken to the
fullness of life and its possibilities. We start to realize that what we’ve been living in (the system we’ve
been living under) is not \textit{the} way, it is \textit{a} way of existing. We can, and should, choose different. The
more we practice our form/s of resistance, the more time and energy we gain. The more time and
energy we have, the less we need to engage in traditional forms of work to provide for our needs. This
process moves alternative ways and connections into being by placing ourselves within the long arc of

\textsuperscript{52} Toni Cade Bambara was an author and activist in the struggle for Black Feminist Thought.
human history—connecting the personal and the political—and slowing it all down. This critical self-reflection and contemplation brings clarity and vision for the world that could be.

As I have previously stated, it is often only in death that we come to appreciate life. And, it is in those moments when we begin to understand that we are human beings and not human doings. Living is a balance of both who we are and what we do. Being able to have time to center ourselves (to reach clarity) in who we are and how we want to express our essence through what we do is a core aspect of being reborn and growing within community. As the late, great Eduardo Galeano reminds us, “Somos lo que hacemos y, sobre todo, lo que hacemos para cambiar lo que somos” (We are what we do but, above all, we are what we do to change who we are). In a similar way to the metamorphosis of the caterpillar that I discussed in Tierra, our own rebirth is a constant process of change, a constant revolution of beginnings and endings.

The most powerful lesson that scholars like Juanita Nelson, bell hooks, Toni Cade Bambara have taught me is that “revolution begins with the self, in the self.” Without a clear connection and understanding of the relationships between the personal and the political, we cannot effectively work to overgrow the system; our efforts will be ineffective because we will either not know how to take care of our self or we will lack the socio/political context for the decisions we make day after day. This is why being able to place the self in community is so important. However, that said, it is crucial to note that “the revolution” is not confined to the self alone. It begins with us but does not end with us. This is crucial because much of Westernized philosophical thought is predicated on the Randian underpinnings of objectivism, rational individualism and selfishness. This is not the type of selfhood that I am referring to. Rather it’s a selfhood that allows me to understand who I am in the context of the social prism that contains us. In this way our rebirth and personal revolution is manifested through choosing to live and be the change that we wish to see. To gravitate towards what most
matters in our life and, from those places, allowing our rivers and waterways to flow and connect with the greater whole. It is the beginning, the seeds, of the here-after.

**Conclusion**

Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless, like water. Now, you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle. You put it into a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can flow, or it can crash. Be water my friend. (Lee, 1971)

We must allow ourselves to follow our heart. In this sense, following our heart is like floating on a river—effortless, yet not afraid of where the river will lead. When we place our heart in the trust of the river, we allow ourselves to flow with the Earth and so are able to see beyond our own creation. Beyond our own ego. Beyond our own premeditated beliefs and superstitions.

El Agua, the Water, allows us to understand the ways in which we may be complicit (even if against our will) in maintaining structures and systems of inequality and suffering. Through constant reflection and meditation, the Water brings clarity into how we participate in society. As we begin to see ourselves more clearly (and maybe for the first time), we free ourselves to envision a world not based on systematic exploitation and enslavement. And, in doing so, we are reborn and able to radically re/imagine a future that moves and works to rekindle the preciousness of life. We begin again, allowing the currents of the ocean to wash away all non-essential attachments and leave us with only the most precious, the most sacred in our lives. Our imaginations run wild as we begin to ask, How can I free myself/my community from the traps and traumas of colonization? How can I live my values in society? What would make the act of living better—more vibrant—for both people and planet?

When we begin to understand and ask these questions, we invoke the spirit of Viento (the Wind). In the Wind we able to move beyond this current paradigm and breathe life into the clouds of imagination and inspiration our hearts and minds know is possible. We are no longer chained by the
world as it is but, rather, fearless able to envision the world as it could be—full and strong with diversity and place-based epistemologies. Wind is our creative spirit. Out of the Wind we can learn to fly on the wings of intuition and reason. Above all, the Wind teaches us to radically re/image the future now.

We will now enter las nubes del Viento (the clouds of the Wind).
breathe in
the worlds
  *our hearts know are possible*
breathe out
this world
  *which tells our minds it's not.*

(Tróchez, 2017)

“I preferred the world of imagination to the death of sleep.”
(Anzaldúa, 1999)

May the winds carry us on the clouds of change.
ON THE WINDS OF CHANGE: SIMPLICITY AS DECOLONIAL RESISTANCE AND TRANSCENDENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Once we understand the deep-rooted dilemmas of colonization and oppression—and the ways in which we are born\(^3\) of these conditions—we invoke the spirit of Viento (the Wind). The Wind can often seem elusive; though it cannot be seen, we feel its presence. From the smallest seeds to the very oxygen we breathe, the Wind carries life and the possibilities of change. When we take time to fully understand ourselves in the colonial fabric and expressions of history, we invite the winds of change into our lives so that profound clarity becomes possible. Like the Wind, this clarity and vision are not visible, yet they undoubtedly exist. If we commit ourselves to be still, and in a constant state of reflection, we give ourselves an opportunity to be more in tune with the ebbs and flows of the tangible, living world all around us.

As we take time to reflect and meditate on the meaningful relationships between “self” and “other,” we allow ourselves to be swept up into the Wind’s atmosphere—that which holds all life—and move towards ways of living that exist beyond the abusive confines of a system predicated on control, dominance, and subjugation. This visionary movement is the process of liberation (bell hooks, 1999; Audre Lorde, 1984; Levins Morales, 1998; Chela Sandoval; Patricia Hill Collins, 1990; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Paulo Freire). And when we intimately understand our own oppression—as well as the oppression of others—as manifestations of dehumanization, then we can radically imagine a world that neither replicates nor re-inscribes the traps and traumas of colonization and oppression. Through this understanding, we can actively engage in efforts to humanize and rejuvenate with the Earth instead of finding new ways to recolonize and assert dominion over the Earth and all who live here.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) By this I mean, literally born as actual living manifestations of the larger systemic paradigm that informs our being.

\(^4\) “Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity,
By actively resisting and refusing what we do not support or condone, we create distance and form a wedge between us and the system. This wedge gives us the time and space to fearlessly envision ways of existing that are not predicated on enslavement, domination, oppression, and control. The Wind is air that exists in constant motion and, even though we cannot see it, all life is carried through its motion. As it builds up strength and power from the currents of the ocean, the Wind brings oxygen into our being. With each breath, the spirit and energy of the Wind is affirmed again and again. The Wind enables us to breathe life—or even to have a breath at all. Furthermore, from this new and different place, epistemic chasms between us and “the system” become possible and many alternative types of living and finding purpose, fulfillment, and happiness emerge. Ultimately, the Wind teaches us how to use our time and energy to move beyond this current paradigm and breathe life into the radical imaginations and inspirations our hearts and minds know is possible.

All this movement in the air allows us to collect and connect our visions like the clouds in the sky. When we look up and see the clouds, we know that it is our imagination in action. By virtue of its being, the Wind and the clouds it creates all exist in a space in our minds that transcends outside support. In other words, to be in the clouds is to allow the Winds to carry us to places where we are free of time, place, and space. It is a state of being which engenders creativity and love because it has the power to deeply tap into the here and now.

**Guía del Viento**

This chapter is a reflection and meditation on my personal philosophy of simplicity as a lived methodology for more connected forms of education. These thoughts are my offering and wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle” (Freire, 1993, p. 29).

55 Here I am speaking about embodied, political forms of resistance and acts of refusal. In subsequent chapters I will list actionable steps.
philosophical guide for education. My vision addresses my values and my will to align what I value with how I live. I do not wish to be chained by the world as it is—I want to fearlessly envision the world as it could be. I dedicate this chapter to crafting new and radical visions of education, one where our values and beliefs are not dictated or bound by the logics of domination or oppression. This chapter seeks to blow away the toxic underpinnings of “modern,” “civil” society and breathe life and affirmation into the ways we choose to live and create our lives on Earth. Of the four elements, the Wind is the one that brings energy and synergy into our lives. As such, the Wind helps guide our thoughts as we work out how to live a just life by allowing us a bird’s-eye view while simultaneously encouraging us to dream and embody visions for a world that has yet to exist.

In this chapter, I lay out my personal vision of an alternative philosophy for higher education rooted in simplicity. My ideas are not dogmas; rather, as I have been stating from the beginning, my thoughts are intended to serve as a philosophical guide for an education rooted in love, justice, and commitment to leave our social and ecological fabric of life better than we were born into it. Before moving forward, however, it is necessary to recall the guiding principles of simplicity that feed my educational philosophy; I will use these principles throughout the chapter to expand my vision of a collective educational philosophy and practice that grows from the gardens.

Guiding Principles

- Simplicity is neither an “answer” nor a dogma. It is a way of living—a process—that is guided by philosophy and practice.
- Simplicity is not a passive act; it is a call to put our beliefs into practice.
- Simplicity allows for inner/outer works of resistance and healing.
- Simplicity enables us to resist against the layers of oppression and violence enacted in the name of “progress” and “civility.”
Simplicity is not “poverty.” It cannot be coerced or forced on people; simplicity is something that each person must willfully want for themselves.

Simplicity makes it possible to understand and confront the world as it is while simultaneously envisioning and working towards a world that should be.

Simplicity is not a synonym for easy. Those who choose to walk a path of simplicity are often making difficult, life-altering decisions to align what they know is right to actually doing right. Simplicity is a process of peeling back the layers of exploitation and oppression intrinsic to our U.S. way of life. In turn, one outcome is that we have the will and courage to (un)learn and move ourselves in radically different ways.

My vision addresses both my values and my will to align what I value with how I live. This chapter is about re/learning to live in (and with) all we share home with. The Wind carries my thoughts fearlessly and allows me to give myself completely; the Wind does not know the word “impossible.” And so it blows through my soul, oxygenating my most radical dreams and desires. Together, you and I are no longer chained by the world as it is, but rather, we fearlessly envision the world as it could be—full and strong with diversity and place-based epistemologies. Wind is our creative spirit. Out of the Wind we can learn to fly on the wings of intuition and reason. Above all, the Wind teaches us to radically re/Imagine, re/Engage the future now. In this spirit, here is my offering.

Ethics for a Collective Education that Works, Lives, and Loves on the Horizons

This government has failed us; the government itself has failed us, and the white liberals who have been posing as our friends have failed us. And once we see that all these other sources to which we’ve turned have failed, we stop turning to them and turn to ourselves. We need a self-help program, a do-it-yourself philosophy, a do-it-right-now philosophy, a it’s-already-too-late philosophy. This is what you and I need to get with, and the only way we are going to solve our problem is with a self-help program. Before we can get a self-help program started we have to have a self-help philosophy . . . Once [we] change [our] philosophy, [we] change [our] thought pattern. Once [we] change [our] thought pattern, [we] change [our] attitude. Once [we] change [our] attitude, it changes [our] behavior pattern and then [we] go on into some action.”
There comes a time when all you yearn for is the essence of life. The essence of a simpler world—one not filled with the noise and chaos of material desire.

—I speak of different worlds. I speak of worlds yet to come; the worlds we create “after the end” of what scholars like Vandana Shiva (1993) call this violent “monoculture of the Mind.” A monoculture is a term frequently used to describe the cultivation or growth of a single kind of organism (a “crop”) in a given area (typically an organism in the industrial food system). For scholars like Vandana Shiva and myself, however, a monoculture refers to a single way of being. Because of this, I refer to what is happening in our society as a “monoculture of being.” Why? Because we live in a society that systematically and deliberately excludes other possibilities—in this process of exclusion and denial, other possibilities of life are extinguished by the pesticides that cloud our minds. So naturally, what happens when you kill life, annihilate difference, and deny diversity? You kill yourself.

This is how scholars are able to see and predict the fall of this monoculture of being. They are simply not able to survive the test of time. All empires, all regimes, all totalitarian ways fall. The question is not if, but when? If there is still a doubt, I encourage you to research any empire, regime, or totalitarian way of life. There, you will find a series of beginnings and, more importantly, a series of endings. I believe education can help us make the philosophical and material shifts necessary to bring about a way of living that is much more aligned with the rhythms and essence of life on earth. In order to achieve this, education must create and move from the essence of life; education must center the scared teachings of the five elements and, from that place, work to establish meaning, purpose, drive, fulfillment, and action.

