

**“PŪ‘ALI KALO I KA WAI ‘OLE”: HARM, CARE, AND THE UNEVEN
GROWTH OF A HOUSELESS COMMUNITY**

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ABSTRACT

This work is a longitudinal ethnographic study of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, a self-organized houseless village in Wai‘anae, O‘ahu. It explores how people living at the margins of state support construct systems of care, governance, and moral order through everyday acts of *pilina* (*relational connection*), *kuleana* (*responsibility*), *kōkua* (*aid*), *aloha* (*compassion, love, friendship*), *kāko‘o* (*support*), and *pono* (*ethical balance*). Drawing on 2+ years of immersive, participatory fieldwork from 2020-2022, the study traces how village residents navigate overlapping experiences and histories of abandonment, interpersonal harm, and institutional betrayal – and how they build fragile but meaningful forms of collective relational life.

Rather than framing care and harm as opposites, this study traces their entanglement. The very systems which offer refuge can also wound; practices of care can become coercive; and structures of support can reproduce the logics of control. Similarly, autonomy and control are not framed as static opposites but dynamically linked: residents sought freedom from surveillance, paternalism, and relational harm even as collective life in the village required some level of mutual accountability and shared obligation which shifted in their intensity. The village’s moral order emerged through this tension – between freedom and *kuleana*, care and enforcement – and was continually reshaped by internal strain and external scrutiny.

This paper engages and extends three theoretical frameworks: relational sociology, dissipative structures theory, and charismatic authority. It argues that authority in such communities emerges not just from formal roles, but from relational presence and ethical action; that governance unfolds not through institutional stability but through adaptive reconfiguration, particularly to external pressures and scrutiny; and that care, though vital, can become strained under pressure to perform legitimacy and compliance. Leadership, *pilina*, and moral authority were not fixed assets but relational effects – grown, tested, and sometimes lost in the rhythms of everyday life.

Through close analysis of daily life, leadership dynamics, and moments of strain, this study contributes to the sociology of homelessness, care, governance, and grassroots movements. It challenges dominant homelessness policy logics that equate success just with compliance or exit,

and instead calls for frameworks that recognize dignity, presence, and participation as vital metrics of homelessness life. The 'ōlelo no'eau that titles this work – *Pū'ali Kalo i ka Wai 'Ole* ("Taro grows misshapen when it lacks water") – names a core insight: communities can endure even when those who populate them have coped with a dearth of foundational care and when the community itself is under duress, but what grows in such conditions is inevitably strained. Still, even misshapen kalo strives toward the light. It does not always thrive, but most of the time, it survives.

For Mamas

Yeah, you.

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- **Mamas...**there are no words. My heart aches without you. My days are dimmer without you. My tears fall without you. I want so badly for you to see this – so I hope you do. I know you’re proud of me. I miss you always. I hope I can be even a fraction of the light you were. You are the ali’i whose path I strive to follow to life’s end.

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PREFACE

“O ke kahua ma mua, ma hope ke kūkulu.”

Set the foundation first, then the building.

- #2459, Mary Kawena Pukui, *‘Olelo No‘eau
Hawai‘i Book of Proverbs and Poetical Sayings*

It's hard for me to imagine that the first thing your eye could be drawn to when entering O‘ahu's leeward coast would not be Moananuiākea (*the Pacific Ocean*); but perhaps that's my own bias as someone hānau (*born*) to Ohio, far from any water I could not easily see the other side of. Endless shades of uliuli (*blue*) sparkle before you as you race down Farrington Highway and pass under the bridge heading to Ko Olina – the pristine, manufactured paradise of Disney's Aulani Resort and the Four Seasons O‘ahu – then continue west. Big, tricked out trucks with lit, lifted suspensions cruise alongside beat up pick-ups with bumper stickers proudly proclaiming their owners are Kānaka (*Native Hawaiian*) – a proud mo‘okū‘auhau (*genealogy*) across all these islands, but particularly here on the Westside. Makai (*toward the ocean*), you can see local surfers and giddy malihini (*tourists*) making their way down to the fish-rich waters of Electric Beach, while mauka (*toward the upland*), the Makakilo hills look down on Kahe Power Plant and its hana (*work*) to burn oil day and night to provide electricity for the island. If your window is down and the other motors around aren't too loud (though they often are), you might hear the aunties and cousins by the roadside hocking homemade lau lau and dried aku to passersby, their sweaty foreheads covered by pop-up tents to protect them from the Westside's famously lā haina (*cruel sun*).

“You like stop, talk story, get grindz?” those aunties might yell to us as we cruise on by in our imaginary ka‘a (*car*). “If can, can. If no can, no can. But bumbai no need *rush*. Dis da Westside, da best side, da las' *Hawaiian* side of O‘ahu. You on island time here, cous’.”

After a few minutes – and a few too many speed humps – the blues of Moananuiākea become hidden behind the houses of the first town of Nānākuli, themselves often tucked behind palm trees, chain link fences, and an inordinate numbers of vehicles – some of which look like they run and tell you that way more people than you think could live in that house *do* live in that house, but most – with deep rust stains from the ocean surf – that look like they don't. You find political banners for

the Hawai'i Republican Party in this deeply blue state hanging next to posters denouncing yet another landfill proposed to be built here; both signs motivated by the Westside's common belief – if not knowledge– that no one cares about the Westside *but* the Westside. Indeed, signs of neglect and wear are everywhere – outwardly abandoned houses, rundown convenience stores serving as rudimentary groceries, an uncle who seems a *bit* off as he stumbles close to the highway's edge. And this is to say nothing of choke (*many*) tents lining the coast and beaches, their surrounding camps visibly littered with tarps and signs of rough lives. This is the Westside that I was warned not to visit when I moved to O'ahu as a haole (*white person*) – the hung-out and strung-out side where the going is tough and people are tougher, a good deal of money is held on EBT cards, and violence can erupt at any time out of people's frustration and desperation at their station in life.

What I have found in ignoring that well-intentioned but ultimately misguided advice, however, is that the Westside I was told about is a myth, a stereotype, an Oz of broken brick roads. The Westside I know now is as much an 'āina (*land*) of abundance as it is scarcity. Sure, some say Nānākuli is so named because the 'āina there is so arid that nā kūpuna kahiko (*ancient ancestors*) would nānā (*pretend*) to be kuli (*deaf*) to avoid the shame of not offering food to those passing by; but neighboring Wai'anae is named for the 'anae (*mullet*) that filled the wai (*fresh water*) of the valley's watersheds that used to run strong before the plantations stole them. The summer-brown mountain range of Wai'anae Valley still blushes green when a rain named Ki'owao returns in the winter, filling the 'āina with enough rain to rival the many mo'olelo (*narratives*) composed to honor it. If you turn away from the valley and look makai, you'll see that along with those derelict tents we saw earlier – and often set up right next to them – are pavilion after pavilion of 'ohana and friends celebrating first birthdays at keiki lū'au (*children's parties*) with full barbecues of 'ono (*tasty*) kalbi and teri burgers. Uncles pluck ukuleles at picnic tables, aunties are out shelling in the sand, and keiki jump on giant inflatables, all under a raucous chorus of laughter. This is also the Westside, the one that often goes unwritten about: a place of community, of togetherness, and of *aloha*.

"You like stop, check 'em out?" those uncles strumming their strings might ask us if we were walking by on the beach. "A'ole? You buggah, mus' get one *bug* up your 'okole."

This huaka'i (*journey*) is the same one I took time and time again as I made my way to my research site. Staring out the window of either Bus C or 40 – hopefully the C, “‘cause Bus C get *less stops*” – the old sugarcane land of Kapolei gave way to the Westside in all of its glorious, and what seemed to me at first contradictory, mess. Shirtless teenagers unabashedly skipping school out front the ramshackle façade of Yuen's Grocery & Liquor, haole hikers trudging up a mountain to get an Insta-worthy shot at Pink Pillbox, vendors in the parking lot of half-empty Wai'anae Mall hocking fresh vegetables and açai bowls to locals that would rather just have SPAM and rice. These sights and sounds became the welcome markers of my life; and the bus's aunties, uncles, kūpuna (*elderly*) and keiki (*children*) my travel companions. Over the course of two years, I saw many things and heard many different conversations on those bus rides. But nearly every time I tugged that pull cord and summoned the friendly yet authoritative voice of Puakea Nogelmeier to tell the driver, “Stop requested,” I alighted at the same place: the houseless community of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu.

“Ah, *now* you like stop!” the driver might say, and depending on how local the driver is, maybe he even say 'em friendly today. Yeah, we like stop, Uncle. *Shoots*, he mouths through the front windshield as he heads on toward Mākaha, with a shaka to send us on our way.

Overview of Argument

This research asks: How do care and harm intertwine to shape the growth, governance, and everyday life of a houseless community? Drawing on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu – a self-organized village on the Wai'anae Coast of O'ahu – I explore how residents built and sustained life under conditions of precarity and structural abandonment. The project is animated by a set of interrelated questions: What relational practices sustain dignity, belonging, and livability in the absence of formal infrastructure? How is leadership generated, legitimized, and eroded in contexts where authority depends on presence rather than simply relying on enforcement? And what do moments of rupture and strain reveal about the moral and relational limits of self-governance?

Rather than treating care and harm as opposing relational forces, this research traces their entanglement: how the same systems that hold people together can also stretch, wound, and exclude. Governance in the village was not a fixed structure, but a relational field – shaped by everyday acts of *kuleana* (*responsibility*), *pono* (*ethical balance*), and *pilina* (*connection*), and constantly reconfigured through conflict, fatigue, and repair. In following how the village reorganized itself through stress, tension, and adaptation, the research offers a grounded theory of collective life at the margins – one that resists easy narratives of collapse or triumph and instead dwells in the complexity of persistence.

The Sociopolitical Context of Houselessness

Houselessness as a Global and National Crisis

This dissertation emerges from a context in which houselessness is not an exception, but a defining feature of life under contemporary conditions of extraction, dispossession, and rising economic inequality throughout the globe. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs estimates that 1.6 billion people worldwide live in inadequate housing (n.d.). In the United States, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) documented more than 770,000 people houseless on a single night in January 2024 – a figure widely understood to undercount the true scale of the crisis. (HUD, 2024; Martinez, 2024). Only 30% of these met the federal threshold of “chronic homelessness,” meaning the vast majority were temporarily unsheltered, likely part of a much larger, rotating population experiencing instability across the year (HUD, 2024). These numbers exclude those doubling-up, couch surfing, or living in overcrowded and substandard conditions – categories that HUD classifies as “at risk,” despite the material reality of their houselessness (San Bernardino County Homeless Partnership, n.d.).

Rates of houselessness in the United States have surged in recent years. The 2024 Point-in-Time count represented an 18% increase from the year before, itself a 12% increase from 2022 (HUD, 2024). Family houselessness rose by nearly 40% in a single year. While the lapse of pandemic-era protections – such as eviction moratoriums – accelerated these rates, underlying

trajectories point to deeper structural failures. For example, while 2023 marked the first time that family houselessness increased since 2012, levels that year (186,000+) were higher than that of 2017 (184,000+), well before the pandemic (Casey, 2024). With a 39% rise in family houselessness between 2023 and 2024, these trends are not just continuing but seemingly accelerating.

Policies and public discourse increasingly frame houselessness as a legal and public safety issue rather than a social or economic one. This orientation was codified in *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* (2024), in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state and local governments may criminalize people for sleeping outside, even when no shelter is available. In the months since, sweeps have become more aggressive across many U.S. cities. Rhetorically, both major political parties have seemingly converged around punitive approaches. Consistently Democratic California has become more explicit and frequent in their sweeps of encampments since the *Grants Pass* ruling, and Republican President Donald J. Trump described U.S. cities as “unlivable, unsanitary nightmares, surrendered to the homeless” in his re-election campaign, promising to clear encampments using the full power of the federal government (Botts, 2024; Trump Campaign, 2023). That promise has since taken form in deep staffing cuts at the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), including an 84% reduction to the office that oversees housing services nationwide and the halting of funds to housing organizations, signaling a shift from containment to wholesale abandonment of federal responsibility (Ludden, 2025).

At least until the second Trump administration, the dominant framework for addressing houselessness in the United States for two decades has been *Housing First*, a model premised on the idea that non-conditional access to permanent housing promotes greater stability in other areas of people’s lives, such as mental illness or substance use (Willse, 2022). While this approach has yielded proven gains in housing stability and is considered more humane and more cost-effective than earlier *Treatment First* models, it is not without its critics, even from the left (Peng et al., 2020; Hwang et al., 2005; Cohen, 2022; HUD, 2023). Some argue that it centers housing at the expense of broader structural reform (Eide, 2022a). Others point out that housing vouchers often do little in markets where affordable housing is simply unavailable (Willse, 2022). The model has proven

effective at increasing residential stability, but the question of whether or not it has achieved its additional aim of decreasing social isolation of those (previously) living houseless is unsettled (Eide, 2022b). More fundamentally, *Housing First* often collapses housing and home into a single concept - ignoring or marginalizing the cultural, emotional, and relational dimensions of what makes a place livable, safe, or meaningful (Hopper, 2024). In many cities, services systems have come to resemble an industry of homelessness management: responsive to metrics and funding but detached from the lives and relationships of those they are meant to serve.

Houselessness in Hawai'i and on O'ahu

Few places are the contradictions of housing policy, land use, and dispossession more visible than in Hawai'i. In the 1890s, a recently deposed Queen Lili'uokalani described "the homeless condition of the Hawaiians at the present day" as the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom exacerbated the transformation of 'āina – a living, relational thing – into commoditized land (Lili'uokalani, 1898). More than a century later, Hawai'i consistently ranks among the states with the highest per-capita rates of homelessness (HUD, 2018). In 2024, over 6,300 people were documented as houseless across the islands – numbers that do not even include the thousands displaced by the devastating Maui fires of 2023 (Bridging the Gap Continuum of Care, 2024; Partners in Care, 2024). The majority of those counted live on O'ahu, where this research took place, home to over 70% of the islands' total population and seat of government, business, and tourism (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). O'ahu also consistently ranks among the top U.S. suburban regions with the highest number of unsheltered houseless people (HUD, 2023).

The unsheltered crisis on O'ahu has deepened over the past decade. Since 2012, the number of people sleeping outdoors has doubled, while the number living in shelters has declined – even as total houselessness figures have remained steady (Terrellb 2024b). In 2024, more than 62% of O'ahu's houseless population was unsheltered, one of the highest rates in the country. While the island's temperate climate is often cited as a factor, the closure of shelters, high cost of living, and lack of affordable housing play a decisive role (Associated Press, 2016; Jedra, 2022). Enforcement

has intensified accordingly. Honolulu’s “compassionate disruption” policies targeted unhoused people with encampment sweeps, sit-lie bans, and property confiscations under the administration of former Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell (Nagourney, 2014; Teague, 2018). Though current Mayor Rick Blangiardi initially criticized these tactics during his 2020 campaign, he has since escalated them, particularly in the wake of the *Grants Pass* ruling (Nakaso, 2018; Angarone, 2024; Dowd, 2024). These actions persist despite growing evidence that sweeps disrupt lives, destroy property, sever medical care and documentation, and exacerbate homelessness – perpetuating the very condition they allege to aim to control (Dunson-Strane & Soakai, 2015; Mizuno 2025).

Yet even as enforcement dominates local response, there are signs of other approaches. The State of Hawaii recently passed laws to prohibit discrimination against Section 8 voucher holders, and mobile service units now bring hygiene supplies, medical care, and case management to people living outside. Most notably, Governor Josh Green has launched a statewide *kauhale* (*village*) initiative to develop tiny-home villages that prioritize autonomy, shared space, retention of pets, and community governance – drawing inspiration from Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, the site of this research (State of Hawai‘i, n.d.; Tsai 2024; Terrell, 2024a). These developments suggest growing recognition that conventional service models alone are not enough – and that community-based forms of housing may offer alternative paths forward.

Ka Moku o Wai‘anae (The District of Wai‘anae)

The village of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu is located on the west side of O‘ahu, in Wai‘anae moku (*a large district, of which O‘ahu has six*). This moku includes towns like Nānākuli, Mākaha, Mā‘ili, and Wai‘anae, and is home to the highest concentration of Kānaka ‘Ōiwi (*Native Hawaiians*) on O‘ahu (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). While the Westside, as it is commonly known, is rich in cultural and ecological significance – home to *wahi pana* (*storied places*) like Ka‘ena, Mākua, and Mauna Ka‘ala – it has long been neglected by the State. Infrastructure is aging, access to basic services is limited, and environmental burdens (e.g., power plants, landfills) are disproportionately placed there.

Poverty rates are high, and incomes are well below the island average. According to United Way's ALICE report, nearly half of all households in Wai'anae moku struggle to meet basic needs (2023).

This history is not incidental – it is structured by land seizure, resource extraction, military occupation, and deliberate policy decisions. The diversion of water from the moku's valleys to central O'ahu plantations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rendered the land drier and less agriculturally viable than it once was. The establishment of Hawaiian Homelands in this area was framed as restitution for Kānaka 'Ōiwi for the dispossession experienced upon the occupation of Hawai'i by the United States of America, but often placed 'Ōiwi families on marginal, desolate lands far from economic opportunity. Over time, Wai'anae has come to be seen by many officials as the most “appropriate” place for undesirable infrastructure, including the highest concentration of unsheltered houselessness on the island.

In 2024, Wai'anae accounted for 28% of O'ahu's total unsheltered homeless population – despite comprising only about 5% of the island's total population – housed or unhoused (Partners in Care, 2024). More than half of those counted in the moku were considered chronically homeless. This disproportionality reflects not only economic precarity, but also deep ties to place. The majority of unhoused individuals in the region identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Many grew up in the area, and many remain on decades-long waitlists for Hawaiian Homelands. The conditions that produces their houselessness are the same ones that have long affected housed neighbors – low wages, high rents, disrupted land relationships, geospatial isolation, and the intergenerational consequences of American occupation and subsequent cultural and economic marginalization. In Wai'anae, the line between the housed and the unhoused is thin, and often fluid. In fact, many housed residents come to the unhoused community of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu to access the village's donation tent, which is open and available to the public to obtain clothing and other items.

Site of Study: Kīpuka 'Aineamalu

Kīpuka 'Aineamalu is a self-organized village of houseless people living on seven acres of public, oceanfront land in Wai'anae moku. While people had long pitched tents in the kiawe grove

there – often swept out by police amid periods of violence and instability – it wasn't until 2008 that a more consistent sense of community began to take shape. Over time, the area became a kind of pu'uhonua (*refuge*) on the Westside, known to houseless people as a place where residents looked out for one another and set clear expectations for behavior – even if had a reputation for harsh consequences when one stepped too far outside of line. What would officially become known in 2015 – here pseudonymously – as *Kīpuka 'Aineamalu* grew slowly, through relationships and shared stories of survival. The name used here, though a pseudonym, reflects the spirit behind the community's real name: *kīpuka* – *an island of life surrounded by lava* – and *'aineamalu*, a combination that evokes *malu* (*shelter and peace*) amidst *'ainea* (*weariness*).

Today, the village is home to a shifting but interwoven group of roughly 150 to 300 people. Most residents are Kānaka 'Ōiwi (*Native Hawaiian*), some with generational ties to Wai'anae, but the community also includes those who are pōpolo (*Black*), hapa (*mixed*), Micronesian, Polynesian, Asian, and haole (*white*). Many residents grew up on the Westside, attended local schools, or remain on beneficiary lists for Hawaiian Homelands parcels they likely will never receive. Some came after being displaced from other areas of O'ahu; others arrived through word-of-mouth, following stories of a place where rules were clear, children were protected, and rest didn't have to come at the cost of vigilance. Relationships in the village comprise families, long-term friendships, shared addictions and recoveries, borrowed tools, romantic histories, and neighboring lots. It is a deeply local place, and an unusually diverse one – held together less by shared identity than by mutual need, reciprocity, and a commitment to preserving something that feels worth protecting.

New residents enter through a formal intake process: they're given a tour of the village and sign a conduct contract before being allowed to pitch a tent in an assigned lot. Lots – or *camps* – are often delineated by stone walls, ti plants, or ubiquitous wooden pallets found everywhere and used for every kine (*kind*) thing; and each dwelling is shaped from whatever materials are available – tarps, tents, lumber, scrap metal, yet more pallets – layered and rebuilt over time. When someone leaves the village, their space is inherited; and materials are often reused, repurposed, and offered to others who need them. There is no running water or electrical infrastructure, so residents haul

water from the nearby harbor, where they also shower and clean themselves in the spigots used by boats to clean off salt and algae. Some residents use generators to power fans, radios, or lights. None of it is easy, but the effort to make things work – to share, to repair, to help one another get by – defines some of what holds the village together. The daily grind of routines – tedious, negotiated, deeply shared – reflect the village’s broader ethic: take care of each other, remain low-profile, and hold the land with as little disturbance as possible.

The first time I visited Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, I wasn’t entirely sure I had arrived at the right place. Shrouded within a kiawe grove whose twisted branches offer both shade and shelter – while dropping thorns sharp enough to pierce straight through your *slippahs* – most of the village’s infrastructure is invisible from the boat harbor parking lot. From the highway on the other side, the view is blocked by nearly two acres of makeshift fencing made from weathered plywood. This inconspicuousness is intentional. Though the number of residents has grown and signs of life are more visible now – hand-painted signs with rules and the village name, cars parked outside, residents hauling water or talking story in the lot – discretion remains a guiding principle. The less they are seen, the less they are bothered. Or perhaps more to the point: the less they are seen, the less likely they are to be treated as a problem.

The community’s current structure emerged gradually over nearly two decades, shaped by shifting conditions, external pressure, and the persistent presence of Auntie Cookie, a Kanaka ‘Ōiwi woman who arrived in 2006. At the time, the site was an informal encampment where a small group of residents lived under the kiawe. Cookie introduced a basic set of rules – respect others, keep the peace, no stealing – not through formal authority, but to protect the camp from sweeps and the instability she had witnessed in other parks she had gone to with her partner, Cassia. These early efforts at structure were grounded less in shared vision than in a mutual desire to stay. Enforcement was initially informal but sometimes harsh, especially among Cookie’s ‘ohana and close allies, who acted to remove residents they saw as disruptive. While this approach brought a measure of stability, it also introduced uneven power dynamics and conditional belonging.

