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Author(s): Vanessa Anthony-Stevens

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Cultivating Alliances: Reflections on the Role of Non-Indigenous Collaborators in Indigenous Educational Sovereignty

VANESSA ANTHONY-STEVENSON

Indigenous educational sovereignty is a question of equity and self-determination. Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations in practices of Indigenous educational sovereignty present pressing tensions and challenges to be negotiated. Speaking particularly to non-Indigenous scholar-educators, this article furthers understanding of the role(s) and responsibilities of non-Indigenous collaborators in support of community-driven educational sovereignty. Within the frameworks of Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies and Critical Discourse Studies, issues of *when, where, and in what ways* non-Indigenous scholar-educators may productively serve as allies in processes of community-driven education are addressed. Utilizing vignettes from the author's research and personal experience as a White scholar-educator collaborating with Indigenous communities, examples push beyond simple recognition of power relationships and move toward conscious allied power negotiation. This article concludes that alliance building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholar-educators requires increased emphasis on praxis-oriented relationships which explicitly redress asymmetrical movements of power in current institutions of education, to better support Indigenous educational sovereignty.

Situating the Problem

Can non-Indigenous allies effectively support Indigenous educational sovereignty?¹ This article analyzes the roles and responsibilities of non-Indigenous scholar-educators in the process and practice of Indigenous educational sovereignty.² I believe that Indigenous language and cultural reclamation within institutions of education are embodiments of educational sovereignty and critical democracy (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002), and as such it is my intention to revisit Swisher's (1998) critique of the role of non-Indigenous scholar-educators in transformative

practices of Indigenous educational sovereignty. Nearly two decades ago, Swisher (1998) called attention to the overrepresentation of non-Indigenous scholars leading conversations on Indigenous education, surfacing a need to increase the presence of Indigenous peoples themselves at the helm of transformative Indian education (p. 197). Not intended to eliminate non-Indigenous collaborators from inquiry and action in the field, Swisher's critique, echoed by leading scholars (e.g., Smith, 2012), poignantly challenged the field to directly contemplate *when*, *where*, and *in what ways* non-Indigenous collaborators can productively contribute to processes of educational sovereignty. The call to action has been made, yet a productive on-the-ground mapping of Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations remains elusive.

The past and present tensions of Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration are not outside the inherent paradox in merging Indigenous sovereignty and schooling. The history of institutionalized education for Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas is framed by violence, assimilation, and cultural/linguistic genocide (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006), yet schools are emerging as crucial platforms for enacting Indigenous educational sovereignty (Lomawaima, 2000; McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). Educational sovereignty, which entails spaces where communities enact local control of their language and culture (Moll & Ruiz, 2005), "attends directly to asymmetrical power relations and the goal of transforming legacies of colonization" (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 103). With increasing attention to culturally responsive schooling (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008), critical culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogies (McCarty & Lee, 2014), and language immersion schools (Hermes, Bang, & Marin, 2012), schools are becoming sites of hope for transformative pedagogical and epistemological shifts in Indigenous education (Smith, 2005). In order to increase support for educational sovereignty, this article proposes that non-Indigenous scholars and educators explicitly engage with difficult questions regarding histories of schooling, persisting social and education inequities, and the role(s) non-Indigenous collaborators play in perpetuating or interrupting unequal power dynamics.

Self-determination and relationality are at the center of Indigenous education (Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl, & Solyom, 2012), and I address the following questions to examine the role and responsibility of non-Indigenous allied collaborators:

1. How do non-Indigenous scholar-educators, particularly White scholar-educators, *cultivate* an allied stance that both contributes to educational sovereignty and "steps aside"?

2. How do non-Indigenous scholar-educators gain the knowledge necessary to recognize critical moments for “stepping up”?
3. What does “acting as a broker” look like for non-Indigenous allied collaborators?

My analysis of the role and responsibility of non-Indigenous collaborators attends to the sociopolitical nature of interaction, and advocates for a praxis-based approach to situated power through reflection on discourse and action (Freire, 2000). I argue that a critical awareness of power nuances in the interactions among Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators offers vital opportunity space for forming and strengthening transformative allied relationships. For each of the three central questions, this article offers descriptive examples to illustrate the challenges and opportunities faced by (mostly) White scholar-educators in collaboration with Indigenous community-driven education.

I begin by positioning myself in this conversation, and the methodologies I use to illuminate allied relationships. Next, I survey the theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing relationality and power. The tensions among Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations are explored by presenting the context of my own experience as a teacher and ethnographic researcher: Indigenous schooling in the United States and Mexico. I address each of the three central questions of allied collaborations using on-the-ground examples, followed by a conclusion.