I envision education as a gathering of hearts, minds, and bodies in the gardens of the present. In this education there is a specific place, space, and time that symbiotically seeds us in community and
community in us as we work out how to grow closer with knowledge, wisdom, and truth.

Consequently, the education I envision is cyclical in nature—it has no beginning or end. In these educational gardens, we meet together as equals to: work to understand our distorted pasts; work to understand ourselves and others in the present; and work to move, think, act, and love in better ways in the present/future. The educational philosophy and practice I envision strategically shifts away from the symbol of life as a destination and invokes symbols of life as a gathering and a journey.

Here is a synthesis of how I envision this process:

- Tierra/Earth compels us to be clear in order to ground each other on the deep dilemmas inherent in colonization and oppression.

- Agua/Water helps us see and understand ourselves in the conditions of a problematic dominant worldview. Agua/Water allows us to understand the ways in which we are implicated, and perhaps complicit, in maintaining these structures and systems of colonization and oppression.

- Viento/Wind frees us to envision worlds not based on systematic exploitation and enslavement. By being able to understand oppression, and understand our relationships with it, we are able to envision worlds yet to exist.

- Fuego/Fire moves us towards these new visions in tangible ways without reenacting the colonial projects. By consistently engaging and reflecting on the teachings of Tierra, Agua, y Viento, we act in ways that are not trapped in this current iteration of what it means to be “human” in a more-than-human world.

- Espíritu/Spirit is what exists at the center and holds all of this present. Espíritu/Spirit moves through all in one and one in all.
This elemental diagram is how I conceptualize the process of coming into consciousness. It is how I visualize the sacred cycle of life, a cycle that flows as freely as the seasons. As Fall, Winter, Spring, and Summer give way to one another, each season literally becomes the next as they mark moments in time. In the same way, these elements also give way to one another, marking moments (and transitions) that are made possible through the passage of time.

breathe in
the worlds
our hearts know are possible
breathe out
this world
which tells our minds it’s not.
Chasing Freedom in a World Built by Slaves

Each of us is born into this life completely naked. All we have are our incarnated bodies, our souls and, sometimes (if we’re fortunate), we have the families which brought us here. Because of this, everything we come to gain in our lifetime is a blessing. Every single moment and experience should be celebrated because of its very existence. Indeed, this is not to suggest that all of us are born equally. Existing does not mean equality or freedom, because we are born into a socially constructed world laced with hierarchies and privilege. The U.S. has created a world where only a privileged few benefit greatly over the majority of all others. Because of this condition, most of us have different material, economical, and environmental outcomes for our lives. As we work out how to live a just life, we cannot lose sight of this cohesive master/slave way of life. If we do lose sight of this, we will fall into the trap of trying to gain our freedom at the expense, indeed the enslavement, of others. As we chase freedom in a world built by slaves, the ways we achieve it are just as important as the reasons why.

When I was growing up my parents raised me to believe that freedom was possible. This belief permeated my thoughts and actions; it allowed me to see that other worlds were possible—worlds only known in my deepest imaginations. From a young age my parents allowed me to act out my freedom. They encouraged me to follow the questions, wants, and desires that stirred deep within me. Even though it would have been so easy for them to dictate everything I did—regulate who I spent time with, what I chose to prioritize, and more—they consciously did not. They allowed me to find my own way. I roamed, explored, and learned the ways of the world from my own view and with my own distinct eyes. While my parents allowed me this relative freedom, though, they were by no means “checked out.” They asked me questions and we talked about my experiences. In fact, they would share their experiences with me. These talks were what helped me make sense of the world around me and gave me a sense of freedom from a young age. This freedom was, in itself, a lesson.

“Libertad no es libertinaje [freedom is not the ability to do whatever you want],” my parents
would always remind me. Freedom was given to me because of open communication, trust, and the expectation that my liberty would not be abused. In this sense, my liberty, and my independence was (and continues to be) defined by how my life serves to nourish and enrich the lives of those all around me. Freedom becomes possible with expressions of love and acts of goodness. Essentially, if we do right by others, we do right for ourselves. Our ancestors knew this in the most intimate of ways. They knew que yo soy, por que tú eres [that I am because you are]. We exist because of the “other,” and the “other” exists because of us. And around the world, this wisdom knows no boundaries. The Bantu know it as Ubuntu and the Mayans as In Lak’Ech. In Spanish, the words “freedom” and “liberation” come from the same root word liberar, which means “to free.” They are bound together and cannot exist without the other. The process of becoming free (liberation) and being free itself (freedom) are in a constant dance. To be truly free, we have to commit ourselves to the freedom of those around us. This is the sacred way of being all our ancestors knew and lived.

When we use freedom to lie, manipulate, take and harm others, we lose it and become trapped in this vicious and addicting cycle of oppression that normalizes and tempts us to abuse others who are seemingly “beneath us.” Yet this is precisely counter to a struggle for liberation because becoming free and being free are intrinsically tied to the freedom of others. As we chase freedom in a world built of slaves, we cannot continue to live as we have been living. It is imperative to have a way of educating that grounds us in the responsibility and connection that we have to one another.

Education should teach and encourage us to grow in both inward and outward expressions of love, compassion, and justice. Simplicity offers tangible ways to move education in this direction by engaging a way of being that is, both in thoughts and actions, fully connected to the living world around us. Simple living is, by definition, an act of resistance in this world of material desire and excess. What that means is that simple living is also an invitation to release and let go of everything
that does not affirm life—affirm you, affirm me, affirm us. In doing so, we actively co-create a different type of education; one which offers us ways to transcend the violence that underpins our society while growing the types of values and morals that move us towards justice, liberation, and freedom. Through learning to love ourselves, we are able to love others (hooks, 2000). Furthermore, when we choose to uplift and align ourselves with those who have been most wronged by a global human order governed by domination, hate, and oppression, we find our connection, our humanity, and our spirit.

**Understanding the Breath of Simplicity**

Simplicity allows us to step back and pay attention to the intimate and the personal as a way to contextualize and align ourselves with the causes we seek to change in the most direct ways. My offering begins with simplicity because simplicity is a conduit that makes the work of liberation possible. I first became aware of the philosophy and practice of simplicity in 2013, not through school, but through personal *testimonios*, or first-hand narratives and accounts. I saw how people actively questioned the type of life they were living and asked themselves: Why am I here? Why am I living? Why am I over-worked, under-valued, and forced to live a life of debt? What do I love? How can I be free? These profound questions inevitably prompted me to think of my own life, my own purpose, my own values, and my own reasons for being. These are the kinds of questions a philosophy and practice of education rooted in simplicity engenders. I started seeing how each attempt I make to live more simply, more mindfully, more intentionally, and more deliberately helps me foster alternative ways of existing. At its core, simplicity is about resisting and refusing mindless material consumption, and finding ways to create an intentional break from systems of slavery and dominion. These actions, in turn, give us the space and time to enter into different kinds of relationships that transcend hierarchies and cultures of exploitation.
By allowing simplicity to be the basis of education, we *breathe-in* our personal and *breathe-out* our political. *Breathe-in* personal, *breathe-out* political. Breathe-in. Breathe-out. Inhale. Exhale. In this kind of education, every breathe is both personal and political, political and personal. Therefore, as we continue to pursue truth and wisdom, we do so from a place which understands all as sacred, because we all are. Currently, however, simplicity is seldom associated with higher education discourse (or educational discourse at all). More often than not, systems of higher education are the complete opposite—large, complicated, bureaucratic systems with a never-ending thirst of producing and developing more and more and more (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Similarly, Mats Alvesson (2013) articulates the relationship(s) between consumption and higher education very well in his book *The Triumph of Emptiness: Consumption, Higher Education and Work Organization*. Alvesson argues that we live in an increasingly consumer-oriented society, where *substance* boils down to “media branding” and the use of “trendy jargon.” The success of individuals, groups, and organizations within the academy, Alvesson maintains, is based on “packaging” rather than anything “substantive.” He explains that in systems of higher education, “the brand is often more crucial than the actual product, and the CV [Curriculum Vitae] is more important than expertise and ability . . . The ambition is to put a gilt edge on life by applying attractive indicators that often have no or little substance” (page ix). Like Slaughter and Rhoads, Alvesson illustrates a portrait of higher education as a commodity. These authors all show students *how* to perform some tasks, but largely neglect *why* or *if* said tasks should be done in the first place, or whether it will bring us closer to creating living conditions rooted in love, justice, and freedom of all living beings.

As I detailed in the Introductory Chapter, I maintain that the reasons institutions of higher education operate this way is because they are precisely intended for this purpose. The guiding philosophy of higher education that exists today protects the interests of an ideological and material
world predicated on a White-male centric standard of being and understanding. As such, spaces of higher education often reflect an extractive way of being that takes, invades, consumes, and co-opts others in order to glean the fruits of their wisdom and trash whatever does not fit the already preordained paradigm of a White-controlled social order.

If the term “simplicity” is mentioned in higher education discourse, it is almost always in reference to specific technological efficiency or business financing models that aim to be as “simple” and as “efficient” as possible (Berge, 1998; Brown, 1993; Collins & Berge, 2000). Ryan Craig's (2013) article, “Achieving Apple-ish Adoption & Satisfaction in Higher Education,” is a rare example of simplicity and higher education in conversation. However, Craig explores but does not delve deeper into efficient-based technologies which aim to streamline services and procedures in higher education. Craig does not speak to the broader implications of simplicity within higher education as a whole. What I mean by this is that authors like Brown, Berge, Collins and Berge, and Craig all explore simplicity as a tool to meet a faster and more precise end, rather than a general philosophy and practice of transcending the domination and oppression in our thinking. While their use of simplicity helps to streamline the complicated situation of higher education in the twenty-first century, it does not attempt to link itself to larger systemic forms of violence perpetuated by this paradigm of thought.

Simply put, I do not know of any scholars who explore simplicity and higher education as a way of fundamentally transforming society through the education we receive. And for the scholars (and scholarship) that links simplicity and education, their work is not found in the academy. This is by design. As I have stated in previous chapters, colleges and universities were created to serve the needs of the dominant culture. As such, the primary knowledge, tools, and purpose that are expressed

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56 For more on this please see hooks’s (1999) *Simple Living: An Antidote to Hedonistic Materialism* and *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, 10(1).
often reflect an incorporation into the status quo as opposed to a sustained effort to transcend or transform it. Students, especially in the university, are seen and treated as the “leaders of tomorrow” instead of the liberation seekers of past/present/future. To engage simplicity and education is a decolonial act of love and justice—this is fundamentally a different project.

**My Approach to Simplicity**

Simplicity requires calm awareness – insightful thinking. Decolonizing the mind starts with insightful thinking.

(Tesfaye, 2014)

When I write about simplicity, I am not referring to “mechanical processing speeds” or “optimizing product performance” or “technological efficiencies.” In contrast, I am referring to philosophical ways of life grounded in practice and action. Centering simplicity is to understand that simple living is much more than just a tool; it is a philosophy and practice that engenders a revolution of the heart. Why? Because simplicity encourages all of us to gravitate to what is most precious and essential in our lives and, from that place, move our minds, bodies, and spirits with the rhythms of the living world all around us. In this way, simplicity is more than just a tool. It becomes a way of life, a living methodology that informs and grounds how we choose to move about the world. Educating through simplicity is to educate from where we are; it is to immerse ourselves in the conditions of each other and the Earth from the place/s we exist. Simplicity allows us to grow close to the wisdom, struggle, and rhythms of the stories we tell. By focusing on the essence—the roots—of the way we live, opportunities open before us to question, challenge and resist the ways we live and, from this place, intentionally and deliberately craft alternative ways of living that work against violence and oppression.