The village began to reorganize more deliberately in response to external threats. After a 2012 sweep at a nearby park brought a wave of new arrivals – and with them, increased conflict and scrutiny – Cookie divided the site into sections, appointed trusted residents as section captains, and worked to restore order through both pilina and practical improvements. Still, enforcement remained inconsistent and was often carried out by those closest to power. In 2016, another sweep was threatened, prompting a deeper internal shift. Leaders adopted a more compassionate model, with Cookie’s presence helping to re-anchor authority in care rather than fear.

While Cookie remained the village’s central figure, leadership expanded beyond her ‘ohana and a group of residents trusted by her to include others who showed commitment to community well-being. Over the last fifteen years, a formal but loosely-organized leadership structure has emerged, complete with designated roles, regular leadership and community meetings, and increased emphasis on transparency and participation. Broader community efforts also grew during this time: the village launched an outreach program and began distributing clothing, toiletries, and other essentials to unhoused people elsewhere along the coast through a mobile donation van, coupled with scheduled clean-ups of neighboring beach parks where other houseless communities lived and were swept. Events like a Halloween haunted trail and an annual backpack drive for school-aged children helped to strengthen ties with the broader Westside community. These efforts, rooted in *kōkua* (*aid*) and *kuleana* (*mutual responsibility*), transformed the village’s public image – from an encampment merely trying to survive to a community actively investing in its neighbors.

The village’s growing organization and outreach have helped legitimize it in the eyes of broader O’ahu. Then-Governor David Ige called off a 2018 sweep after sustained conversations with Aunty Cookie, and current Governor Josh Green – who credits the village as inspiration for homelessness initiatives adopted by his administration – has visited several times. State and county officials, representatives from Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR), nonprofits like Legal Aid, and various church groups also maintain relationships with the village, offering legal and material support (as well as, at times, scrutiny). A circle of well-connected private citizens also contributes guidance, time, and resources, further strengthening the village’s ties beyond its borders.

In recent years, Aunty Cookie and others in village leadership worked with outside supporters to further formalize operations and expand impact. This included forming an island-wide volunteer network, 'Ohana Kōkua, to elevate houseless voices in policy discussions, and creating a nonprofit, Loliō Kākou, to manage donations to the community. The primary goal: secure private land so the threat of a sweep would no longer loom. That goal was partially realized in 2020, when Loliō Kākou purchased twenty acres in a nearby valley with private funding. The new location is known as the mauka site; the original oceanfront area is referred to as the makai site. This research concentrates predominantly on the makai site, often referred to as *the village* or *the kaiāulu (community)* in this paper, with occasional references to the mauka site, sometimes called *the land*.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic and rising construction costs delayed development at the mauka site – particularly the installation of a central water line – construction was well underway as of late 2024. Several tiny homes and a hale 'āina (community center with kitchen, laundry, and bathroom facilities) have already been completed, and about twenty residents relocated, including Aunty Cookie, Cassia, and several members of Cookie's 'ohana (along with her well-known, often well-behaved pack of dogs). While Cookie still maintained a presence at the makai site, day-to-day leadership now circulated among a few residents – mostly her 'ohana or close allies – but remained shaped by the ongoing influence of her value systems (compassion!), regular returning presence to the makai site for meetings and community activities, and the relationships she forged over many years, often with those who strongly resisted connection or trust.

While some residents move between the two locations of the village, many remain primarily rooted at the site at which they live. Full relocation of the village is projected by 2026, although not all residents intend to move mauka. For some, the makai site is where their camp has stood for years, where they raised their children or lost their spouses, and where they feel a deep sense of pilina (*connection*). Others express hesitation about rules, surveillance, or losing freedom that comes with living less formally. Still, once construction is complete, the State has consistently stated that all remaining residents will be required to vacate the makai site, which is – as of early 2025 – slated in part for redevelopment by DLNR for the use of a nearby high school.

Methodology

This research draws on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu. The longitudinal nature of this fieldwork – spanning over two years – was essential. In a community shaped by repeated interpersonal and institutional betrayals and harms, trust could not be assumed, nor was it always granted. I can say with certainty that I did not earn every single person’s trust. But over time, I believe that what emerged between myself and many residents was *pilina* – reciprocal, relational connection; something like bonds, intimacy, familiarity, all tied up with one another. This was not something I built alone or was “entrusted with”; it was something we built together – slowly and cautiously, through consistency, presence, care, and curiosity. Unlike trust, which can be singular and unidirectional, *pilina* is mutual. It offers a way of being in relation that made deep observation possible – not as an outsider peering in, but as someone accepted, if provisionally, into the daily life of the village. Long-term involvement made it possible to witness not just events, but transformations – in people, in relationships, and in the village itself.

Drawing inspiration from Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) critique of research as a colonial tool, I sought to root my methodology in Kanaka ‘Ōiwi values and a localized, relational ethics. I remained committed to collaboration, reflexivity, and accountability to those most affected by the work. This meant approaching research not as extraction, but as relation grounded in *ha‘aha‘a* (*humility*), *aloha* (*compassion*), *kuleana* (*responsibility*), and a willingness to be changed by the community I was learning with and from. It meant recognizing that knowledge is not just gathered, but given and constructed, and that these *makana* (*gifts*) carry *kuleana*. It meant showing up not as a neutral observer, but as a participant accountable to the rhythms, values, and needs of the place.

I first met a few residents of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu before I ever began my doctoral program, brought out to an event by a friend who had connections with the village. I met Cookie very briefly, but didn’t think much of it at the time. Later, while working in houselessness services in Philadelphia at places like Project HOME and the Bethesda Project, I began to think more seriously about the systems that fail people and the spaces they build in response. I knew I wanted to return to Hawai‘i

after completing graduate coursework and study houselessness in ways that felt grounded, human, and relational. I remembered the village and, when I looked them up, found out about the plan to move mauka. At the 2019 American Studies Association conference in Honolulu, I connected with scholar J. Kehaulani Kauanui, who put me in touch with someone who conducted their own dissertation research at the village, and after I emailed Cookie a few times with no response, the researcher told me: just go. So, only a month later, I did, taking the bus ride that begins this work for the first time. It was nerve-wracking. But Cookie welcomed me and told me I could come back.

As a haole (*white*) academic from the U.S. continent, I didn't know how I would be received – especially in a predominantly Native Hawaiian community on the Wai'anae Coast, where the legacies of Americanization, military occupation, and systemic neglect remain deeply felt. I had heard about things like “Kill a Haole Day,” the unofficial practice at some Westside schools that expressed, however bluntly, a long history of pain, resistance, and resentment toward outsiders – particularly white ones. I understood my presence could easily be read as extractive, unwanted, or untrustworthy. I don't think residents ever stopped seeing me as a haole – nor should they – but the more I accepted that without defensiveness, and the more I simply showed up, listened, and helped out, the more I was allowed in. Some residents noted that they started to smoke pakalolo (*marijuana*) around me as a sign of my acceptance – a far cry from the early days, when no small number of residents thought that I worked for a church (an assumption that still cracks me up). I also think the way I was raised helped. I grew up in a large, cross-generational family where respect for elders, teasing, and offering help without being asked were just part of family life. That kind of relational energy in the village felt familiar. It helped me move through not as an insider, but not exactly as an outsider either.

I approached Kīpuka 'Aineamalu not as a fieldsite, but as a living community in which I was a guest. As previously stated, my ability to conduct research there was made possible by building pilina (*connection*) and establishing relationships not only through interviews and observation, but through acts of kōkua, listening, care, and simply being present. I often visited the village two to three times per week and usually stayed late into the night. On a few occasions, I slept over in

Cookie's tent when a trusted resident deemed that it was too late for a haole boy like me to ride the bus home safely. Many of my most meaningful observations were not scripted or anticipated; they unfolded through hours of hanging out, talking story, hauling water, sharing meals, and walking the same worn trails through the village again and again.

My primary method of data collection was participant observation, supported by 23 semi-structured interviews, recordings of community meetings (with Cookie's and residents' consent), and informal *talk story*. I took jot notes on my phone during visits and later expanded them into full fieldnotes within 48 hours whenever such a timeframe was possible. Occasionally, I recorded interviews and conversations between myself and other residents. Initially, I sought verbal consent for each recording; however, as time wore on and I had to keep asking, some residents provided blanket consent. I often listened to the recordings on the bus ride home, using the time to reflect on what I had heard and how it was said. I used Otter.ai to transcribe most recordings, but due to the frequent use of Hawaiian Creole English, or *Pidgin*, transcription required extensive refinement. Over time, I came to understand Pidgin not just as a language but as a worldview with a particular way of conveying *'ike (knowledge)*, *mana'o (opinions)*, and *na'auao (wisdom)*. Learning it through immersion was essential to my comprehension and ethical representation of what was shared. It is among the greatest gifts I received from this experience – particularly as a haole.

Not every visit resulted in recordings or notes. Some days, I chose not to document anything – opting instead to be fully present and open to the rhythm of daily life. These undocumented visits were often the ones that built the deepest *pilina*. I came to see that being present without a phone in hand was often more powerful than anything I could type out. All names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms. I did my best to follow a localized ethics of care, choosing not to record certain things that felt too intimate, compromising, or vulnerable to preserve in writing.

As previously stated, my fieldwork was guided by longstanding 'Ōiwi values, including *aloha (compassion)*, *mālama 'āina (care for the land)*, *kuleana (responsibility)*, *kōkua (aid)*, *pono (ethical balance)*, and *pu'uhonua (refuge)*. These were not abstract values; they were practices I saw enacted daily by residents, and which I sought to honor in turn. As a haole researcher, I remained

constantly aware of the structural, racial, and historical dynamics that shaped my presence, and I tried to let that awareness shape how I moved, what I asked, and what I chose not to record. In the early days of my time at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, I agonized over this. Then Cookie told me that I should not be so afraid of doing something wrong that I choose to do nothing, while she gesticulated about her tent and told me that maybe I wasn't the person who was ideal to do this research, but did I see anyone else doing it? That stuck with me. I didn't stop worrying, but I worried less.

Fieldwork required navigating other ethical and cultural questions for which there were no clear answers: Should I bring my own food? Should I eat if something is offered? In the beginning, I brought snacks and sometimes snuck away to some remote part of the village to eat them. But over time, I came to understand that refusing food was itself a disruption – a violation of the norms of aloha and reciprocity. I chose eventually to eat and drink what was offered to me, recognizing that doing otherwise risked appearing disrespectful and high maka maka (*pretentious*). In turn, I regularly brought baked goods like cheesecake, brownies, and breads that were difficult – though I learned not impossible – to cook over a propane camping stove. However, I did not drink alcohol at any time nor use drugs. Other questions percolated – when do I ask to record the conversation? Am I giving back enough? Questions ranged from logistical to existential. Dr. Judith Levine, the primary advisor for this dissertation, fielded many calls to calm me down, for which I am very grateful. These questions were never fully resolved – at least, not internally – but I strove at all times to approach the work with care, aloha, scientific ethics, and kuleana (*responsibility*).

My analytical process combined inductive coding with memo-writing and iterative reflection. While grounded theory shaped the practical structure of my analysis, it was ultimately the relational patterns I witnessed – rather than themes or categories – that drove my interpretation. My thinking was guided by the theoretical frameworks outlined below: relational sociology, which foregrounds the social world as constituted through interaction; and dissipative structures theory, which illuminated how both individuals and collectives reorganize through rupture, strain, and adaptation. Together, these frameworks allowed me to understand the village not as a fixed structure, but as a dynamic relational field, constantly remade through tensions between care and control, autonomy

and obligation, protection and abandonment. They also allowed me to understand myself not as a distant observer, but as one part of the unfolding social life of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. As we say in Hawai'i, it is a kākou thing – *kākou* meaning everyone together, including you.

Theoretical Framework & Contributions

This dissertation draws on two primary theoretical frameworks – **relational sociology** and **dissipative structures theory** – to make sense of the emergence, evolution, and internal dynamics of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. These frameworks provide a lens not only for describing the village's patterns of care and governance, but for understanding how these forms arise through relation, instability, and contested legitimacy. They allow for an analysis of the community not as a static entity or case, but as a dynamic, contingent system continuously made and unmade through relational interaction, constraint, and transformation.

Relational Sociology

Rather than taking individuals or institutions as the starting point, *relational sociology* emphasizes the social as a process of ongoing relation and emergence. As Emirbayer (1997) writes, “a relational sociology takes as its point of departure neither the individual nor society as discrete entities, but the dynamic, unfolding relations between actors.” Bessant (2018) deepens this premise by arguing that relation is not merely a method of sociological inquiry, but the ontological basis of social life: people are made not in isolation, but through interaction, exchange, and interdependence.

This framework helps us understand a place like Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, where categories such as *houseless*, *leader*, or *governed* are not fixed positions but roles continuously negotiated in and through everyday life. The village is not a container for individuals – it is regularly and reflexively produced through patterned but unstable relationships: between people, 'āina, governance, state institutions, histories of harm, the will to survive, and the desire to be left alone. This perspective allows for the analytic centering of *pilina* (*connection*), *kuleana* (*responsibility*), *kōkua* (*aid*), and

kāko'o (*support*) as core mechanisms of social life and self-organization. Indeed, many 'Ōiwi (*Hawaiian*) values – including pono (*ethical balance*), aloha (*love, friendship, compassion*), and mālama (*care through stewardship*) – are organized primarily through relationality. Relational sociology, in this sense, does not simply offer an analytical tool for interpreting the village; it resonates of Hawaiian Indigenous 'ike (*knowledge*), na'auao (*wisdom*), moral reasoning, and action systems that already structure the foundations of life at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu.

Relational sociology also shifts the analysis of power away from top-down structures and toward embedded, affective, and informal forms of authority. In Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, authority operates, at least in part, through relations of obligation, charisma, care, kinship, and shared hana (labor). It shows up in who gets listened to, who gets away with breaking rules, and who is quietly resented for not showing up for official acts of kōkua. These dynamics resist easy measurement but are no less consequential. They shape who feels a sense of belonging, who is positioned as trustworthy, and who finds themselves isolated as relational fields shift. They condition access to protection and forgiveness as they distribute vulnerability and risk. They become especially salient in moments of tension or crisis, when relational trust is tested, strained, or broken — and when the endurance of pilina becomes the thin but vital thread that holds collective life together.

This research contributes to relational sociology by offering a thick ethnographic account of how moral governance, care, legitimacy, and resistance emerge through – and collapse within – relational fields. While prior work has emphasized how social action is shaped by networks and ties, this project shows how obligations are produced, stretched, and sometimes abandoned within a moral economy of care. By documenting the uneven building of pilina (*connection*), the messy distribution and adoption of kuleana (*responsibility*), and both the presence and absence of pono (*ethical balance*), this study demonstrates that informal governance is not merely patterned by relationality – it is *generated* by it. Furthermore, by engaging 'Ōiwi values as lived forms of relational structure – not as cultural metaphors – this work extends relational sociology into a plural and indigenous register. It invites future research to treat such relational ethics not only as theoretical tools, but as infrastructural realities in the making and unmaking of social order.

Dissipative Structures and the Social Life of Instability

To understand how forms of order in the village emerged, shifted, and strained – not through external design but internal adaptation – this research draws on dissipative structures theory. Originally developed in the physical sciences by Prigogine and Stengers (1984), dissipative structures describe systems that sustain themselves not in equilibrium, but through instability, energy flow, and rupture. Rather than collapsing under strain, these systems transform – reconfiguring in response to new pressures. In the social sciences, this concept has been extended to account for how collectives reorganize through critical junctures, feedback loops, and the unpredictable interplay between individual practice and emergent form (Allen, 1988, 1990; Artigiani, 1993; Weber, Louçã, & Gerrits, 2022).

Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was not built from a blueprint. It took shape across ruptures – sweeps, fires, evictions, leadership changes – and continually reorganized in response. Intake procedures, quiet hours, leadership meetings, community kōkua, security duty: these were not static policies but improvisational responses to mounting complexity. As Weber et al. (2022) note, bifurcation points emerge when older forms can no longer hold a system together. But what I mean by the “system” in this work is not rigid or total – it is better understood as an ecology of relation: a shifting field of pilina, pressures, habits, ethics, and structures. At every point of strain, something gave way, and something else grew in its place. That growth wasn’t neutral – it was shaped by who had influence, who had been harmed, who felt responsible, and who had the energy left to care.

This relational terrain was never blank. Residents arrived carrying relational histories – of abandonment, violence, institutional betrayal – and those histories shaped how they engaged with collective life. The village’s social form emerged from these histories, just as it was constantly reshaped by new entanglements: trust fraying, care being repaired, rules being tested, leadership evolving. The “structure” of the village, in this sense, was always becoming – held together through dynamic relations rather than fixed rules. Dissipative structures theory allows us to see the village not as a system moving toward order or collapse, but a constantly shifting configuration of moral, relational, and material tension. The structure was real, but porous; present, but negotiated.

This framing also illuminates how dynamics between the part (*individuals*) and the whole (*the village*) play out over time. Feedback loops – like unmet enforcement, burnout, or perceived favoritism – did not stay localized. They reverberated across the village, creating new conditions for change, disengagement, or reconfiguration. You may wonder while reading whether or not Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu ultimately “succeeded” or “failed” in achieving its aims – but this research resists that binary. That question presumes a fixed set of goals and a stable metric by which to measure them. What mattered here was not outcome, but endurance: the capacity to adapt, reorganize, care, falter, and still try again. A dissipative view resists teleology. The village was not evolving toward stability or collapse; it was persisting through motion. In this way, it mirrored houseless life itself – where adaptation, resilience, and exhaustion coexist within every attempt to make home.

This research contributes to dissipative structures theory by rooting it in the ethical, affective, and relational textures of a community under stress. Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu did not stabilize so much as hold together, differently, again and again. Some configurations brought care to the surface; others enabled avoidance, detachment, or control. None lasted, yet something always persisted. This is not a story of system failure, nor of triumph. It is a story of a collective that reorganized to survive, and in doing so, revealed what frays when care-based structures stretch too far and come under pressure. Rather than rejecting order, the village continually reassembled impermanent order – though “order” was never singular. For some, it was deeply tied to individual commitments to personal autonomy; for others, it meant enforcing collective safety, clear and consistent rules, or mutual accountability. Residents, as nodes in a shifting relational field, sought what they thought was right, livable, or pono. In this way, the system did not overcome instability but moved through it – redefining order not as resolution, but as the capacity to remain in relation. What remained may not always have been healing, but it was sometimes – even often – enough to keep going.

Charisma and the Contingency of Leadership

Within this relational and adaptive system, the role of Cookie was central – and best understood through Weber’s (1978) concept of *charismatic authority*. Unlike legal or bureaucratic power,

charismatic authority arises when a person is perceived to possess extraordinary personal qualities that make them uniquely capable of leading in times of uncertainty. Cookie's leadership was not granted by any institution, but through her ability to establish trust, create order, and maintain moral clarity amid instability. Her authority rested not simply on enforcement, but in established pilina – the relationships and connections she built with residents through personal acts of care, and the common belief that she saw, protected, and uplifted people others discarded.

Yet Weber also warned that charismatic authority is inherently precarious. It must continually be reaffirmed by followers and is always at risk of collapse when legitimacy erodes. When the figure at its center recedes, what often follows is the routinization of charisma, as relational trust gives way to formalized roles, bureaucratic structures, and rule-based enforcement. The third chapter of this dissertation confronts precisely that transformation: how charisma fades, how contradictions emerge, and how a system once held together by relational intimacy begins to fracture – or harden – when pilina is no longer central to a relational system and structure moves in to take its place.

This research contributes to theories of charismatic authority by showing how charisma can be built not through spectacle or symbolic rupture, but through the living demonstration of care. Cookie's leadership was not marked by dramatic acts, but by daily presence – *talking story*, feeding others before herself, raising other's keiki, remembering small details about people's lives. Her authority was not just personal – it was relationally embedded and morally legible. When she moved mauka, what followed was not just a shock to leadership, but a partial breakdown in relational circuits that had made collective life possible. Attempts to replace her daily presence with policy, enforcement, or formal delegation struggled – not because the structures were weak, but because relational charisma cannot easily be routinized, nor can it be passed on through appointment. It must be lived. This reframes Weber's model of routinization by showing that when charisma is grounded in care, its absence is not just institutional – it is emotional, moral, and destabilizing, particularly for those whose learned strategies of distrust, detachment, and domination had to be gradually and consistently worked through by a charismatic leader like Cookie.

A Review of Relevant Literature

On Homelessness

Over the past four decades, the study of homelessness has evolved into a densely layered, multidisciplinary field that traces both macro-structural forces and micro-level experiences. Foundational typologies distinguished transitional, episodic, and chronic homelessness (Kuhn & Culhane, 1998; Culhane et al., 2007), while longitudinal studies tracked demographic variation and institutional churn across U.S. cities (Wong & Piliavin, 1997; Metraux & Culhane, 1999; Crane et al., 2005). Scholars have examined how structural forces such as housing market collapse (Burt, 1992; Eide, 2022; Colburn & Aldern 2022), welfare retrenchment (Beckett & Western, 2001), mass incarceration (Stuart, 2016), and deinstitutionalization (Koegel et al., 1996) generate and sustain housing precarity (Jencks, 1994). These analyses have been extended through critical perspectives on the carceral state (Wacquant, 2009; Garland, 2001), neoliberal governance (Lyon-Callo, 2004; Willse, 2015), and the transformation of homelessness into a site of punitive urban management (Mitchell, 2003; Herring, 2019). Yet even as this literature engages deeply with systems of marginality, it often maintains an analytic focus on individuals or nuclear family units – how they become unhoused, how they navigate services, and how they cope with daily hardship.

Ethnographic and symbolic interactionist traditions have provided rich accounts of how unhoused individuals manage stigma and construct meaning in public space. Snow and Anderson's (1987, 1993) foundational work on "identity talk" launched a wave of scholarship on how individuals perform dignity and moral legitimacy amid exclusion (Anderson et al., 1994; Boydell et al., 2000; Marvasti, 2003; Huey & Berndt, 2008). Others have explored survival strategies through peer networks, informal economies, and street-level moral economies (Duneier, 1999; Molina, 2000; Stablein, 2011; Orrico, 2015), while youth-focused studies have highlighted creation of "found family" and stigma management among homeless adolescents (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Dunne et al., 2002; Ennett et al., 1999; Rice et al., 2008; Kidd, 2007; Roschelle & Kaufman, 2004). Yet much of this literature too focuses on the individual, often treating coping as emergent from the condition of homelessness itself. It rarely considers how entire communities actively resist stigma or how pre-

existing moral frameworks shape everyday life within homelessness. At the same time, scholarship on the social construction of homelessness has shown how stigma is not only experienced interpersonally but also produced through policy, media, and expert discourse (Bogard, 2003; Gowan, 2010), contributing to a public imaginary that shapes how unhoused people are perceived and policed (Agulles & Cárcel 2024).