Positioning Myself

Before I tackle the central questions of alliances, I must situate myself as a scholar-educator: Who am I to illuminate the gray space? I am a White scholar-educator. The focus of my ethnographic research to date has grown out of 15-plus years of collaborative work in Indigenous-multilingual communities in the southwest United States, Mexico, and Paraguay, as a Euro-American woman, relative, partner, neighbor, friend, teammate, mother, teacher, teacher-educator, and scholar. I speak from experiences gained along the back roads (Gilmore, 2008). Prior to entering academia, I worked in the southeastern United States, and Asunción, Paraguay, in nontraditional settings of education serving minoritized adolescents. I taught elementary school on a reservation in central-eastern Arizona, and middle school in an urban Indigenous-serving charter school in southern Arizona. As an advanced doctoral student, I coordinated and then directed an in-service professional development program for Indigenous Mexican elementary educators hosted

at a university. I am currently junior faculty at a public land-grant university erected on the ancestral homelands of the Nez Perce people. My partner of 15-plus years is a tribal member, and together we are raising tribally enrolled children. Naming these experiences situates my voice in the saturated minefields of institutional and noninstitutional interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the postcolonial Americas.

Critiquing non-Indigenous/Indigenous collaborations emerges from my own ongoing grapplings with the role(s) I play in Indigenous language and culture reclamation in schools. As a graduate student, I was fortunate to be schooled in the transformative academic field of community-based Indigenous education led by Indigenous scholars and well-prepared non-Indigenous allies (e.g., Lipka et al., 1998; May, 1999; McCarty, 2002; McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998), and in Indigenous epistemologies (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2000; McCarty, Borgoiakova, Gilmore, Lomawaima, & Romero, 2005; Smith, 2012). The field illuminates important conceptual and applied pathways for anticolonial, antiracist scholarship and education. However, as I observe scholars and pedagogues more widely cite Indigenous methodologies, using “buzzwords” such as “relationships” or “cultural responsiveness” as antecedents to research and projects in Indigenous communities, I find myself dissatisfied with the superficial ways these terms are taken up. At times, these unexamined buzzwords covertly perpetuate what scholar Eve Tuck (2009) calls damage-centered research, masking the underanalysis of “good intentions” which maintain the status quo of educational inequity (Castagno, 2014). Thus, I use my own experiences working in Indigenous education to examine the nexus of gray space present in the gulf between status quo and transformative collaborations among Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholar-educators.

Methodologies of Storytelling: Ethnography and Autoethnography

I have selected stories, narratives, and personal vignettes as the empirical means to examine the questions I pose about Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations. Brayboy (2005) writes, “Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being” (p. 430). As a counterperspective to the Western science research tradition, I use ethnography and autoethnography to privilege the meaning in my own stories, and the stories shared with me by others. The stories shared were gathered

with traditional ethnographic methods: participant observation, individual and focus group interviews, and detailed field notes. Each case study was documented with Institutional Review Board approval, and individual participant consent was obtained in the case of direct quotes. Additionally, pseudonyms are used in the place of actual names in order to protect the identity of the storytellers. Making a place for story within the process of knowledge production is a tenet of Indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008), and (re)emplaces relationality into research and practice as vehicles of knowledge production.

Theoretical Framework

In schooling settings, the microdynamics of postcolonial power relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people saturate “not only the broad stories that societies formulate about themselves and Others, but also constitute the DNA of day-to-day interactions” (Davis, 2010, p. 4). Alliances in this context are not intrinsic; non-Indigenous/Indigenous collaboration requires *alliance building*. My understanding of cultivating alliances builds on the Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies (CIRM; Brayboy et al., 2012) framework of “the four Rs”: relationality, responsibility, respect, and reciprocity (p. 436). I use Critical Discourse Studies (CDS; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) to bring into relief the movement of power and to examine privilege in the praxis of relationship building.

Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies: “The Four Rs”

Brayboy and colleagues (2012) write, “a Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies (CIRM) perspective, which fundamentally begins as an emancipatory project that forefronts the self-determination and inherent sovereignty of indigenous peoples, is rooted in relationships and is driven explicitly by community interests” (p. 424). Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies continue an ongoing call among Indigenous scholars and educators to privilege Indigenous community well-being and self-determination, in order to frame research as a process defined for and by the people. Through a relationship-based orientation to community accountability, Brayboy and colleagues (2012) offer a distinct framework to counter Eurocentric paradigms and promote the anticolonial interests of Indigenous communities. Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies surface concerns around *who* is engaging in research and *how* and for *what purpose* they do so (Evans,

Hole, Berg, Hutchinson, & Sookraj, 2009). As Indigenous scholar-educators assert that Indigenous research(ers) and educators (re)claim and (re)define how research and knowledge are understood and taken up in schooling, the CIRM framework offers an important conceptual structure for non-Indigenous collaborators to analyze *how* and *for what* purpose an alliance stance may serve local communities.

Critical Discourse Studies

The false information perpetuated by Western research about Indigenous peoples thickly coats school walls. It persists in the tomes of university libraries, the content of public school curriculum, and a multitude of folk theories about learning and cultural intelligence. Well-intentioned collaborators may desire to briskly denounce and move past the violence of colonial legacies in order to declare their anticolonial, antiracist stance. However, the space(s) we occupy, and the ways power is unevenly dispersed throughout discourse and social interactions (Foucault, 1979), often go underanalyzed in the nebulous gray space of power-laden non-Indigenous/Indigenous collaborations.