That being said, we must not fall into the simplicity trap. The simplicity trap occurs when we do not contextualize our “simple” actions within a larger, dynamic global context. It is not enough to simply remove and/or retreat ourselves from society. Simple living alone does not inherently liberate
us from the ills of society. In itself, it is not a “safe” hiding place. Issues of racism, sexism, classism, climate change, droughts, air pollution, toxic rivers, genetically modified organisms, nuclear proliferation and so on will continue to affect the entire planet. Simplicity alone will not solve this. However, what simplicity does is create a wedge between us and the dominate forces of society that want ownership of our lives. This, in turn, gives us distance, separation, an opportunity to fully-understand what we are in and work to address this state in both our self and our community.

Simplicity is Not Poverty

There are those who believe that choosing to live simply is the same as choosing a life of poverty. They believe that simplicity subjects those who participate in it to a life of material deprivation and misery. Why? Because they say we deprive ourselves from our desires, wants and limit our lives to abject poverty (Andrews, 1997; De Graaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2001; Elgin, 2010). However, this could not be further from the truth; choosing to live simply is not the same as having no other choice but poverty. Furthermore, imbedded within this belief is a problematic conflation that wealth is material excess and poverty is material deprivation. Wealth is not bound in the realm of the material. True wealth is having agency and freedom, and having time and access to the people, places and activities that lift our spirits. And as I have previously discussed, these abilities are intrinsically tied to the freedom of others.

I grew up poor. I know poverty, and the only benefit of growing up that way was that I never had much material wealth. Although I may not have always known what I could “live without,” my situation was such that I did not have the luxury of even being able to ask that question. The problem with poverty—besides how it disproportionally affects marginalized communities of color—is that poverty is a circumstantial form of simple living that is forced and not voluntary. Poor peoples’ lives are simple, not because they chose it to be, but because they have no other choice. I did not eat rice and
beans every single day because it was my favorite meal; I ate rice and beans because that’s all we could afford to eat.

Simplicity, on the other hand, is voluntary and must be chosen. When I write about simplicity, I do so from a holistic point of view. It is a view which understands that simplicity is not the same as poverty (or the glorification of the way poor people are forced to live) and that simplicity is more than just an underground, new-wave movement of mostly privileged and highly educated White people looking to “escape the rat-race” (Andrews, 1997; Elgin, 2010; hooks, 1999; Merkel, 2003; Nelsen, 1998; Segal, 1999). Simplicity is a personal and political commitment to resist the many, often invisible forms of oppression, forms of oppression which are largely rooted in how we live (hooks, 1999; Nelsen, 1988). I often view the relationship between simplicity and poverty the way Bryan Stevenson (2014) expresses the relationship between poverty and wealth. He explains “The opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice” (p. 14). To me, simplicity is a living methodology fundamentally rooted in justice, a justice based on community, respect, and reciprocity.

Because the process of unlearning and decolonizing takes time and demands so much from people of color, historically, those who have chosen Voluntary Simplicity are middle class, well-educated and often white (Andrews, 1997; Elgin, 2010). Why? Because having access to resources allows people much greater agency over how they want to live. I do not criticize the middle class, well-educated and mostly white for embracing simplicity—the virtues of living this way transcend notions of race, class and gender—and they have decided to live their lives in a way that is more fulfilling and purposeful by shaking off the shackles of consumerism and choosing to live a life simple, with purpose and intention. I have also found that choosing to align yourself with the struggles of most on the Earth serves as a powerful gateway for empathy and change. Simplicity scholar and educator, Cecile
Andrews (1997) recounts how she came to understand the systemic violence of white privilege and oppression perpetuated in her own culture like this:

As I continued to work in the South, I began to see the arrogance and lack of vitality in my own culture . . . [The white people] who were uploading segregation were sick, for their lives were blighted by racism and prejudice. Prejudice is a part of a wider culture that judges people on the basis of status--their education, their wealth, their race, their gender, their age, the sexual preference, their disabilities. Prejudice is a symptom of the sickness of culture of success, a culture that does not value people. I began to understand that the more successful you seem to become, the more vitality you lost. I saw that the successful middle-class white culture is often repressed and artificial. (p. 107)

In this way, simplicity is not at all about poverty, lack or scarcity; it is about justice and love for people and planet. By aligning theory and practice in such an embodied way, simplicity becomes a living methodology by which to live our lives. The more we simplify, the more intentional and direct our lives become. As such, for me, simplicity is much more about freedom and liberation than what we can live without.

**Simplicity as a Living Methodology**

In the book *Simple Living: An Antidote to Hedonistic Materialism*, bell hooks (1999) explains how “systems of domination like white supremacy and capitalist patriarchy are among the sources of people’s unhappiness” (p. 139). She goes on to assert that this system, this culture of domination, needs us to be in a constant state of yearning so that we can fill this emptiness, this void, with the material, specifically the very same material that drives economic growth and corporate power in this capitalist system. “Everything in our culture is telling us that anything we can do for money is okay . . . [oppressed peoples] can move towards money, but [we] cannot move toward the things that might spiritually sustain [us]” (p. 139–140) in this current way of life.

Striving to achieve (and embody) simplicity in our minds, bodies, and spirits is to commit ourselves to daily acts of resistance and affirmation. It is a symbiotic set of principled, conscious decisions that we make, with each waking breath, to leave Earth better than we were born into it. We
resist by abstaining, speaking out, and moving against the tide of materially driven, consumer capitalist economies that often abuse and enslave people and our planet in order to chase profit. Yet resistance, by its very nature, is difficult. In essence, I am arguing for a way of educating that goes against an ingrained sense that we can consume and create without limits, without consideration of the non-human, and without thinking of a restorative ecology of our thoughts and actions. On the other hand, simplicity is an affirmation of all that we hold dear—it gives us the power to consciously choose what we do with our life and energy, such as time, money, talents, expertise, and more.

An education rooted in simplicity can help us move beyond these toxic ways of being. This kind of education can help align our minds, bodies, and spirits, and free us up to imagine, cultivate, and move our life-energy differently and in more just ways. However, this kind of education is not of the university, the state, or any form of “system” predicated on power. This kind of education is of us! To be sure, this kind of education is not systemic, but personal, communal, local, and fluid; it is adaptive and place-based, and not as interested in efficiency as it is in intention, intuition, meaning, and purpose. It is a slow and patient type of education, one that attempts to inform and connect us with the Earth and with each other instead of training us on how to better participate in a system based on enslavement, extraction, control, and oppression. When we intentionally commit ourselves to simple living, the personal is political, and our actions (both intimate and communal) are expressions of love instead of domination (Andrews, 1997; hooks, 1999; Nelson, 1988). In these ways, simplicity is a living methodology that allows us to be intentional and mindful as we work out how best to live with each other and the Earth.

Lastly, I do not trace the embodied politics of simplicity to the counter-culture movement of the 1960s (as many do) nor do I equate its lineage with authors and thinkers coming from a predominantly Euro/Western-centric epistemology. While I respect these authors very much and
have been incredibly touched by their work, I trace, understand, and articulate simplicity as the basis of all our origin stories, regardless of the race, class, sex, gender, ethnicity or culture we come from and/or identify with. All our ancestors were people born of the Earth, just as we are. Every single ancestral group of peoples was, at one point, a living embodiment of simplicity. By no means were they all the same, in fact they were infinitely diverse in their ways of being, speaking and communing in the world. However, the main difference between our ancestors and the way we live today, is that most of us are living in a world blinded by materialism, hyper-consumption, and dysconnectivity, and as a result, we do not see or understand how much we are nature, or how much nature is us. We live in a techno-fantasy driven by desires to create, without asking, “What are we creating for?” We are constantly trying to develop without asking, “What are we trying to achieve?” We even live our lives without asking, “What are we living for?”

To me, simplicity is a state of being guided by values, morals, and principles of humbleness, compassion, and consciousness. Simplicity is understanding that we exist within a beautiful web of life, where all life is precious and valuable. However, I want to make it clear that everyone engages and/or identifies with simplicity in different ways. People also have different terminology to describe this multi-faceted concept of simplicity. That does not mean either is wrong, but rather it is a call to pay attention to the nuances and distinctions of how people identify. For instance, I have read terms like “voluntary simplicity,” “minimalism,” “living light,” and “frugal-living” all used to describe what I would refer to as “simplicity.” Where I take it a step further is articulating the philosophy and practice of simplicity as an educational way to decolonize our minds, bodies, and spirits.

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57 Term by co-originator of the permaculture concept, David Holmgren, in his four scenarios for the future. Permaculturalist and author Toby Hemenway (2010) also used this term in a lecture entitled “How Permaculture Can Save Humanity and the Planet – But Not Civilization” at Duke’s Nicholas School of the Environment.
My vision, philosophy, and practice of education is rooted in the gardens, wilderness, and geographies we call home. It centers these sites as the beginnings of our lessons and expressions of humanity. We are a people of the Earth, of the Water, of the Wind, of the Fire, of the Spirit. In this way, the gardens, forests, deserts, tropics, and savannas teach us languages, histories, sociologies, politics, biologies, and senses of purpose and meaning from which to engage ourselves, others, and the world at large. I begin with the garden because the garden makes visible and tangible the living world all around us.

**Educating from the Gardens**

Education begins in (and with) the gardens, the wild places, the geographies we call home. These places exist all around us. Even what we may perceive as the most lifeless concrete jungle, has life. It is the work of education to help us see, encounter, feel, and connect with life. Starting with the garden removes all the excess of material life and makes visible the most precious aspects of our lives: connection, community, food, water, biodiversity, and interdependence. All gardens exist in a place in time. These specific places and moments have stories to share and great lessons to be learned.

First, the garden teaches us that we are all interdependent and interrelated. Think of your favorite fruit or vegetable. Where did that fruit or vegetable come from? How did it get to you? Who grew it? How long did its plant-mother take to create it? Chances are, we do not know. We do not know because we live in a system which disconnects us from how things come to be, as well as how things enter and leave our life. This, in turn, has had drastic consequences on how we educate, understand and value life. How can we value something that we do not see, do not encounter, and do not tend to?

Second, in today’s malnourished state, we need to re-engage our connection to the land, water, wind, fire and spirit that makes community possible. The garden teaches us connection. Those seeds, those plants, those flowers which gave birth to our favorite fruits or vegetables need us to tend to their
well-being. Gardens teach us that we are not inherently destructive; we can work to bring habitat, community, safety, water and time to the foods that bring us life. As gardens move from one state of being to another, they mirror our own struggle to exist in a world so often predicated on death, and what we find is that on the other side of death is life.

Education is like soil: it is the vital foundation upon which we grow our society. Like soil, education can be a depleted, lifeless substance, but it can also be a rich, biodiverse living organism. Educating from the garden inspires higher forms of consciousness that are life-affirming, diverse, restorative, resilient, and adaptive. Educational gardens transform our political, social, and environmental situation by providing alternative orientations and ways of relating with each other and the non-human world all around. As one of Paulo Freire’s students and colleagues, Moacir Gadotti (2010), so poetically articulated:

The garden allows for working with the Earth, learning to care for the fabric of life; perceiving the Earth through the Earth; seeing the seed assume the form of the plant and the plant assume the form of food, the food that gives us life. It teaches us patience and careful handling of the Earth between sowing and harvesting. In gardening, we learn that things are not born readymade; that they need to be cultivated and cared for. We also learn that the world is not ready made, it is being made, it is making us; that building it demands persistence, hopeful patience of the seed, which at some moment will sprout and flower, and will be fruit. (p. 208)

By educating from the gardens, we actualize and manifest the possibilities of new connections, relationships, and understandings day after day. We learn that the world is not readymade, stagnant or fixed. Rather, it is constantly growing and evolving just as we do. In these ways, the garden helps us tap into the energy and wisdom of the universe and flow with it instead of against it. Education is about getting dirty, about unearthing that which has always existed and learning how to relate to it. In this process, this embodied form of education helps us cultivate love, patience, and restorative ways of being in the garden.
Lastly, for me, gardens are not only plots of land on which we grow domesticated human food; gardens are my way to articulate and express all kinds of relationships that we have with the non-human world. Because our relationships have been so severed from the natural world, I feel that the word “garden” portrays the essences of life. I do not just mean those places that are cultivated, orchestrated, or actively tended to by humans, but natural, independent, wild places as well.

