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Decolonizing Schools: Women Organizing, Disability Advocacy, and Land in Sāmoa

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In the 1970s and 1980s, Sāmoan women organizers established Aoga Fiamalamalama and Loto Taumafai, two educational institutions, in the independent state of Sāmoa. This article examines these schools' support of students labelled as *ma'i* (sick), specifically those with intellectual and physical disabilities. Through oral histories and archival research, I show the vital role performed by the women organizers in changing the educational system by drawing attention to the exclusion of disabled students. I focus on the collective labor of Sāmoan women and their influence in decolonizing schools. In this regard, the women organizers used Sāmoan concepts of *fa'a Sāmoa* (culture), *fanua* (land), and *tautua* (service) as ways to redefine the commitment of the education system. This is a story about daring to reimagine indigenous disabled bodies and their futures through knowledge systems, theory, and literature.

Keywords: advocacy; decolonize; disability, education; indigeneity; land

Vignette

Gele was three years old and loved to dance and interact with people. He was also eager to go to school like his five-year-old brother, Jay, who was attending preschool. Every morning, Gele sat at the kitchen counter watching as Jay packed his pencils and erasers in his backpack, put food in his lunch pail, and left for school. One morning, Gele asked Sina, his mother, "When can I go to school like Jay?" Not knowing what to say, Sina replied, "We'll see."

Sina was bothered by her son's question and motivated to find an answer. In her mind, she rehashed the reasons why Gele could or could not go to school. She thought, "He is potty trained, and although he can be difficult to understand when he talks and looks different from other children, he knows his ABCs and can write his name." Despite Sina's justifications as to why Gele should be in school, the reality was that schools at the time did not allow children with disabilities, let alone someone with Down syndrome like Gele.

Introduction

Gele's story is one of many that inspired the women- parents, teachers, disabled women, and community members- who organized a movement in the 1970s to develop physical spaces in which to teach disabled students in Sāmoa. Generally, Sāmoan notions of disability are captured under the umbrella term *ma'i,* sickness, which is generally defined as people with visible or physical disabilities. Disabled people[1], the preferred term used in this paper to foreground disability as a political category, were considered sick and uneducable, and they were often hidden from the wider community.

This paper focuses on women's activism in Sāmoa to establish schools to educate both disabled and preschool students. The stigma associated with people with disabilities was an attitude that the women organizers aimed to change over time with the schools' development. The objective- to create formal educational institutions for disabled students- contradicts the legacy of schools as colonizing spaces. This paper explores the multifaceted roles of educational institutions as both colonial and decolonial spaces.

Historically, colonial school systems often perceived disabled people as being not fully human and not productive citizens (Carey, 2009), in turn justifying their exclusion from educational and social institutions. As disability studies scholars argue, disability has been recognized as a denial (Oliver, 1990), as an antithesis of citizenship (Linton, 1998), and as an identity that is devalued and othered (Barton, 1993). The legacy of such attitudes is promoted by the eugenics movement of improving the genetic composition of the human race, a practiced promoted by governments, institutions, and influential individuals around the world (Baynton, 2001). Thus, in the Sāmoan context, disabled people were excluded from formal schools because they were considered undeserving of the opportunity. I argue that the establishment of these schools is a concrete, localized manifestation of a wave of decolonization projects initiated in Sāmoa in the wake of its independence from New Zealand in 1962. The context of a newly independent state adds to the insistent activism by the women organizers and their motivations to find land to establish educational institutions for excluded students.

Establishing schools for disabled students is an example of a decolonization project. The women organizers aimed to create schools that included students with intellectual and physical disabilities, and they used Sāmoan language and ideas in their teaching and organizing practices and processes. The women organizers also collaborated with supporters of early childhood education to develop services for students aged three to five. In the 1970s, students in these grade levels were also excluded from attending formal schools; this prompted the women's organizing efforts to create schools for both preschool and disabled students. The women's activism is an example of strategic approaches that disrupted and transformed ableist and normative educational structures in the region. I assert that the

national decolonization politics prior to the 1970s greatly influenced the women organizers pedagogy. Based on this continuum, the women organizers' activism in the 1970s and 1980s rested on the Samoan concepts of *tautua*, (service to others), *fanua* (land), and *fa'a Samoa* (culture). The creation of the Aoga Fiamalamalama, early childhood centre, and Loto Taumafai schools transformed Sāmoan understandings of belonging and citizenship.

In the following sections, I trace Sāmoa's brief colonial educational history by situating the relevance of a decolonizing framework to examine the women organizers' search for land to anchor disabled students as members of the community; and their use of Sāmoan value systems of land connections and service towards others' wellbeing to change a colonial educational system that did not include disabled people.