This research challenges both the individualism and the rupture narrative embedded in much of this work. Based on more than two years of ethnographic fieldwork in a self-organized houseless village, I found that many survival strategies – related to caregiving, rule enforcement, emotional detachment, or conflict navigation – were not invented “on the street,” but were drawn from prior experiences of trauma, abuse, absence of parents, bullying, deceit, and institutional navigation. This extends critiques offered by feminist and critical ethnographers (Dordick, 1997; DeWard & Moe, 2010; Hoffman & Coffey, 2008) by showing how relational strategies formed before houselessness shaped not just individuals, but the governance and ethos of an entire houseless community. The village of study was not a blank slate; instead, it was a thick relational world, where histories of harm and obligation informed how people related to one another, responded to crisis, and upheld collective values. Moreover, stigma was not simply managed – it was actively resisted, not just by individuals but through communal practices of accountability, generosity, *kōkua* (*aid*), and interactional care. These practices form a sort of symbolic labor that countered dominant narratives of disorder, dysfunction, and dependency. This project shifts the unit of analysis from the individual to the collective, and expands the field’s understanding of how stigma, legitimacy, and moral meaning are negotiated in and through community.

Further, while institutional interaction literature about homelessness has emphasized police, caseworkers, and shelters (Gowan, 2010; Stuart, 2016; Herring et al., 2020), this study expands the frame to include engagements with civil agencies that are rarely foregrounded in sociological analysis: the Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR), the Office of the Governor, and the Honolulu Fire Department. Residents of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu were in constant negotiation with these actors – not as passive subjects, but as people asserting claims to land, safety, belonging,

self-determination, and recognition. These interactions complicate the notion of “street-level bureaucracy” by highlighting a wider governance field, where regulatory power is diffuse, environmental, and often opaque (Lipsky 2010). They also challenge frameworks that cast unhoused people solely as the managed, the criminalized, or the service-dependent. In Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, residents built protocols, enforced rules, repaired infrastructure, and confronted civil authority not as clients, but as a community. Distribution of toiletries, clothing, and other items throughout the coast to both unhoused and housed people further complicates this dynamic, as the community itself served as a service provider.

This project thus offers a shift in scale and sensibility. It foregrounds not just how *individuals* navigate stigma and survival, but how a *community* enacts relational care, governance, and resistance – how it collectively negotiates the moral, material, relational, and institutional stakes of daily life under duress. In dialogue with work on moral economies (Snow & Mulcahy, 2001; Duneier, 1999), care-based authority (Dordick, 1997), and activist ethnography (Desmond, 2014; Lyon-Callo, 2004), this dissertation introduces culturally grounded frameworks rooted in ‘Ōiwi values: *pilina* (*connection*), *kuleana* (*responsibility*), and *pono* (*ethical balance*). Rather than reinforcing houselessness as a site of rupture, dependency, or pathology, this work treats Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu as a living, collective system – a space where histories persist, relationships transform, and dignity is not presumed, but actively made and remade through the social. In doing so, it expands the sociology of homelessness to include not only those who have been cast out of the societal center, but those who stay, build, and resist together at the margins.

On Trust

Trust has long been a foundational concern in sociological theory, viewed as a necessary condition for social cooperation, coordination, and order. Early theorists such as Simmel (1950), Parsons (1963), and Goffman (1959) treat trust as a tacit infrastructure of everyday life – an assumption that allows interaction to proceed without constant verification. Luhmann (1979) frames trust as a means for navigating social complexity, while Misztal (1996) and Seligman (1997)

highlight its moral, emotional, and institutional dimensions. Sztompka (1999) frames trust as a cultural “bet on the future,” embedded in broader structures of risk and continuity.

Much contemporary scholarship tends to treat trust as either a rational or cognitive stance: a willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another based on expectations of their behavior (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Hardin, 2002; Cook, Hardin, & Levi, 2005). Even when extended into institutional or networked domains (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Giddens, 1990), these accounts often retain an individualized model of trust as something earned, calculated, and potentially withdrawn. Processual accounts have attempted to move beyond this instrumental framing. Möllering (2001), drawing from Simmel, presents trust as a three-part process: expectation, interpretation, and suspension. Trust, in this model, is not simply rational or volitional – it involves a kind of emotional or existential leap, a suspension of doubt that makes forward movement possible. While this formulation expands trust beyond pure rational calculation, it still presumes a bounded individual actor who cognitively or affectively *decides* to trust. Trust remains an act – performed at a moment of risk – rather than a condition of embedded relationship.

In studies of poverty and homelessness, this model often proves inadequate. Trust in such circumstances is typically described as contingent, high-stakes, and easily broken. Levine (2013) details how low-income mothers develop preemptive distrust in response to repeated institutional betrayals. Comfort et al. (2015) and Wasserman & Clair (2010) similarly show how people navigating housing insecurity and carceral entanglement learn to limit vulnerability and ration trust. Gowan (2010), Stuart (2016), and Desjarlais (1997) document how distrust becomes a necessary survival strategy, shaped more by context than by individual calculation. Orrico (2015) synthesizes these insights and shows how trust functions not only to enable cooperation, but to also police boundaries and regulate inclusion within precarious economies. Her ethnographic account of street vendors in Venice Beach demonstrates how trust is often operationalized through codes of access, familiarity, and informal governance – less a moral orientation than a social logic for managing instability in a high-risk, high stakes situation.

Building on critiques of individualized and instrumental models, recent scholarship reframes trust not as a discrete act of judgment, but as something that emerges within relational fields. This orientation draws on earlier philosophical work, particularly Baier's (1986) foundational argument that trust is not primarily a rational calculation, but a form of moral vulnerability – extended within relationships shaped by care, responsibility, and mutual recognition. Baier's work marked a departure from both functionalist and cognitive-processual models, helping to reorient trust toward its ethical and affective dimensions. Expanding on this foundation, scholars such as Scheman (2020), McMyler (2020), and Cook and Santana (2020) emphasize how trust is structured through roles, moral expectations, epistemic deference, and historical asymmetry. In this framing, trust is not a momentary act, but a longitudinal form of ethical positioning – often negotiated alongside (not antithetical too) distrust and rooted in the maintenance of connection itself as an ongoing moral and relational practice.

This dissertation builds on that trajectory by turning to the 'Ōiwi concepts of *pilina* and *pono* as theoretical interventions into relational sociology and the sociology of trust. *Pilina* refers not merely to interpersonal connection but to a broader relational condition touching on connection, reciprocity, familiarity, intimacy, and trust, with ties between people, place, ancestors, and the nonhuman world. Derived from *pili* — meaning to cling, adhere, or bind together — *pilina* implies relational continuity rather than episodic leaps. In this framework, trust is not a discrete decision made in response to risk; rather, it emerges from the depth of *pilina* built between entities, which allows for trust to be reformed, renegotiated, or withheld without dissolving connections altogether. *Pilina* is not just built but tended, repaired, and remade across time, through the accumulation of actions and the everyday reaffirmation of mutual recognition. Framing trust within *pilina* shifts the analytic lens away from individual judgment and decision-making toward conditions that sustain or erode relational life. In contexts of precarity, where survival often demands guardedness, *pilina* captures how community life can persist even in the presence of ongoing distrust.

Pono – often reductively translated as balance, righteousness, or justice – serves as the ethical horizon through which *pilina* is measured, judged, and repaired in this dissertation. Yet *pono* is not

simply about moral correctness in a rigid, prescriptive sense. It is a lived, situational striving toward right relationality: an ethic that demands mutual care, attentiveness to imbalance, and an openness to restoration. In 'Ōiwi epistemology, *pono* exists not as a static state but as an ongoing practice – a continual, relational calibration seeking to uphold dignity, respect, accountability, and decency across human and nonhuman relations. It calls forth not only what actions are taken, but how they are carried out, with what intention, and with what sensitivity to the web of relations they affect.

Together, *pilina* and *pono* offer sociologies of trust a critical and necessary expansion. They reorient theories of trust and connection away from transactions of risk and individual judgment, and toward the broader moral ecologies in which relationships are formed, strained, and remade. They illuminate that survival, legitimacy, and governance in communities like Kīpuka 'Aineamalu are not held together by institutional structure or contractual agreement, but by ongoing ethical labor: the work of building, maintaining, and repairing *pilina* in ways that strive toward *pono*. This reframing foregrounds the moral and cultural logics of relationality in ways that existing trust theory rarely captures. It shows that the question is not simply whether one trusts another in moments of risk, but whether people continuously honor the relationships they are already bonded within – especially when trust falters. It demands that sociology see relational life not as a background structure but as a living, ethical terrain: one where connection is never presumed, where the stakes of disconnection are profound, and where endurance itself becomes a moral achievement.

On Social Movements

Scholars of social movements have long documented how grassroots collectives navigate the tensions between moral vision, internal governance, and external legitimacy. Movements are not only defined by their opposition to external systems, but by the internal labor required to hold people together across difference. Trust, solidarity, and shared ethical orientation do not automatically arise; they must be built, tested, and continually reaffirmed (Melucci, 1989; Snow & Benford, 2000; Jasper, 1997). As movements evolve – from emergence to routinization – they often encounter cycles of cohesion and fracture, particularly as they face pressure to scale, formalize, or respond

to external threats. This dynamic is not unique to large-scale movements; it also characterizes the micro-politics of collectives grounded in care, mutual aid, or survival.

While Kīpuka 'Aineamalu did not identify as a social movement, its practices – resisting displacement, asserting autonomy, creating structures of accountability, and caring for those most often abandoned – echo dynamics of movement formation and transformation. Scholars like Polletta (2002) and Ganz (2010) show how participatory groups rooted in deep moral commitments often struggle with leadership transitions, contested authority, and the interpretation of shared values – especially as early charisma gives way to a contested structure. These tensions are echoed in Tufekci's (2017) analysis of horizontalist movements such as Occupy Wall Street, which were sustained by powerful moral clarity but often lacked mechanisms to manage disagreement or adapt strategy. Without ways to navigate internal strain, such groups risk what she calls “tactical freeze” – a stasis driven not by repression, but by unresolved tension. This research contributes to this literature by tracing how similar dynamics unfolded within a village that also became a kind of movement – shaped by shared values, strained by shifts in power, and held together not by slogans, but by daily acts of care.

Beyond formal movement theory, others have expanded the lens to include every day, decentralized, emergent forms of resistance. Scott (1985) describes the “weapons of the weak” that characterize survival-oriented collectivities – those that do not name themselves as movements, but engage in forms of refusal, endurance, and creation, nonetheless. Solnit (2009) writes of “disaster utopias” that emerge from crisis: temporary communities of care and possibility, built from necessity but animated by hope. Kīpuka 'Aineamalu bears traces of both. It was not a movement with a platform or clear ideological stance, but it was undeniably a collective formation that challenged dominant paradigms of governance, value, and social worth, particularly of the houseless. What unfolded there – through tension, trust, fragmentation, and care – offers not just a story of a village, but an intimate account of a movement in motion.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into three empirical chapters, each tracing a different temporal and relational dimension of life within Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu. Together, they follow the emergence, transformation, and ongoing adaptation of a self-organized village built through care, negotiation, and survival amid systemic instability.

Chapter 1 examines the deep and often compounding adversities that shape the lives of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu residents before, during, and after becoming houseless. Drawing on personal histories marked by relational harms like childhood neglect, institutional betrayal, interpersonal violence, and systemic abandonment, the chapter traces how early and ongoing harm affects not only how people enter houselessness, but how they navigate it – and why some may be unable or unwilling to leave it behind. Residents develop protective strategies such as distrust, detachment, and domination – not as pathologies, but as vital means of survival in a world that has often failed to protect them. These strategies, although once adaptive, can later complicate trust, community participation, or acceptance of help, illuminating how harm reshapes relational life long before and after one loses housing.

Chapter 2 traces how Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu became a living network of pilina: a community built not with formal structures, but through everyday practices of connection, care, and kuleana. It shows how the possibility of pilina – once strained for many residents by years of relational harm and institutional abandonment – was painstakingly rebuilt through small acts of kōkua, shared rhythms of daily life, and collective stewardship of people and of place. Leadership, especially that of Aunty Cookie, emerged not from status or control, but from living pono – behaving ethically and relationally within the village’s evolving moral field. Care at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was not conditional nor was it hierarchical; it was a shared practice holding dignity and autonomy together. In foregrounding pilina as the connective tissue of village life, the chapter illustrates how residents wove together stability, belonging, and social value into a world that too often denied them all three.

Chapter 3 explores how mounting external scrutiny and internal expectations strained the relational fabric that sustained Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu. As the village formalized to meet demands from

fundors, neighbors, and state agencies, participation increasingly shifted from voluntary kōkua to mandated contribution, exposing deep tensions between autonomy and collective responsibility. For some residents, these shifts affirmed a growing sense of community; for others, especially those shaped by histories of institutional harm, they felt like an encroachment on a fragile autonomy they fought to protect. The chapter shows how rising obligations, uneven enforcement, and the fraying of trust began to destabilize pilina between people and place, not through dramatic rupture but through slow relational dissipation. Care persisted, but obligation hardened, and leadership – once grounded in living relational authority – grew strained by positionality and fatigue. Rather than depicting collapse, the chapter theorizes how governance rooted in pilina can falter under relational strain, revealing that in communities shaped by harm, legitimacy cannot be sustained through rules or roles alone. It must be continually regenerated through ethical, relational presence – and when that presence falters, survival becomes more precarious even if structure endures.

The conclusion returns to the village at this moment of fracture, marked by theft, fire, and growing strain – not just on systems, but on the relationships that sustained them. It reflects on how residents, despite profound histories of relational harm, continued to show up – for each other, and for Cookie – in moments that mattered, and shows how care continued to flicker even as the structures around it strained. Drawing on theories of relational sociology, charismatic authority, and dissipative systems, it argues that authority grounded in connection must be actively nurtured, not assumed; that pono leadership is relational, not positional; and that what allows communities like Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu to survive is not structure alone, but a moral legitimacy that grows through pilina, presence, reciprocity, and care. What was lost, and what might still be recovered, rests in whether kuleana can once again emerge from connections of care – not from obligation.

The conclusion also considers the broader policy implications of the case. In a context where houselessness is increasing and support systems are actively being dismantled, the future may hold more – not fewer – places like Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu. The chapter challenges dominant service models that demand compliance without relationship and emphasizes the need for policy that recognizes care as negotiated, trust as earned, and autonomy as essential. It argues for investment

not just in materials or programs, but in the people who quietly hold communities together – those like Cookie – whose leadership is forged through humility, presence, and the practice of living pono. Rather than pathologizing resistance or demanding performance, policy must support the slow, difficult work of relational repair if it hopes to sustain real alternatives to displacement and harm.

The title of this dissertation, *Pū'ali Kalo i ka Wai 'Ole* – “Taro grows misshapen when it lacks water” – is drawn from the seminal book, *'Ōlelo No'eau*, as collected by Mary Kawena Pukui – one of many sayings serving as grounded reflections throughout this dissertation. 'Ōlelo no'eau are Hawaiian aphorisms or proverbs carrying layered meaning or *kaona*, transmitting intergenerational 'ike (*knowledge*) and na'auao (*wisdom*) about ethics, behavior, 'āina, community, and life. This particular 'ōlelo no'eau serves as a metaphor for one of the core tensions at the heart of this dissertation: what happens to people – and the pilina between them – when foundational conditions for safety, care, and dignity are not readily present. When there is no wai (*water*), growth still occurs, but it becomes uneven, misshapen, and fragile. It also speaks to the immense power possible in the resilience of people and place, as the kalo survives despite the lack of water it receives.

Relational sociology tells us that communities are not collections of autonomous individuals, but dynamic systems of connection – constituted through trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. Dissipative structures theory helps us see how those relational systems can emerge and reorganize in the face of instability, rather than because of order. The kalo (*taro*) in this 'ōlelo no'eau, then, does not grow free; it grows under pressure, in response to what it lacks. In the same way, Kīpuka 'Aineamalu arose in a landscape marked by American occupation, trauma, sweeps, displacement, and systemic neglect. It did not form in ideal conditions, and its structure bears the imprint of that harm and strain. Yet it is also a site of extraordinary care, innovation, and adaptive relationality – an evolving system shaped by both scarcity and abundance, damage and dignity. The kalo may grow misshapen, but even so it can produce mea 'ai – *food*, that which feeds.

The subtitle – *Harm, Care, and the Uneven Growth of a Houseless Community* – reflects the dissertation's central analytic arc: that the social life of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu cannot be understood apart from the histories of harm, abandonment, and survival that shape both the people, the place,

and the community that they produce. Growth happens – not as smooth progress, but as a strained, uneven, and sometimes painful unfolding. In this kīpuka – an island of life surviving within a wider landscape of devastation – community isn't absent. It is always present, if often in fragile, contested, and shifting forms. The analytic question, then, is not whether community exists, but how it survives, reorganizes, and struggles to stay pono amid pressures that risk bending it back toward the very violences it seeks to refuse. The subtitle, although written in English, carries kaona too: individually, it speaks to how residents carry relational scars and possibilities forward; collectively, it marks the difficult work of sustaining pilina under pressure; historically and materially, it recalls the colonial, carceral, and dispossessive forces that shape collectives like this one; epistemologically, it centers 'Ōiwi understandings of land, relationship, and obligation; and relationally, it reminds us that survival is not merely endurance, but an ongoing ethical negotiation. *Harm, Care, and the Uneven Growth of a Houseless Community* is thus not simply a description – it is a recognition of the imperfect, unfinished, and deeply human work of tending to life at the margins, where care is possible, harm is near, and growth remains both a burden and a hope.

A NOTE ON HAWAI'I AND THE UNITED STATES

Hawai'i pae 'āina (*the archipelago of Hawai'i*) is a chain of 137 islands and islets situated at the middle of Moananuiākea (*the Pacific Ocean*). Settled between 1000-1200 CE by Polynesian voyaging ancestors of Kānaka 'Ōiwi (*Native Hawaiians*), the primary eight (8) islands of Ni'ihau, Kaua'i, O'ahu, Moloka'i, Lāna'i, Kaho'olawe, Maui, and Hawai'i developed complex systems of natural resource stewardship influenced by forces both noa (*profane*) and kapu (*sacred*). The pae 'āina was united as a single entity in the late 1700s CE by Mō'ī (*King*) Kamehameha I of Hawai'i Island as Ke Aupuni Mō'ī o Hawai'i (*the Kingdom of Hawai'i*) and was recognized as sovereign by nations such as the United Kingdom, France, and the United States of America. The kingdom government reigned until 1893 CE, when a group of Hawai'i-based foreign businessmen conspired with the U.S. Navy to overthrow Queen Regnant Lili'uokalani and attempt annexation to the United States. While annexation was never enacted, the United States formally occupied Hawai'i in 1898 CE. It is due to this occupation that Hawai'i is governmentally administered at present by the United States of America and its satellite entity, the State of Hawaii.

This text recognizes the ongoing US occupation of Hawai'i, a nation whose ea (*sovereignty*) has been upheld by the United Nations' International Court of Justice. Nonetheless, this text also recognizes that due to ongoing occupation, the United States has significant jurisdiction over the islands, including in matters of poverty through its Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and matters of homelessness through its Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). In acknowledging this de facto authority, this text does not affirm its legality, legitimacy, or morality, but seeks to portray the functional reality of Hawai'i and its peoples – particularly those experiencing homelessness – whose lives are shaped by living under American occupation. References to Hawai'i as a "state" in this text acknowledge this as a contested designation.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE: WHY “HOUSELESS” AND NOT “HOMELESS”?

Throughout this dissertation, I generally employ the term *houseless* rather than *homeless*. This choice is intentional and reflects both the lived realities of those in this research study and the broader political and cultural stakes of language as a tool to construct reality. For many residents of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu and other encampments, the word *homeless* fails to capture the complexity of their lives. It implies not only a lack of shelter, but a lack of belonging, a lack of worth, a lack of identity, a lack of placedness, and a lack of stability. But those living outside are not necessarily without home, even as they are without housing. They are often without protection from the state, violence, and the elements, but do not live without connection, meaning, or care.

This distinction is especially important in Hawai‘i, where *home* carries layered meanings. For Kānaka ‘Ōiwi (*Native Hawaiians*), home is Hawai‘i – ‘āina, genealogy, and relational continuity. It is not simply *where* one lives – it is *who* one is. To call Kānaka *homeless* in their own occupied homeland is to perpetuate a double erasure: of their dispossession and of their enduring belonging. The term *houseless* better honors the truth that while many may lack a roof, they are not without place, and they are certainly not without home. In this sense, *houselessness* is not merely a material condition – it is a structural outcome of American occupational and economic systems that have made it difficult, and often impossible, for many to live in dignity on the land that raised them and on which their ancestors were raised, their ‘iwi (*bones*) entombed in its lushness.

This language also reflects how many residents describe themselves and one another, both within the village and to outsiders. It resists the clinical language of the state and instead affirms relational identity, lived presence, and dignity. It is not a perfect term, nor is it universally adopted. But it gestures toward something vital: that even in the absence of housing, people continue to create, defend, and live within networks of *kōkua* (*aid*), *kaiāulu* (*community*), and care. This work seeks to honor that refusal to be defined by lack – and to instead trace the richness, contradictions, and possibilities of life lived at the margins.

CHAPTER 1

THE PAIN & STRIFE OF THE PAST

“Lu‘ulu‘u Hanalei i ka ua nui; kaumaha i ka noe o Alaka‘i.”

Hanalei is downcast in the heavy, pouring rain, laden down by the mists of Alaka‘i.