Entering and encountering the Wilderness is a very humbling experience. In particular, it is humbling to be immersed and in tune with the world as it is instead of the world as we have made it to be. It is life-altering to breathe clean and free air, and to hear the sounds of the living murmur all around. Wilderness is not just those “faraway, wild places,” but places that can and should exist everywhere. Even in the heart of the city, trees grow, pigeons flock, mice walk, and grasshoppers and butterflies roam. Education must teach us to see life, uplift life, and work to restore life on Earth. My goal is for us to see gardens (both domestic and wild) everywhere and for us to see ourselves as reflections of those gardens.

Envisioning the Educational Gardens of the Future

Simplicity allows us to enter and be present in the gardens. Because we are intentionally trying to slow down and be receptive to the world around us, we become more aware of everything that makes our lives possible. We beginning to see our places of being with new light. Who built this home? Where is my tap water coming from? Where is it going? What kinds of bugs are those? When I envision education, I see garden places with the power to peel back layers of specific geographies. Time and space are one as we unearth, toil and grow in our understandings. History becomes alive, languages become clear, intentionality becomes the oxygen behind the way we move. I see groups of people working every day to challenge and question “what is” in order to move towards “what could be.” When we are immersed in the garden, we enter freely into community because we realize that we could not (and would not) exist without the complex and intimate ecosystems that
sustain life. From the water we drink to the medicinal foods we eat, gardens nourish our bodies, minds and spirits day after day.

In terms of gardens and restoring place, I offer my own perspective from several years ago:

I find myself in a highly contested place; a place where people’s ideas, philosophies, and motives about the “way that things are” and the “way that things were meant to be,” move as swiftly and invisibly as a gentle breeze. Although swift and seemingly innocent, this breeze is dangerously toxic. For those who have the courage and will to look beyond the mundane, the stench of coloniality is everywhere. We must filter the air so that life is not death in disguise. (Tróchez, 2014)

The stories we tell greatly affect our perception of reality (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Because of this, it is important to peel back the layers of our storied existence and ask questions like “Whose narrative is this?” and “What stories are not being told?” What this does is create windows into alternative ways of being, windows that can help make sense of the present and influence the choices we make in the future. Because gardens are the keepers of life, they exist in all time. Just like Winter gives way to Spring, and Spring gives way to Summer and Summer gives way to Fall and Fall becomes Winter again, so too does our past give way to our present which gives way to our future/s which becomes our past again. Place is cyclical. Place is contextual. Place is past, present, and future at the same time. This is a vital point because the ways we decide to think, feel, love, and exist already exist. Education, then, is what helps us tap into the wisdom of the universe to grow from the mistakes of the past to restore the future/s.

**Gardens Offer A Necessary Critique Against Violence and Towards a Life Ethic**

Those of us who are marginalized, rejected, out-casted and dehumanized in society intimately know the conditions birthed of oppression; it is this intimate knowledge that allows us to envision a word outside of it. As scholars like Anzaldúa (1999), Levins Morales (1998), Sylvia Wynter (2003), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), hooks (1999), Sophia Villenas (1996), Freire (1970) have articulated, our
decolonization is the process of liberation because we can now actively engage in efforts to humanize the world and not recolonize it by mimicking the faulty logics of the oppressor. In this seemingly never-ending state of violence, there are a few things that my vision of an education from the garden wishes to make clear: one, is that conflict is inevitable, but violence is a choice. Two, if our response to conflict is violence, there will only be more violence. Three, we can choose different.

Conflict is inevitable; it is a result of being unlike other beings; it is a bi-product of standing for different things and having fundamentally different ways of interacting in and with the world. Conflict occurs in situations when someone else’s ideology, someone else’s being, impedes on another’s ability to live. However, when we act violently as a response to conflict, we only create more violence. Violence can only create violence because it can never solve underlying issues of the conflict. Why? Because conflicts stem from the interaction/s of fundamentally different ways of being. But that, itself, is the point. Conflict is inevitable, but violence is a choice. We do not need to respond to conflict with violence; we can respond to conflict/s with respect, cooperation and working to achieve ends that are mutually beneficial. What is the source of the conflict? What are alternative ways of handling the situation that are more socially and ecologically just?

Regardless of what we believe we should also have the empathy and the will to support other ways of being. There are ways to share and exist simultaneously without necessarily having to believe the same thing. What we really need in life—water, food, shelter, family, community—all transcend specific belief systems. A capitalist and a communist both live in places, they both eat food, they both drink water.

58 By “we” I mean people of color because I agree with Freire (1970) when he asserts: “Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle” (p. 29).
Conclusion

Yes, consumer capitalist patriarchy and white supremacy have been a destructive force in our society (Collins, 1999; Fanon, 1967; hooks, 1999; Lipsitz, 2006; Smith, 2006). However, that does not have to be our condition moving forward. We are more than the current, narrow dictates of mainstream society. We can change. We can grow. We can live our lives in ways that restore, mend, and heal our communities. Viento allows us to see past our reality and dream of worlds that are tangibly, materially and qualitatively different. The Wind enables us to breathe life into the situations that most ail us. From these new and different places, alternative ways of living are possible. In Viento swirls the winds of change that allow us to realize that nothing will change until we change ourselves.

Through a combination of critical, introspective formal education and a personal conviction to figure out how to live out our values of love and justice we begin to have a fundamental shift in our perspectives and thinking about the ways we participate in this society. We begin to realize that the most precious “resources” that any person has is time (not money, wealth, mansions or material luxuries). Money and material wealth can be created and lost and created again, but time is something that none of us can ever get back. Time moves in only one way, and each of us in this universe have a relatively short moment that we are blessed to be incarnated, breathing, moving and living.

However, there is a paradox in time. In our early years, we are young, impressionable, strong and energetic. This is the time when we have the energy and the drive to move mountains, but yet our minds often lack la sabiduría, the wisdom, to understand the best way to channel that energy. As a result, much of society falls into the vicious cycles of the status quo, of working within the pre-approved limits that others have conditioned us to adopt. It takes a lot to unlearn our own conditioning. People must be ready and willing to envision alternatives in their heads before their actions can gain traction. And, yet, the more and more we age and grow in consciousness, the more
our energy and vigor tends to dwindle (unless of course you are of the super fit among us) but even then, we all eventually slow down.

It is a paradox because what we most need is that youthful, energetic and rebellious energy with the wisdom of time. It is very unlikely that the people in the latter years of life could (or would) willingly undergo the radical changes necessary in their lifestyle and attitudes about life in general to significantly alter our current trajectory. It can happen but we don’t actively teach people to understand and see themselves in the long arc of history. Life is cyclical. We have been here before, just in a different form. If we would teach our young to understand the signs, I believe that radically different choices would be made from the jump. This is why I am calling for a radically different form and kind of education than the mainstream.

As I began to pay closer attention to how I spent my time, it became more and more unbearable to waste such a precious gift on frivolous and meaningless things. I realized that continuing to mindlessly trade my time for dollars (and not question or resist this often-harmful exchange of my life force for labor) would keep me chained to a socio/economic order that is systemically draining our planet and the most marginalized among us. I do not want to be trapped as a cog in the machine; I want to transcend beyond that to be an active and restorative force in the world.

The only way any of us can have the time to be truly active and restorative forces on this earth is to first escape the vicious and systemic cycle of debt-slavery that keeps us subservient to the money that ultimately robs our life. The alternative form of education I propose gives us the time, space and freedom to envision the world anew and move towards those visions with all our hearts. This type of philosophy and practice of education is found in the gardens and calls upon the five sacred elements to teach us how to re/story and restore places by creating shareable communities and gatherings where we can critique violence and work towards a life ethic that does not run from conflict, but embraces
and deals with conflict. It is an education that works tirelessly to transcend the violence, hatred, and indifference that exist. I think the monoculture, the singular, the belief in the universal is really a part of the problem and in my educational philosophy and in my world, many different worlds are possible. But not only are they possible, many different worlds are necessary because that is diversity; that is life. There is no single entity that exists in isolation; everyone is part of everyone else. And simplicity allows us to see that; simplicity gives us a way of engaging the world as it is and reconnecting with the essence—the elemental truths of our existence—and in that journey we find ourselves, we find each other, we find our reason/s for being.

To make this Wind, this energy, this vision a reality, we need that energy and youthful spirit to spark the change we wish to see. We need Fuego, the Fire, to light the way.

We will now enter the Fire.
“Your life is your action”
(Nelson, 1980)\textsuperscript{59}

when
the dry brush of a soulless civilization
encounters
the \textit{beat} of people yearning to be free

past/present/future
meet
rub
grip
claw
collide
create uncontrollable friction

fueled by the winds of change
fires ignite

fires which
  breathe oxygen
  breathe life
  \textellipsis(and in these breaths)
bring
\textit{what is} into \textit{what will be}

our life is our action!
our life is the fire, the light, that makes possible the impossible
our life is the fire, the life energy that allows us to grow close to the wisdom of the universe

(Tróchez, 2018)

\textsuperscript{59} Quoted in an interview with \textit{The Recorder} newspaper in Greenfield, Massachusetts in 1980
Education alone is not enough.

As we actively create these radical visions of alternative forms of education, our beings begin to move to the beats of different rhythms. We are no longer mindlessly herded towards embracing a worldview that does not reflect that which we yearn for. Although we are born in a system predicated on oppression, Earth|Water|Wind|Fire|Spirit show us that we do not need to be of it—we can choose a different path. We can think and act differently. By understanding the world as it is, and mindfully reflecting on who we are within it, we move to dream and live with greater clarity, conviction and purpose. This feeling creates the spark, the catalyst, the drive which invokes Fuego (the Fire) into our lives. It is the Fire which moves our lives into action.

Fire is an energy and life-force which exists on a spectrum. The Fire’s energy ranges from positive to negative as this force comes into being through a presence of fuel (the Earth) and oxygen (the Wind). From a chemical lens of analysis, fires start when flammable materials combine with oxygen-rich compounds and are exposed to heat. If the heat is able to sustain rapid oxidation, this produces a chain reaction which fuels the fire (Morris & Moses, 1987; Schmidt-Rohr, 2015). From a philosophical point of view, this is significant given how I express the teachings and lessons of the elements of life. If fire comes into being through the mix of Earth (material and fuel) and Wind (oxygen), then fire is the result of mixing our understandings of the deep rooted dilemmas of colonization and oppression with a desire to embrace a radical imaginary floating on the winds of change. In other words, fire can be understood as the manifestations of problems meeting the yearnings for solutions. But what is missing? Water is missing. In this philosophical guide and practice, our fire needs the balance of Water, of constant mindful self-reflection and awareness. Without it, our fire will rage uncontrollably; our fire will be trapped between the traumas of colonization and the yearning for radical visions that do not yet exist.
As I previously stated: fire is energy. It is a life-force that exists on a spectrum from positive to negative. Just as one fire can burn—or even kill—you, another fire can keep you alive and help sustain you when you’re hungry or cold. While Water brings balance and direction to our fire, ultimately, it is the fire that gives us the energy and strength to move other realities into existence. But, because the fire is energy, we must be ever-mindful to direct our energies in a positive and life-affirming manner in order to move towards justice instead of destruction. In this way, the fire represents the power to transform our social conditions and relations through conscious acts. The fire is movement and dance. As our flame burns, we shine light for others. As this process unfolds, we undoubtedly become attracted to the fire in others—and so the fire grows.