Historical Context

For over fifty years, administrations from Germany (1900 to 1914) and New Zealand (1914 to 1962) governed the western islands of the Sāmoan archipelago. Before missionaries arrived from the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1830, education in Sāmoan society was an integral part of the routines of daily life. The learning process began at birth and often involved the collective household. Children learned from elders and extended family members, ensuring the collective aspect of learning and teaching; a formal school was not the only place for young people to learn. After the arrival of the LMS, missionary schools were established, but the church's mission was directed primarily at converting the Sāmoan people to Christianity rather than on providing universal education. Soon after its arrival, the LMS launched a formal school to teach Sāmoans how to translate Christian scriptures from English to Sāmoan. Missionary schools were formally established in villages, and by the 1900s they had become a foundational institution within Sāmoan culture. As scholar Tupeni Baba (1986:83) argues:

> The missionaries were concerned with total societal change and both the church and the school played a part in that effort. The islanders were not only converted…they were also introduced to new and more "civilized" ways of living, based on Christian principles. The school became an agent of change and it taught the package of skills necessary for living in what was conceived [of]…as constituting a Christian society.

Baba demonstrates the intertwined systems of colonial and indigenous education with culture and Christianity. The church's authority and role in defining the purpose of formal education continues to reflect the attitudes and systems inherent in educating students, particularly able-bodied students today. The church's mission was to spread the word of God according to the Christian values of peace and harmony. As scholar Eve Coxon (2007:269) suggests, 'The most significant mechanism through which the missionaries aimed to transform Sāmoan

society into a truly Christian community was formal school'. The role of education in the 1900s was about the conversion process that went beyond indoctrinating the 'natives' with the notion of a true god; it also involved introducing Sāmoans to white, middle-class, Christian, European values of so-called 'civilization'.

Prior to the 1970s, the exclusion of disabled students was enforced by such policies as the Education Act of 1959, no. 14, which focused on the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education to establish and maintain government schools. The Education Ordinance of 1959 was a holdover of colonial policy from the New Zealand administration, which initially excluded Sāmoan students from schools meant for the children of foreign or expatriate workers. These exclusions were based on race, class, and, most likely, disability. This same ordinance was later amended, becoming the Education Act of 1965/1973. The women organizers and educators collaborated with government officials to change educational policies, which eventually resulted in the extension of the school curriculum to include a vocational-education path for secondary students.

As a result, the overlaps between indigenous communities and colonial structures continued to define Sāmoan society even after it gained national independence. The transition to a postcolonial[2] state has required review and reform of educational policies regarding questions of educability and belonging in the school system. In pre and postcolonial Sāmoa through the 1970s, the stigma and shame that commonly surrounded disabled people was reinforced by both indigenous and colonial discourses labeling disabled people as *ulu ka'e* ('broken in the head') and unworthy of inclusion in formal schools. The crucial period from 1970 to 1980, the primary focus of this paper, reflects a newly independent state's evolution, during which time the nation's infrastructure was slowly changing to accommodate the needs of a new nation. It is against this backdrop that the women organizers advocated for the inclusion of disabled students in schools. Despite the changes to the schools' curricula and staff, the Sāmoan government continued to neglect their responsibility of including disabled students in the educational process. Aoga Fiamalamalama and Loto Taumafai are the first nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote the education of students with disabilities.

Decolonizing Framework and Schools

This paper applies decolonization as a theory with both local and scholarly resonance to the education of indigenous disabled people and marginal groups in Sāmoa and throughout the broader Pacific region. Generally, decolonization is the undoing of colonialism, where a nation dominates and maintains its control over dependent territories or nations. I borrow from scholars and decolonization activists several definitions of decolonization: as an event, reaching a critical consciousness level of self-identity; as a process of engaging in activities

of creating, restoring, and birthing (Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird, 2012); as a process of questioning the legitimacy of colonization and the truth of this injustice (Memmi, 1974); and as an active (as opposed to passive) form of engagement that requires praxis, a reflection and action focused on transforming subjugated human beings into liberated human beings (Freire, 1968). Thus, the term 'decolonization' as used in this paper is understood as a process by which communities actively work to restore the harm done by colonial expansion, genocide, and cultural assimilation.

More importantly, this paper also proposes decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 1999) as a construct within which communities can reframe their understanding of the history of their colonization, rediscover their ancestral traditions and cultural values, and consider their future using indigenous frameworks and perspectives (Hau`ofa, 2008; Wendt, 1980). In so doing, the terms 'decolonize' and 'decolonizing' as used here relate to indigenous peoples, particularly in the Pacific, and their shared strategies of survival and commitment to leading sovereign lives in their own homelands. They denote the widespread and destructive impact of imperialism (Hutchings and Lee-Morgan, 2017).

Decolonizing approaches, then, examine the history, colonial processes, ideologies and institutional practices that structure the power relations between indigenous people and settler societies. They involve the deconstruction of the larger intent to take apart the stories, the underlying texts, and the historical and social policies that will improve people's current conditions in life (Grosfoguel, 2002; Maldonaldo-Torres, 2007; Smith, 1999; Trask, 1999). As scholars Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird (2012) relate, colonialism can be understood as the conquest of and control over indigenous peoples and the usurpation by colonizers of the resources of the colonized land and the intentional suppression of indigenous social, cultural, political, and economic ways of living. Education has played a crucial role in the colonization of the Samoan people and other indigenous communities globally. The task of decolonizing is difficult, especially when the normalization of the colonizers' power and control are reflected in cultural knowledge systems, traditions, beliefs, and practices. It urges indigenous peoples to analyze the legitimacy of colonization in each context (Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird, 2012). For the Samoan case, Samoans had already been thinking of decolonization well before formal independence. Regardless of their oppressive history among indigenous communities, educational institutions were critical to Samoa's goals to gaining sovereignty. As Tina, an administrator in the Ministry of Education shared, "We were out to get independence, *O lea e maua ai, le mau e pule* [the emergence of the oppositional movement][3] (Personal communication, December 29, 2012).