I draw upon CDS to map power as it conditions and constitutes social identities at the micro- and macrolevel of interactions (Mills, 2004). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) write, “since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power” (p. 258), helping to produce and reproduce unequal power relations between people and groups of people. How we interact with others, and what those interactions are recognized to mean, form part of how power structures and restructures itself throughout our social landscapes. Attending to the movement of power in discourse underscores power as locally negotiated through the interplay of interpersonal interactions and socio-historical context (e.g., ethnohistoric). For example, the production of colonial hegemony is at work in widely circulating social structures (e.g., schools) *and* in on-the-ground discourses (e.g., relationships between Indigenous and Euro-American immigrants in the United States) (Blommaert, 2005). Examining power within an ethnohistoric context is essential for conceptualizing *how*, *when*, and *where* non-Indigenous allies can be of service to Indigenous communities.

Why Talk About Whiteness (Again)?

Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies and CDS are concerned with power and representation. I draw upon these frameworks to de-

naturalize Whiteness and prioritize relationality in allied collaboration. I use “Whiteness” to refer to both a socially constructed racialized category and a system of privileges based on racial dominance (Leonardo & Grubb, 2013). Whiteness is pervasive, and in a global society, falsely bounded categories of race (e.g., skin color) do not singularly constitute Whiteness. Participation in mainstream institutions, schools, and other systems of power socializes many into ideological and institutional practices of domination whereby one may believe it is in one’s best interests to perpetuate domination (Castagno, 2014). Through a critical lens, it can be seen that the pervasiveness of what Quechua scholar Sandy Grande (2003) calls “whitestream” identities and social structures obfuscates the inherent colonial and racialized narratives that shape neighborhoods, access to economic resources, and institutional interactions, past and present (Leonardo & Grubb, 2013).

Whiteness is commonplace in the life of schools (Castagno, 2014). In my work in K-8 schools and the academy, I continually witness my non-Indigenous colleagues, both White and those of other nationalities/ethnicities, reproduce perspectives laden with racial undertones, whereby “others” are measured through the lens of Whiteness. As a young teacher working on my partner’s reservation, I began noting the reoccurrence of impromptu Whitestream comments expressed to me as I was assumed to be a “safe” interlocutor by non-Indigenous colleagues, identifying with or identified by Whiteness. These discursive sidebars have continued in my personal and professional activities over the years. Comments revealing unexamined White guilt, such as “Well, I would like to know more, but [the Natives] just don’t want me around because I’m White . . . so there’s not much I can do,” or statements that capture the noble imperialist sentiment, such as “You know there is just so much loss here, but their culture is so beautiful,” or reflections of patronizing folk theories about language and legitimate knowledge, such as “How can they teach [Indigenous] language in school? It’s not like they are linguists,” abounded. These daily anecdotes were subtle yet common ways well-intentioned colleagues externalized colonial legacies and reproduced inequity in educational interactions by glossing over or failing to acknowledge power dynamics. Importantly, allied collaboration necessitates the surfacing of power and Whiteness in order to identify interactions that support the advancement of anticolonial/antiracist educational projects.

Contexts: Indigenous Education in the United States and Mexico

My thoughts on alliances between Indigenous/non-Indigenous scholar-educators are informed by my experience with Indigenous schooling in the United States and Mexico. In both countries, community-driven language and culture reclamation projects are built upon decades of hard-fought local, national, and global activism amidst social and economic constraint. In the United States, significant legislation protects the status of Indigenous cultures and languages, all of which relate to schooling: the 1972 Indian Education Act, the Native American Languages Act of 1990/1992, and the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006 (McCarty, 2009). Language reclamation movements inside and outside of schools have given rise to new political and institutional spaces. However, the historical racism of federal education policy in Native North America carries residual challenges, such as histories of institutional violence that reverberate in relationships between schools and parent/community voices around language and culture education (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014). The legal opportunities for Indigenous educational self-determination in the United States represents a possibility often simultaneously constrained by persisting educational standardization and high-stakes accountability policies (McCarty, 2009).

In Mexico, following decades of postrevolution policy that considered linguistic diversity an obstacle to national unity, shifts in the 1980s institutionalized the rights of Indigenous children to receive school instruction in heritage language(s) (Hamel, 2008). Global attention brought to the rights of Indigenous peoples by the Indigenous Zapatista National Liberation Army rebellion in 1994 produced a series of 2001 National Constitutional amendments acknowledging linguistic rights for Indigenous peoples. These institutionally legitimized avenues for Indigenous language and culture education, situated within the larger Latin American inclusion policies known as Bilingual Intercultural Education/Intercultural Bilingual Education (López, 2013), are also constrained by top-down assimilationist policy toward Indigenous peoples within government and social institutions (Hamel, 2008).

The literature on language and culture reclamation in schools offers some long-term examples of the generative, yet equally complex, possibilities of Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations when community interests and praxis-oriented research combine (Hornberger & McCarty, 2012; Wyman, McCarty, & Nicholas, 2014). Additionally, a select

number of educational ethnographies describe collaborative examples of community-led efforts to improve the school experiences of their youth through both cultural and linguistic maintenance/reclamation and meaningful academic experiences (Anthony-Stevens, 2013; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2013; McCarty, 2002; see McCarty & Nicholas, 2014, for a survey of other such sites). It must not be overlooked, however, that in the 21st century, although some sovereign tribal governments (federally recognized U.S. tribes) and territories (e.g., Zapatistas in Mexico) have hard-won local control over their institutions of education (for now), the vast majority of schools serving Indigenous youth are public, federally or state-controlled, and offer monolingual, monocultural instruction. The majority of Indigenous children in the United States and in Mexico attend school where non-Indigenous and/or noncommunity members make up the majority of the school staff. Given these constraints, non-Indigenous scholar-educators need to play a vital role in expanding the institutional spaces for Indigenous educational sovereignty. Navigating *when* and *where* we recognize and honor community interests, and *how* we mediate the workings of colonial institutions must bring forth direct and consistent attention to the negotiation of asymmetrical relationships of power, even and especially when uncomfortable.