*- #2034, Mary Kawena Pukui, ‘Olelo No‘eau
Hawai‘i Book of Proverbs and Poetical Sayings*

When she was growing up in affluent Mānoa as the daughter of a well-respected and beloved teacher, Gina never saw herself becoming houseless. Sure, like many young people on the island, she experimented with drugs, but when she found that out that she was pregnant in her 20s and made the decision to move to the Midwestern United States in the 90s, she put all of that behind her. She turned her life around: established a career in police dispatching, raised two daughters, bought a nice house. “I owned my own home: free, out, clear; didn’t have no payments on it. I had a lawn and a really good job, cars, and nice bikes, and stuff like that,” she told me as we sat under the shade of a kiawe tree in a park on a hot summer day. Across the park’s parking lot lay Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, where Gina now lived in a tent that wild pigs regularly ransacked for loose food.

“Biggest regret is coming back here, honestly...I had seventeen years of sobriety and a lot of stuff that happened when I got back here caused me to lose my sobriety,” she continued, her usually joy-filled voice heavy.

That was in 2009. Mahina, Gina’s eldest, was pregnant and wanted to raise her child back in Hawai‘i. Gina knew what it was like as a kid to miss her grandma living in Kansas and did not want it to be like that for her own mo‘opuna (*grandchild*), so she came back to O‘ahu too – a decision that would eventually pull her into a spiral back to the drug habit she kicked when she left years ago. Mahina started on meth first when they came back, just after she gave birth to her second child, so Gina took on unofficial guardianship of her granddaughters for a few years while her daughter went to “have fun.” Maybe she had too much fun – when Mahina eventually left her partner for another man, her partner’s parents – with whom Gina and Mahina had been living since coming back to O‘ahu – kicked them both out and onto the street. This fracture was the catalyst for Gina’s return to drug use:

They [the in-laws] started making false accusations to CPS [Child Protective Services]...and because I didn't have...legal guardianship of them [her grandchildren], they...took them outta my custody because I couldn't foster 'cause I'm homeless. And that was the downfall of it all. I lost...two of the most important people in my world, and then I started using drugs again.

Her renewed drug use led a houseless Gina into a relationship of extreme abuse, the marks of which she carries all over her body in the shape of knife blades, gunshots, and cigarette burns etched onto her by her ex. Despite the abuse she suffered, Gina is a warm, friendly person, but often hides her mouth when she smiles. I thought for a while that she lost her teeth the way many in the village have – from meth. It was only after getting to know Gina over many months that I learned it was a baseball bat to the face from her ex-boyfriend that took her teeth out and nearly killed her in the process. She fled the abuse multiple times, but always found the police unwilling to offer *kōkua* (*aid*) for her safety:

I put restraining orders on him that were never served 'cause the popo don't do their jobs around here. They're just fucking nonchalant about everything, won't put like nothing in their books. They don't care about it...I literally got four restraining orders against him; not one of 'em got served and their excuse is because he's homeless. I'm like, bullshit...you know where he lives, where his camp is...Why don't you do your job? I've done what I'm supposed to do. I've called you. I made reports.

Fed up with being dismissed by the police and stalked by her former partner, Gina came to Kīpuka 'Aineamalu in 2019, where Mahina was already living with her new guy, Chip:

He found me at all the shelters, or whatever camp I moved to on the beach he found me at and he used to terrorize me. But he couldn't do that here 'cause they wouldn't let him in. So I found safe haven here back in 2019...he knows that if he was to hit me now that he'd have some real shit on his hands because a lot of people would beat his ass up for me now...I don't feel unsafe now.

Although Gina's abuse was extreme among residents of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, her story illustrates a broader pattern of relational harm – both interpersonal and institutional – that many residents experience as they enter into and navigate houselessness. These relational harms arise not only when existing *pilina* (*connection*) is actively betrayed, but through the sustained absence of *pono* (*ethical balance*) in the behavior of others. When institutions and individuals consistently fail to act with *aloha* (*compassion, love*), *mālama* (*care*), and *kōkua* (*aid*), residents come to

anticipate relational neglect as the default and the norm. Interpersonal betrayals, such as the in-laws forcing Gina out and potentially misleading authorities, or her boyfriend's rampant and horrific abuse, break relational bonds along with people's spirits and senses of self. Institutional betrayals, such as CPS policies barring houseless fostering and police inaction, intensify these relational ruptures, embedding distrust as a rational response and, in Gina's case, leaving her frightened and unsafe wherever she went.

While in cases of abuse like Gina's it is clear that relational harm is intended, in other situations, intention is less clear. Did Mahina's in-laws really intend to lie, or were there valid concerns about child safety? It could be the case that the police truly could not serve Gina's restraining orders when they were unable to locate her boyfriend – upon becoming houseless, one resident specifically recalled being advised by another houseless person that “when the cops come to give tickets, not to be home, to go walking around on the beach...so that you wouldn't get a ticket.” Conversely, it could be what Gina alluded to – the “nonchalant” attitude of local police who “don't care about it.” But could it also be that they were uninterested in helping Gina because she is houseless? Certainly, this would align with the beliefs of others in the village who talk about how the cops don't care about the homeless. It is difficult, for both Gina and us, to determine intention in the absence of direct, honest conversations with the other party – an opportunity that is rarely afforded.

The “true intention,” however, is not necessarily the point. Rather, it is this ambiguity – along with the pervasiveness of relational harm – that often leads those experiencing it to develop distrust, detachment, and domination as coping strategies. Crucially, residents internalize these reactions not merely as reactions to direct harm, but also as responses to the ongoing absence of pono (*ethical balance*) in the actions of those with whom they interact – such as not having arbitrary rules explained that make little sense but result in manifest, material harm. When those meant to care do not, distrust and detachment become adaptive, relational responses in the absence of other forms of recourse. Aggression, too, can emerge as a relational response to interpersonal harm like abuse or mockery, offering an illusion of control even as one loses control of one's ability to control oneself. In navigating relational harm, residents internalize these strategies as necessary tools for

survival, reinforcing cycles in which distrust and dogged self-reliance dominate daily life. Gina's story exemplifies how interpersonal and institutional relational failures intertwine, shaping residents' interactions with the world.

This chapter examines the many ways residents of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu have experienced relational harm – abuse, neglect, disregard, and dehumanization. These harms, intertwined through interpersonal and institutional betrayals, taught residents to navigate the world defensively through strategies of distrust, disengagement, and domination. These approaches, often framed as behavioral failures of individuals, are not inherent traits, but emerge as relational adaptations to repeated adversity and harm that protect those wielding them from experiencing such harm further. Whether through childhood neglect, housing instability, or systemic exclusion, residents learned that stability and safety are often precarious, and that reliance on others – whether personal or institutional – carries significant risks. Yet, beneath these coping mechanisms often lies a deep, concealed longing for relational healing, connection, and security. The need to seem tough, distant, or in control often conceals grief, loneliness, and a longing for *pilina* (*connection*). The following sections explore these dynamics closely, revealing how relational harm shapes lives, and how survival often demands relational strategies that simultaneously protect and isolate, offering a tenuous security at the cost of connection, trust, and healing.

These stories do not stand alone. They are not included here as isolated case studies, but as windows into the relational conditions that structure community life in Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. Each resident is a node within the village's broader relational web – arriving there not as blank slates, but with histories of care and harm that shape how they relate to others and others relate to them in turn. These histories do not disappear in collective life; they are carried into the village and become entangled with new relations, new conflicts, and new forms of repair. The purpose of this chapter, then, is not to retreat into individualism, but to lay groundwork for how patterns of distrust, domination, and detachment born from earlier harm become part of the relational terrain of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu itself. These are the starting points – the relational orientations that later chapters show are reshaped, strained, or sometimes reaffirmed within the shared social space of the village.

Relational Harm in Childhood & Adolescence

Gina's experiences of abuse, neglect, and disregard occurred when she was an adult, directly preceding or occurring in the aftermath of becoming houseless. Yet in *talking story* with me, Gina revealed that her pathway to drugs was originally paved by a desire to dull the pain of her mother's death when she was younger. Like other residents of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, her early experiences of loss, instability, and emotional pain shaped how she later navigated the world. For many, it was both the presence of relational harm and the absence of mālama (*care*), aloha (*compassion*), and pono (*ethical balance*) in their experiences as keiki (*children*) or 'ōpio (*youth*) that long preceded the possibility of houselessness in their lives, forming both the hurt and the coping strategies they carried into adulthood. These experiences taught them who could and could not be relied upon, fostering patterns of distrust, disengagement, and domination as means of self-protection.

Rae lives in a large, tented area in the front of the kaiāulu with her husband and their two young children. Originally from Moloka'i, Rae had a hard time fitting in in school – a problem exacerbated by the rural nature of the island and limited opportunities to make friends there. Rae recalled being taunted relentlessly by schoolmates as a teenager:

Started high school and everybody would talk shit about me. Ya know, call me ugly, stink, fake girl. Fat...It took me just one, one actual day to stand up to the people that was bullying me and fight wit' 'em. And ever since that fight, I just, anybody says something to me or gives me a stupid dirty look, I'll go off on 'em. I think it's just a point being teased almost half my life.

Rae's treatment in school led her to adopt a lifelong coping strategy of domination in response to being threatened or demeaned; she expressed wanting to have power "over the people that were bullying me," and still does. But her experiences as a teenager also led Rae to proactively keep people at a distance, guarding herself against even the possibility of relational harm by maximizing her autonomy and minimizing the interference of others whenever she could. She told me in her time early into coming to Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, "I never used to talk to anyone before. I would just walk out to do whatever and go my own way." She often refers to herself as a *bitch* – at times seriously, at other times with a hearty laugh that follows. In her view, she still has few friends because friendship requires trust, and that is still not something she finds easy to give.

Rae's neighbor Reina also used to get into fights in high school. Sitting on a shabby sofa in the pop-up tent at the front of the kaiāulu that serves as both a check-in office and a popular place to talk story, Reina and her best friend Alana laughed as they described getting into a fight with three other girls in high school that led to them both getting suspended – one fight among many because as Reina tells it, as she “got in one fight at every school” she attended. Yet like Rae, I learned over time that Reina's tough exterior masked a sensitive person who had been neglected and hurt as a child. While she would rarely go into specifics, Reina left her parents as a teenager to move to the village and expressed strong resentment toward them whenever they were brought up. Once, when a keiki from the kaiāulu was being discussed, Reina made it clear that while housed as a child, she didn't have access to electricity, an oven, or even a bed – only a comforter, a pillow, “and the floor.” Due to her upbringing, she is intimately aware of the rules for Child Protective Services, remarking at one point that only running water is a household requirement for parents to retain their children because “you can always boil water.”

For some residents, it was simply the impression of relational harm or neglect that affected the trajectory of their lives. During a school supply drive organized by the kaiāulu for keiki in the broader Wai'anae community, Joyce recounted how she was moved up a grade in school because her teachers recognized that she was smart, but she could not see this at the time. Instead, because she found the new schoolwork difficult, a young Joyce assumed the school was trying to make her feel stupid and refused to do her work, even though she was capable. Joyce began to act out, threatening to “lick kids” (*beat them up*); and, in one instance when she was annoyed by another student tapping on the other side of a window from her, punched through the glass and pulled the boy through it, leading the school to call her father. While Joyce graduated, she explained that she still finds it difficult to feel confident about her abilities after this experience.

Joyce's story shows how ambiguity about institutional intentions can affect not just adults (as we explore later in the chapter), but children who are even less likely to be provided explanations for decisions that affect their lives. For young Joyce, the decision to elevate her in school was not a positive one – instead, it was an act meant to shame her, and despite having perspective on the

situation now that allows her to see it differently, the effects of that unintended shame continue to play out in her life. Further, Joyce's story fixes a personal lens onto widespread racial and structural issues on O'ahu and in Hawai'i more generally. Joyce explained that at the time, she felt the school targeted her because she was one of the only 'Ōiwi (*Native Hawaiian*) students at a largely haole-Japanese school in Honolulu. This belief, fueled by historical harms directed toward generations of Hawaiians, underscores how the consequences of harm on a group compound personal feelings of exclusion and shame, leaving lasting impacts on individuals like Joyce.

Often, however, the effects of relational harm across generations are more personal and intimately felt. Like Gina, the absence of a parent was one of the first and most deeply felt forms of adversity for many residents of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, shaping how they learned to navigate the world long before the possibility of houselessness arose. For some, this absence was a result of personal loss or family instability. For others, it was the product of larger institutional failures – incarceration, economic hardship, or a lack of meaningful support structures that could keep families together. Regardless of the cause, the result was often the same: children left to make sense of the world on their own, developing coping strategies rooted in withdrawal, skepticism, and self-reliance.

Aunty Cookie's nephew Ka'ōnohi, who lived with her off and on during my time at the village, carried a deep guilt over his mother's death, believing he was to blame when she missed several dialysis appointments on mornings when he didn't wake up in time to remind her. After her death, Ka'ōnohi went to live with his father, who paid him little attention and whose neglect Aunty Cookie blamed for Ka'ōnohi's lack of confidence. At a village cleanup, Silas told me that his mother's early onset dementia led her to think that "I was eighteen when I was ten; kicked me outta the house." Silas was among Kīpuka 'Aineamalu's first keiki, remaining there until he moved to the continent at age seventeen, before bouncing around from job to job and eventually coming back to Hawai'i and the kaiāulu. Reflecting on his life, Silas described the lessons he had learned:

Brah, you gotta be a tough cookie or not, sink or swim. Most people don't understand that. Whatchu gotta do is, gotta have an open mind to life. Life, give you lessons. And...it took me to come home and get sick to actually realize that the things I went by was actually true in life. Um...fuckin' life is harsh, I'll tell ya that. I think the harshest thing in life is when you gotta find all this shit on your own, even though you got siblings and family.

The absence of stable parental support in their formative years shaped how both Ka'ōnohi and Silas navigated the world – Ka'ōnohi internalizing guilt and self-doubt, Silas learning to rely solely on himself – reinforcing coping strategies of withdrawal, distrust, and self-preservation that many developed to cope with early hardship. These patterns, first learned in response to neglect, carried into adulthood, shaping how many later engaged with systems and people around them.

For other residents, relational harm came not from neglect or absence, but from the pervasive presence of violence, which shaped their understanding of power, conflict, and survival from an early age. Margot, a thin woman with a curly mane of strawberry blonde hair who has lived in the kaiāulu for a decade, grew up with a stepfather who “used to hit my mom all the time.” At a community clean-up, Carol told me that her parents used to beat her so often as a child that she refused to go home and was raised largely by other families. Ke'ao was raised in a household where he remembered his mother slamming his sister to the ground and beating on her when they got into an argument, as well as another incident in which his mother tore apart the family home because he and his sisters had not cleaned up. For those who grew up under these circumstances, violence was not only something endured but something learned – an ever-present force that shaped how they came to understand power, conflict, and survival. These early experiences reinforced the idea that violence was not just a response to harm but, in many cases, the most effective tool for control and self-protection. Margot, for instance, was known to get into physical fights with her partner, Jay, with their arguments sometimes spilling into public view. The impulse to fight was often like with Rae and Reina – immediate, a reflexive response to harm and potential harm shaped by years of lived experience.

In Gina's case, the adversity of her life has not ended with her. After watching her elder sister descend into drugs and bearing witness to her mother being abused, Gina's younger daughter, Emmy, struggled in school and had a baby young. At 17, however, she signed up for a residential, military-style program run by the National Guard to achieve “something better for her family.” The program offered Emmy both structure and discipline, promising a pathway out of the instability she had grown up with. Although she graduated, her mother described how things quickly unraveled:

While she was in Youth Challenge, her boyfriend lost custody of the baby to CPS...got into some stupid shit. Robbed 7-Elevens and got ten years in jail...so when she [got] out of Youth Challenge, she lost her baby, lost her boyfriend. I'm in an abusive relationship with a guy that beats my ass on a daily basis, and she's scared for me; and she's just turning 18...she went to a shelter with me a couple times when he found me. A good thing: he never did hit me in front of her, thankfully. But she saw the aftermath of it...she'd see me in the hospital all the stab wounds and burns and everything...that's when she started having her mental health issues.

The intervention of a structured institutional program briefly provided Emmy with an opportunity to break free, but the weight of relational harm made manifest in systemic failures and personal trauma proved overwhelming. Although she had attempted to carve out a different path, she emerged from the program only to find that the conditions shaping her life – family instability, violence, and state intervention – had not changed; if anything, they worsened. Now struggling with meth addiction compounded by usually unmedicated and untreated schizophrenia, Emmy lives only spans away from Gina in Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. Despite fleeting glimpses of hope – such as her time in Youth Challenge – Emmy, like her mother, struggles under the weight of familial trauma. The same forces that shaped Gina's path – violence, addiction, and systemic neglect – now entangle Emmy too. The proximity of mother and daughter, living just tents apart, is a stark reminder that relational harm is not simply inherited through personal relationships but is reinforced by the institutional conditions that create and sustain cycles of harm. Without meaningful intervention, whether at the level of family or system, these patterns persist – not because of personal failings, but because the structures that perpetuate them remain unchanged.

Relational Harm as Adults

While experiences of harm and adversity in childhood were common among kaiāulu residents, adulthood brought its own set of relational challenges. Mistreatment, abuse, deceit, and disregard remained persistent forces in their lives. As in their youth, consistent interaction with those who did not behave toward them in ways that were pono (*ethically balanced*) – not acting with kōkua (*aid*), mālama (*care*), or aloha (*compassion*) – had a deleterious effect, leading many residents to turn toward distrust, disengagement, and domination as key relational strategies. These relational

absences alongside the presence of active relational harm directly influenced residents' abilities to secure stability and housing, as both interpersonal betrayals and systemic failures left them in precarious, sometimes dangerous situations. For many, becoming and remaining houseless was not only a result of direct harm but the culmination of repeated relational absences that undermined their capacity to trust others and navigate the world with confidence.

Relational Harm in Entering into Houselessness

Stories of harm in adulthood are often tied directly to residents' entry into houselessness. As recounted at the outset of this chapter, this was the case for Gina when her daughter's in-laws kicked her out and her boyfriend perpetrated horrific abuse on her. For Rae, who was taunted as a young person in school, it was her husband Pa'a's aunty and uncle who they were staying with and "only gave us, like, a day or to two to get out" when they unexpectedly decided to adopt a baby and "needed the room that we were staying in" that landed them on the streets. While it is, of course, reasonable for a couple to want a child and utilize space in their own home for their own purposes, it is the abruptness in which Rae and Pa'a were dismissed – and their inability to plan as a result – that created a situation culminating in their becoming houseless.

Before moving in with Pa'a's hānai family, Rae had reunited and been living with her mother Roxanne (Roxy) and her two younger siblings after they moved from Moloka'i to O'ahu to live with Roxy's then-husband, who had been working and living on the island for a while. Rae moved out from living with her 'ohana because they were having a hard time finding affordable housing for all five of them, with Roxy and her now ex-husband winding up at a long-term stay motel paying \$1,000/week to house them and the other two teenage children once Rae left. "The jobs that I had; I had like two, three jobs. Not even that could help out to where we had the electric to pay and the water to pay, the rent," Roxy told me as we sat in Rae's camp set right at the front of the kaiāulu where visitors check in. From the bedroom (i.e., the part of the 20' x 20' tent with the bed in it), we could both hear the sounds of Rae's daughter Faye playing with a xylophone, one bang after another striking a discordant tune that never ceased to make her light up with giggles.

We had found a place up on this side that was, I figured, cheap?...We signed a rental agreement so that we can move in the next day. When we went there, somebody else was moving in...they had somebody else moving in to that place. So I wen' ask, 'Excuse me. Are you folks still fixing da place?' And they was telling me no, they're just in their place, they're renting it. I'm like what? So I tried calling the landlord back. They wasn't answering the phone, nothing. So we ended up homeless...that was the hardest year of my life.

Roxy did not provide any further insight into if and how she followed up on what went down with the house, nor is it clear – even to Roxy – what happened with the landlord and why another family was allowed to occupy the place for which Roxy had signed up. What is clear, nonetheless, is that Roxy and her 'ohana found themselves houseless due to a collision of structural barriers and interpersonal betrayal. Already struggling to get by on an island where median rent is among the highest in the United States, Roxy's options for housing her 'ohana were limited to begin with; then, when she managed to secure a place and had already signed a rental agreement, she learned that the landlord had given the apartment to another family instead. While this decision was made by an individual, it was also enabled by the absence of meaningful protections for renters, a gap that left Roxy with no recourse. Roxy's experience shows how institutional gaps and interpersonal failures compound to produce profound relational harm.

Roxy went on to describe that initial year of houselessness as “the hardest year of my life,” sharing how being unhoused taught her to be “aware of [her] surroundings,” as “there are people that does steal” and “make trouble.” Yet even as she reflected on the survival skills she gained, she expressed hesitation about seeking out housing again, fearing she would once again be deceived. The experience of losing out on a home did not just place her in immediate crisis – it reinforced a broader sense of distrust, making stability feel even more unattainable for her and her 'ohana, several of whom – like Rae – now live with her at the village or have lived there at some point in time. In not being treated with *kōkua* and *mālama* by the landlord, Roxy came to believe that others would not act *pono* in the future, leading her to disengage from the idea of housing altogether.

For Nānā, a friendly, funny fifty-year-old who treks nearly three hours each way every day from the village to her job at a McDonald's in Honolulu near Lē'ahi (*Diamond Head*), there was little ambiguity as to why she encountered relational harm that led her to houselessness. In 2011, while

living with and taking care of her father in a senior living community, Nānā's life was upended in an instant. After a routine dialysis appointment, her father suffered a traumatic heart attack in their car. She was forced to perform CPR on him for several minutes until the medical team could admit him to a nearby hospital – but despite their efforts, her father died. With his sudden passing, Nānā lost not just her father, but also her home. Fighting back tears, she told me:

They gave me one month. And I have to deal with, ya know, um, his services, all that kind of stuff plus having to pack up everything and...yeah it was really stressful. Here I just lost my dad, and now I come homeless.

Since Nānā was not the primary resident at the senior living community, nor was she old enough to live there on her own, she was told she could not remain after her father died. This policy, while clear and even reasonable in its intended purpose, exemplifies how institutional structures constrain the capacity of those involved to act in ways that are pono –ethical and relational – even if there was sympathy for Nānā's plight. The rigid enforcement of rules without flexibility, aloha, or meaningful kōkua in the absence of transitional support puts into relief a relational environment operating under ethics vastly different from those central to traditional, relationally-embedded 'Ōiwi values. Ultimately, the facility felt no kuleana (*responsibility*) for Nānā, who was forced out in one of the hardest moments of her life to catastrophic consequence. Thus, the absence of these critical relational behaviors – rather than direct malice – produced deep relational harm. Already grappling with the emotional and logistical aftermath of her dad's death, Nānā was thrust into houselessness for the first time. Even a decade later, when I asked her how losing her housing made her feel, she was unable to find words through her tears.