Tina was speaking of the period leading up to 1962 and pointing to Samoan resistance of German and New Zealand colonial rule; most Samoans during the early to mid-twentieth century did not want the New Zealand administration governing their affairs. During our *talanoa* (talking) meetings, Tina also clarified the purpose of decolonization by saying,

"Education was for decolonization, meaning the education system was a tool of decolonizing", signaling the complicated entanglements between education and sovereignty. Yet, Tuck and Wang (2012) remind us that decolonization requires reparations for harm against indigenous land and life. Along these lines, the Samoan women organizers demanded improvements to the exclusive practices by using Samoan cultural processes, or the concept of *tautua*. Establishing the schools for disabled and young students is the women organizers *tautua*, their process of recasting advocacy with indigenous frameworks of thought (Smith, 1999).

The undertaking of creating schools for disabled students was an act of decolonizing that changed the educational system. Throughout the 1970s (post-independence), Samoans sought to expand school opportunities for students at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Many villages took on the task of investing their resources in school development. Given the foundation of Christian missionaries and their role in establishing schools as part of the colonizing scheme, Samoans indigenized these existing colonial systems. For example, the *aoga faifeau* (minister school) is considered the first formal system of education for Samoan children, where they learned about the Bible and Samoan ethos. As postcolonial studies remind us, even after independence, colonial infrastructures of governance remain in place, and non-European people continue to live under colonial values (Quijano, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2002). Age-old colonial-based hierarchies continue to impact indigenous reorganization of systems of local governance. Reflective of such arrangements, in the mid-1960s, the Samoan government awarded scholarships to students who were regarded as 'educable' and who were considered the cream of the crop and had the highest test scorers. Such practices reflect the ableism and hierarchies in the practices and beliefs that assign inferior value to people with developmental, emotional, physical, or psychiatric disabilities (Campbell, 2009)- essentially a replication of colonial hierarchies and the system of meritocracy based on rewarding those who are perceived as being capable, while excluding the majority of the other students. Unsurprisingly, school systems also replicated hierarchical and discriminatory practices that were vital to sustaining the legitimacy of colonial regimes.

The linked colonial genealogies continue to shape how schools, governance, and care are institutionally applied. Thereby, the concept of coloniality is critical to our understanding of the aftermath of colonialism. Coloniality has become the most general form of domination in the world today, after colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed. Further, it is the crux of the global capitalist system of power, organized around two axes: coloniality of power and modernity. As scholar Quijano (2007) suggests, 'coloniality of power' is based on racial social stratification of the world population under Eurocentric world power, which pervaded and modulated the basic instances of the capitalist colonial and modern world power. Additionally, scholar Lugones (2007:190) extends our understanding of coloniality of power by arguing that gender and sexuality combine with race in the operations of colonial power, 'a violent introduction consistently used to destroy peoples, cosmologies, and

communities'. In addition, Lugones (2010:742) further proposes a rereading of capitalist colonial modernity itself, because 'the colonial imposition of gender cuts across questions of ecology, economics, government, relations with the spirit world, and knowledge, as well as across everyday practices that either habituate us to take care of the world or to destroy it', complicating how such competing goals and relations to power influence how we think about decolonizing the education system as an option for independence.

Methodology

This paper is guided by an interdisciplinary analytical framework that questions normalcy, ableism, and compulsory able-bodiedness. At a family party in 2006, Sina, one of the women organizers and a relative of this author, shared a story about her role in organizing the schools. However, it was not until 2011 that I asked her again about the story. She nonchalantly replied, "Oh yeah, that was a little something we did back then" (personal communication, September 2, 2011). This 'little something' was initiated by women organizers (disabled and non-disabled) who came from middle-class families, were educated overseas, and used their resources to establish the schools. Pseudonyms are used for the twenty-one women organizers interviewed; most of the women chose to remain anonymous. The data for this research was conducted from 2011 to 2013.

In 2012, with Sina's permission to write about Aoga Fiamalamalama and Loto Taumafai schools, I launched into conducting interviews with the founding members of the two schools, including some of the educators from the early childhood centre. To clarify, the disabled students initially attended school at the early childhood centre *before* Aoga Fiamalamalama and Loto Taumafai was established. Indeed, the early childhood educators' advocacy and collaboration with the women organizers was instrumental to the creation of schools for disabled students. In the interviews and archival documents, I specifically focused on understanding the development of the schools from 1970 to 1980. Concurrently, I reflected on my positionality as a member of the communities being researched and as a researcher speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991). As a Sāmoan woman raised in both the islands and the United States, my interest in the topic evolved from my family's role in the story. I was eager to learn more about this unknown Sāmoan women's history and social movement (White and Tengan, 2001). The politics of conducting research in my own (Samoan) community is fraught with personal and professional dilemmas (Kang, 2000). Because I am researching two educational institutions that were cofounded by my family members, my involvement as a scholar directly affected my role, compelling me to balance my function and identity as a researcher and the dynamics of Samoan customs. During the data collection, I conducted multiple interviews with the participants and used archival documents (newspaper articles, newsletters, annual reports) to verify the information collected. Furthermore, I shared my interview transcriptions with the women and sought their feedback throughout the various

stages of the study.