The Three Questions

Cultivating Alliances: Relationship in Motion

How do non-Indigenous scholar-educators cultivate an allied stance that both contributes to educational sovereignty and “steps aside”? Cultivating an allied stance begins with the centrality of the *process* of fostering relationships (Brayboy et al., 2012, p. 437). Relationships are arguably the most productive and riskiest aspect of cultivating an allied role. Relationships involve vulnerability, risk, and humility. Relationships can be thought of metaphorically as the soft tissues that connect hard structures like bones, becoming types of connector highways for coconstructing relevance and reciprocity. Who we are—the identities we enact or are assigned membership to—can be understood and analyzed as essential body parts for establishing a relevant reason to invest in difficult processes like Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations. These essential body parts open pathways for developing trust and rapport (Lemley & Teller, 2014), leading to understandings of *how* to support, and *when* to “step aside.”

Viewing relationships through an ethnohistoric lens contextualizes interaction as part of an ongoing historical and cultural struggle. The ongoing impacts of colonization work to naturalize and silence the historical construction of social inequities (Grande, 2003). When ignored, the smoldering tensions live in our bodies, households, communities, and institutions, keeping us from productive social change. Insider-outsider relationships “are politicized and cannot be viewed in a distant manner” (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000, p. 166). Cultivating an allied stance involves a deep understanding of *who I am recognized to be* within the ethnohistoric context of Indigenous communities, as well as an active cultivation of *who I want to be recognized as* in relationship with others.

A few discourse interactions illustrate this point of understanding relationality within an ethnohistoric context. A few years back, an in-law uncle returned to the family after many years of incarceration. As it was known that I was born and raised in the Chicago area, one evening he asked me, with sincerity, “Did you ever see or touch trees before you came to the reservation?” On another occasion, while teaching on a reservation, an Indigenous mother of one of my fifth-grade students came early to the first day of school to see me. Recognizing that I was using the surname of a local family, the mother introduced herself and looked me in the face to state, “I just needed to see you for myself, to make sure you were White and not Native. White teachers teach better than Native teachers. I wanted to make sure my daughter had a White teacher.” Both interactions involve untruths; however, they constitute available identity categories, revealing important aspects of the ethnohistoric context of our interactions. Examining these interactions uncovers the multidimensionality of how I am viewed within a particular Indigenous community. Ideologies that inform ways of looking at the world, such as beliefs that urban/suburban White people do not have experiences with the natural world or the association of Whiteness with school achievement (and Native teachers with the opposite), underscore discourse not as a disembodied collection of utterances and statements but as “statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence” (Mills, 2004, p. 10). Interactions do not exist in isolation; exchanges through language and discourse are objects and sites of constant contestation of wider circulating meaning (Mills, 2004). As non-Indigenous allies, understanding the ethnohistoric situatedness of Indigenous/non-Indigenous interactions informs opportunities to interrupt unproductive stereotypes, allowing us to humanize ourselves and those around us.

As an on-the-ground example of prioritizing relationality and “stepping aside,” I recall here my years as a classroom teacher at an Indigenous-serving bicultural charter middle school. Through collaboration with colleagues, families, and tribal offices, resources were pooled annually to take all students (roughly 60 seventh and eighth graders) on overnight trips to culturally significant places, including sleeping in tents, outdoor cooking and guided activities around community and academic knowledge. Some label this place-based education. We simply called it “learning what you should know” according to the participating members of the community. These trips were led by tribal members, and privileged relationality by utilizing school as a space to teach youth about their relationship(s) to the local geography and related bodies of knowledges.

On one such trip, I was the only female teacher spending the night, and, as one of two non-Indigenous teachers at the school, I was the only non-Indigenous teacher present at the camp. Honoring the community’s values, camp activities frequently involved moments of gender-divided reflection. At this camp, I was asked, somewhat spontaneously, by my senior Indigenous colleagues to lead the gathering with the female students. I was to guide them through an extended hike that would culminate in discussion about the roles and responsibilities of womanhood. As a noncommunity member, the idea of facilitating a conversation on womanhood uncomfortably surfaced my limitations, and brought forth an awareness that I could not be an authority on the local experience of womanhood shared among my students. Yet, I was not in a position to turn down my colleagues’ request—our established relationship of trust framed this request as a responsibility. I had to think carefully about how to initiate a meaningful conversation without perpetuating stereotypical relationships between White teachers and Indigenous students (e.g., White teachers telling Native students who they are, what they know, and how they ought to feel; or acting as the hopelessly ignorant White person devoid of culture, and/or perpetuating the romantic “other” view of Indigenous people in harmony with nature).