My opening sentence in the Fire is that “education alone is not enough.” As a person who has dedicated my life to education, this sentence is worth repeating. *Education alone is not enough.* It is not enough to know or even understand oppression, violence and/or hatred. We must be willing to actively move beyond it. The lessons of Juanita Nelson (1988), Beverly Tatum (1997), Audre Lorde, bell hooks (1994, 1999, 2003), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), Emma Pérez (1999), and others like Desmond Tutu teach us that when we remain neutral in situations of injustice, we perpetuate that injustice because we have decided to align ourselves with that which seeks control and dominion over our lives. We must be willing to live our philosophies and put our theories into action. This is why I decided to dedicate my life to (higher) education. I feel a deep moral and spiritual responsibility to help right the wrongs of our pasts, presents and futures through an embodied educational philosophy and practice; to help right the wrongs we’ve committed against ourselves, each other, the earth and the millions of other living beings who all share this sacred home with us.
Guía del Fuego

This chapter is about action. But in a more profound sense, this chapter is about how we act. What do we do, how do we move, in light of what we know to be true? How does what we do contribute to/ make room for/ expand the possibilities of alternative forms of reality? Alternative forms of being? Ultimately, what is it that we yearn for and how do our actions get us closer to those desires? This chapter will explore ways of acting in order to craft a life we deem worth living—a life of mindfulness and intention. Through doing the purpose-driven work of freedom (or freedom/work), we align understanding and practice, theory and action. In other words, by choosing to align what we do with what we know day after day, we commit ourselves to creating a world grounded in love, justice and reciprocity.

Fire teaches us how to channel our energies in ways that move us closer to the visions we are dreaming into existence. Fire has the potential to cleanse, to heal, to inspire and to ignite. However, fire also has the ability to set ablaze and sear away all it touches and, as such, we must tend to our Fire (our actions) with care. If we do not, our Fire will spread violently leaving large-scale devastation in its path. But tended to in the right way, our Fire will move swiftly and with purpose. When we tend to our Fire, the light of the flame guides us and helps us transcend darkness. The conscious acts which fuel our actions sear what cannot exist in this light. In doing so, our actions, like the Fire itself, create fertile soil from which to begin anew.⁶⁰

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⁶⁰ According to the Pacific Biodiversity Institute (2009), “The ecological benefits of wildland fires often outweigh their negative effects. Fires often remove [invasive] plants that compete with native species for nutrients and space, and remove undergrowth, which allows sunlight to reach the forest floor, thereby supporting the growth of native species. The ashes that remain after a fire add nutrients often locked in older vegetation to the soil for trees and other vegetation...burned trees provide habitat for nesting birds, homes for mammals and a nutrient base for new plants. When these trees decay, they return even more nutrients to the soil. Overall, fire is a catalyst for promoting biological diversity and healthy ecosystems. It fosters new plant growth and wildlife populations often expand as a result.”
Chapter’s Path

This chapter has six main sections that grow from a tradition of Black Liberation grounded in simple living. The organization of this chapter was inspired by the “6 Minimalist Principles for Black Liberation” that activist and writer Yolanda V. Acree laid out in 2015 in order to help people engage the process of liberation (Acree, 2015a). In this chapter, her principles are my point of departure as I think through the actions that allow us to create a wedge between us and a system predicated on our enslavement. My six mini-sections that are inspired by Acree’s work are: (a) Changing our Perspective: We are Enough, (b) Existing on our Own Terms, (c) Learning to Let Go, (d) Making Space for What Matters, (e) (Re)defining Money: Towards a Life-Centered Economy, and (f) Living with the Earth, Not Against it. Each section has subsections that speak to the section as a whole.

Lastly, this chapter will leave readers with two lists to help us on the journey. One is a list of ways to simplify and the other is a list of critical works that deal with the subjects of freedom, liberation and simplicity. This is important because my work does not exist in a vacuum. As I have previously stated, it is part of a lineage of scholars, activists, thinkers, writers who have sought—and seek—to create a world where the fullness and potential of what it means to be human in a more-than-human world can come into being.

These sections are interdependent and both need and inform one another. These sections are not in an “order” however, I did present them in a way that makes sense to me. Please feel free to enact, add to and grow in this process in a way that makes sense for you. Before we transition into the main six sections, I would like to ground the reasons why I believe this process, this practice, is central to the work of education for liberation and freedom.
Lighting the Movement for Freedom

In 1967, Nina Simone’s yearnings for freedom culminated in a song that is as poignant and powerful today as was when she first released it over 50 years. When I first heard Nina Simone sing “I Wish I Knew How it would Feel to be Free,” my soul knew. I knew. This song conveys the deepest potential of what it means to be human. To be me. She sings:

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free
I wish I could break all the chains holding me
I wish I could say all the things that I should say
Say 'em loud, say 'em clear
For the whole round world to hear

I wish I could share all the love that's in my heart
Remove all the bars that keep us apart
I wish you could know what it means to be me
Then you'd see and agree
That every [one] should be free

I wish I could give all I'm longing to give
I wish I could live like I'm longing to live
I wish I could do all the things that I can do
Though I'm way overdue I'd be starting anew

Well I wish I could be like a bird in the sky
How sweet it would be if I found I could fly
Oh I'd soar to the sun and look down at the sea
Then I'd sing cause I'd know
Then I'd sing cause I'd know
Then I'd sing cause I'd know
I'd know how it feels to be free
I'd know how it feels to be free
I'd know how it feels to be free

I also wish I knew how it would feel to be free. This feeling has been the fuel and fire that drives me. In this journey I have learned that grounded in every movement towards freedom, is the right to be self-determined. Self-determination is the root of all the fruits of freedom. We are not free if we do not have the right to control our own lives. But as we explored in Viento, freedom is not code for imposing one’s views, attitudes, beliefs, or moralities on another but, rather, the inner/outer work of
relating and connecting because we are different. Freedom is ultimately about how to create and sustain communities, ecologies, and economies that are distinct and diverse but that grow and feed one another in ways that restore and heal.

The act of living outwardly simple but with inward richness sets us on the path towards freedom. It is a way of life, a living framework, that takes time, energy and will. But, if engaged with love and introspection, simplicity can also be the Fire that lights our way. Acree’s (2015a) principles for Black Liberation form a powerful process that helps us get there. We will now enter these six principles as it relates to tending the Fire in our own lives.

**Changing Our Perspective: We are Enough.**

This is a fundamental truth of every person’s spiritual journey and I do see [simplicity] as a spiritual journey ultimately. You are made whole. Nothing external to you can define you or determine your worthiness. You have everything you need within you to create and live the life you want. (Acree, 2015b)

The emotional scars of oppression and violence cannot be minimized (hooks, 2000; Levins Morales, 1998). Our healing has to be a priority. When we decide to face the most traumatic and scary parts of our lives, we release the control that those fears have over us. We are able to understand and acknowledge these things for what they are but choose to move forward, move towards these things with love instead of fear. When we operate through fear, our world becomes a cold place. We do not trust and, because of that, we are full of anxiety which leads us to feel unstable and insecure. It is this fear of the unknown that drives us to invest our life energy in the immediate, private, personal sphere and neglect the collective—the commons—because we see others as a threat and do not understand our own worth to the community. As a result, the Earth (our ultimate shared place) erodes in the absence of our communal actions. Too often our pursuit of personal security leads to the loss of collective places. Without an understanding, appreciation or care of how our individual sense of security is intrinsically tied to everyone around us, we deplete our world instead of enrich it.
When we move towards our fears with love, the wounds that have been kept open, can finally close and begin to heal. As we heal, our bodies change as do our minds. Liberation begins in the mind and the type of education that feeds the mind (Tesfaye, 2014). We encourage ourselves and those around us to ask better questions, to go deeper to move further. This creates an alternative way of educating, an alternative type of education no longer concerned with the dictates of conformity. We find ourselves yearning to write, find joy, and engage in the reciprocity of learning how to give and humbly receive.

**Write, or Be Written**

Writing is a way to express our self-worth and convey our truths. Regardless of medium, it is vital that we allow our Fire to shine bright for others and encourage others to grow their own light. Whether we share with the people we trust or people we do not know, we have to share our experiences to heal and to learn from others. We have to write our truths into existence. We must write, or be written.

**Finding Joy**

I often feel that my happiness and sense of joy is constantly under assault. In coming to realize the entrenched nature of how oppression and dominance is expressed in the very way/s in which we are policed to live, my heart often feels a constant weight. However, in these times, I am reminded of the intimate moments that have changed my life—a word on a page, a voice through a song, a poem or work of art. I remember that I did not choose to be born in this world, but nonetheless I am here—you are here. My spirit knows that we exist for a reason and that there are lessons to be learned in the fullness of life. As I allow myself to focus on these things, I find myself understanding that Joy is not always happiness. Joy is being grateful and thankful to be alive (even with its heartache). When I think of the happiest times of my life, that happiness is only felt because I
have also known great pain. My joy—our joy—is in the ability to move towards what we love and to be love all along the way.

**Reciprocity**

The Earth can provide all that we need. Wood, soil, fire, water and the Sun are all elements found in nature that form the basis for the world that we have constructed. The Earth provides the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink, the shelters which are our homes. The Earth even provides the raw materials for things such as electricity, computers, internet, smart phones, and television—all of which started off as living organisms, like you and me.

Right now, we take, extract and mine from each other and the natural world far more than we give, replenish, or restore. These actions are, in effect, what creates chaos, disorder and disease. When we take (and take incessantly) we destroy that from which we are taking from. In order to not fall into this trap, we must engage in reciprocity and change the nature of how we understand the relations between us and other people and between us and the vast non-human world in our midst. This begins by changing our language; by changing the way we talk or describe the nature of the relationships among us. To “take” suggests that we acquire or come to possess something without the consent or will or what is being “taken” or the person that we “took it” from. Because of this, to *take* is (by its very nature) the ability to seize or acquire something through an expression of power and control.

Why do we take? Because we perceive that we *need* something and, therefore, we must have it. The problem, however, lies in not understanding how our needs impact the people or places from which the things we took came. Are our needs even really needs? In this paradigm, we exist in a zero-sum game. We can only acquire by extracting, depleting and destroying each other and the planet. We do not need that.

What we need is to rekindle the connections we share to (and with) all (Andrews, 1997; hooks, 1999; Segal, 1999). We must engage in reciprocity—the act of giving and receiving. To be in
reciprocity is to be in relationship with the source of all that we need. When we receive, we are sustained; and when we give, we actively help sustain others. This is why the way forward is in mutual exchanges of giving and receiving. Where, yes, the Earth gives to us, but we also give back to the Earth. We do not exist in this world, on this Earth, alone.

**Give and Receive with Humility and Love**

The act of giving away something after you receive something is a powerful practice for existing with the rhythms of the universe. Nothing in life or in nature is ever singular. There is no life without death, just as there is no food without seeds. When we give and receive with humility and love, we enter willingly into relationships with everything that surrounds us. When we practice giving something whenever we receive something, it reinforces the role and responsibility we have to ourselves and the community. When we give, we release the power of that thing from our life and willingly give it forward to help another. We become ever-present and mindful with what remains in our lives and we understand why it is with us.

**Existing on our Own Terms**

Related to the first principle, you get to define what your life will be . . . You are free to be who you are, pursue your passions, evolve, and change your mind at any moment. (Acree, 2015a)

We must exist on our own terms. We must be independent and self-sufficient, to truly be interdependent. That is the basis of Freedom. Because of the persistence of colonization and oppression, our communities are economically, politically, and materially controlled by a larger system that we did not create. It is a system that necessitates violence because it grew from a paradigm of thieves—that is that the only way to “acquire” what we “need” is to take it. Thievery. Stolen land and stolen labor gave rise to society obsessed with “gains,” with “winners and losers.” Ultimately, as Fanon (1967) and Aimé Césaire (1972) remind us, this psychosis of destruction, destroyed us. The obsession with control and efficiency stripped us of our morality and individuality. We became cogs in
the machine. But we are not cogs, not machines, not monocultures. We are us; unique and special simply for being who we are.

Although we did not create this oppressive system, left unchecked and unquestioned, we will certainly perpetuate it through our thoughts and actions. However, if we make the choice to strive to exist on our own terms, we are choosing to affirm our humanity, individuality and our unique contributions to ourselves and our community. The paradigm shifts. It is Ubuntu. It is In Lak’ech.