Storytelling and *talanoa* (talking) were used as research methodologies. For some indigenous communities, storytelling is an approach used to contest colonial knowledge and to teach history (Osorio, 2004). Historian Osorio argues that for Hawaiians, ancestry is the root of everything people know and everything that is knowable about ourselves. He prefers to 'teach and write *mo'olelo* (stories)—not history, perhaps as you know it, I tell stories' (2004:14). Perhaps the most powerful element of Osorio's writing is his self-reflexivity and how he positions himself within the histories of the people he studies. He puts faces to his ancestors by linking them with people he knows today. His methodology of storytelling has relevance to indigenous peoples by asserting how ancestry is the root of indigenous knowledge and identity (Maaka, 2004). *Talanoa* complements storytelling as a formal and informal conversation that involves critical discussion and signifies culturally appropriate practices of respect, especially when talking to elders in the Polynesian communities (Vaioleti, 2016). Throughout the data collection, I listened to how women organizers co-created knowledge and solutions for themselves. *Talanoa* is not just about chatting. It also involves deep, interpersonal relationships, the kind of relationships in which most Pacific activities are carried out (Morrison et al., 2002). In the following sections, I center the women organizers use of *fa'a Sāmoa* (Sāmoan way of life; culture), values of *fanua* (land), and *tautua* (service) as organizing strategies to create educational spaces for *all* Sāmoans.

Schools: Aoga Fiamalamalama, Preschools, and Loto Taumafai

The formation of the schools for disabled and preschool students disrupted the education of able-bodied students. The collaborations between the women organizers and the preschool educators led to the creation of the Aoga Fiamalamalama and Loto Taumafai schools. At the time, the preschool, or early childhood education, was established concurrently with the support of parents, community members, and women's groups from local churches. The preschool movement ambitiously sought to establish an early childhood education curriculum nationally.

IHC New Zealand (originally established as the Society for Intellectually Handicapped Children) was instrumental in the creation of the Aoga Fiamalamalama organization. Through IHC's international partners sector, countries in the Asian and the Pacific Islands also benefitted from the NZ Aide programs and funding from private donors. As a result, numerous communities identified children with intellectual disabilities while empowering their families to advocate for their rights. Notably, IHC New Zealand offered grants to affiliated IHC centers and organizations for professional development. Many of the women organizers in Samoa attended professional development workshops in Fiji and New Zealand (Sua, personal communication, January 28, 2013), while more centers were established in Fiji

(1978) and Vanuatu (1983) (IHC Newsletter, 1985/1989). The initial partnership between the women organizers and IHC New Zealand led to a long relationship between the organization and disability communities in the Pacific region. By 1980, Aoga Fiamalamalama's doors were open, and six students were enrolled (Sua, personal communication, January 28, 2013).

Sua, one of the founding teachers of Aoga Fiamalamalama, recalls the two founding students, Gele and Hone, who were instrumental in the transformation of the Sāmoan education system (sadly, at the time of this research, these students had passed away). Gele and Hone were students in Telesia's preschool classroom, and they inspired her to think seriously about the education of disabled students. Telesia recalled, "We had to do something because we had a lot of students with disabilities in our classrooms and we were not ready for them" (Telesia, personal communication, January 12, 2013). Her recognition of the scarce support for students with intellectual disabilities led to her involvement in creating other educational spaces. She initiated a relationship with the Special Education Office in American Sāmoa (an unincorporated US territory) to help her develop a curriculum for disabled students. Given the minimal support, she contacted other organizations in New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and Canada. More importantly, finding land to establish the schools was critical to how the women organizers conceptualized inclusion through land affiliation. They held a firm belief that land serves as a bridge to the inclusion of disabled people.

Fanua: Bridging Land and Schools

Land is central to most indigenous communities' stories, history, creation, and belonging. For Sāmoans, similar stories and contentions exist about land and family titles and names in the f*aamatai* (chief) system. The subject of land is critical to the vitality of the culture as reflected in the dual court systems, the Sāmoa Land and Titles Court and the Westminster Court. The Sāmoa Land and Titles Court primarily deals with disputes about land and chiefly titles, while the Westminster Court system governs social and civil society concerns. The Land and Titles Court is essential to *fa'a Sāmoa* (culture) because most chiefly titles are closely tied to land.

The significance of land is inherent in Sāmoan words and phrases. For instance, *fanua* in the Sāmoan language means land and also placenta or place of birth. *Fanua* defines Sāmoan rights and access to land, underlining women's cultural roles, past and present, in land knowledge. Here, *fanua* situates women in relation to land as stewards. Land is symbolic of women's bodies and their responsibility to the survival of the collective community. More importantly, *fanua* is a source of life- the life of the family and the nation- showing the significance of women's reproductive roles in the nurturing of future generations.