Following the mile hike through rugged Arizona shrub brush, 30 adolescent women sat with me in a circle by a pond. Tentatively, I framed the conversation by inviting definitions of what it takes to be a strong, responsible woman. With my 18-month-old daughter on my lap, I spoke about myself, and how strength and responsibility were taught to me. I shared my understanding of womanhood and motherhood, as taught to me by my own Euro-American family in the Midwest, and spoke about learning to be a daughter-in-law and mother in accordance with

the cultural practice of my Indigenous in-laws. Students listened and began to share their own experiences—what their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, fathers, siblings, and cousins had taught them. Those who felt the desire voiced their perspectives on community roles, and their ways of understanding community values. The more senior of the young women took the lead in speaking to the younger women about values they felt were important, or issues they felt could obstruct pathways to being and becoming responsible people, such as boyfriends and substance abuse. My role supported keeping the conversation fluid, asking generative questions when moments of silence ensued, or lightly inviting less bold voices to share their thoughts. My story served as a catalyst; however, my primary function was to maintain myself in a supportive role of *their* stories. By engaging in authentic sharing, and stepping aside, space was created for the young women to feel safe and confident enough to share what womanhood was from their own cultural practice, with the most senior among them taking the lead.

This discussion can be analyzed as an opportunity to address and shift power dynamics. Relationally, the space was constituted by the students, inviting their peers to share their thoughts and speak of the world of womanhood as they knew it. As a non-Indigenous ally, negotiating my relevance and relationality through my own identity rather than by imposing on theirs or “teaching” others who *they* should be, is part of cultivating an ability to recognize relevant interactions within an ethnohistoric context. The hegemonic nature of Whiteness and the dominance of my narrative as normative in a White supremacist society had to be considered and attended to—intentionally acknowledged but minimized. For me, facilitating such a dialogue was uncomfortable. It forced me to attend to aspects of asymmetrical power relationships that I may, at times, want to avoid.

I use this example because it highlights relevance as a fluid *thing* that is cultivated through relationships. Relationships involve often inconvenient narratives and uncomfortable settings. Cultivating an alliance stance is built from “a place of openness” (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 627), involving vulnerabilities and uncomfortable barriers to be negotiated. In the example offered, my contribution to the school community was facilitated by a willingness of presence, a respect for the roles community members ask me to fill, and by placing my individual agenda behind the agenda of the community. Knowing when and how to enact these stances unequivocally necessitates relationality—knowing individuals and communities in order to coassess priorities. (Re)emplacing relationships at the center of cultivating an allied stance facilitates respectful

opportunities for gaining understanding of oneself as part of a series of ongoing, interwoven reciprocities not to be treated distantly. Such a stance informs the question to follow.

“Stepping Up”: Dealing with Eurocentric Supremacy

How do non-Indigenous scholar-educators gain the knowledge necessary to recognize critical moments for “stepping up”? Projects of language and culture reclamation are largely competing against mainstream educational narratives that racially code Indigenous students as “at-risk” or, worse, as school failures and social threats. The Eurocentric assumptions behind educational policy, teacher preparation, and classroom interactions uniquely impact Indigenous communities, yet are pervasive and shared across communities of color in the United States (Roberts, Bell, & Murphy, 2008). Projects of self-determination, such as culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogies, “are affirmations of Indigenous sovereignties which aim to destabilize dominant policy discourses, even as . . . educators operate . . . ‘under the radar screen’ of dominant-policy surveillance” (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 103). In many public school settings, negotiating when to “step up” is a process of navigating dominant and local discourses, both publically and covertly, to better serve Indigenous communities. Through the lens of CIRM, serving Indigenous self-determination implies (re)centering classrooms, curriculum, and institutional interactions around the values, voices, abilities, and knowledges of Indigenous students and community members.

For non-Indigenous allies, identifying moments to counter entrenched ethnohistoric power relations is multilayered and negotiated through two steps: (1) attention to one’s personal (re)education, and (2) an awareness of interactional processes as building parts for productive collaboration. White privilege affords Whitestream scholar-educators relatively open access to underserved communities of color. More subtle forms of academic voyeurism, also known as academic tourism, continue to be a common practice, whereby White students are taken to look at non-White/poor communities to reflect on poverty and difference (and perpetuate othering as a reinforcer of Whitestream values). These practices obscure racializing processes, and disconnect students from seeing how discourse works to maintain institutional discrimination and cycles of poverty. By problematizing the easily available damage-centered narratives of broken communities and students in need of fixing, non-Indigenous scholar-educators can challenge the settler colonial ideology of hierarchy and supremacy (Tuck & Yang, 2012). As

collaborators in projects of educational sovereignty, the study of how and where Eurocentricity manifests is vital to our (re)education; consequently, it enables us to recognize and reconceptualize what “stepping up” looks like.