Given the grave social and environmental injustices that have occurred in the name of progress, civility, mastery, control and dominion, we must all take a step back, pause, assess what is really happening and have the will to choose differently. We must engage ourselves in the intimate and local in order to affirm our rights to be free and self-determined. Increased political involvement at all levels is necessary with an understanding that it is only one part of process. The ideal of globalization and exponential growth is not possible and the more we can focus on the needs of where we are—socially and ecologically—the more we can advocate for and affirm the rights of the many, to be many. We must ask ourselves: Am I self-determined? Is my community self-determined? If not, why not? How can I be?

Ultimately, what we find is that being self-determined requires profound interdependence and trust because we rely on others and others rely on us. Our lives are as intertwined as the roots which connect the trees. To be self-determined is not being able to live without anyone but, rather, being able to live knowing that we are a valuable part of our local ecology. It is important to recognize the difference between existing freely and being able to serve others through that existence, versus existing in bondage and, through that bondage, being forced to serve privileged few. Existing in bondage has been the mainstay of the masses and it only leads to discontentment, anger and the proliferation of those conditions. As the great Nina Simone (1976) exclaimed, “I wish you could know what it means
to be me, then you’d see, you’d agree, everybody should be free, "cause if we ain’t we’re murderous.” Letting go of ownership and control is the ultimate expression of freedom, because I depend on you and you on me. I am because you are. Always and everywhere.

Let us let go so that we may let live!

**Learning to Let Go**

Letting go is my process of releasing what does not fulfill or uplift me in order to make space for all that does. Letting go is also my way to pass on what has helped me grow in hopes that it may help others grow as well. This is my process of renewal and transformation. May the things I release have purpose, fulfill and uplift another in this journey. (Tróchez, 2018)

We humans have a bad habit of holding onto things we don’t need. Not just physical things, but emotional baggage, and unhealthy habits. We keep these things because they provide some comfort and familiarity, but they are false and based on fear of the unknown. If you want to evolve and be your best self, you have to let go. (Acree, 2015b)

We are often very attached to the material items in our lives. Whether they are sentimental or not, we hold on to things. We hold on to things to hold onto memories and moments in time. We often hold onto things “just in case” we need them in the future. But we do not just hold onto the material in our lives; we hold onto beliefs, values, ways of relating and ways of being. When left unquestioned, we hold onto the social/environmental value systems that were learned, passed on, assumed and incorporated into ourselves through a lifetime of socialization. In this county, we are taught that change is bad and that fitting in is good. This means that we are often afraid to let go of things, people, beliefs for fear of being alone or different.

Letting go is about being present and deliberate with our actions. It is the ability to understand that we will never be able to understand it all (and that’s okay). Instead, we should focus our efforts in honing in, and making room for all that truly matters in our lives (Dominguez & Robins, 1992; Elgin, 2010; Kondo, 2014; Merkel, 2009; Millburn & Nicodemus, 2014; Sasaki, 2017). Everything has a relationship, everything has a story, but that does not mean that these things should control or define us. I am not suggesting that we get rid of everything meaningful in our life, but rather that we practice
releasing all the things that we do not need or bring us joy (Kondo, 2014; Sasaki, 2017). When we learn to appreciate materiality for its purpose in our life, we begin to separate the thing from the feeling. Millburn and Nicodemus (2011, 2014) believe that “we should love people and use things, because the opposite never works.” Although this statement is easier said than done—given that we live in a world predicated on materiality and material desire and attachment—it, nevertheless, is a life-ethic worth striving for. As Millburn has stated, “the ‘things’ that are most important in our lives aren’t things at all.” They are sharing time and experiences with our families, friends and loved ones. They are the importance of feeling loved, valued, seen and appreciated for the people we are. No amount of material can give us these intrinsic yearnings.

When we let go, we literally have less that enters and stays in our life, allowing us to be less stressed because we have less stuff to manage, protect, preserve or covet. When we allow ourselves to realize that everything in life has a beginning and an end, we are able to make peace with letting go and our spirits are lifted from all of the anxieties, worries and stress that come from “forever.” We become able to focus on the things that really matter—on the things we really love. We free up our space and, in doing so, free up our time to give to what most moves us; it frees us up to continue to re/learn how to live in more just ways. By removing the physical clutter in our lives, we are able to reflect and continue to work on the emotional/psychological clutter that weighs us down (Kondo, 2014). Often our lives are so busy and frantic that we don’t have time to think about our own socialization and whether or not we want to continue living that way. For example: practicing simplicity has given me time and space to reflect on what it means to be a man living in a patriarchal society. It has allowed me to see how the sets of beliefs that privilege my manhood stem from the same logic that actively justifies the need for slavery and violence—an incessant attempt of one group to dominate, control, and dehumanize another group.
By orienting our lives with our values and removing all the excess, we move more into our truth, our fire, our initial actions that make manifest the changes we wish to see, the changes we wish to be. Juanita Nelson, a Black civil rights activist, environmentalist and war tax resister, used to say that finding ways to simplify her life allowed her “to live out her beliefs.” In a similar way, simplifying our own lives allows us to live out our own beliefs, every day. That congruence is powerful and liberating. We become able to engage in a politics of resistance and direct action for the things that affirm life by not participating in the chains of anti-life. Simplicity leads to focus; it helps us shift our attention and energy away from the superfluous and, instead, channels our energy to shed light and change what matters most in our lives. Every time we find ways to remove the excess, clutter in our lives, we gain more and more time to embody and live our values and embrace a new life ethic. By not living for material possessions, wants and desires, we are no longer defined by the things we have or own. We can appreciate ourselves and others for who we actually are as opposed to who we appear to be. Instead of spending our time wishing and wanting, we are able to spend our time doing; helping to transform society by living out our ideals—love, justice, equality and peace.

Being able to let go is a political act of resistance. When we understand that we are of the Earth and the Earth is of us, we begin to see our existence as a gathering of living, breathing, and feeling life forms. Our existence extends beyond our human condition and is elevated to the sacred rhythms of life itself. The Elders from all the indigenous communities and roots knew this sacred truth; our ancestors all had a love and concern for the environment, because they had a love and concern for themselves (and vise-versa). As scholar Nicole Bell (2013) explains in the anthology *Contemporary Studies in Environmental and Indigenous Pedagogies*, “Everything is but an individual manifestation of an underlying whole. Everything is connected, just like the strands of a spider’s web. Touch one and you affect them all. True wisdom is thus a recognition that everything is dependent on
everything else; that everything is interlinked with everything else in an intricate network or web and therefore everything is respected because it is a part of the Great Spirit. Nothing is independent. All are related and interconnected (Manitowabi, 1992). Everyone is a manifestation of a greater whole” (p. 99). From these ancient ways of knowing, we suddenly start to see everything in a new light—a familiar light, an intuitive light. Because as Bell reminds us, “all is one circle” (p. 100).

As we begin to see that each material possession in our lives has a story, we gaze on our homes, schools and communities with new eyes. Each and every thing we have is a reflection of our participation in the world around us. As we begin to let go of what we do not need, of what does not bring us a sense of joy and fulfillment, we make room for all that does and are able to allow that very excess to have purpose and meaning in the life of another.

Every time we get rid of something or bring something into our lives, let’s ask ourselves: “why am I getting rid of it?” “Why am I bringing it home?” “Why am I holding on to it?” “Does this fill me with joy?” Asking these questions helps us identify abstract emotions tied to the symbolic, material, practical or sentimental value an object may hold. By questioning ourselves, we can work through the core reason/s for why these feelings exist. It encourages us to assess the type of world these material things invoke and choose whether or not it supports our visions and values for the future. By working to fill our lives with only the things that bring us joy, love and fulfillment, we are enriched in two ways: (a) we actively work against child-labor/slave-labor and environmental degradation, and (b) we free up our lives to live in accordance with the rhythms and seasons of the Earth, herself.

**Making Space for What Matters**

There’s a reason why you may not be reaching the goals that will change your life. There is no space for growth in your life. When you hold on to what does not serve you, you block your blessings and prevent the things you need from coming into your life. (Acree, 2015b)

Making space begins with having mindfulness and intention. Every decision has a significance and consequence (whether positive or negative). As we make space for what matters in our lives, we...
become more aware and in tune with all that surrounds us. Intent gives us a sense of purpose, clarity and focus which makes us active participants in (and for) the world we wish to be a part of. Before choosing to simplify my life, I was constantly stressed, in debt over things that did not bring me joy, and numb to the rhythmic beauty in life and the little moments that make life worth living.

One of the greatest possibilities for cultivating a decolonial philosophy and practice of education is to challenge the ways in which social and environmental injustice plague our daily lives. From the food we eat to the air we breathe and the neighborhoods we live in, most of our waking lives are saturated in unjust, selfish and divisive acts. By taking time to pause, reflect on, and engage with the ways in which our lives are implicated in larger politics of consumption and control, what becomes clear are the numerous ways we are taught to fear the ‘other.’ Because of this fear, we learn to ‘other’ ourselves (along racial, gendered, class and spiritual lines), and we learn to other those outside ourselves (the plants, animals, insects and trees that exist all around us). When we engage in separating ourselves in these ways, we actively objectify those on the other side of this constructed divide. In doing so, the ‘other’ becomes a thing, an object, a means to an end and, therefore, something that can be controlled, owned and dominated. This type of othering can be seen in the insidious logic of slavery and the pervasive idea of nature as ‘property.’

By reflecting on, and understanding how, social and environmental injustices are enacted every single day, we begin to be more attune, and in tune, with how we understand and engage with difference in the world. Trees, for example, are commonly portrayed as having no intrinsic value. In fact, one of the most derogatory putdowns for someone who shows too much care for the environment is a “tree hugger” as though caring, respecting and even loving a tree should be so beneath us. Attempting to constantly be present through mindful and intentional practices gives us
the space and time to think clearly—to know what we’re in and move to find ways of transcending these conditions.

**Discipline**

Discipline makes things easier, organize your life
Discipline makes things easier, organize your life
Uh um, uh um, it’s gonna be alright
Uh um, uh um, it’s gonna be fine
Uh um, uh um, it’s gonna be alright
Uh um, uh um, it’s gonna be fine
Discipline, discipline (practice makes perfect)
Discipline, discipline (Health is wealth)
Discipline, discipline (All things in moderation, plan your work work your plan).
(Dead Prez, 2000)

Discipline is pivotal in making space for what matters. We must be willing to suppress desires and instant gratifications as a way of achieving long-term goals. When we suppress our desires, we practice and exercise restraint. This restraint creates space for us to be in a contemplative and meditative state. Being in this state then allows us to truly seek the essence of what brings us true happiness, love, fulfillment and joy. As such, discipline is key to living a materially simple life. The more disciplined and materially simple our life becomes, the more freedom we gain in all the realms of life that most matter—those realms that fill our spirit and which no amount of stuff could ever quench. When we practice discipline with positivity and embrace, our values align with our aims. We become able to do what we know is best and do it freely and with love.

Discipline is not passive. We do not simply wake up and are no longer affected by consumer-capitalist patriarchy or systemic cycles of oppression expressed in our thoughts and actions. Nor will we wake up one day and magically have a disciplined, intentional life of meaning and fulfillment. Discipline requires practice. At first, this new daily practice may be challenging, hard and uncomfortable. It is at this point that many of us may go astray. We tap out of the process because of feelings that may arise during the process. What helps me is remembering that in our journey to heal
the social and ecological terrors of the planet, the hardest thing to do is to have the courage and strength to change the problematic assumptions we, ourselves, carry. We must be patient yet hold ourselves accountable each time we fall short and renew our commitment for all the reasons we decided to make a change in our life. The more we practice, the easier our discipline becomes. Before long, discipline becomes second nature—our new normal—and great change becomes possible. The more we continue to work at our discipline, the more our discipline becomes part of us.

Discipline is a skill and state of being that must be created through repeated exposure. We do not make the path by walking it once, we make the path by walking it consistently. This is a lesson that all our ancestors knew well. Discipline is a practice of aligning (our)selves with the larger world and earth we inhabit. When we decide to make space for what matters, we move in ways that create new spaces to inhabit and commune together. We invoke, celebrate, and honor what is life-affirming instead of life-denying.