This relationship of women with the land is similar to that in other matrilineal communities,

for example, in the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in the northeast (Goeman, 2013) and across the western and northern parts of the Pacific Islands (Simanu-Klutz, 2011; Sualii-Sauni et al., 2009; Teaiwa, 2005; Trask, 1999). In the Marshall Islands, a common saying is 'These islands belong to the women' (Stege, 2008). In matrilineal communities, women continue to play a critical role in land stewardship, which often entails caring for living and non-living beings on the land (Chen, 2012). In Samoa and other parts of the Pacific region, the placenta is often buried on family land, thereby enforcing the intertwined relations among women, land, and nation (DeLisle, 2015). The literal and figurative burying of what some women in my family call the 'afterbirth', or placenta, roots them to the soil and ties them to the land. Even after a mother's death, her children are the heirs of family land, and these matters are often discussed by the extended family and village.

Disputes around land are as old as Sāmoa, but colonial disputes date back to pre-contact, German, and New Zealand administrations of the twentieth century and their efforts to decenter the Sāmoan concept of *feagaiga*, a practice of living in harmony with the land and a source of women's mechanisms of power (Simanu-Klutz, 2011). As Pacific scholars suggest, colonialism is gendered through the imposition of patriarchy in communities, the establishment of colonial rule, the usurpation of land, and the naturalization of a racial hierarchy (Teaiwa, 2005; Kauanui, 2008; Te Awekotuku, 1991). Indeed, the colonial and gendered legacies of Pacific women as 'exotic' female beauties available for conquering (Jones et al., 2000) are similar to the mammy figure, a stereotype and ideology that supported the slavery of African American women as passive nurturers and asexual mother figures (hooks, 1981). For the Sāmoan context, although men and women held complementary leadership roles in precolonial Sāmoan society, men occupied a majority of the leadership positions within the colonial governments, a dynamic that continues to define the power and gender dynamics in Sāmoan society today. Therefore, the concept of coloniality is pertinent in situating the continuity of colonial forms of domination that persist even after the colonial administrations depart (Maldonaldo-Torres, 2007), and colonial structures and systems continue to operate in the modern/colonial/capitalist and patriarchal world system (Grosfoguel, 2007).

Sāmoans also define land as being either customary, freehold, or government. Customary land does not belong to one person but includes family clans living in the *nu'u*, or the village. Customary land cannot be sold for monetary gain, ensuring its transference to the next generation (Meleisea, 1987); recently, this is a sensitive matter regarding the leasing of customary land to international investors (Samoa Observer, 2017). A *nu'u* usually consists of *matai* (chiefs), *fono* (council of chiefs), and very specific roles for the men, women, young adults, and children. Land that is freehold, by contrast, can be purchased and sold through monetary exchanges and is scattered throughout the islands.

Not only was finding land, particularly freehold land, important for the schools' success, the

role of educational policies was also critical in supporting the inclusion of disabled students. For example, the Education Act of 1983 was eventually amended to include disabled students in schools, preempting the implementation of the National Disability Policy of Samoa in 2009. Thereby, the creation of the Aoga Fiamalamalama and Loto Taumafai schools for disabled students slowly altered Sāmoan understandings of belonging and ultimately of citizenship. The entangled topics of land tenure, stewardship and schools also proceeds from a history of land taken back by indigenous communities that were once alienated by colonial governments. The relationship among women, motherhood, and land are integral to how the women organizers understood disabled people's participation, connections to land, inclusion, and education. I suggest that the women organizers understood land as the anchor to Sāmoan peoples' belonging, a belonging that included disabled bodies. For the Sāmoan case, by the late 1970s, the educational system and policies were shifting again. The disability community was dissatisfied with the slow changes and ableist educational policies.

Tautua: Enacting Service Through Disability Advocacy

Fa'a Samoa encompasses the protocols, expectations, and values of Sāmoan culture. The concept of *tautua* (service) is *fa'a Samoa* (culture), and it greatly influenced how the women organizers disrupted the normative practice of educating only able-bodied students. *Tautua* derives from the principles of *fa'amatai*, Sāmoa's chiefly system, and is a measure of one's claim to a chiefly title through service and ancestry. As the Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi, the former Sāmoan head of state, relates, the significance of *tautua* as the right to a title is afforded to those who serve others (Suaalii-Sauni et al., 2009:160). Although getting a chiefly title is one aspect of *tautua*, the women's version was about changing systems and policies at the local level. They sought to define the everyday use of *tautua* as a collective responsibility to children while also changing Sāmoan understandings of belonging and citizenship. This is evident in the following examples of *tautua* by Telesia, Sina, and Fele in securing land for the schools.