I offer one example as an on-the-ground vignette of an emerging ally stepping up through (re)education and the careful selection of participation within community-driven spaces. As part of my ethnographic documentation of an Indigenous-serving charter school, I interviewed school faculty about their teaching experiences (Anthony-Stevens, 2013). The school, Urban Native Middle School (UNMS), was unique in that it served an all-Indigenous population in an urban setting. The school had a mission of biculturality, infusing Tohono O’odham content with Western state-mandated content, to provide college-bound academic rigor. Among the faculty, a teacher named Karen and I were, for a number of years, the only non-Indigenous teachers at UNMS. Karen, a White woman originally from the East Coast, came to the school with over 20 years of teaching experience. She held two master’s degrees in education, and occupied an important supportive role in the school as the special education resource teacher. Karen did not come to the school with a background in culturally responsive teaching.³ In an interview with Karen after she concluded three years of teaching at UNMS, I asked her to explain her perceptions of how she defined being supportive of Indigenous students. Karen identified learning how to reject the deficit discourses associated with her Indigenous students as a way to be supportive. She also described her realization that to become a supportive teacher at UNMS she needed to learn more about her students, which meant, among other things, attending Mr. Isidro’s Tohono O’odham and Native History class alongside her students.

My responsibility is to them as a student, and to their parents. Their parents put them into this school with certain expectations. I bought into the school with joining with the parents’ expectations on how that would fit with bicultural, and I spent that first year in [Mr.] Isidro’s class, and I said, “I’m your worst student in the class” [laughs]. I had gone to [the school principal] and said, “Here’s the thing. [Isidro’s] teaching culture and that’s where I need to be. I need to sit in his class, and how can that work with [my duties to the] kids?” And she said, “Well, you know, you’re gonna be helping the kids.” . . . OK, and then, I can do [my] homework on the days I’m not there. [The principal] said, “Oh, yeah.” So I thought, I gotta go and do whatever it is that will help me have the level

of awareness that I feel comfortable with, 'cause you're always gonna be you. You're not ever gonna be anybody different, but you can change your level of awareness.

Karen's reflection identifies multiple levels of self-awareness and action, resulting in garnering institutional support for Indigenous knowledge. Karen negotiated when to "step up" by acknowledging her responsibility to serve the interests of her Indigenous students and their families. To do this responsibly, she identified an action: the need to educate herself about Indigenous experiences and perspectives. By becoming a student in the Indigenous culture and history class, Karen enacted a micro shift in institutional power dynamics. An experienced White teacher, Karen was in the role of a learner among her students, while her Indigenous colleague, Isidro, was in the role of authority. By sitting in weekly classes on Tohono O'odham and Native History, Karen was "stepping up" by gaining consciousness of counterperspectives to Eurocentric history. By being visible in the learner role, she leveraged institutional power to support content areas driven by Indigenous perspectives, placing a Whitestream agenda aside. Karen's reflection brings into relief the transformative implications of reshaping relationships among school leaders and school curriculum, and highlights how intentional interactions facilitate steps toward prioritizing community's goals in education. Karen's participation in the Tohono O'odham and Native History course further legitimized that content area in an institutional context. Her reflection and action surfaced the social implications of discourse and interaction, and their potential to redirect power (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

As seen with the example of Karen, being and becoming a non-Indigenous ally to Indigenous communities must involve prioritizing one's own (re)education, which can inform, through relationships, how one can and should "step up." Such praxis requires the guidance of a critical mass of Indigenous colleagues. For non-Indigenous collaborators, increased exposure to contexts and conversations driven by and for Indigenous peoples themselves can have significant influence on how non-Indigenous scholar-educators *actually* listen. In the case of Karen, relationships with non-Indigenous teachers and stakeholders, including her own minority status within the school context, mediated, but did not necessarily mandate, the action she took to redistribute power in school interactions. In a nonlinear sense, knowing when to "step up" or "step aside" is informed by multidimensional relationships.

“Acting as a Broker”: (Re)centering Indigenous Voices

The third and final question builds on the previous two: What does “acting as a broker” look like for non-Indigenous allies? To act “as ‘brokers’ of sorts” (Swisher, 1998, p. 194) is to negotiate value exchanges—to leverage institutional power in support of what CIRM refers to as explicitly Indigenous community-driven interests (Brayboy et al., 2012). Explicitly Indigenous community-driven projects (re)center Indigenous voices as the primary conductors, both conceptually and technically, in Indigenous education. While non-Indigenous allies will not, and should not, be the authors of Indigenous educational sovereignty, allies do and can strategically help. The brokering in alliance work negotiates how to consciously leverage available resources—Indigenous voices, and Whiteman institutional capital—in order to generate new resources.

Discussion of voice and empowerment in education is not new. My late mentor and friend Richard Ruiz (1991) wrote that, in social discourse, “subordinated minority groups are those who are named and defined by majority groups” (p. 218). He went on to state that the concern for language and power—whether a person or group is allowed the power of self-determination—is closely related to the distinction between language and voice: “To have voice implies not just that people say things, but that they are heard (that is, that their words have status, influence)” (Ruiz, 1991, p. 220). Poignantly, Ruiz critiques the use of the word empowerment in the education of minorities by calling attention to the common, perhaps well-intentioned, use of the verb “to empower” as an action performed by others on behalf of an individual or a collective. Problematizing this colonial assumption that individuals, institutions, or policies empower others, Ruiz (1991) states that “teachers do not empower or disempower anyone, nor do schools. They merely create the conditions under which people can *empower themselves*, or not” (p. 223, emphasis in original). (Re)centering Indigenous voices requires non-Indigenous collaborators to ask questions such as “Who says?” and “What are the impacts of my voice?” in self-reflection and in dialogue with Indigenous colleagues. Harnessing the humility required to act “as brokers of sorts” increases the opportunity space for Indigenous self-empowerment, not for non-Indigenous collaborators to empower Indigenous peoples.