Although Nānā was always aware when living with her dad that she would not be able to remain there without him, other residents were caught completely off guard by how rapidly they lost housing – and by the treatment they faced in the process. Waina, a cherubic woman who lives in the village with her partner and her pre-teen son Kyle from a previous relationship, was never informed by her boss that her former job was not completely above board, leaving her ineligible for unemployment when she was let go in the early 2010s. Without work or any source of income, Waina was unable

to keep up with mortgage payments on her home and had to move into an apartment. Still struggling to secure another job, she eventually lost her housing altogether:

I lost my house in 2013. I had an apartment in Kāneʻohe and I lost it too...I lost my job, and they didn't record it. It was a whole big housing thing....I had my own house. I had my own house for thirteen years. I had a job; I was a general manager. I never need nobody till I moved here.

Waina's retelling leaves the exact circumstances of her job loss unclear (and she was unwilling to disclose further when asked), but what is clear is that her employer withholding vital information left her without safety nets that could have prevented her from becoming houseless. Her experience further highlights how institutions, not just other people, can fail to conduct themselves in ways that are pono – whether through omission, deliberate concealment, or bureaucratic opacity – and how behaving as such can leave individuals entangled with and dependent on them vulnerable to cascading consequences beyond their control. Rather than experiencing direct mistreatment, Waina experienced harm in a series of institutional silences and gaps. These systemic absences left her isolated, precarious, and ultimately houseless.

Relational Harm while Houseless

For many residents, the path into houselessness was shaped by hardship – financial instability, family conflict, or systemic failures that left them with nowhere to turn. But becoming houseless did not mark an end to relational harm; instead, it introduced new struggles that compounded existing wounds. Life without stable shelter brought constant uncertainty – displacement by police sweeps, theft, exploitation, and the pervasive risk of harm from both strangers and community members. Residents often found themselves navigating cycles of relational harm that continued long after becoming houseless, shaped profoundly by the presence of abuse or active mistreatment but the ongoing absences of pono, aloha, kōkua, and kuleana in interactions with others.

Through her experiences with the police and her ex-partner, Gina had already learned in her early days of being houseless that institutions ostensibly there to protect her could not be trusted to act in even the most dire circumstances - a view that became even more ingrained when Emmy

moved into the kaiāulu near Gina and her mental state worsened. The trauma that she and her daughter endured shaped Emmy into someone Gina barely recognized, and while she was relieved to have her daughter nearby, caring for her was exhausting. Emmy's schizophrenia made her destructive and occasionally violent as she talked to herself and the voices in her mind, sometimes lashing out unpredictably. One day, while we were casually sitting around talking story, Gina recounted how she had woken up in the middle of the night to find Emmy standing over her, wielding a knife. When she desperately reached out to the local mental health crisis hotline for kōkua, their refusal exposed a stark relational absence:

They say they're here to help, but then you call them for help – begging 'em for help – and they're like, 'Well, has she harmed herself or others?' It's like, well, so she has to be harm to herself before you guys get help? But yeah, she's harmed herself...what else does she have to do? She need to get banged...or what? She need to stab me in my sleep? I mean, I don't understand. They're supposed to be helping and they're not.

Even when Emmy ran into the busy highway outside of 'Aineamalu and was nearly hit by a car, Crisis Line still failed to act:

If the guy hadn't swerved and I hadn't tackled her, she woulda gotten hit. And so, I call the Crisis: 'What the fuck is it gonna take for you guys to come help me?' And they finally agreed to come out here and do an assessment but it's like, when? 'Oh, as soon as we get an available caseworker.' I was like, she could be dead by then.

These encounters underscore how mental health systems, by failing in kuleana (*responsibility*) they profess to hold, put those experiencing houselessness in uniquely dangerous situations. Instead of providing kōkua (*aid*) in managing Emmy's severe crisis, the Crisis Line did not intervene, leaving Gina to cope with the crisis in a situation in which she could not simply lock a door or call for alternative kōkua from a secure location, leaving her incredibly vulnerable should her daughter become violent. The failure of institutional support did not just leave Gina to cope alone – it actively placed her in harm's way, turning what should have been a safety net into yet another source of abandonment and risk in her life, another demonstration that institutions that profess to be relational fields of kōkua and care are seemingly incapable or unwilling to treat those they serve in ways that ar pono. As Emmy spiraled, the support Gina pleaded for never came. In the end, it was Gina – not

the crisis workers, not the police – who spent hours calming her daughter down, a stark reminder of the relational harm produced by systemic and institutional inaction.

Although Gina faced institutional neglect, other residents conversely described how institutional intervention in their lives was the very thing that disrupted and disturbed them and their senses of security. Both Roxy and Nānā relocated to the kaiāulu after they were *swept*, or forcibly removed, from a nearby beach park. Liora, Roxy's best friend and her granddaughter's hānai tūtū (*adopted grandma*), recounted her experiences of a sweep, telling me that “the cops, ya know bother you. I cannot handle this; [I] got a big camp. Middle of the night, they fucking bothering us. We get up, we get off the beach.” Ironically, Honolulu Police Department (HPD) officers prominently display badges on their uniforms invoking the Kānāwai Māmalahoe – *the Law of the Splintered Paddle*, a foundational Hawaiian law ensuring all people, including those without homes, could sleep without fear of harm. Yet their actions directly contradict this profound relational commitment.

Several sweeps of the village itself were threatened over the years. In reflecting on the threat of a sweep in 2018, usually stoic Mahina admitted her anxiety as well as her partner's:

You hear about people getting swept every frickin' week and it's just crazy...[so] it was scary. I mean, I know – don't let him hear this – but I know Chip, Chip was scared. Big time. 'Cause this is all he's known his whole life. When he found out that this might not be an option anymore, he was really scared. And it really, really hit home for him. And because he was scared, I was scared, ya know what I mean?...I'm thankful for that [not happening]. That woulda been crazy.

These experiences reveal the double-edged nature of institutional involvement in the lives of those experiencing houselessness – either through inaction that allows harm to persist, as with Gina, or through direct intervention that uproots and destabilizes, leaving residents in a constant state of uncertainty and fear. In Chip's case, the institutional intervention of the police led to anxiety for him because he feared being disrupted from his home, despite being labeled as “homeless.” The pilina that Chip had built with place at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu throughout his life was seen as secondary to the need among police to remove a houseless person from public space.

In other cases, it was other houseless people who caused harm to residents. Ace, a mid-20s mähū (*person embodying both male and female spirits, such as trans-people*) who had lived in the

village for about a year when we spoke, stayed at a shelter before coming to Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu. One morning, Ace woke up to find some of their personal effects had been stolen, then confronted the person who they believed had taken their stuff. When the individual refused to give it back, Ace – not usually one to fight – threw a punch, starting a brawl that led to them getting tossed out of the shelter. “Can’t trust nobody and sure as fuck can’t trust the shelters,” they told me as we sat waiting at the edge of the highway for a bus. The theft itself was a deeply personal violation, reinforcing Ace’s belief that even among those experiencing the same struggles, trust was fragile. But the shelter’s response – the decision to expel Ace while allowing the alleged thief to stay – made the betrayal feel systemic as well. Ace came to Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu because they heard stealing was not tolerated by village leader Aunty Cookie, a seeming contrast to the shelter, which Ace believed had wronged them by punishing their reaction to harm rather than addressing the harm itself. Their experience highlights how houselessness does not just expose people to institutional neglect but to interpersonal exploitation, with few spaces offering real protection from either.

In reality, Aunty Cookie’s stance on stealing is more nuanced and forgiving than it may seem – yet this approach, like with other residents, has at times left her vulnerable to the very treatment that contributed to houselessness in the first place. One day I showed up carrying freshly made mango bread to find that Cookie had kicked her long-term partner Cassia out of their place three weeks prior after learning she had been stealing from her. When I expressed some surprise at this, Cookie brushed it off – I learned this had been their pattern for many years; in fact, it was a breach of trust involving theft by Cassia that led them into houselessness:

I was the breadwinner in our house. But I, I was...I took vacation one year and that’s when I check da mail and I had an eviction lettah. And I ‘as like, uh, ‘What the fuck is this?’ because every month I was signing, I was sign four checks; all [Cassia] have to do is put in the amount, send ‘em in. Wasn’t happening like that. She was cashin’ da checks. By the time when I found out it was too late, big dollahs...And that’s when we leave there...And today I tell her, ‘I should have never followed you.’

Cookie and Cassia wound up on the streets and eventually came to the overgrown, waterfront ‘āina that would become Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu under Cookie’s guidance and leadership. Even as they built a new life together under the shadows of the kiawe branches, the cycles of hardship in the village

persisted. Their love for one another endured, yet it remained shadowed by a constant undercurrent of distrust – one that was regularly reignited by Cassia’s ongoing transgressions.

Even within the kaiāulu, some residents remain vulnerable to exploitation – especially those who struggle with mental health challenges or financial instability. After suffering a stroke that left her with significant cognitive issues, Aunty Dex lost her sense of smell and as a result, often smells something *foul* – an issue that Sis tried to address by helping her bathe and clean, despite Dex’s resistance. One day when Sis was doing her best to lure Dex out of her tent to shower, Sis’ husband Freddy told me that Dex was repeatedly being taken advantage of by a woman who pressured her into handing over her benefits card:

The other lady that comes around once in a while tryin’ ta, to get her card from Sis. Her buddy card, yeah? And the lady came around recently asking for her card and she know she doesn’t have it....She’s wasting all her money, major kine, but Sis still gives it to her, yeah? She has, she has...income of \$850 a month, and I don’t see how she can do much with it. People are stealing it from her.

This exploitation underscores the relational vulnerability inherent to financial precarity, leaving many houseless individuals susceptible to both systemic exploitation and personal betrayals that further destabilize their lives, even when they have some form of income. Just as Ace left a shelter due to theft and Cookie was betrayed by Cassia’s financial deception, Dex’s situation highlights how economic exploitation can be yet another layer of relational harm that those experiencing houselessness must navigate even as they may be unaware of it happening at all.

Not all harm, however, comes from mistreatment or neglect of individuals or institutions; sometimes, the instability and constant loss intrinsic to houseless life shapes how residents cope, and relate to each other and themselves. Pilina (*connection*) forged on the streets through proximity and necessity is often intense, yet frequently fragile. Gina explained this poignantly:

That’s, that’s the sad thing when you do put yourself out there, you get attachments and get bonds with people and...sometimes you don’t want to be bonded to these people [laughs]. And, that’s part of street life and living on the streets is like, you get close to people you live wit’, live around. ‘Cause that’s all you have is the people who live around you.

Yet, despite their development from shared survival, such relationships regularly end abruptly – due to sweeps, incarceration, addiction, or death. During my time at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, at least seven residents died, underscoring how frequently death is woven into daily life when houseless. On the morning Gina and I were discussing her life, she had just learned that a man who once took her into his tent had been found dead – a loss only discovered a week later. This perpetual relational uncertainty and loss shapes profound forms of emotional detachment as a survival skill, with Gina noting that loss is “part of street life too, you know, you kinda get used to losing people. One day you see ‘em, the next day, they’re gone.” Over time, the weight of these losses can numb even the most resilient people. Gina further reflected on how those she has met on the street have become hardened by grief, detaching themselves to avoid feeling its full weight:

It's sad when it gets to the point where it's kind of numb and you don't really feel. Thank God, I haven't gotten quite there yet but I've seen it happen, where you tell somebody they say, 'Oh, that's sad,' and they walk away - nothing. You get hardened, you get hardened to it in this life.

Gina’s words show how constant loss and uncertainty of houselessness can deeply compromise people’s capacities and willingness to build and sustain pilina, express aloha for others, or offer kōkua, even as some continue to do so out of a need to survive. Thus, relational harm inherent in houselessness manifests not just externally, but internally, profoundly reshaping and demarcating the very possibilities for relationality within their lives.

For some, this means building pilina and expressing aloha despite the pain, while for others, it means shutting down emotionally to protect themselves; as Gina put it, “everybody copes differently and everybody does grief differently.” Waina, for example, avoided painful memories she would rather leave behind, telling me that after becoming houseless, she tried to see a therapist, only to leave because “I tryin’ a bury my stuff and when you first see one new psychiatrist, you gotta dig all that shit back up. I don’t wanna remember that. It’s been years.” The weight of accumulated loss and hardship has made her wary of reopening wounds, a sentiment shared by many houseless people who can spend years operating in survival mode. For houseless people, loss is just one of many struggles to navigate – alongside securing food and water, finding shelter, avoiding the intervention of authorities, and managing addiction. With so many immediate concerns, grief is

often compartmentalized and pushed aside as a means of survival. Rather than confronting it head-on, many disengage, adapting in ways that allow them to keep going, even if it means carrying their pain and trauma in silence.

Relational Harm Perpetuating Houselessness

Houselessness is not just a condition of lacking shelter – it is shaped and perpetuated by relational barriers, trade-offs, and consequences that come with attempting to leave it behind. Pathways into housing can require people to make seemingly impossible choices: trusting institutions that have repeatedly failed them, returning to unsafe or unstable family environments, or giving up the very relationships – whether with family, community, or pets – that help them endure life while houseless. Even when housing is secured, the stigma of having been formerly unhoused can follow, bringing harassment, exclusion, and dehumanization that complicates reintegration into housed communities. These dynamics do not simply delay a transition out of houselessness – they actively shape whether people choose to pursue housing at all.

For Minnie, a kupuna so nicknamed for her diminutive stature but whose fiery attitude towers over most everyone in the village, it was putting trust in institutional actors that played a role not in causing her to become houseless, but in perpetuating her life on the streets. After moving from a Chinatown apartment to the Westside for her “ex-old man,” Minnie’s Section 8 enrollment was suspended after a conflict between her landlord and the property owner, and she became houseless. Soon after, Minnie marched all 4’10” of her into Satellite City Hall “to give the man all my paperwork...and told him I’ll be back in two years” once the suspension was lifted. Yet when Minnie returned, she learned that getting a pathway out of houselessness would not be so simple:

I went back there – exactly two years, the same day, everything – and he’s trying to hide from me! He said he threw all my paperwork out ‘cause his boss said to. I’m supposed to have gotten back my Section 8...he wouldn’t even talk to me...it says on the paper, everything, you know, in two years I’m supposed to get it right back. So I trusted the man...and then I showed up, and the man was trying to hide. Never shoulda trusted him! Yeah, I had hard luck on that.

As with Aunty Roxy's situation involving the landlord renting out the house to another family, it is unclear exactly what happened to Minnie's Section 8 paperwork – why it would have been thrown out, why “the man” avoided her, and what steps, if any, she has taken to challenge the situation. While these details matter, what has particular relevance here is Minnie's conclusion: that she erred when she “trusted the man.” Her experience underscores why distrust is not just a reaction, but a survival strategy for those navigating systems that repeatedly harm them in failing to conduct themselves in pono ways that respect the relation between institution and individual. Regardless of the specifics of how her paperwork was lost or dismissed, the outcome remains the same: after already spending nearly two years unhoused as a result of a feud that did not directly involve her, Minnie found herself forced to remain “on the streets,” not because she had neglected the process, but because the very institution tasked with offering kōkua had erased her from it. For Minnie, the lesson was not just that trusting the system was a mistake, but that the system had never been built to uphold its kuleana to people like her.

While Minnie remains unable to access housing through the Section 8 program, some residents have housing options but choose not to pursue them because of the adverse relational treatment they are aware they would face if they did. When Aunty Roxy and her children became houseless, a return to the family home and 'āina on Moloka'i was technically an option. However, the toxic and selfish behavior of her siblings – far from the aloha that is traditionally associated with *home* – kept her from taking that option:

My siblings don't like the idea of me being homeless. I knew that I had a house up on Moloka'i. My mom had land. But I never wanted to live over there – too much fighting over the land. I just never like my kids go through that. We've been through a lot lately, and I don't want them to go through that too. It's like going to court and this and that...I told them, you guys can have it. I don't want it if they have to go through that...and so, I just decided to put up here. My brother still lives on the land. He wants me to come home, I guess. Maybe I'll come visit! That's it. But not to live. Because it's still, they're still fighting over the...land. It's ridiculous!

Wily Aunty Pua's decision to remain in the village rather than return “home” echoes Roxy's sentiment – housing is not always preferable to houselessness when one is aware that it comes with conditions that compromise one's hard-earned peace and autonomy. Despite her sister's repeated offers to “just come home!” Aunty Pua refuses:

I love my dad, I really do. But we're too much alike. We're not opposite attracts, we're just too much alike dat...you know, uh...we just under each other's skins mainly at times but we just love each other to death. We have a better relationship from afar, yeah.

Both Roxy and Pua's decisions underscore how housing, while providing stable and consistent shelter, can fail to offer the relational sense of safety, autonomy, and pu'uhonua (*refuge*) integral to a meaningful sense of *home*. When familiar spaces prove otherwise, houselessness can prove a logical choice made in pursue of greater emotional security and peace. Continued houselessness as an act of self-preservation is underexplored in homelessness scholarship, but Roxy and Pua's experiences show how *home* is a relational construct intimately related to but distinct from *housing*. These aunties chose the village, where they feel a sense of control over their daily life and where the relational field promotes aloha, kōkua, and kuleana between people, in contrast to houses where toxicity and relational harm are the norm and operating ethos.

Institutional rules that require residents to abandon relationships that give their life greater meaning and which helped them endure adversity in order to access housing can also perpetuate houselessness. Kālepa, who explored going to a family shelter when her family found themselves once again houseless, discovered that doing so with teenage children would force them apart, placing her autistic son, Ikaika, in an adult men's facility where she would have no way to monitor his safety. The thought of separation was unbearable:

The process of all the other places I went to just to get our family in was crazy. The list was long... My girls and I would be separated from my husband and my boys. And that's not how we live, ya know? So it would be difficult for us to act that quick when from the time the kids were born until dat point would've been the first time we separated.

Their decision to remain together, even at the cost of stable housing, was shaped by years of instability and displacement. Kālepa gave birth to her first child while living in a shelter, where her husband was a frequent but inconsistent presence due to his job. Their first real attempt at housing was in a complex offering a two-year lease designed to help tenants regain financial footing before moving on; however, they stayed only one year before becoming houseless again. Over the next few years, as the family grew to six, they moved constantly before landing on land owned by her

husband's mother – until a family dispute once again left them without a place to go. By then, they had already given their notice to vacate their previous home, leaving them with nowhere to turn.

With few options left, Kālepa reached out to Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. Soon after, she and her family moved in, finding in the village what traditional housing programs had failed to offer – a place where they could remain together. Their story illustrates how institutional housing often demands people break apart social support structures in order to access institutional and shelter support, reinforcing the very instability they are meant to alleviate. For families like Kālepa's, remaining unsheltered was not a rejection of shelter and stability – it was a deliberate choice to protect the relational bonds that carried them through their struggles, as well as a commitment to the kuleana that she and her husband held for their keik.

Other residents were offered temporary or even permanent housing while living in the village, but moving in would have been required them to surrender their pets. Eva, a dog owner herself, told me one morning as we walked together that this was not a choice many residents felt they could ethically or emotionally make, explaining that “some people need their dogs to deal with whatever they are dealing with.” She pointed to several residents' animals as often the only source of comfort and stability that kept them going.

Carol was one of those people. By the time she came to live at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, she had endured physical and mental abuse from a great many people in her life – her parents, both of her ex-husbands, and other family members. Her two dogs had become more than companions; they were her sense of security in a life in which people behaved in ways that deviated significantly from acting pono, with aloha and care. Her attachment to them was so strong that one morning, when I suggested she should go to the hospital after noticing her swollen ankle and an open wound attracting flies, she hesitated. Going would mean being away from the village, she explained, and she feared that without her there, her mischievous and sometimes aggressive dogs might be taken away. If seeking medical care for a few days felt too risky, the idea of entering permanent housing that required giving them up would be unthinkable. Because of this common requirement, housing programs that might have provided Carol with stability were never real options at all. Institutional

pathways out of houselessness were effectively foreclosed to her – not because she did not want them, but because the institutions were unwilling or unable to value and adapt to the kuleana Carol felt for the only consistent characters of care in her life.

For many experiencing houselessness, the path to stable housing can be blocked not just by systemic barriers, but by the active, relational resistance and harm they face when trying to leave it behind. As the village neared acquisition of the mauka property, they organized several meetings with soon-to-be neighbors, hoping to foster pilina with them. Instead, gatherings quickly devolved into tense standoffs, with those living housed nearby making it clear that the community of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was not welcome up mauka. In one of the most striking incidents, residents organized a community event at the boat harbor – a chance to develop relationships with neighbors over food and conversation – only to be met with nearly fifty (50) protestors holding signs and shouting that they did not want the *homeless* in their neighborhood.

For Cookie, the most heartbreaking part of that day was the impact on the kaiāulu’s keiki. During my time at ‘Aineamalu, parents like Waina shared with me how their keiki (*children*) grappled with the stigma of being houseless, and often hid this fact from others – especially from their peers – out of fear of being judged or excluded. For many of them, that day only deepened their shame; one child asked Cookie as she was tearfully shuffled away, “Why do they hate us?”

Even after the village acquired the land, the hostility did not end – what had once been outright protest gave way to more insidious forms of harassment. Signs declaring *No Shantytown* were posted on the road leading to the mauka site and flyers urging resistance to the move were distributed anonymously around the Wai‘anae community. Neighbors accused those who moved onto the land of pilfering electricity off of their grid, harassing Cookie to the point where she sent photos to her nonprofit board to prove that her residents were not to blame. At a village leadership meeting, Haukea – whose ‘ohana was the first to move mauka – angrily recalled how the same neighbors were “screaming up there at us” and peeking over the fence, watching their every move. The harassment was not just verbal – while those living mauka could not confirm whether it was intentional or not, two dogs belonging to the same neighbors somehow made their way onto the

property, and Haukea worried that they might attack the village's goats. Eva offered her opinion in the meeting that given the resistance and harassment, perhaps the move mauka – and thus into communal housedness – was not worth the trouble.