Telesia was a founding member of the schools and the preschool teacher at the Protestant Church of Apia village. She admitted Gele and Hone into her classroom, although, she was uncertain if this was the appropriate approach to teaching disabled students. She believed that every student could learn, and this bold act of inclusion led to her involvement in reforming schools. With the support and commitment of parents such as Sina and Fele, these schools materialized. These women sought to find an alternative to educating any student, regardless of age or ability. The combined efforts of parents, teachers, community members, and international organizations led to the creation of the schools. The women's activism also situates the cultural discourses of exclusion and shame at the time. Telesia relates:

> By then, the government was starting to realize the need for it [schools for preschoolers and disabled students]; We used to visit in the villages, not only were we trying to promote preschool education, but we were trying to promote the special needs idea for families who have special needs kids. Families were trying to hide them. There was a lot of that going on in the villages. *Ma* [shame]… *Fa'aali mai tamaiti* [not wanting to show their kids in public]. (Telesia, personal communication, January 6, 2013)

Despite the normative discourse of omitting disabled students from formal schools, the women organizers struggled to change attitudes. Another aspect of the women's organizing also led to alternative community-based definitions of disability that acknowledged disabled people as members of the community. The creation of the schools slowly shifted the perceptions of the wider community about educating disabled people, those considered *ma'i* (sick), and the *ma* (shame) that marginalized many people in the disability community.

Under Telesia's leadership, the women organizers applied for grants from agencies in Canada, Belgium, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia (Telesia, personal communication, January 28, 2013). Subsequently, small grants, ranging from $100 to $500, were awarded. The preschool also asked the Protestant Church to allot one of their properties in Apia for the relocation of the school. This request was denied, but the cardinal of the church pointed Telesia to the Western Samoa Trust Estate Corporation for Land (WSTEC), a local government office that leases out available lands. After numerous meetings with government officials, the WSTEC granted 3.25 acres of land to the women organizers. This land is located in the village of Sogi, where the Early Childhood Centre resides today.

Mobilizing to find land to establish these schools was not simple. Ray's (1999) study in India illustrates what we have long known: women's movements do not occur in a vacuum; they emerge from political instability and protest. Similarly, Sāmoan women organizers responded to the broader issues at hand, protesting the exclusion of disabled people from schools and from the wider community. Although busy with full-time jobs as nurses, mothers, and business owners, Fele and Sina found time to network continuously with potential local and international supporters. As Sina related, "[Local] people kinda laughed at us. Of course not in our faces, but they made comments that we were *vales* [or crazy] like our kids" (Sina, personal communication, September 12, 2012). Sina was recounting the stigma that she experienced for openly supporting her disabled son. The normalized shame inherent in the jokes made by people also contributed to the further impeding of the women's organizing efforts. As the women organizers clearly stated in our *talanoa* sessions, their advocacy was not limited to educating disabled students. They also sought to change other exclusive practices and attitudes in the Sāmoan community around such issues as poverty, healthcare, and mental illness.

Funds from international organizations supported the establishment of the NGOs. Much of this money was disbursed through local government offices. This systematic process required that the local government disperse the aid through their offices; in the process, they couldn't help but notice the international support that the women organizers had attracted. Tasi, an administrator for the Ministry of Education in the 1970s stated, 'There was no money to do this, and so funding from outside was key' (Tasi, personal communication, January 29, 2013). Conversely, Fili, one of the women organizers, insisted that the local government had always taken the position that social services for disabled people were an NGO matter.

Given the financial support from international organizations, the Sāmoan government later supported the schools. As Lupe succinctly related, "It twisted the government's many arms [to support the schools for disabled students]" (personal communication, January 21, 2013). This reluctant support by the local government meant different things to the women organizers. For instance, the women organizers shared the idea of 'saving face' as an effective strategy for getting the local government to act. The women organizers realized that once the international community became involved in supporting the schools, the local government would act. International support also meant that the local government strived to represent itself as a proficient partner with their global allies. Funds were eventually allocated to the local NGOs, and the outdated educational policies were amended. Finally, in 1981, Aoga Fiamalamalama received its first government grant of $10,000, which Lupe called "peanuts" when compared to the budget received from the Legislative Assembly [or Parliament of Samoa] (Lupe, personal communication, January 23, 2013).

In the preschool's case, it was the growing student body that led to its relocation. The preschool classroom included disabled students, and unfortunately, after leaving the church hall, the school was unable to find a new location. Fele, a parent and organizer, immediately volunteered her family's home. After several months and numerous meetings with local government agencies, the preschool was granted government land (the 3.25 acres in the village of Sogi mentioned earlier). Noteworthy is the fact that the government land was an uninhabitable seawater swampland, making the gesture emblematic of the undercurrent of resistance to the education of disabled people and young students by locating the grant on land that was itself considered deficient. As some of the women organizers related in their stories, this assignment of government land, symbolizes the exclusive ageist and ableist attitudes in Samoan culture. The concept of coloniality aptly applies to how the local government responded to disabled and young children as "undesirable" citizens. Furthermore, we must reflect on how disabled bodies and minds are marked with power, privilege, marginalization, and dispossession (McClintock, 1995). Pointing to the coloniality inherent in the education system, refers to the longstanding patterns of power that define culture, labor, gender, relations, and knowledge production that linger beyond a colonial administration (Quijano, 2007; Lugones, 2007). The allocating of swampland for educational purposes, especially for a particular kind of student body, further motivated the women organizers to

advocate against such exclusive practices.