My personal examples of brokering asymmetrical power relations are undoubtedly imperfect. They involve negotiating layers of multiple subjectivities, uneven flows of power, and ongoing personal (re)education. As an on-the-ground example, I offer a vignette from my collaborations with Indigenous teachers in various parts of rural Mexico. This final

vignette is from my ethnographic research with Indigenous teachers in the state of Puebla. As a White, American, female academic interacting in rural, public Indigenous elementary schools, it is crucial for me to negotiate the tensions of power and voice to act as a responsible ally. Tania, a former student of mine and current colleague/collaborator, invited me to visit her school and community. She is an elementary school teacher who lives and works in her community of origin in rural southeastern Puebla. Tania is bilingual/biliterate in Ngigua and Spanish.⁴ In addition to managing the bureaucratic responsibilities involved in public school teaching, Tania's energies over the course of the academic year since we studied together concentrated on engaging her community and colleagues in strengthening Ngigua language practices among school-aged children. As she experimented with her own bilingual classroom pedagogy, one of Tania's central efforts involved the founding of Ni kjen Tha Ngigua (Young Writers of Ngigua Club). Prior to my arrival, through various social media chat outlets, Tania and I discussed what she might like me to do while visiting her school and hometown. We also explicitly revisited the issue once I arrived and we had time to sit face to face. Tania identified three areas where she wanted my collaboration: (1) support to increase the visibility of Ni kjen Tha Ngigua, (2) offer professional development for district teachers, and (3) observe her in her first-grade classroom and provide feedback on her teaching.

On one of the days of my visit, Tania strategically leveraged my presence to organize an official school-community forum showcasing Ni kjen Tha Ngigua. She invited parents, teaching colleagues, and local government officials to visibly solicit increased community support. The event was attended by roughly 40 people, including eight invited local government and educational officials. I was honored as a guest, and invited to share reflections on the relevance of the work as an educator and academic, which I did; however, Tania was the leader and facilitator of the event. Over the course of the event, many of the youth participating in Ni kjen Tha Ngigua spoke with emotion about the meaning of their participation in the group, as did a number of their parents and community members. Highlighting the (re)centering of Indigenous community voices, participation throughout the event was facilitated by Tania in both Ngigua and Spanish, with no translation of Ngigua offered on my behalf.

In an informal interview following the event, Tania and I sat around her kitchen table reflecting after others had gone to sleep. I asked Tania directly, "How does my presence as a non-Indigenous outsider further or hinder your goals?" She responded:

You bring weight to my project . . . people who have institutional positions, like you, they know how power circulates. People who are out in front, they can open doors for you. People think, the United States, no way! We need, I need this resource and power that people in institutional positions [like you and municipals leaders] have. I can close myself to the outside and focus only on my community, and I will have community power; however, I need wider reaching power as well . . . [you serve my needs], because I need to be stronger, and understand how to appropriate institutional resources . . . not for my own benefit, but for the benefit of my children and my students. I need to help them see a path much longer and farther than the one I can see . . . we need to believe that Ngigua people can live well. [Author's translation]

As an ally, my value to Tania and her community was as a broker. It is crucial for me to realize my presence did not empower Tania and her community collaborators. As she describes, my presence added "weight," or institutional capital, to the efforts she has put into motion through her vision and community relationships. Allied brokering, as seen in this example, can be a negotiated values exchange whereby Indigenous people empower themselves in mapping "the longer path" toward educational sovereignty, and non-Indigenous allies leverage institutional power to *support* such efforts.

Acts of power brokering are constant and ongoing parts of "doing" educational sovereignty. As a collaborating non-Indigenous scholar-educator, my responsibility to act as an ally hinges on a cultivated engagement, which confronts circulating power, and facilitates space for counterstories through "processes of contestation and collaboration" (Gilmore & Smith, 2005, p. 69). In cases such as the Ni kjen Tha Ngigua project, it was my responsibility to negotiate my assigned identity as the White American academic "expert" while using my voice in collaboration and support of community interests. I alone may not have selected the White American academic "expert" identity; yet, in line with CDS, my ability to negotiate the social implications of these identity categories, and their relationships to power, does become my responsibility for interrupting inequitable distributions of power. Through praxis with Indigenous collaborators, Tania and I were able to identify, plan, and utilize my power-laden identity category to show deference to community leaders as they voiced the vision for the "longer path."

I continue to emphasize that ongoing attention is needed to confront the flow of power because a zeal for change alone cannot supplant multidimensional understanding of unique needs and local histories. Nor

can zeal alone construct the relationships necessary for facilitating equitable collaborative partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholar-educators. Being “a broker of sorts” is produced in the constant weaving of relationality-knowledge-reciprocity, threads gained in humble partnership with Indigenous communities themselves, as a beginning, middle, and concluding priority, not a sidebar, afterthought, or addendum.