This resistance faced by village residents highlights how the stigma of houselessness follows people even as they try to leave it behind, compounding existing feelings of shame and making a transition into stable housing feel fraught with hostility rather than relief. Securing shelter is not just about finding a home – it is about being accepted as a neighbor, and for many, the wholesale abandonment of pono relational treatment by others – manifesting in rejection, harassment, and dehumanization – makes leaving houselessness seem more difficult, of even less safe, than simply remaining in it. The shame imposed by others can be internalized, making people hesitant to enter spaces where they may be seen as problems rather than as community members. While the organized, communal nature of the kaiāulu led many residents to fight for their place (as Haukea eloquently put it, “This our fucking land”), Eva’s hesitation reveals that not everyone in similar situations will choose to fight – perpetuating cycles of houselessness not because people refuse housedness, but because they refuse to endure – to choose – further relational harm.

Conclusion: Roots Bent, Not Broken

The experiences of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu residents reveal that harm – both interpersonal and institutional – is not merely a defining characteristic of houselessness but a persistent relational reality. Many residents encountered relational harm long before losing housing through abuse, economic instability, and social marginalization, only to find the path to exiting houselessness similarly fraught. Institutional settings meant to offer kōkua, such as shelters with restrictive rules or housing programs demanding separation from family or pets, often reproduced or exacerbated harm rather than alleviating it. Kohut & Patterson (2022) emphasize that leaving houselessness involves profound social and psychological adjustments, often deepening feelings of isolation, even in environments designed to offer support; and in this, many houseless individuals may turn away from it rather than further engaging with harm. For residents of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, relational harm

is shaped continuously by individuals and institutions failing to behave in ways that are pono, unable or unwilling to consistently offer aloha, kōkua, or uphold their kuleana.

This chapter has advanced that both interpersonal and institutional harm are profoundly present in the lives of those experiencing houselessness; however, this distinction obscures their intertwined nature in lived reality. Institutional harm usually depends on an individual enacting it, and interpersonal harm frequently arises within institutional contexts, leaving the categories of interpersonal and institutional porous in practice. Take the example of a parent who abuses a child – does this constitute interpersonal harm, or is it an institutional failure of the family as a social structure? When a caseworker dismisses a client’s needs, is this bureaucratic neglect, or an interpersonal betrayal? When Minnie says she should never have trusted "the man," she points not just to an individual worker but to the institution he represents. Hoffman & Coffey (2008) find that houseless individuals regularly experience objectification and disrespect from service providers who are themselves embedded within institutions that shape these approaches, often leading those engaging with them to withdraw from services rather than have their dignity and respect further compromised. Relational harm thus emerges in interactions shaped by both people and institutions, and has profound impacts on how individuals experience houselessness.

The rigidity and dearth of care in institutional structures strongly influence these cycles of instability. When Nānā had to leave her father’s senior living community, it demonstrated not only bureaucratic inflexibility but a systemic unwillingness to operationalize aloha in a deeply vulnerable time. Minnie’s discarded paperwork was not just an administrative error – it signaled a failure of the state to treat her in a way that was pono, obscuring rather than offering transparency, and refusing relational accountability. Kālepa faced institutional demands that asked her to vacate familial kuleana for shelter, highlighting how structures that ostensibly offer kōkua render it conditional on often impossible moral and relational choices. These examples illustrate how institutional rigidity, absent of or secondary to relational values like aloha and kuleana, deepens vulnerability. As Parsell & Parsell (2020) argue, constrained “choices” – like Roxy moving back in with her dysfunctional family or Carol giving up her dogs – are structurally dictated rather than genuinely autonomous,

demonstrating why these options are often refused yet houselessness is framed broadly as a “choice.” Such options offer only an illusion of true choice in a neoliberal capitalist system where precarity is a structural necessity tied to inequality, sustained through systemic barriers rather than resolved through individual effort (Lemke, 2016). In other words, relational harm and precarity are built into the systems themselves.

Research into the criminalization of houselessness further illustrates these relational dynamics (Herring et al., 2020; Darrah-Okike et al., 2018). Policies like anti-homeless laws produce relational harm by imposing constant surveillance, displacement, and punitive interactions, weakening trust in institutions as well as in personal relationships. In Honolulu, enforcement of sit-lie and nuisance bans deepens civic and social exclusion, stripping individuals of personal belongings, disrupting employment, and intensifying experiences of anxiety and despair (Darrah-Okike et al., 2018). Rather than alleviating houselessness, these policies add to relational environments profoundly lacking in pono, exacerbating exclusion and the instability of the houseless. These environments are predictable outcomes of deeply embedded systems that govern access to housing, legal protections and resources, which often operate not with ethos of care but control.

In response to these persistent harms, residents of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu have adopted protective strategies of distrust, disengagement, and domination. Levine (2013) reframes distrust not as a personal deficiency, but as a rational response to repeated interactions with those that demand trust yet consistently fail to earn it – the very absence of reciprocal pono in an individual-institutional relation. Orrico (2015) expands this point, framing trust as a crucial, but deeply withheld, resource for survival in precarious contexts. “You can’t really trust people, even the ones you think you know,” Mahina told me as she looked over at her mom Gina, sleeping on a bare mattress with Mahina’s son held in her arms. Her words capture the broader reality that many residents navigate, where even the closest of relationships are built on uncertain and unstable relational ground. Thus, these strategies reflect not relational failures but protective adaptations for those navigating people and institutions that behave in ways that are not pono and which often do harm.

Viewed through relational sociology, these adaptations are not simply behavioral reactions, but responses shaped within relational fields marked by absence. Harm here is not always about what is done, but what is withheld: *kōkua* not offered, *aloha* not shown, *kuleana* not honored. These are not just emotional wounds or bureaucratic failures; they are voids where relational responsibility should exist. What emerges is not just trauma, but an entire relational environment built from harm, shaped by institutions and people unable or unwilling to act in ways that are *pono*. These situations fracture dignity not through violence alone, but through omission, dismissal, and neglect – through the slow erosion of what a person or community is owed in relation.

Dissipative structures theory offers a way to see how people survive this erosion and absence. Rather than collapse, individuals reorganize: emotionally, socially, relationally. They recalibrate how they trust, whom they engage, and what kinds of connections feel real and possible. On the surface, street-level relationships may appear to be weak ties, but as Gina told me, they are often marked by intense affective immediacy – high-stakes, high-emotion, and ultimately fragile. This fragility emerges not from superficiality, but from deep relational harm and the ever-present risk of new harm. What results is a heightened commitment to protection: ties may form quickly and feel profound, but once violated, they are often severed without hesitation. Gina's reflection on a dulled reaction to loss is an unfortunately common experience among residents: that relational intensity is often accompanied by emotional withdrawal, a reflexive distancing that protects against the hurt of seemingly inevitable loss. In these relations, potential for deepening *pilina* – mutual, reciprocal, sustained connection – is constantly strained by the imperative to survive.

Distrust, detachment, and domination are protective strategies – means to manage closeness without ceding control, to connect without being consumed. For many residents, particularly those shaped by childhood abuse, institutional betrayal, or long histories of abandonment, withholding deep *pilina* is not just habit but necessary. As Waina explained, returning to therapy required her to “dig all that shit back up,” something she refused to do. “I don't wanna remember that,” she told me. Revisiting past harm – whether through reflection, vulnerability, or institutional intervention – can feel more threatening than pain itself. For those living in relentless precarity, emotional distance

becomes a form of control, a boundary against being destabilized by others or one's own memories. These protective adaptations enable survival, but they come at a cost: pilina becomes harder to build and even harder to sustain. And without it, the deeper forms of relational healing and collective resilience remain tenuous, flickering at the edges of possibility.

This chapter challenges the tendency in homelessness scholarship to treat houseless life as a discrete rupture in people's social and psychological trajectories. Rather than emerging anew on the street, many of the coping strategies described here were forged long before houselessness began. They reflect accumulated adaptations to years of interpersonal and institutional harm, carried across time as people navigated relational fields marked by instability, neglect, and violence. While street conditions may intensify these strategies, they do not originate there. In fact, for some – like Roxy and Pua – the streets offer pu'u honua from relational settings more corrosive than the conditions of houselessness itself. For them, and others, houselessness was not a step down from stability, but a protective condition where fewer relational demands were made and more autonomy was preserved. What this chapter makes clear is that houselessness is not only a structural position or spatial condition – it is a deeply relational terrain, shaped by long histories of care withheld, trust broken, and self-protection learned in the absence of pono.

Adaptive strategies like distrust, detachment, and domination do not remain contained within individuals. The residents introduced in this chapter are not merely stories of personal adversity, but relational nodes whose past experiences reverberated into collective life in Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. Their orientations toward trust, harm, and authority shaped the village's atmosphere – its rules, its conflicts, its daily rhythms. The village was not built just from pallets, but from people who arrived with histories of relational harm. The stories captured here, and their scars, became part of the very material through which new forms of life, governance, and care would have to take shape.

Chapter 2 picks up from here, tracing how an evolving relational field of care wove the village together – not by erasing individual histories of harm, but entangling them within a larger collective practice of healing. Transitioning from relational harm to relational possibility required more than shelter; it demanded a daily, often fragile, reorganization of how people interacted with one another

and with place. Through acts of *kōkua* (*aid*), practices of living pono (*ethically balanced*), and the slow building of pilina (*connection*), residents began to remake social life – not perfectly or all at once, but meaningfully. Chapter 2 explores how everyday practices of care made trust imaginable again, how autonomy was honored as part of relational life rather than outside of it, and how the village’s fragile, emergent structure offered a counterpoint to the abandonment many had endured.

The ‘ōlelo no‘eau that opens this chapter – *Lu‘ulu‘u Hanalei i ka ua nui; kaumaha i ka noe o Alaka‘i* – captures the weight of relational harm: the way it settles, lingers, and seeps into the roots of people’s lives. Yet like rains and mists of Hanalei and Alaka‘i, heaviness can also nourish. The kalo at the center of this paper – *pū‘ali kalo i ka wai ‘ole* – does not recover from a lack of *wai* (water) easily. But even with the bends it made under strain, it grows. Even under duress, it reaches to survive. What follows are stories of reaching: not toward perfection or full repair, but toward a livable form of collective life. In the presence of everyday care, the possibility of pilina, and respect for autonomy, the kalo does not break. It persists. And that persistence, too, is a kind of healing.

CHAPTER 2

THE COMFORT OF THE PRESENT

“Ike aku, ‘ike mai, kōkua aku, kōkua mai: pela iho la ka nohona ‘ohana.”

Recognize others, be recognized, help others, be helped: such is a family.

*- #1200, Mary Kawena Pukui, ‘Olelo No‘eau
Hawai‘i Book of Proverbs and Poetical Sayings*

It’s an unusual day in the village if you see Aunty Terry by anything other than moonlight or the beam of a flashlight pushed out in front of you to ward away the dark. You see, Aunty Terry *get* the Parkinson’s – makes it hard for her to sleep through the night, so she usually naps during the day instead. One night, we were out near the cove at the village’s edge sitting security duty together under the stars, our asses numb from the hard, rusted metal chairs under us, but our spirits lively with laughter. “You one night marcher,” I joked, referring to the spirits of ancient ‘Ōiwi warriors who roam the islands at night and may bring harm to the living who cross their path. Aunty Terry stopped laughing, but only for a little while. I learned that night that we could joke about most everything, but some things – especially kapu (*sacred*) things – were not to be mocked with kūpuna (*elders*).

That morning in May was an unusual one then, because as I made my way into the village via Section 1 – where most of the kūpuna live – there was Terry tending her plants behind the short, rock wall she had built to mark out her camp. “Can I help you? Who you need?” she yelled out to me, not remembering me or my name at that moment. I could have responded with her name – not *Terry*, but the Japanese name she inexplicably told me one day was given by her mother, on account that Terry is a mixed, hapa-Japanese Hawaiian. But Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu doesn’t really do “government names” – only Aunty Pua knows all of them since she does the village census, and she isn’t about to tell ‘cause “that’s private.” So, I just called Terry *Aunty* – the way we all do in the islands to address an older lady – and told her my name instead. She remembered me then; the Parkinson’s don’t just make it hard *for sleep*, she apologized, but make it hard *for remember*.

We were talking when Sis and her husband Freddy shuffled up – Sis looking out of it, Freddy looking uncharacteristically frustrated. Sis had just returned from being hospitalized after suffering cardiac arrest from unwittingly eating pakalolo (*marijuana*) candy, and she was not treated well by

most of the medical staff during the stay. Freddy told Terry through exasperated huffs that they refused to give Sis any pain medication because of her history of meth abuse, asking Terry, “How can they judge her as a drug addict?...She has two babies.” In a dejected voice, Sis said she had some money in her bra when she was taken to the hospital but thought someone took it off her while she was there because when she woke up, it was gone. When Terry suggested that Sis should have demanded it back, Sis brushed this advice aside as not worth the trouble.

“But you’re still a person,” Aunty Terry firmly insisted.

As with other resident experiences described in Chapter 1, Sis encountered relational harm when she went to the hospital and the medical team was unwilling or unable to give her medication for pain due to her drug use. Similarly to Nānā, who was kicked out of the senior living facility where she had been living with her father before he passed away, it is likely that hospital guidelines for distribution of pain medication are clear and designed to protect the hospital itself, but it remains the case that the stringency and inflexibility of institutional protocol – captured in refusing Sis even Ibuprofen – can be unnecessarily cruel and cause unintended harm when it is not weighed against human suffering. Further harm came when someone – seemingly a hospital staff member, given that COVID-19 restrictions at the time did not allow others (even Freddy) into patient rooms – lifted money off of Sis. Was it stolen? Did the staff, who assisted Sis with getting into her hospital gown, simply forget to give it back? Did it just get lost? Once again, these questions are unanswerable – but it is the effect of the loss and the ambiguity surrounding it that led Sis to brush it off, coping with it through dismissal and detachment as others have.

Yet even while Sis sought to dismiss and detach from the situation, those around her pushed back on the harm she suffered. Freddy’s question, “How can they judge her as a drug addict?” goes beyond merely questioning why Sis was mistreated; by emphasizing the word “judge,” he reveals his interpretation of the way Sis was treated as not driven by protocol, but by a deliberate lack of respect for her by hospital staff and an intent to shame her drug use. In pointing out “she has two babies,” Freddy underscores the fullness of humanity he believes Sis was denied in seemingly reducing her to a single, stigmatized identity, emphasizing that she should not be defined by her

struggles, but recognized as a mother with connections, kuleana, and a life beyond a marginalized label imposed upon her. Resistance to the dehumanization and flattening of Sis continues when the topic of the disappearing money comes up: Terry is unwilling to let it go as Sis does, insisting Sis cannot give into this kind of harm because “you’re still a person,” and as such, deserve to be treated in ways that are pono – with care, aloha, and respect.

This moment reveals a deeper pattern of social life in the village: where institutions fractured relational trust, relations within the village often worked to reconstruct it through affirmation, aloha, and care. Unlike outside institutions, which often prioritize the processing of people over the development of pilina – a bond, a connection, a knowing of another person (or entity) and of the relationship between – treatment of others in the village is rooted in the pilina that residents built with one another and the community as a collective over time. The interaction was not simply about individual support, but part of a broader system of everyday practices – reaching out, connecting, bonding – that organized relational dynamics around the fullness of one another’s humanity and the ties that bind. When Freddy asserts that Sis should not be reduced to a marginalized identity, he is implicitly calling for the kind of knowing, the kind of framing of people, that can emerge through building pilina with them, even if trust has not yet been fully realized.

This same value of developing pilina with others shaped everyday care at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu. Aunty Terry’s insistence was not just about acknowledging Sis’s right to basic decency – it was about rejecting the learned relational detachment that interactions with institutions had conditioned her to expect. Having experienced dehumanization before, Sis’s instinct was to minimize her mistreatment. But in Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, care often meant pushing back against that expectation of dismissal and insisting on the fullness of humanity realized in built pilina: seeing the whole of a person beyond their past struggles, beyond their addiction, beyond the marginalizations imposed upon them. It meant insisting that others be treated in ways that were pono – in ways that affirmed connection, restored dignity, and refused to let people be diminished, marginalized, or harmed.

After some time standing and talking to Aunty Terry about the hospital experience, Sis, worn out from the ordeal, eventually retreated to her camp, while Freddy, still visibly upset, continued to

talk with Terry. He recounted how Sis's life was saved only because an on-call doctor performed an innovative surgery that pulled her back from the brink of death. In speaking about this, the two of them revealed more about the dehumanization that they frequently endure as houseless people:

Freddy: It's mayjah [*"major"; extremely good*] that this doctor was on call at that time. There you go, keep a bloody dream come true to get her as your patient...the guy awesome. How come they cannot all be like that, you know? That's the thing.

Terry: Yeah...like we human, yeah? They fo'get that they [houseless people] human; just like the cop, the one that killed that guy. That's sad. I made a nasty letter to him.

Freddy: It was kinda mayjah, yeah? Sending your wife off in her ambulance with nothing but a question mark and waiting for the phone call. How the fuck you gonna do that?...it's crazy. I...I...and I just have to trust the doc, the, the, the medical team, you know? That's fucking crazy...

Freddy and Terry's exchange shows how societal denial of humanity to houseless individuals can foster more than just anger or shame – it cultivates a profound sense of relational distrust between people and institutions exhibiting such treatment, in addition to entrenching the expectation that they as houseless people will always be poorly treated. Freddy felt anxious as Sis was taken away in the ambulance not just due to her medical emergency, but in having to put his trust into the same institution in which he had deep distrust because mistreatment "is our experience every time," as he noted at another point in the exchange. Terry's connection between police brutality of houseless people and Sis's treatment in the hospital shows how deeply ingrained this sort of dehumanization is across multiple institutional fields. For Terry and Freddy, these institutions are not experienced foremost as sources of safety or support, but as entities that often perpetuate harm or indifference in their relationship with them as houseless people by behaving in ways that are not pono (*ethically balanced*). Freddy's praise for the doctor only underscores how rare compassionate treatment is for those living rough.

Moments like these reveal that care was not merely an interpersonal exchange in the village, but the medium through which social life took shape. What emerged in Kīpuka 'Aineamalu was not simply a structure built by leadership, but a rhythm of daily life generated in presence, interaction, and mutual adjustment among residents. Pilina (*connection*) and pono (*ethical balance*) were not abstract ideals, but everyday practices – lived and built through acts of kōkua (*aid*), shared meals,

quiet hours, gestures of recognition, and a willingness to show up for others even when tired or frustrated. Here, care did not follow set rules; it emerged in unique, specific ways, shaped by the nuances of pilina – by how well one knew another’s needs, limits, or silences. Because pilina bound people together not through obligation, but through recognition, care was responsive rather than rote, adjusting to the particularities of people. It was not about adhering to external standards of what care should look like, but about cultivating a practice of relational attunement, where the right action – the pono action – could differ moment to moment, person to person, even as cumulatively a broad system of care rooted in dignity, respect for autonomy, and aloha emerged.

Many systems serving the houseless rely on conditionality – care offered only after compliance, after proof of readiness or need. In the village, that logic was turned on its head. Care was not something earned; it was a starting point. No one had to prove their worth to be treated with dignity. The assumption, instead, was that everyone arrived carrying stories of harm, abandonment, and mistrust – stories and subsequent behaviors that could not be erased, only carried differently in community. Pilina, in this context, was not just something built between individuals; it was woven into the collective life of the village itself. The community was a relational field – something living, something known – with which one could also build pilina. Even if close bonds with specific people were slow to form, residents still moved through a world shaped by shared understandings of how people should be treated: with care, with regard, with space for dignity and self-determination. Coming to know this, to accept collective care, was in its own way, a way of healing.

Autonomy, here, was not an exception to care; it was part of it. The freedom to set boundaries, to hold distance, to choose when and how to engage, was treated as a relational right – not a failure of connection. Care did not demand intimacy as a condition of belonging. Instead, it created an environment where pilina could take many forms: a conversation, a gesture of kōkua, a silent respect for someone’s space. Sometimes wariness softened, sometimes it did not; but the relational field remained steady, offering recognition and care even – and especially – for those who needed more time, more distance, or more protection. In this way, Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu wove together pilina and autonomy, holding space for both as fundamental to shared life.

Village life carried rhythm and responsibility that emerged through practice and pilina, not prescription. Longtime residents guided newcomers without needing to be asked. Kūpuna and keiki were cared for without needing to justify their place. Shared labor was not always divided equally, but when someone contributed – or didn't – it was often understood in the context of their relationships, struggles, and presence, rather than monitored or punished through strict oversight. Leadership emerged not from authority, but from doing the work – cleaning up trash, settling disputes, sitting late-night security shifts, and most importantly – building pilina between themselves and others, and having one's potential recognized through those formed bonds. Belonging was not about proving anything. It was about being present, again and again, in a space that asked for care, not perfection. The village did not erase the strategies people developed to protect themselves, nor did it pretend to heal everything. But it offered a way of living where those strategies didn't always need to be at the forefront – where people could, in time, begin to give and receive care not because they had to, but because they chose to.

Forming Friendships, Forming Family, Forming Community

When Gina and I sat talking to each other the morning she told me about her daughter Emmy's most recent schizophrenic episode, she shared an essential truth about life while experiencing houselessness: survival is often tied to the relationships formed with those around you:

And that's part of street life and living on the streets – like, you get close to people you live wit', live around. 'Cause that's all you have is the people who live around you.

The truth of this is deeply functional – houseless people formed connections with those around them not just for companionship, but for survival. Without the security of locks and doors, neighbors provide protection for personal belongings. Without consistent access to food or water, offering *kōkua* (*aid*) becomes necessary to get by. And beyond safety, there are lessons to be shared – small but crucial bits of *'ike* (*knowledge*) that can make the difference between enduring or being overwhelmed by the conditions and demand of one's survival. Aunty Roxy recalled how a woman

took her under her wing when she first became houseless, teaching her what she needed to know to get by:

She taught like...recycling. Never did recycle, ya know? Small things to where it's gonna get harder...she was telling me that it is going to get harder. It's not going to get easier....but you can learn from everyt'ing that's going on. Just be aware of your surroundings. There are people that does steal. There are people like us come around make trouble, ya know?