The women organizers refused to allow the swampland to derail their goal of establishing schools. They applied for funding to fill in the swampland, organized fundraising events, and donated their own time and money to the effort. Finally, Sisi persuaded her brother to use his company's heavy machinery to fill in the swampland- one of the many examples of selfless support provided by the women's extended families and networks. The Samoan scholar and *faifeau* (minister) Latai's work (2015) on kinship relations, emphasizes the importance of familial networks as a decolonizing methodology, especially sister-brother relations or *feagaiga* and *va* (space between them) in Sāmoan, arguing that a brother's obligation is to support his sisters. However, under the influence of capitalism and Christianity, these mutually supportive kinship obligations are slowly fading away and are being replaced with more oppositional and competitive relationships. But family connections and community support were vital to the women's organizing of the schools; without their *tautua* (service), the women organizers most likely could not have accomplished their goals.

Because not everyone in the community supported the idea, building enthusiasm for the establishment of the educational centers was an ongoing goal for the women organizers. Some of the opposition to the effort was at the governmental and local level. The women often heard people say, "That is only child-minding service (babysitting) that you are doing, and there is no education in it" (Sia, personal communication, January 28, 2013). Despite such simplistic views of educating students, the women organizers were adamant about finding a place in which to relocate the preschool. As Telesia indicated, "All I asked is land somewhere close to town to set up our preschool and headquarters" (Telesia, personal communication, January 28, 2013).

Telesia was interested in finding land to establish the Early Childhood Centre, thereby institutionalizing the importance of the education of all young children, with or without disabilities. Her methodology is fundamentally tied to indigenous values about *fanua* (land), which centers land and people, similar to environmental justice advocacy roles taken on by mothers in a process known as 'triple/third shifts' (Krauss, 1998), a term that describes the tripartite division of commitment as activists, parents, and community workers and is comparable to the collective care of children in the community by 'othermother', as coined by Collins (1991), or 'activist mothers' (Naples 1988), in which the broader goal is to care for each other while also seeking justice based on the community's needs.

Together, these women organizers' efforts reveal a much larger world of power and resistance that challenges the social relations to powers. The Sāmoan women organizers aimed to validate the education of disabled children and preschoolers through their ties to land, representing the connections of *all* people to Sāmoa. Further, the women's recognition of the connections between land and belonging also rests on the interdependent relations that land,

culture, and people have toward the survival of future generations.

By 1980, after numerous meetings with local and international officials, fundraising efforts, and collaborations among community members, the schools were finally opened. As a result, Aoga Fiamalamalama ended up purchasing freehold land in the village of Alafua. The preschool moved from Fele's backyard to government land in the village of Sogi. Loto Taumafai rented freehold land in the village of Matautu, and several years later moved to government land near the national hospital.

The making of Aoga Fiamalamalama, early childhood center (preschools) and Loto Taumafai went beyond simply changing the school system; the process exposed the ongoing evolution of colonial systems that continues to reinforce ableist and exclusive ideologies of citizenship. For the Sāmoan case, educator Coxon (2007:281) reminds us that 'education was a tool for decolonizing'. Likewise, Samoan educator Ma'ia'i (1957) also remarks that the purpose of education by New Zealand administrators was an assimilation project, similar to New Zealand's official policy for Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) education. Education also acts as a tool in the promotion of supposedly social and economic progress (Coxon, 2007). These entangled and contradictory reasons for establishing schools and endorsing colonial structures, also adds to the robust conversation about the roles of indigeneity, education, and ability. Furthermore, I suggest that the women organizers' community-based activism straddles the notions of culture and change by including disability activism within local concerns for education. We must understand these modes of activism as inseparable from the *fa'a Sāmoa*. Since the schools were established, the women organizers feel that disabled people are more visible in the Samoan community. The women organizers have been applauded for their efforts in advocating for land and educational institutes in the 1970s. More importantly, they reminded the Sāmoan community of their *tautua* to people on the fringes of society. The organizers strived to create community-based definitions of disability, and they developed new disability pedagogies, paving the way for other disability services and providers.

Finally, the relations between colonialism and ableism set the tone for who was worthy of getting an education. Campbell (2011) refers to ableism as ideas, practices, institutions, and social relations that presume able-bodiedness or compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006) as the norm while constructing people with disabilities as "others" and invisible. These structures of exclusion and violence are entwined with materialist politics that need change, particularly to the economic relations of production and the nature of ableism and racism in capitalism that continue to create a system of exclusion for disabled people (Erevelles, 2011). In the Pacific region, colonialism supplements ableism and vice versa, reminding us of the history, practices, and ideologies that justify the devaluing of disabled people and the limiting of their potential.