Conclusion

This article has reflected on the ways non-Indigenous allies attend to the on-the-ground, everyday praxis of supporting Indigenous projects of educational sovereignty. Within a CIRM framework, and through the lens of CDS to analyze power in interaction, my reflection ventured into the gray space of negotiating *when*, *where*, and *how* non-Indigenous scholar-educators can contribute meaningfully to educational change. With humility, I have offered my experiences as a socially situated, but not socially unique, non-Indigenous ally. While I do not propose prescriptive answers to the complex issues of Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations, I do propose that praxis-oriented relationships are necessary for generating an increased recognition of pervasive Whiteness in institutions of education—that is, if our work is aimed at understanding and dismantling the patterns that construct educational inequity. Power and Whiteness have material and social implications that limit or open opportunities to shape productive collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. These issues are too little acknowledged by non-Indigenous scholar-educators wanting to work with Indigenous communities in areas of education and research.

The questions posed—(1) How to cultivate an allied stance?, (2) How to know when to “step up”?, and (3) How to act as a “broker of sorts”?—all revolve around unpacking daily interactions within the asymmetrical power relations of K-12 education. A view of relationality as coconstructed and negotiated treats every interaction as a potential site for recognizing and transforming ethnohistoric relationships and institutional structures into opportunities for allied reciprocity. Each of the examples I have offered took place in contexts where Indigenous people themselves led and guided the purpose of the interaction. The vignettes highlight cultivated relationships between non-Indigenous scholar-educators and a critical mass of Indigenous scholar-educators/leaders, not limited only to individual relationships. While each of the vignettes emphasizes Indigenous leadership, it is known that the vast majority of institutions of education

servicing Indigenous youth and families are not in the hands of Indigenous communities themselves. Critically aware non-Indigenous allies are needed to redress these entrenched institutional inequities and further Indigenous agendas for educational sovereignty. My analysis of these issues has emphasized that allied voices are secondary to Indigenous voices, yet allied voices are nonetheless crucial when cultivated through explicit antiracist, anticolonial commitments to redirecting the flow of power relations in spaces of schooling. This praxis orientation values relationality and reciprocity even and especially when it is uncomfortable and without immediately gratifying results.

The urgency of interrogating non-Indigenous/Indigenous collaborations is presented against the backdrop of the current reality of Indigenous education: scholarship in Indian education does not adequately acknowledge colonial paradigms (Tuck & Guishard, 2013), and schools continue to be predominantly unsafe spaces for Indigenous youth and families (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Even still, the progressive contributions to Indigenous educational sovereignty, led by Indigenous peoples, represent persistence and hope in the rugged landscape of schooling. It is critical that non-Indigenous scholar-educators contribute to the broader transformative movement of educational paradigms led *by* Indigenous communities *for* Indigenous communities. To do this, we need to insist on acknowledgement of the persisting elephants in the room—White supremacy, colonial hegemony, and institutional racism—and the roles collaborating non-Indigenous scholar-educators play in perpetuating the oppressive narrative many intend to resist, yet further through selective social amnesia. Such explicit and developed awareness occurs only through collaborative relationships, the essential nexus that informs *how* and through *what action* non-Indigenous scholar-educators *can* contribute to Indigenous decolonizing research methodologies, pedagogies, and schools.

While many among the non-Indigenous scholar-educator community may still feel we are supporting Indigenous interests, I challenge us to elevate our commitments to reflection and action. Guided by “the 4 Rs”—relationality, respect, reciprocity, responsibility—we need to better assess the productivity of an alliance stance. The persisting political, material, and ideological circumstances that constrain Indigenous youth and families in institutions of education should stand as clear reminders that the health and wealth of Indigenous communities do not benefit from abstract usage of buzzwords, but may be strengthened through ongoing attention to complex relationships, uncomfortable acknowledgements of power differentials, and a commitment to antiracist, anti-

colonial education. With this reflection, I join my position with those who have spoken before, and the many to come who will speak, in saying that interrupting inequity in Indigenous education requires non-Indigenous scholar-educators to explicitly prioritize, from the ground up, Indigenous voices as the definers of *how* and *for what* purpose allies can and should be of service to projects of educational sovereignty.

Vanessa Anthony-Stevens is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Idaho. She is an educational anthropologist who studies discourse and identity in Indigenous schooling. Her recent work focuses on preparing teachers for diversity in rural contexts, and issues of Indigenous educational sovereignty in the United States and Mexico.

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NOTES

1. The terms Indigenous, Native, and Indian will be used interchangeably to refer to individuals and communities identifying as originating in the Americas. I capitalize all these terms to recognize the unique political and cultural relationships between Indigenous peoples and their homelands.

2. I use the term scholar-educator to include teachers, those who prepare future teachers, and educational researchers. The scholar-educator voice braids the relationships between teaching, teacher education, and scholarship as interlaced responsibilities in social transformation.

3. See Castagno and Brayboy (2008), Gay (2010), and Ladson-Billings (1995) for discussion of culturally responsiveness in schooling, teaching, and pedagogy.

4. Ngigua is the name Tania and her community use to self-identify. Ngigua is referred to as Ngiwá and Popoluca de la Sierra Negra in the academic literature (see Gámez Espinoza et al., 2009).

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