Such acts of *kōkua* (*aid*) and *kāko'o* (*support*) were also common in the village. Small, everyday acts made this manifest: Aunty Pua offering to loan Uncle T a tent after his was ripped apart by high winds, directing him to Trey, who had extra nails to help secure it; residents buying each other soda cans from Cookie's 'ohana-run "store" with the unspoken agreement that they'd "get you next time"; a reminder that being found with a cart taken from the nearby grocery store was a crime, so best get it back; the bumming of endless amounts of cigarettes to the point where I lost track within the first month I visited. These acts were not transactional interactions, but gestures of mutual care, reinforcing the idea that stability was not just about having a place to sleep – it was about knowing someone would be there for you when you needed them.

Yet even with this culture of *kōkua*, Kīpuka 'Aineamalu seemed different from other houseless collectives. Although beach encampments often held patterns of reciprocity, they lacked continuity. There was no guarantee that someone you relied on today would still be there tomorrow, nor that you would remain yourself. Mahina described how the constant movement of people in transitional encampments created instability, and how the village offered something radically different:

Anybody can go [to the beach parks]! Anybody can come and go as they please. Anybody can move in whenever they want. You could have no neighbor today and then, like, 25 new neighbors tomorrow. And then be getting kicked off the beach the next day! I can't imagine why somebody would want to live like that though, ya know what I mean? Like, just amazes me. Do you guys enjoy that shit? Having to book it and move camps every week and having to build another one? Like, that's messed up.

What Mahina points to is more than just stability – it is also a groundwork for relational depth. *Pilina*, derived from *pili* (to cling, adhere), speaks to a kind of attachment that thrives and grows fullest in continuity. At Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, that continuity was not passive. Acts of *kōkua* (*aid*) and *kāko'o*

(*support*) were not just strategies for survival; they contributed to the constitution of the village's collective relational foundation. Residents didn't just give and receive support – they actively built and sustained pilina through the reciprocal flow of care, kōkua, and kāko'o, establishing varying degrees of trust and reconstructing dignity across time.

Trust and care certainly existed outside the village, but they could often be conditional, fleeting, always at risk of rupture. On the beach, where neighbors came and went and sweeps dissolved communities overnight, people had little choice but to protect themselves – to withhold, detach, and keep relationships light enough to lose. In Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, people stayed – and in staying, they returned to one another across time, across conflict, across silence. Even when trust was hard-earned or strained, the structure of the village allowed people to remain in relation to one another and the collective. That endurance – the choice to show up again – combined with everyday practices of care to create the ground from which pilina could grow. Not easily, nor for everyone — but with meaning and consistency.

Kīpuka 'Aineamalu occupied a space between the precarity of encampments and the rigidity of shelters. Where service providers often structure care around compliance and eligibility, and encampments offer autonomy without stability, the village wove the two together into something different. Sure, there were expectations – quiet hours, security shifts, intake conversations – but residents could build their camps as they pleased, come and go freely, and decide for themselves how and when to engage. That freedom mattered. For people shaped by betrayal, surveillance, or control, the ability to choose within relationship – to stay without submitting, to participate without being managed – was itself a form of healing. The village didn't erase past harm, but it offered a different relational grammar: one in which autonomy and care could coexist, and where pilina could begin to grow, not through force or demand, but through presence and return.

Another resident expounded on this, describing how those in the village could live their lives without the kind of judgment they would receive from others beyond it:

Over here, I don't feel like I'm being judged, ya know what I mean?...We, we separate ourselves from the outside community. That's how I feel. Ya know what I mean? Like, this is our own little world. Whereas everywhere else it's not like that.

You've got the community constantly looking, looking at you and... You hear about people getting swept every frickin' week and it's just crazy. Over here, we're, we're guaranteed permanent housing, ya know what I mean? And... I'm happy with it.

Furthermore, the resident articulates that a sense of permanence – of knowing you would not wake up to find your home swept or your neighbors cleared out – allowed residents to finally exhale. Instead of constantly bracing for displacement, they could focus on building pilina with others, with community, and with place – finding stability, and investing in both the present and their futures.

For Auntie Roxy, this consistency made Kīpuka 'Aineamalu feel like home in a way that other places “out there” never had:

The people, friends...we get up and make something to eat. We take your baby, you know? We walk around. We see friends, li' dat. Talk story. Out there is totally different. It just wasn't my t'ing...[here is] something like family. I can say...everybody helps out. Everybody helps each other out...Sitting down together, eating. I like that. To me, that's family.

These small moments – walking with friends, sharing food, simply talking story – captured what Kīpuka 'Aineamalu offered. It was not about grand transformations or dramatic changes in fortune; it was about the quiet certainty of knowing you belonged somewhere and could largely engage with it as you chose. As an ethnographer, it can be tempting to focus on the “big things” – the dramatic stories, the moments of crisis, the visible struggles. But in doing so, one could overlook the quiet, persistent rhythm of pilina that sustains the kaiāulu in these small expressions of care and kāko'o. These are rarely grand gestures, but they are constant, forming foundational beats of the village's heart. Mutual care, expressed in many manini (*small*) acts of aloha, could strengthen relationships built with proximity and shared hardship. And because they were repeated constantly, they could easily become so woven into daily life that they were almost invisible – a foundation beneath it all.

For many residents, this certainty of care was unfamiliar. Waina reflected on how rare it was to rely on others, and how the bonds she built led to trust that in the village, some people would show up for her – not because they had to, but because they wanted to:

If I was to ask for something, they gon' try their best to help. You know what I mean? But I don't need anything...if I really need 'em, I gon' come ask; I know the help is there. You know what I mean? Just they, they care about me like how I care about them.

These kinds of statements may seem simple, but they can often reflect a profound shift. For many residents, survival once meant low expectations – assuming others wouldn't care, couldn't help, or might exploit vulnerability. In the village, that assumption didn't always go away, but it could loosen. Care was extended not as a test, but an invitation. And over time, that consistency made it possible, for some, to risk believing in others again.

Mahina described how care extended beyond material needs and the sharing of information. Unlike other encampments, where relationships could feel transactional, here, friendships endured even when people had nothing to give.

I have my little group of people that come around, no mattah. Like, Treasure is one of 'em. She'll come, even if we ain't got nothing. She always likes to give back and stuff. Reina comes and she'll come and help us out with stuff.

This closeness also meant that when residents found themselves in crisis, they had people to turn to. Mahina recalled how, during a hard period in her relationship, she had somewhere safe to go:

My best friend Gretchen used to live here...Chip used to kick me out a lot and I hung out at her place one time and I ended up staying there. I mean, it was off and on, like, like, I'd be gone for a couple days and then I'd come home 'cause you, ya know, we're good again and then I'd go back, stay there as long as I wanted it. Like, she had a spare room and everything in her tent. So it's pretty cool.

These kinds of relationships – those that transcended necessity and reflected genuine friendship – were possible in part because the village created a foundation of stability.

For some, that foundation even meant feeling supported in making life-changing decisions. Sis, whose deep pilina with the ocean left her reluctant to move from makai up to the mauka property, ultimately saw her ties to the kaiāulu as even stronger than the call to remain next to the sea. "If I could have it my way, I would stay here. I'm an ocean kind of person," she admitted, recalling camping trips by the shore with her 'ohana as a child. Still, she was willing to move mauka because of the support she found in the community. The transition up to the land also meant confronting her meth addiction, as drug use would not be permitted mauka, but this was a challenge she expressed feeling prepared for because of those around her. "I feel supported in making that change because of the community. It's like one big family; if you're having a down day, people look out for each other

and check in on you.” While leaving the oceanside would be difficult, she had come to believe that stability could also come from the people around her.

For many, Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was not simply a place to survive – it was a pu‘uhonua, a place of refuge where they could heal, rebuild their ability to trust, and imagine a future beyond mere survival. As Nānā told me, “You look out for each other. And that’s what it’s supposed to be about. You know that’s, that’s community. That’s family. That’s unity. You know, you watch out for each other?” Her words highlight how security in the village was not just about physical safety, but about the trust that comes from knowing some people will be there, no matter what. In a world where care so often came with conditions, this was radical: a space where people could receive care and build pilina without surrendering autonomy, and reenter relationships on their own terms.

Still, trust was neither immediate nor guaranteed. Building pilina took time. Many residents arrived carrying the weight of abandonment and betrayal alongside strategies developed to cope with these harms referenced in Chapter 1. That history didn’t disappear within the village’s fences. It showed up in silence, guardedness, the learned instinct to expect little from others. The village could not undo that past, nor did it promise healing for everyone. But it did offer the conditions under which trust might return – through presence, consistency, and care that was not contingent on performance. Pilina here did not come easily. But the fact that it could come at all – on one’s own terms, in one’s own time – was its own kind of promise and transformation.

Caring for the Most Vulnerable: Keiki, Kūpuna, and Those with Disabilities

Care at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu extended beyond friendships and daily interactions – it was deeply embedded in the way many residents held kuleana for those who were most vulnerable. Unlike institutional models of care, which often prioritized efficiency over dignity, the village fostered a culture in which kāko‘o (*support*) was offered in ways that were rooted in pilina and pono: without dehumanization, infantilization, or strict conditions imposed upon autonomy of its residents. Keiki (*children*) were cared for by the community, kūpuna (*elders*) were respected for their independence,

and those with physical and mental health issues were supported in ways that acknowledged both their needs and their right to some degree of self-determination.

Keiki (Children)

At Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, keiki were not just raised by their parents – the entire village held kuleana for them. The stability, consistency, and relational nature of the village made this possible, allowing children to move freely through the community without fear, knowing that multiple sets of eyes were always watching over them. Early in my time there, as I walked the village's main path to head home, I noticed Aunt Pua's two-year-old granddaughter Bexleigh, barefoot and wearing only a diaper, toddling her way toward the village entrance. With no adult in sight, I instinctively followed her to ensure her safety. But before I could intervene, a voice called from ahead, and she immediately ran toward it. When I later told Aunt Pua about this, she laughed, reassuring me that her granddaughter had simply been on her way to her other grandma's tent. A toddler wandering alone through a "homeless encampment" might seem alarming to an outsider, but in the village, it reflected the pilina that residents had built with one another and as a collective of care, leading them to look out for the keiki even when they were not their own.

Rae, who had two young children living with her and her husband in the village, spoke to the trust she had in the community to help care for her two-year-old daughter:

Sometimes she walks out and I don't even know 'cause I'm laying on my bed watching my movie. She'll walk out and then the person will just grab her, walk her in, and tell me, 'Oh, she was here, there.' And I'm, 'OMG, I'm so sorry!' But, like, everybody in this village knows her already so I don't really feel like I have to worry about her. I know they're gonna watch her and take care of her and make sure nothing happens to her. So it does take a village to raise a child. She has like four, five, six grandmas!

Mahina reiterated these feelings about her own daughter, only a few months younger than Rae's:

I don't have to worry about, about my daughter walking around the trails and shit, ya know? Because everybody knows everybody. And everybody knows that's my baby. And everybody knows...I don't have to worry about her being hurt because we all know who lives in our community.

This everyday trust was possible because of pilina and the network of relationships, attachments, and mutual knowing shaping life in the village. As Rae and Mahina both describe, care for their children was not confined to those with whom they had built deep personal bonds; it extended outward, carried by a collective ethic of shared responsibility that pilina made possible. Even when residents did not know every individual closely, the presumption of care rested on the strength of connection to the community as a whole. Through ongoing interaction, kōkua, and a sense of mutual recognition, residents built a relational environment where keiki could move safely through the village, watched over not by strangers, but by a network of familiar, trusted adults.

This sense of communal caregiving was not just about safety – it was an embedded ethic of shared kuleana. Residents did not simply watch keiki passively; they actively ensured their well-being – correcting behavior, guiding them back home, and treating them as their own. Kīpuka 'Aineamalu provided keiki with structure, ensuring that they were not just watched over, but guided in their daily lives. Aunty Roxy described how, upon moving to the village, she saw keiki being raised in a way that reminded her of “the olden days.” Under Cookie’s leadership, the children – no matter who’s they were – were “Mama’s kids:”

'Cause Mamas made sure that they had food and do their homework, they do their chores. They go play. Teaching 'em how...like the olden days, how we were raised. School, homework when you come home, chores. And then go play. And then, when it's time for dinner, dinner.

This routine – simple yet consistent – gave keiki stability. If a child struggled or refused to go to school, they were often sent to Cookie, who ensured they stayed on track and had, thus far, ensured every child who grew up there graduated from high school.

As keiki grew into 'ōpio (*youth*), the village’s ethic of care remained steadfast, offering support and guidance through the challenges of adolescence. Yet receiving that care required maintaining pilina – the living, ongoing relationship between individual and community. Teenagers, wrestling with their own struggles, sometimes pulled away from that closeness. Speaking about a teenage boy who had recently been in a fight, Aunty Pua emphasized to Aunty Terry that while the village stood ready to care for him, its full transformational power depended on his willingness to stay

connected. “There’s a village here who cares about him,” she said. “This village gon’ be respectful to you, this village gon’ take care of you.” But she also made clear: “Whatever no good happen in his life,” he had to “change it” by choosing relationship over separation — and if he did, “everybody gon’ change their ways to him.” At Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, pilina was not incidental to care; it was the condition that allowed the village’s collective nurturing to reach those who needed it most.

Kūpuna (The Elderly)

Just as keiki were cared for within the kaiāulu through informal but deeply embedded networks of support, the kūpuna of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu were looked after with a balance of care, respect, and autonomy. Aging while houseless presents unique challenges – many kūpuna end up on the streets because their Social Security, or SSI, payments are not enough to cover senior housing. With few options, many turn to informal encampments or live alone in unsafe conditions. But at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, they were not left to fend for themselves. Instead, they were looked after in ways that acknowledged their individual needs while still respecting their independence.

This care took many forms, all rooted in pilina. When a hurricane was forecasted to hit O‘ahu, Cookie’s nephew Ke‘ao took action, gathering residents in the front office tent and asking, “Who is over the age of 62 here?” It was through the relationships built over time – the pilina that wove the community together – that residents could quickly name those who would need extra attention: Gary, Bud, Aunty Dex. Yet pilina also shaped how care was offered. Ke‘ao recognized that not all kūpuna would readily accept help; Dex, for example, was fiercely independent after her stroke and unlikely to allow just anyone into her home. Rather than imposing care, Ke‘ao turned to Uncle Tito, someone Dex trusted, to check on her. In this way, pilina served as both the map and the method of caregiving – allowing the village to know who needed support, and enabling individuals to receive it through the relationships they trusted. This approach reflected a core ethic at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu: offering kāko‘o without paternalism, respecting autonomy and people’s dignity while sustaining a network of mutual care through the enduring ties of pilina.

This careful balance – ensuring care without enforcing it – extended beyond moments of crisis. Pua, for instance, fiercely defended the independence of kūpuna in her section of the village when others tried to schedule a cleanup.

They still...try to get in, come into my section; my section no want. They're like, 'Oh Aunty, you need to schedule a clean up.' I say, 'clean where?' They're like, 'your section!' 'Again, where? My section is the cleanest in this whole frickin village.' And they're like, 'But ya know, like...' I says, 'my section no like.' I say, 'We had a meeting a'ready and they no like.'

Pua made it clear: her section's kūpuna did not need or want outside intervention, and in the end, leadership respected their decision. In many institutional settings, elder care is structured around control – where autonomy is sacrificed for the sake of efficiency, and where kūpuna are often stripped of the ability to make decisions for themselves. But as Aunty Pua once told me, "Everybody is different. We are all different; God made us all different. If we were all the same, life would be boring." At Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, care was shaped around dignity and respect for difference because it was about how to care for individual people. Kūpuna were not infantilized or forced into routines they did not want; they were given the respect to decide how they wished to live. This was not just an act of aloha – it was resistance to systems that too often erase the agency of the elderly, treating them as burdens to be managed rather than as individuals with full lives and histories.

At times, however, direct intervention was necessary for the safety of kūpuna. After suffering a stroke that left her with serious cognitive impairment, Aunty Dex struggled with self-care, particularly bathing. Freddy described how difficult it was to convince her to clean herself:

She doesn't shower, yeah, she doesn't wanna – she just change her clothes...We t'ink she lost her sense of smell, yeah? You cannot handle that smell. 'Ey, she will come into an area; you get a headache right away. Like dat is how bad it is.

On the streets, someone in Dex's condition might be left to deteriorate, unnoticed and uncared for, but at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, she was surrounded by people who refused to let that happen. One morning, as I sat talking with Freddy, his wife Sis was in the midst of her ongoing effort to get Dex to bathe – something that was never an easy task. Freddy sighed as he anticipated the struggle:

No no, she's gonna shower over near the bat'room over there but she lives on dat side so Sis will walk down with her probably gonna come out here. But dey gonna have a whole argument just ta get up and go there, yeah?

But to his surprise, Sis won out. That day, Dex took a shower in the open spigots of the boat harbor parking lot. The victory was small, but significant. Caring for kūpuna in the village meant knowing when to push, when to step back, and when to simply stay persistent. It was also only possible because Sis had built pilina with Dex – even if, at times, Dex struggled to remember it.

For others, care took the form of small, daily acts of kōkua. Gina saw it as part of an unspoken kuleana to ensure kūpuna were cared for when no one else would step up.

I'm doing water for any kupuna who needs help. If they don't have an able-bodied person living with them, I'll go get water for you. I'll take your trash out....Yeah, we're not City & County [of Honolulu, who handles sanitation services across the island], so we're not supposed to take the trash out but, ya know, for the kūpuna, why not? Ya know, like Aunty Terry, she has Parkinson's. She shouldn't be doing any of that. It's not good for her. Ya know, she could have an attack and brah, we don't know what could happen to her. People think Paula's a chronic – so what? She's a kupuna.

At Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, people were not reduced to a single identity or struggle, and care was not conditionally offered. The fact that someone had a drug addiction did not negate their need for care. Similarly, Aunty Terry's Parkinson's should not have been something she had to manage alone.

Unlike institutional elder care facilities, where services were assigned based on strict criteria, care in the kaiāulu was flexible, relational, and responsive. Kūpuna were not passive recipients of kōkua (aid); they were valued members of the community, deserving of dignity, support, and the kind of care that only comes from people who truly know you. It was through these bonds of pilina that care could be individualized, shaped by an understanding of what each kūpuna needed, would accept, and would allow. Knowing when to offer help directly, when to send a trusted friend, or when to simply stand nearby reflected a depth of relationship that formal systems could rarely match. In the kaiāulu, care was not simply provided; it was relationally negotiated, carried through the shared recognition of trust, history, and aloha.

Residents with Physical & Mental Health Challenges

The same ethos of collective care that ensured keiki and kūpuna were looked after extended to residents living with physical and mental health challenges. Unlike institutional systems that often isolate, reduce, or overlook those with disabilities or mental illness, Kīpuka 'Aineamalu ensured that everyone remained part of the community. Care was not about managing people – it was about ensuring their inclusion through getting to know them, and their struggles, as individuals.

This care was woven into the daily rhythms of life, providing both practical assistance and emotional support. Jimmy, a thirty-something-year-old resident, was an avid free diver before he lost his eyesight during a mental health crisis. Still struggling with his blindness, Jimmy regularly roamed the village shirtless, using a stick as a makeshift white cane to feel his way through the kiawe bean-covered trails. When he did not have a stick in hand, other residents became his eyes – Reina calling out directions from the office tent to help him navigate around a truck parked near the front to unload donations, or Kālepa putting his hand on her shoulder to walk him through muddy paths after a rainstorm. These small, everyday acts of kōkua didn't just aid Jimmy – they allowed him to maintain independence while ensuring he was never left entirely vulnerable. He rarely had to ask for this kōkua – it was offered because people instinctually recognized when he would need help navigating a space, having witnessed him doing it many times before.

Care in the village was not just about helping individuals navigate daily life – it was about adapting as a community to ensure full participation. When a deaf boy in the village struggled to communicate, Aunty Cookie brought in a tutor to teach weekly American Sign Language (ASL) lessons at a nearby park. Over a dozen residents attended, eager to learn so the boy would not feel isolated. Rather than expecting individuals to adjust to a world not built for them, Kīpuka 'Aineamalu adapted itself to include them as fully as possible, opening up new possibilities to build pilina with a young person with whom it was otherwise difficult to communicate with.

An ethic of care was just as evident in how the kaiāulu supported those with mental health challenges, often stepping in when external systems failed. In Chapter 1, we learned about how Gina struggled to get formal help when her daughter, Emmy, experienced schizophrenic episodes

that put them both at risk. Without reliable outside support, many in the village collectively held kuleana to keep Emmy safe not by restraining, medicating, or institutionalizing her, but by building pilina with her – supporting her in quiet moments and individualized ways:

There's people in here that are so good with her. Uncle Bud, Uncle Larry and um...Kara. Certain people can just talk to her and just calm down when she's in that really bad manic state. They'll just be like, 'Emmy, come, come talk.' Or Uncle Bud, all he does is hands her ukulele. Just sits down playing the drums and she just sits down starts playing the uke. Amazing when I see that. 'How do you do that?!

Unlike the Crisis Line, which repeatedly failed to send aid, Kīpuka 'Aineamalu ensured Emmy was not left alone in her struggle.

Gina noted that this collective vigilance extended beyond moments of crisis, shaping Emmy's everyday life in the village through the pilina she built with others:

She hardly goes out anymore...mostly she just stays here and...she knows she's safe here. And everybody knows her, knows who she is, and they all keep an eye on her, watch out for, you know, they see her do something stupid, they're like, 'Emmy!'

Community support went beyond practical kōkua – it provided emotional reassurance. Aunty Pua recalled Emmy returning to the village after being gone for a time, having been caught up with some people who had taken advantage of her:

She hadn't been home for a while. She got in with the wrong crowd and was wiggling out. When she walked back in, I asked her where she'd been. She just put her head on my shoulder. I told her, 'It's all right. We all make mistakes. You're home now.'

The village did not wait for outside intervention that never came – instead, it had its own care system, where familiarity and community replaced institutional neglect.

Care in the form of aloha (*compassion*) in Kīpuka 'Aineamalu was just as vital when someone had already reached a breaking point. One evening, as Kālepa and I walked the trails through the kaiāulu, Pete, an older resident, sped past us on his bicycle. Kālepa later recounted how, not long ago, Pete had been in deep distress and nearly took his own life. She had found him wandering the trails, his voice filled with frustration and pain. When she asked what he needed, his response

was both shocking and heartbreaking: “Help me die.” Kālepa refused. “No, Uncle.” Instead, he asked her to take him to the emergency room. Without hesitation, she agreed: “Okay, Uncle, let me grab my keys.” On the drive, Pete made one more request: “Don’t leave me.” And so, she stayed.