(Re)defining Money: Towards a Life-Centered Economy

Minimalism is not about not buying or owning things. As a human living in the modern world, it is nearly impossible not to acquire stuff and create some waste. The difference is you understand the impact of using your resources responsibly. Whether you aspire to be debt-free, eat healthy, reduce waste, build your own tiny home, you know planning and commitment is required. (Acree, 2015b)

In order to work towards a world of justice and freedom, we need to address the role of money in our lives. Why? Because in this paradigm money is the medium by which many of us feel bound or driven to attain. I suggest that by understanding what money is, we fundamentally shift our thoughts and belief systems about the role money plays in our lives. We need to embrace a healthy head space around the nickels and dimes in our lives.

Is money/wealth a tool of white male human supremacy? Yes. But money itself is not of white male human supremacy. It is a tool. It existed before this current experience of life and it shall exist after. Why? Because money is a conduit; it is an exchange of energy for (and towards) what we
value. Money is an exchange of our time, creativity and effort to make all kinds of visions tangible. However, under white male human supremacy and consumer capitalist patriarchy these visions have been co-opted and corrupted. To many, money is understood as a means to limitless material ends OR as an end onto itself. This is a grave mistake because it removes, omits and dismisses the relationships that money is meant to strengthen—the accountability between people.

Every action has a reaction. To believe in infinite growth on a finite planet is to not understand the ways in which this “growth” is often predicated on violent means of extraction and enslavement. In this system, us “having,” “owning,” and “controlling” is fundamentally tied to the domination and abuse of others. Often money enacts the “I over We” ideology of the master and slave instead of the “I as We” ideology of existence. If we want to address, speak to, and move towards freedom, we need to deal with money and it must be redefined.

What is Money?

In order to understand what money is, we should first understand what money is not. Money is not power. The mainstream idea of money is that money is powerful and that, through it, a person can have “everything they’ve ever wanted.” However, in reality, money is simply an agreement, an exchange of energy, a conduit, a current that moves between and among us. Money is literally pieces of paper or digital currency that have no intrinsic value. Economists call this current form of money “fiat currency” because it has no tangible value. Its value comes from governments that maintain a certain value and a general consensus that certain amounts of dollars are worth so much (Graeber, 2014). Money is not backed by tangible assets in this country; it is only our belief in its value that allows money to have power over our lives. It symbolizes agreements between and among people. In this sense, it is quite malleable.

As a country, the U.S. has a problematic and violent association to, and dependence on, what we understand as “money,” “wealth,” “prosperity” and “financial freedom” in general. By looking at
the founding texts that guide our current orientations of money, like Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), we better understand the economic realities in the U.S. *Wealth of Nations* is a foundation text of classical economics and is often taught as the “natural laws of economics” in colleges and universities. As a result, how we are taught to *value* life is often rooted in Smith’s incomplete assumptions that (a) the ultimate value in life is money, (b) that money and production could be greatly magnified through a division of labor, and (c) that a nation’s economy is a system of “natural liberty” that was automatic and self-regulating. However, what Smith and many leading economists of his time did not take into account was the role that slavery and slave labor had in how wealth was created in this country.

Slavery brought with it the ultimate “free” labor that Smith never accounted for in his theory of natural economic law. Smith also did not understand the ways in which creating narrow specializations of tasks within a production process where each worker is only in charge of doing one task, especially on an assembly line (often referred to as divisions of labor and hyper-specializations) serves to systematically dehumanize the worker, artisan, and producer. Why? Because in this process the worker is systemically denied the ability to understand their labor in a larger, interconnected context. I suggest that it is, in part, these ideas that led people to focus solely on the task they were given, without understanding the significance of what they create (i.e., drone engineers, nuclear physicists, scientists working on cloning and genetic modifications and so on). In this society, we are encouraged and incentivized to operate in silos.

Colleges, universities and our educational system as a whole reflects this compartmental and fragmented approach to learning and growing to fit the goals and ambitious placed behind money. In the twenty first century, for example, money has become so important to institutions of higher education that, the purpose, objectives and implications of research are often crafted to fit whatever
desired economic or funding stream drives said research. In that sense, our work as knowledge creators has been bought out by the various entities that have a stake in the results of said research. This is academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoads, 2004). In the academy, we do not question or challenge the basic premise/s that money hold in our society. Instead, we feverishly participate in it even when doing so only perpetuates and exacerbates inequity, injustice and violence in this country and around the world.

We indebt ourselves to the very systems that keep us stagnant. Debt has become so normal in this country that from the moment we are born, we are implicitly and explicitly taught about the “virtues” of debt. We hear it all the time: “Debt is the only way to build your credit,” “It’s okay, everyone has debt, you’ll pay it back no problem,” “What’s your debt to society?” and “I am indebted to you.” It is important for us to step back and ask ourselves:

- Who benefits from these messages?
- Who stands to gain or lose?
- How much does debt cost us in life energy?
- Is it really worth it?

What we discover is that debt is not really our friend or here to help us. Debt is one of the biggest material conditions that keep us in bondage, that keeps us wedded to a system designed around the dominion and control of its people. Debt is slavery by other means and it is not okay. When we are in debt, we are forced to live our lives by someone else’s terms, someone else’s rules. In this type of relationship, we cannot be self-determined or free to gravitate towards what we love because, quite literally, our fates rest in the hands of an external force which is forcing us to pay back what we owe with interest. While this does not necessarily have to be negative, what happens when we cannot pay the person or entity who loaned us the money? Is it forgiven? Do they say, “It’s alright, get me next time?” In the vast majority of cases it is not like this. If anything, the situation quickly snowballs into owing more money at higher interest rates and even less chance of getting out of that situation for
years to come. We are forced to sign away our future time and energy to pay back what we owe *plus* whatever some entity (or someone) determined is the price of having used their money in the first place. For most material things, debt is a trap.

This is not to suggest that debt is *always* a trap, but we don’t *need* it. We can create lives that do not carry in it the implicit treatment of enslavement. We need a new way of educating people to have different intimate and communal understandings of this medium of exchange that preoccupies much of our waking life energy. It is imperative that we craft a “Deep Economy”\(^{61}\) for how to live life in communal forms of reciprocity and exchange. There are a several techniques and approaches to living a more cooperative, holistic and ecological life. I encourage those who are reading to look into them further. They provide alternative perspectives for how to go about exchanging our time and energy in the pursuit of a different—more deliberate—life ethic. Here is a list of just a few:

- Community Land Trusts
- Cooperative Housing
- Intergenerational Living
- Barding Economies
- Time Banking
- Small Scale Permaculture Design
- Horticulture

**Living With the Earth, Not Against the Earth**

May we truly learn to embrace the seasons in our lives and move with the rhythms of the Earth. For it is that inter/play which allows us to exist and be fully present

in the light of the sun we all become pure
as the sun sears away what cannot exist in this light

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\(^{61}\) For an in-depth understanding this subject, please read McKibben (2007).
at the same time
in the light of too much sun
we all perish under the blazing truth
that only our hearts can understand.
(Tróchez, 2014)

In the light of the desert sun we see the beauty of the Earth—the Earth as it is, not as we have made it to be. Whether it’s the blazing sun of day or the vast moonglow of night, the desert’s light touches us, guides us. The desert, like the Earth as a whole, teaches us how to slow down and experience the essence of this moment, the essence of life, as we commune directly with the natural world. Intuitively, we know this. We are all peoples born of the Earth. Every single one of our ancestors knew that the wisdom in living comes from the elemental teachings of Earth, herself. By no means were all our ancestors the same, they were infinitely diverse in their ways of being, speaking, and interacting with the Earth. However, the main difference between the ways our ancestors lived and the way we live today, is that most of us live in a world dominated by hate, materialism, hyper-consumption, and individualism. And, as a result, we do not see or understand how much we are nature, or how much nature is us. When we are fully-present, mindful and deliberate in our actions we stop living against life and, instead start living with life.

Catalysts: Important Questions and Actions

We must educate in ways that move beyond the traps and traumas of colonization and oppression. To achieve this, we must always and everywhere, move to create the wedge. How do we do this? There are a few ways that I have sought to go about it that may be helpful: (a) By creating a community of supported people, (b) By being knowledgeable and conscious of what I’m in (there are many different mediums, books, videos, audio, etc...), (c) By being knowledgeable and conscious of what I consume (materially, philosophically, and spiritually), (d) By resisting (therefore, consuming much less) and being intentional and deliberate with what I do consume, and (e) Like the circle and
cycles of life, repeating and repeating. What this process has given me is the ability to open up my life and invite what is truly life-affirming.

Being able to unclutter our lives, helps us grow close to the aspects of life we feel most connected to and inspired by. It is the process of letting go, of releasing, all that does not fulfill through active and mindful contemplation. What we choose to unclutter (or let go of) can be tangible or intangible, material or emotional. To that end, these are some questions and actions to ask ourselves as we engage the process of making space to gravitate towards what we love.62

- **Who am I?** This simple question is at the same time one of the most complex questions of our lives. It encapsulates our hopes and dreams, our perceived visions and purpose and speaks to the greater purpose of life and our place within this time and place. Though profound, it is worthy of constant reflection and meditation. What do I love? What do I value? Are my hopes and dreams aligned with my actions? If not, what is in the way? What things are around me that are holding me back from having the time, space and energy to give to what I feel makes life worth living?

- **Having Purpose.** Are we surrounded by what brings purpose into our lives? Has this [insert material object, commitment and so on] had a positive purpose in the last six months? If the answer is yes, then of course, we want to keep it, but if the answer is no, then the next question might be: why am I keeping it? Does it hold sentimental value?

- **What is “enough”?** This consumer-capitalist and materialistic society is predicated on consumption and expansion. We are implicitly and explicitly taught that we lack—that there is a void which some material can fill—and in seconds, we could order much of what we might

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62 These are inspired by lists found in Andrews (1997), Sasaki (2017), and Babauta (2007).
ever want, but when would it be enough? Most people don’t know, and thus keep buying to fill that void. It is a never-ending cycle. We can get off that vicious cycle by figuring out how much is enough. A tangible way to do this is to make a list of what you need (access to food, water, shelter and so on) and love them as if they were your deepest desires. When things beyond needs enter your life, you’ll be surprised how extra they may come to feel.

- **Letting go before we organize.** People often make the mistake of taking a cluttered space and trying to organize it. This is not only hard to do, but it complicates life. When we let go of what does not align with our purpose and values, we only keep what is truly necessary. Then the task of organization becomes easier.

- **One-in, One-out.** For every one thing we get (or give ourselves), release one thing in its place. Embracing this practice makes us evaluate, and be conscious of, how much we need an item before we bring it into our lives. For instance, when we find ourselves in a store thinking, ‘I really need this’ (whatever it is), we have to stop and think about what we are willing to part with in order to have whatever we are looking at in the moment. If we cannot think of anything that we are willing to give away in order to possess what we see, then this practice has helped us not acquire something that we don’t like or need more than what we already have. Clothes, furniture, stationary, electronics, and books are all areas in our lives that can quickly overtake our lives. Before we know it, we don’t even know how it got so bad. Being able and willing to give is humbling.

- **Consumption is necessary, but we can do it with grace, respect and beauty.** Society at large is addicted to consumption and materialism; it is the main driver of what is seen as progress in this country. That said, the act of consuming is not intrinsically bad because consumption is a necessary part of life. Consumption is us receiving from a being external to
ourselves who gave of something for us to receive it. The problem lies in that we consume way beyond our needs and do not give back in exchange for what we receive. To consume with grace, respect and beauty, we must consume less and give back to the humans, animals and trees that allow us to live. We must engage in acts of reciprocity.

When we educate in ways that embrace a philosophy and practice of simplicity, we actively engage in a process that moves us beyond the traps and traumas of colonization and oppression. The only way to really get beyond something is to intimately understand what it is, how it relates to you, how you relate to it, what parts of it are harmful, and then making conscious decisions to not reenact or perpetuate that belief into the atmosphere. If we don’t understand what we are in, we cannot understand ourselves in relation to what we are in. Said another way, if we don’t understand the problem, we don’t understand the way/s in which we may be implicated in the problem and it impedes our ability to reach a different state of being.