As Meekosha (2011) reminds us, the field of contemporary disability studies constitutes a form of scholarly colonialism and needs to take fuller account of the four hundred million disabled people living in the global South (United Nations, 2009). Meekosha examines the processes of colonization, colonialism, and neo-colonial power that have resulted in the vast majority of impaired people being located in the global South. Many of these impairments are caused by or are connected to the global economy through the violence of wars that are constantly provoked by the North, directly or indirectly, in its efforts to control minerals, oil, and economic resources. The fundamental business of colonization involves structural, cultural, economic, and political domination, usually by peoples from the Northern European metropole over peoples from the South (Meekosha, 2011). Appropriation of the land of indigenous peoples was and still is a key part of the disabling process. The relationship between colonialism and ableism is ubiquitous in the fabric of our communities; the inclusion of indigenous disability relations is a critical component in the dismantling of this relationship. This paper hopes to add to this discourse by accounting for ableist structures through a decolonizing lens and by offering a context within which to understand the intersections of colonization and to see how the Sāmoan case is an extension of the "Americas", especially when dealing with indigenous groups outside of the dominant Western frameworks.

Making Changes

In closing, the work carried out by the women organizers reminds us of the need for more models of inclusive spaces. Their activism complicates our understandings of Sāmoan ideas of inclusion, land, decolonizing, and able-bodiedness. This is a story about prejudice, ableism, and the balancing of communal obligations and customary practices that the women organizers were instrumental in transforming. The women's philosophy was primarily rooted in the *fa'a Sāmoa* or Sāmoan values of *fanua* (land) and *tautua* (service). Fili put this succinctly: "There had to be a better way for our kids to become more productive citizens" (personal communication, February 5, 2013).

Fili's plea for an alternative way to educate disabled students is an example of de-colonial praxis that disrupts the ableist ways of thinking about education and students (Grech, 2011). The women organizers' activism and advocacy decolonizes and forces indigenous societies to rethink marginal communities beyond capitalist notions of productivity, normativity, and property. The women organizers all agreed about one point: even if they had not received financial support from the local and international organizations, they would not have been deterred in their efforts. The idea that a citizen must be "productive" is an ableist myth that defines people with disabilities as "unproductive" (Baynton, 2001). The women's activism disrupted both the normative model that limited education to able-bodied students only and the process by which ableism and colonialism create a system of exclusion, while also

nodding to the historical materialism (Erevelles, 2011) of disabled bodies and the re-owning of bodies as an act of self-definition within the social relations of production and consumption of transnational capitalism (Petchesky, 1995). Ultimately, this is a story about why some bodies matter more than others.

Today, over three hundred students with various disabilities and chronic illnesses are serviced by these schools. The involvement of women with physical and intellectual disabilities and chronic illnesses attests to the significance of this history. Disabled people are seldom included in decisions that directly pertain to their communities. This is an example of a potential model for inclusive education in Sāmoa and in postcolonial nations, and a way to think about solutions to these oppressive practices. As disability feminist scholars (Garland-Thomson, 1999) and activists suggest, women with disabilities, especially indigenous disabled women, are underrepresented in research studies (Hall, 2011; O'Toole, 2015; Soldatic, 2015). Particularly, more stories are needed about individuals like Gele and Sina, stories that teach us about inclusion, access to land, and belonging.

When Gele asked, "When can I go to school like Jay?" Sina simply replied, "We'll see." Yet Sina was bothered by her son's question and motivated to find an answer. Eventually, her answer came by way of collective Sāmoan women's organizing. This paper offers another means to think about how indigenous communities understand land, politics, and citizenship for contemporary feminist struggles, indigenous feminism, and for understanding such present-day praxis and movement. Importantly, it seeks to share a history and future by which indigenous women have consciously chosen to act as stewards of the Sāmoan people. With the assistance of families, allies, and a supportive global community, Aoga Fiamalamalama, early childhood centre, and Loto Taumafai materialized and eventually transformed Samoan's ideas of education and inclusion. In this regard, the women organizers used Sāmoan concepts of *fa'a Sāmoa* (culture), *fanua* (land), and *tautua* (service) as ways to redefine the commitment of the education system.

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Notes

[1]Disabled students and people with disabilities are used interchangeably in this article. Depending on the context and preference, some prefer 'disabled people' to 'people with disabilities'. The term 'disabled people' is used in this paper since this was a preferred term

used by the participants; also, the term foregrounds disability as a political category (Erevelles, 2011). The disability rights movement has redefined "disabled people" to mean people with impairments who are disabled by socially constructed barriers. Others prefer to use 'person with a disability' because they identify themselves as a person first, more than just a disability. For example, in the United Kingdom, the phrase 'disabled person' has been reclaimed by the disability rights movement as an act of solidarity. It is considered an effort to include people with all impairments in one minority group that is oppressed by society and has united to challenge the barriers society has put in place for it.

[2]Postcolonial scholarship is increasingly questioned, especially by indigenous scholars, activists, and advocates, in terms of its ability to adequately know, understand, and describe the experience of indigeneity. The positioning of 'post' in the postcolonial are the real constraints; colonization has not ended, and the canons of postcolonial scholarship do not reflect the ongoing and broad dispossession of lands, culture, and language of indigenous peoples. "Post'" also does not capture the continuance of colonization as suggested in this special issue.

[3]For more information on the sovereignty movements in Sāmoa, see Hempenstall (2016) and Field (1991).

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