**List of Ways to Help Simplify Our Lives:**

The following section is intended to be a helpful place to start for those who are attempting to simplify their lives. Given that simple living helps create a wedge between us and dominant society, the following techniques are meant to help us get there. This list is based on the lists, lessons and techniques found in Leo Babauta’s (2007) *Simple Living Manifesto*, Marie Kondo’s (2014) *The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up* and Fumio Sasaki’s (2017) *Goodbye, Things*. These practices are a useful initial catalyst as you go on your journey towards purpose, fulfillment, justice and, ultimately, liberation and freedom. For a more complete list, I strongly encourage you to visit with these texts as they offer more tips and may serve as a gateway to a deeper field of practice.

**The Short List**

- Let go of the belief that you cannot let go of your things.
• Identify what is most important to you. What do you need? What do you love? What fills you with purpose and aligns with your values?

• Let go of everything else.

The Longer List

• **Evaluate your time.** How do you spend your days? What things do you do from the time you wake up to the time you go to sleep? Make a list, and evaluate whether they are in line with your values and priorities. Eliminate the things that are not and focus on what’s important.

• **Evaluate your commitments.** Look at everything you’ve got going on in your life. Which of these commitments do you really love doing? Which of these are in line with your values? Drop those that are not in line with those things.

• **Create a simplicity statement.** Why do you want a simpler life? What do you want your life to look like? Write it down and keep it somewhere visible.

• **Do less.** Our work day is made up of an endless list of non-essential tasks. If you simply try to knock off all the tasks on your to-do list, you’ll never get everything done, and worse yet, you’ll never get the important stuff done. Focus on the essential tasks and eliminate the rest.

• **Simplify home tasks.** Think about all the stuff you do at home. Sometimes our home task list is just as long as our work list. Minimize anything you have in multiples. Get rid of it if you haven't used it in a year. Let it go if you have it for the sake of appearance. Take photos of the items that are tough to part with. Leave your unused space empty.

• **Have a place for everything.** Age-old advice, but it’s the best advice on keeping things organized after you declutter.
• **Learn to live frugally.** Living frugally means buying less, wanting less, and leaving less of a footprint on the earth. It’s directly related to simplicity. Let go of the things you have already forgotten about.

• **Learn to say no.** This is actually one of the key habits for those trying to simplify their lives. If you can’t say no, you will take on too much. Do not buy things because they are cheap. Do not take them because they are “free.”

• **Limit your media consumption.** Often, the media in our lives (e.g. the T.V., radio, internet, and magazines) can come to dominate and influence our thoughts and our lives. Don’t let it. Simplify your life and your information consumption by limiting it. Try a media fast.

• **Let go of your belongings.** If you can devote a weekend to purging the stuff you don’t want, it feels seriously terrific. Get boxes and trash bags for the stuff you want to donate or toss. There’s tons of little clutter in our lives, but if you start with the big items; our biggest items trigger chain reactions. Discarding memorabilia is not the same as discarding memories. Our homes aren’t museums; they don’t need collections. Borrow; rent what can be rented.

• **Digital Declutter.** Making space in our digital lives these days is just as important as making space from physical clutter. Having too many files and too much disorganization, creates stress and confusion. We can keep our minds clear and focused by constantly deleting files that we do not need and are not absolutely necessary. Also, minimize the time you spend online; the less time we spend in the virtual world, the more time we gain in the real world.

• **Reduce your consumption of advertising.** Advertising makes us want things. That’s what it’s designed to do, and it works. Find ways to reduce your exposure to advertising, whether that’s in print, online, broadcast, or elsewhere. You’ll want much less.
• **Free up time.** Find ways to free up time for the important stuff. That means eliminating the stuff you don’t like, cutting back on time wasters, and making room for what you want to do.

• **Spend time with people you love.** Whether those people are a spouse, a partner, children, parents, other family, best friends, or whoever, find time to do things with them, talk to them, and be present with them.

• **Spend time alone.** Alone time is good for you, although some people aren’t comfortable with it. It could take practice getting used to the quiet, and making room for your inner voice. It is a healthy and calming way to center yourself and reflect on your life, meaning, purpose, direction and modes of action (past and present).

• **Slow down.** If you rush, you will miss the great gifts of life.

• **Be present.** These two words can make a huge difference in simplifying your life. Living here and now, in the moment, keeps you aware of life, of what is going on around you and within you. It does wonders for your sanity.

• **Streamline.** Many times we live with unplanned, complex systems in our lives because we have not given them much thought. Instead, focus on one system at a time (your laundry system, your errands system, your paperwork system, your email system, etc.) and try to make it as simplified and efficient as possible. Then stick to it. Create a simple system for house work.

• **Establish routines.** The key to keeping your life simple is to create simple routines — a morning routine, a bill-paying routine, an evening routine.

• **Eat healthy.** Our health is one of the most important forms of wealth. Eating healthy will allow your body to stay strong for many years to come.
• **Exercise.** Exercise, especially walking, helps burn off stress, create active times for clarity, reflection and makes you feel better.

• **Nature helps cultivate inner/outward simplicity.** Spending time in nature helps cultivate inner-peace and reflection. This time of being with, and communing with, the Earth, allows for meditating and getting to know ourselves. This time centers our lives and makes clear what truly matters on Earth, therefore, influencing outward actions we take to make this life better.

• **Find a creative outlet for self-expression.** Whether that’s writing, poetry, painting, drawing, creating movies, designing websites, dancing, skateboarding, whatever. We have a need for self-expression, and finding a way to do that makes your life much more fulfilling. Allow this to replace much of the busy-work you’re eliminating from your life.

• **Live life more deliberately.** Do every task slowly, with ease, paying full attention to what you’re doing.

• **Learn to do nothing.** Doing nothing can be an art form, and it should be a part of every life.

• **Go for quality, not quantity.** Try not to have a ton of stuff in your life … instead, have just a few possessions, but ones that you really love, and that will last for a long time.

• **Fill your day with simple pleasures.** Make a list of your favorite simple pleasures, and sprinkle them throughout your day.

• **Simplify your budget.** Work towards saving more than you spend.

• **Leave space around things in your day.** Whether they are appointments, or things you need to do, do not stack them back-to-back. Leave a little space between things you need to do, so you will have room for contingencies, and you’ll go through your day much more relaxed.

• **Always ask:** Will this simplify my life? If the answer is no, reconsider.
A few key lessons in the journey to simplicity

• Keep with gratitude.

• The things we say goodbye to are the things we’ll remember forever.

• The things we really need will always find their way back to us.

• When you discard something, you gain more than you lose.

• Fewer things does not mean less satisfaction.

• We find our originality when we own less.

• Letting go may leave us with less, but it will never make us lesser people.

• Question the conventional way/s we are expected to use things.

• Minimalism is not a competition. We should not boast about how little we may have.

• The desire to let go and the desire to possess are two sides of the same coin.

Conclusion

We who dedicate our lives to justice and liberation try desperately to change the world. We try constantly to plant the seeds that will overgrow the system and shake the world free from its own oppression and heartache. Yet, as we try and try to spark the revolution, we realize that first we must have the courage to rotate around the sun. (Tróchez, 2015)

The Fire forges new paths. As we actively create radical visions of alternative ways of being, of existing, we begin to move to the beats of different rhythms. We are no longer mindlessly herded towards embracing a worldview that does not reflect that which we yearn for. We can think and act differently. By understanding the world as it is, and reflecting on how we are implicated in it, we dream a different dream. This is the spark that ignites our flame and moves us into action.

Ultimately, we learn that no change is possible if we do not change. As I wrote in the quote above, “first we must have the courage to rotate around the sun.” This is not to suggest that we place the weight of change solely on the individual and forget the systematic exploitation of the system we
inhabit. Rather, it is a call for alignment. For us to recognize what we are in and choose differently. It is choosing to blaze a new path into the wilderness of the unknown because our hearts, bodies and spirits know that what lies beyond this way of life is precious and worth attempting to make manifest with our every breath.
CIRCLE OF SIMPLICITY

Agua

Tierra

Viento

Fuego
COMING FULL CIRCLE: EMBRACING ANCIENT WISDOMS

In this world of “progress” and “civility” society has been driven by an idea that we can “master” the Earth. We took the Earth and turned her into a factory of endless desire. We turned the Earth into our World. This process, has led humanity to global chaos. In these times of great strife and suffering, we need to embrace and rekindle the ancient wisdoms of our ancestors who did not view upon one another or the non-human as tools to be enslaved; but as sisters and brothers to enter into relationships with. This dissertation has been an educational call to remember what was forced out of our consciousness—Earth is not the world. Earth is the source of all life and the mother of all creation. We need educational philosophies and practices that align with the Earth.

My journey throughout this process was to pen a living philosophy—a philosophy of how to live—that allows us to understand, question, resist and grow alternative paradigms. Simplicity was vital in my process of creating and putting forth a decolonial philosophy and practice which attempts to transcend the darkness of a world predicated on an ethic and premise of domination and oppression. That said, simplicity (in and of itself) is not the end or the answer; it is a practice, a way of living—a living methodology—which allows us to regain the space and time to choose our path forward. Making the choice to live simply becomes an embodied form of resistance that allows us to move in the opposite direction of the masses. Every time we find ways to abstain, we create a wedge between us and the system. This wedge, in turn, is what gives us more time, resources and energy to change our relationship to the larger status quo.

By actively resisting and refusing what we do not support or condone, we create distance and form a wedge between us and the system. This wedge gives us the time and space to fearlessly envision ways of existing that are not predicated on enslavement, domination, oppression, and control. With each breath, our spirit and energy allow us to breathe life beyond what we currently experience as the “way things are.” From this new and different place, epistemic chasms between us and “the
system” become possible and many alternative types of living and ways of finding purpose, fulfillment, and happiness emerge.

It is vital that we act; but, as we learned from the Fire, action is an engaged process. Action is being able to give and receive, being able to put forth and reflect, evaluate and meditate on that progression in order to move again with greater clarity, intention and love. When we act in ways that attempt to hold all things present, we move away from the things that do not affirm and support life and towards those that do.

I maintain that what underpins a radical imaginary of the future is our ability to understand the past in a way that informs our present so that when we imagine the future, it does not replicate the traps and traumas that have sought to define us. And our greatest task is to, against all odds, hold this imagination close to our heart and move towards those radical visions with love and conviction. If we don’t, if we run away, turn back, or ignore the problematic conditions we live in, we just experience the problem. We feel the hurt, we feel the pain, and don’t know how to understand or contextualize it. Then, when we think about a future where that pain does not exist, we end up replicating the very trap and trauma that caused the pain in the first place. Why? Because we are socialized in it and have never taken the steps to peel back the layers of colonization and oppression.

As the well-known adage goes, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Why are we even paving with bricks in the first place? Where are each of these well-intentioned bricks leading us? If we never seriously deal with the seeds of empire, our bricks will always assume the form of empire. Our actions, no matter how noble, will be predicted on a system of injustice. Without questioning, the flowers and fruits we bring to the world will be born of self-destroying seeds. We will be filled with a notion of wholeness, but this feeling will be undercut by the unquestioned system of injustice.
To me, the essence of decolonization is having the will and desire to tap into the very real, living path that lives beneath the roads we constructed. This is the essence of liberation—to not just face our fears but to work through them with love and compassion.

Many will try to find doubt in these words, but these words are not mine alone. They are the words of a whole living Earth yearning to be free. To those who doubt what I have written, I encourage you to ask “Why?” of your world. Reflect and question what you believe and why you believe it. Embrace the principles of simplicity and experience how your worldview will grow, expand and fill your heart with joy and possibilities. Engaging simplicity is a decolonial act of love which will allow us to grow closer to the wisdoms of the universe. By allowing ourselves to gravitate towards what is essential—towards what is enough—we will be able to live a life of meaning, purpose and harmony. Each day, we will finally be able to meet the rising run with the conviction of knowing that our actions and values are moving with the sacred rhythms of life.

We have the power to wake up.

.peace.
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