This moment was only possible because of pilina – the trust, familiarity, and relational knowing that Kālepa and Pete had built over time. In a system where those in crisis are often met with cold protocols or distant services, Pete reached out not to an institution, but to someone he knew would see him as a whole person. Pilina made it possible for Pete to ask for help and made it possible for Kālepa to respond without hesitation. In Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, care flowed through the strength of these bonds, ensuring that even at the edge of despair, no one had to stand alone.

At Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, care was not dictated by policies or protocols. It was lived — improvised, relational, and shaped by the histories and dynamics of those involved. Unlike institutional systems, where support is often contingent on eligibility or compliance, the kaiāulu practiced care through familiarity, pilina, and daily acts of presence. Jimmy was guided through the village not by impersonal service, but by familiar voices and steady hands. Emmy was not ignored or dismissed when she spirals but gently redirected by those who know what soothes her best. Dex was not forced into compliance but patiently supported by people who recognize when her resistance must be honored and when it must be challenged for her own well-being. These forms of care were not always perfect, nor always successful. They required effort, patience, and, at times, boundaries. But in a world that often criminalizes vulnerability and treats disability or distress as disorder to be managed, the village offered something rare: care that held complexity, honored autonomy, and remained, even when strained, rooted in relation.

Leadership as Transformation: Kuleana and Awakening Mana

Leadership at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was not just about authority – it was about growth, care, and lifting people up. Aunty Cookie often told residents that kuleana wakes up the mana inside – that taking on responsibility could transform a person, fostering confidence, kindness, and deeper pilina (*connection*) with community. For many, stepping into kuleana allowed them to discover strengths

they had not previously recognized, shaping not only the village but also their sense of self. In doing so, they stood as a counter to the absence of pono relations that many experienced in external institutions, authorities, and interpersonal relationships.

For many of those in leadership, the role was not something they sought out, but a kuleana that emerged through the pilina they built within the community. Section leaders were often elevated by those within their sections, lifted up because their neighboring residents entrusted them with authority after they had invested care in them. Haukea, who was a section leader in the village before moving mauka, indicated this was the case for her. For her, leadership was not just about keeping order but about showing up for people, telling me, “When I was captain, everybody in my section got along...oh my gosh, you wouldn’t believe it. We stuck up for each other.” For Haukea, leadership meant investing in ongoing pilina and ensuring people felt heard:

I’m just here to lead us to that path. And that’s how my section was, brah, they was tight. I was like a psychiatrist over there too, ya know? People would come – ‘Captain!’ – and I’d say, ‘Okay, hold on.’ I’d come outside, roll one joint, grab two chairs, sit on the hill, and just talk story. And after that, ‘Let’s smoke a doobie. Let’s go – I’ll walk you home.’

This was leadership rooted in relationships – not solely about authority or command, but also about responsiveness. By making time for others, listening, and offering her presence without pressure, Haukea created a space where people felt seen and supported. Her kuleana as a leader was not to direct behavior, but to hold space for others with consistency and care. In these small but intentional acts, pilina could deepen, and, sometimes, could take root.

At other times, Cookie “voluntold” people into leadership roles, seeing their potential before they did because of the pilina she built, and recognizing what roles would allow someone to grow and flourish. Sis, who ran the donation tent for two years, resisted when she was first asked to take over by Aunty Cookie. She had volunteered under the previous coordinator, but every time she was encouraged to step up, she declined. It wasn’t until Cookie told her outright, “You’ll be the new donation tent coordinator,” that she finally acquiesced. “This keeps me out of trouble,” she admitted. Accepting this kuleana gave Sis structure and contribute to an evolving sense of identity, something she hadn’t always had before. “I’ve always been a bit... well... not quite kolohe (*naughty*),” she

admitted with a grin as we sat on the lifted foundation of the donation tent putting shirts on hangers, “but one that liked to get into things. Having the donation tent coordinator position has made me a better version of myself.” In being put into the role by Cookie, Sis developed a greater sense of pilina even within herself – finding aspects of herself and her personality she had not known were always living there beneath the surface. In this, leadership could be healing.

Accepting kuleana gave many a sense of grounding and purpose. Gina found that her work in the village gave her purpose, especially when managing Emmy’s mental illness:

I'm telling you right now, if I didn't work, and I stayed home, and I wasn't doing what I was doing, I'd be like... I'd probably be broken down before; I would probably be in a mental hospital somewhere, myself. Broken but... um, no, it makes me feel good because I just see the changes are going on in here and I like it.

Her daughter Mahina reiterated this one day when we were talking by the beach:

I think it's good for a lot of people 'cause for a lot of the people in here - like my mom for instance - I don't think they have anything to do with their time. If there wasn't the community clean-up and the section leaders and stuff like that. So that gives a lot of people responsibility and duty in a way 'cause, it, it fills up their time and the void that they have in their life, ya know what I mean? But, that's good.

For Cookie, this was the goal. Kuleana was not just about keeping the village running – it was also about helping people see their own worth. Some, like Freddy, were not naturally drawn to leadership, but with encouragement – and being “voluntold” – they found themselves stepping into public roles. Sis recounted how Cookie had pushed Freddy to speak at a black-tie event raising money for the move up to the mauka land. To his surprise, he enjoyed it. “Cookie brought it out in him,” Sis said with a smile.

Like Sis, Rae found that stepping into leadership challenged her to build pilina with others in new ways. At the outset of her time in the village, Rae had resisted connections – in part because of her histories of relational harm and developed coping strategies of domination and detachment – but accepting kuleana tasked her with navigating relationships differently. Gina told me that Rae “was considered a hoodlum up in here,” but when she took on a leadership role, she found that she could no longer simply act on impulse – she had to think about others, about the community, about how her actions – particularly those that did not prioritize care – played a role in the shaping of the

village's economy of care. Rae's shift wasn't just about learning patience or compassion – it was about recognizing how oneself, as a person, was a node in a broader relational field. Rae told me that leadership changed the way she engaged with people:

Cookie's word 'compassion,' it's like on my forehead whenever I have to confront an issue or situation. I know that the way I talk to people has totally changed. Me working with people totally changed 'cause I used to just, I'd rather just do stuff on my own. Be by myself. But now people come and help me, I accept the help. I'm in donation and they want to come and work, I'll let 'em work. Before I would tell 'em, 'No, no, it's okay, I got it. I'm gonna close soon anyway.

For Rae, leadership wasn't just about personal transformation – it was about learning to balance independence with the interconnectedness of village life and carrying compassion at the forefront. "Now, I can't walk out wit'out being stopped by somebody to talk story with," Rae told me. "And I, I like that." This was a dramatic turnaround for Rae.

Stepping into leadership wasn't just about accepting kuleana – it was about believing in people in the way Cookie did. Rae saw that same potential in others and wanted to help them grow:

I want to see other people step up. Ya know, and we could use help in leadership and donation and pantry. I would like to see them step up. I have one who's asking to be a coordinator for pantry. I have a few asking if they can be captains for their sections. That's what I want to see. 'Cause everyone in this village is a leader.

Leadership at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu may be assigned at times, but it was also *recognized*, emergent from pilina built between people. It was not about status but about seeing someone's mana, their potential, and giving them space to grow into it. For some, this process took time. Jonah, a section leader assistant, hesitated to speak in meetings. Rae, now his section leader, nudged him: "C'mon helper – open your mouth." Cookie often pushed people beyond their initial discomfort even if it was not about accepting formal leadership, knowing that growth required stepping into discomfort. Margot, responsible for organizing an event for the community, initially sat at the back of a village meeting, mumbling her way through an announcement. Cookie urged her to stand and speak and – though nervous – Margot did it, leaving the front not shaking but smiling.

More than just a way to keep the village organized, leadership at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu was deeply tied to care. Section meetings, ostensibly meant for conveying information about logistics, were

also spaces of connection, where leaders didn't just delegate tasks – they listened, supported, and helped shape rhythms of daily life. Kālepa, another section captain, reflected on this, noting how leadership could be as much about presence as about action: “They're begging for it. I hear 'em crying. There's nights I no fucking sleep,” she told me one day, referring to residents' sometimes desperate need for care and understanding when going through mental health crises in the village. Accepting kuleana could be deeply rewarding – many found a sense of pride, purpose, and connection in stepping up for the community – but it also demanded patience and energy.

Yet, leadership at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu was rarely rigid or permanent – if it didn't feel right or if life circumstances changed, stepping back was always an option. Kuleana wasn't about control or obligation, but about the autonomous opportunity to step up, try, and grow, with a latent belief that the pilina one had built with others in the community would be sufficient to understand why pulling back was necessary. Unlike institutional models where leadership is tied to hierarchy, here, it was tied to relationships with others – people took on roles not because they had to, but because they felt supported in doing so. This approach created a leadership structure that was both intentional and flexible. There was room for people to learn, to contribute in ways that suited them, and to shift kuleana when needed. The ability to move in and out of leadership ensured kuleana was most often a source of empowerment rather than a burden, and contributed to a relational, reflexive leadership structure that felt pono – in balance.

The leadership model at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu stood in sharp contrast to traditional institutions, where authority is often assigned based on status, credentials, or position. In the village, leadership could not be claimed without relationship – it emerged from pilina: from being known, trusted, and rooted in the everyday life of the village. Credibility was not conferred by title but earned through presence, action, and relational accountability over time. Further, leadership was not about control – it was also about care. Accepting kuleana wasn't just about ensuring the village ran smoothly; it was about helping people rebuild trust in themselves and in others. Many residents spent years being put down – by institutions that dismissed them, by family members who gave up on them, by a society that saw them as problems rather than people. Some had been abused, manipulated, or

made to feel small. As Chapter 1 showed, these experiences compromised senses of self, stripping people of the belief that they were capable, worthy, or deserving of care; and compromised their capacity to engage relationally, often leading to disengagement and detachment.

But at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, leadership was not about proving oneself to others – it was about stepping into kuleana in ways that felt possible and meaningful with the support of others who elevated you because of what they saw in you – because of the pilina you had built between one another. For some, this meant taking on visible roles; for others, it meant helping quietly behind the scenes. Leadership here offered people the opportunity to feel needed, to contribute, and, in some cases, to begin healing from a sense that they didn't matter. Not everyone could or wanted to take on responsibility, and the village respected that. What mattered was that residents had the space to choose – whether to step forward or step back – without shame. In this way, kuleana was not a demand, but an invitation. And for those who accepted it, it could become a pathway not just to participation, but to a renewed sense of self-worth and confidence.

Cookie's Leadership & A Legacy of Care

At the heart of leadership – at the piko (*center*) of the kaiāulu – was Cookie. Almost from the moment that one enters Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, this was clear. With residents always out and about, it didn't take long until someone's makas (*eyes*) would settle on you. In a village of about 200 people, not everyone knew each other well – but they knew when you were not one of them. The maka-checker would usually ask who you are, what you were doing there, and – almost always – if you knew Cookie. The weight of that last question was not readily obvious to a malihini (*newcomer*), but over time, I learned that it was how residents gauge if you could be trusted, and whether their makas could drift to other matters and other people. If you did know Cookie, you would probably be permitted to pass into the village beyond. If you didn't – well, you would soon.

My first meeting with Cookie was certainly like this. I spent the morning nearly sick with anxiety, unsure of how I (a haole researcher) would be received, and determined not come across as nīele (*nosy*). With a makana (*gift*) of homemade mango bread, I wandered into the front area of Kīpuka

'Aineamalu and met Cookie's hānai daughter Reina, who asked me if I knew Cookie. When I said no, I was led to her tent, where Cookie emerged in an orange t-shirt, her face kind; and before I could say much, she offered a warm, "Aloha," and pulled me into a hug. When I nervously explained that I knew someone else who had lived at the kaiāulu a few years ago, she smiled and told me that a friend of a resident is a friend of the kaiāulu, and I was welcome anytime.. That generosity set the tone. She accepted the bread, took a bite, nodded in approval, then passed it to the keiki. "You hungry?" she asked, offering me food in return just as easily as the hug. That moment was emblematic of Cookie's leadership. She led not through authority but through aloha, not through control but through connection. It was this openness to building pilina – this willingness to pull people in rather than shut them out – that defined her role in the village.

I came to learn that Cookie's deeply embodied aloha was central to her character and her leadership of the community, to the point where a resident once joked that the word *compassion* should be emblazoned on a tshirt as an official motto for the kaiāulu. Residents regularly told me stories of how Cookie had been there for them, illustrating her ability to form deep, personal, often singular connections with those around her. To the outside world, she was a community leader, a voice for the houseless, a force in advocacy circles. But within the village, she was Mamas – the woman people turned to for guidance, for kōkua, for accountability. Her leadership was not chiefly about enforcing rules; it was about seeing people's potential before they could see it in themselves. She believed that kuleana was not just something people owed to the community. It was something that could heal them, too. This ability to lift people up, rather than simply keeping things in order, was what set her apart. She often had faith in people before they had faith in themselves.

The pilina she built with others aided not just in identifying those who would step up but also encouraged those who would be less willing to ask for help to reach out anyway. This sense of care rooted in relationality emanated out into the broader relational field of the village, such that others could be entrusted by extension. Cookie's openness made it easier to seek kōkua when needed:

Cookie was always an open person. Like, she was always the one that if you need help, go to her, ya know? If she can help you, she gon' help you. If not, she can think of somebody that might be able to help you, ya know? I guess because I was always trying not to, how you say it, lean on anybody? You're so used to doing

these things yourself that unless I really, really don't have—don't know what to do, nowhere to turn—then I gon' go to somebody, ya know?

Even for those like Nānā, who hesitated to ask for help, there was a deep understanding that help would be there if needed – because the pilina they built with Cookie made it known to them. Cookie's proactive offers of kāko'o (*support*) reinforced the idea that at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, care wasn't conditional – it was part of what could make the village a home.

Leadership Built through Humility & Trust

Cookie's leadership was deeply rooted in her own struggles, shaping the way she led with humility and understanding. Having battled addiction for years, she only found stability when she came to the land that would become Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. She spoke openly about this past, telling residents, "I went t'rough dat shit," to build pilina with them and remind them transformation was possible. Rather than leading from above, she positioned herself as just another resident, facing the same daily challenges. At the village's annual backpack drive, she waved to Wai'anae residents as she bathed in the open-air spigots of the boat harbor like everyone else, openly scrubbing her hair and butt with her hands down her shorts. This small, everyday act was significant – residents, many of whom had suffered under authority who wielded power through intimidation, took note. Unlike those who sought to elevate themselves through control or titles, Cookie remained among her people, reinforcing that leadership should not be about status – it was about service to others. This was pono leadership – ethical, relational, affirming, and in balance.

Cookie's ability to lead without creating distance from those she served was part of why she commanded such deep respect in the village. When we were talking one day, Aunty Pua criticized some people she had come across in her life "who has been on the dope, who have been on, ya knw, smoke weed and what not" – yet when they stop doing so they tell you "Oh shouldn't do this, shouldn't do that,' oh, like they're better than you. They've been in your shoes, and now all of a sudden, they're better than you." This was not Cookie. Cookie owned her past without demonizing or insulting others' present.

Cookie was direct and demanding, but her expectations of people rarely felt arbitrary. Instead, she held people accountable because she had relationships with and believed in them. Aunty Pua, who was known for her sharp tongue and strong will, laughed as she admitted, “Cookie is the only one who can tell me off; any other person would get a licking.” Even those who bristled at authority trusted her because they knew she understood, that she had been through it too, and that she was just as invested in their well-being as she was in the success of the village. This does not mean she tolerated fools. In seeking to genuinely raise people up, sometimes she called them out. She had no patience for self-sabotage, or for people who refused to take steps toward their own improvement. If she saw someone making excuses, wasting opportunities, or refusing to take accountability, she would say so – not to tear them down, but to push them forward. She was tough because she believed people were capable. If they weren’t, she wouldn’t have bothered:

I know, I hustle these fuckahs, you know, to make sure we can put on your table. And I make sure ma kids no take not one, ‘cause with kids, we can provide ourselves. Even for da ones that cannot. If I find out they sell their food stamp and what not, I’ll punish ‘em. Like...not even gonna t’ink about before you sell your shit, you gon’ t’ink about ‘em this month ‘cause you not gon’ get shit. If I don’t play hardball with you guys like dat, then that’s me enabling you guys to continue doing what you doing.

For Cookie, care and accountability went hand in hand. She was not there to save people – she was there to remind them that they had power to save themselves. She believed that true care meant preparing people for what lay ahead, not just ensuring they were okay in the present. She also understood that the village was a pu’uhonua (*place of refuge*), but not a guarantee. Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu endured threats of sweeps before, and Cookie knew their ability to remain depended not just on agreements with the state but on how prepared residents were to advocate for themselves, to build something beyond the village:

I think a lot of them is afraid because they don’t realize it’s finally something positive in their life. It’s not negative, you know? And...you not gonna have to worry about da sweeps. ‘Cause they will come, they gon’ come for sweep in he’uh and there if they don’t come in agreement with me to give me at least that much acres to continue to help...once I say, we put out, they gon’ pull right in.

Cookie aimed not just to prepare people to live at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu or even just at the mauka site – she was building pilina in part so as to help them work through their learned strategies of distrust,

disengagement, and domination to accept “something positive in their life,” that could carry them forward toward greater stability, wherever they went and wherever they lived. The village had given them pu‘uhonua (*refuge*), but true security would not come from the village alone – it would come from knowing how to stand up, be willing to build pilina with other people and places, and create stability no matter what happened.

For her, this wasn’t about following rules or meeting external expectations – it was about people realizing their own strength. She had seen how traditional shelters and state-run programs cycled people through temporary solutions, offering stability that vanished after ninety days. That could not be what Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu became. Instead, it had to stay rooted in pilina:

Da solution [for others is] shelter, my solution is relationship...not this theory you gotta t’reaten ‘em and t’row them into a shelter. That no work. You just...their problem is they drop ‘em in one place that they can be in but if they don’t get into one home in ninety days they back out on the street, then they back out um...trying to look for tents again, trying to look for portable stools again, I no t’ink dat’s fair.

For Cookie, success wasn’t measured by how well people followed rules or even about how many people transitioned out of houselessness – it was measured by how deeply they were connected. Institutions without relationships could, at times, be little more than holding tanks, places where people were processed rather than supported. They could also, as Cookie points out, merely perpetuate relational harm under the auspices of “doing something” about homelessness. But a village rooted in the pursuit of pono – balance, ethical relationality – could offer something else. It could teach people how to trust and rely on others, how to advocate for themselves, how to create stability that didn’t vanish the moment the state decided it was time to move on. Because the state would move on from wanting this village of houseless people situated on public land. And when it did, Cookie wanted to make sure that no one was left behind.

Resisting Reductionism, Affirming Full Personhood

The care rooted in pilina that defined Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was more than just a source of companionship or kōkua; it was also a measured form of resistance. In a world that often treats houseless people as problems to be solved rather than as individuals with full and complex lives,

the village became a relational field where residents affirmed one another's humanity in ways that the outside world often failed to do, relying instead on stereotypes rather than the kind of individual recognition that comes from building pilina together. Here, people were not defined solely by their struggles or their need for housing – they were friends, parents, caregivers, leaders, and mentors. In this, residents actively resisted reductive narratives by affirming each other's full humanity – expressing aloha through recognition of their complex identities and the kuleana (*responsibility*) they held for others. Yet, even as many in the village deepened pilina with each other through regular interaction and expressions of care, residents remained acutely aware that outsiders did not always see them this way. Some felt their community was viewed as an eyesore rather than a home, and that they, as people, were seen only for their hardships rather than their contributions, histories, and skills. Rather than passively accepting this framing, they resisted it – through acts of care and a reciprocal commitment to showing up not just for one another, but the broader world.

Perceptions of Perceptions

Houselessness reshapes not only people's daily realities but how they believe they are seen by the world. Many residents felt outsiders reduced them to their circumstances. As we saw with Freddy, Sis, and Terry at the outset of the chapter, this perception of being judged – as individuals and as a community – creates tension in how residents see themselves and how they want others to see them. Mahina spoke about this, describing how she believed outsiders viewed the village:

I know a lot of people look at this community like, 'Oh, that's not a community, That's a joke.'...I know that there are people out there that will never take us seriously, because of the fact that we're homeless and we're trying to become a community. Like I mean, we are a community. But in their eyes, we're not.

Yet, when I pressed her for a specific example of someone saying this outright, Mahina admitted she had never heard the words directly:

Not directly, no. But I, I, I know. You can just vibe it out, ya know what I mean? When you're, when you're walking by somebody and you just feel the vibes, ya know? I don't know. I guess it could be me jumping to conclusions or me making assumptions or whatever...but yeah. But I know there are people.

Mahina's words reveal an internalized expectation of dismissal. Even without explicit statements, small daily interactions, unspoken exclusions, and broader societal narratives created a "vibe" that told her to anticipate being disregarded. Mahina saw a community of people, but believed those outside saw atomized homeless individuals squatting together. They did not see the pilina within.

That expectation was not unfounded. Many residents of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu once believed the same stereotypes about houseless people – until they became houseless themselves. RT admitted that before losing her job and ending up on the streets, she assumed most houseless people were either lazy or "druggies." Rae, too, had internalized similar ideas before arriving:

I was kind of sketchy at the beginning 'cause there was a lot of things that are said about houseless people. So I didn't know what to expect... I would say those people are all chronics. They don't shower. They stink. They steal. Stuff like that.

These assumptions did not come from nowhere, but are deeply ingrained through media portrayals, public rhetoric, and everyday interactions that frame houselessness as a result of personal failure rather than structural inequity. This speaks to a broader social field in which the houseless are individualized, marginalized, and pathologized – a field which the village both sits apart from and inside of, an island of its own where societal signals from outside and residents' pasts permeate the airwaves of both self- and communal perception. Before arriving in the village, many residents spent years absorbing the idea that they were less deserving of dignity, stability, and care

This sense of being judged extends beyond individuals and to the village as a whole. Some residents saw proof of this in the kinds of donations that sometimes arrived at the front of the village. One morning, I sorted through a donation drop-off under the heat of the plastic tarp that served as the donation tent roof and found a box filled with a broken rotary phone, several snapped hangers, and an empty glass candle jar – no candle, not even a wick. When I showed the useless items to Sis, she barely glanced up before shaking her head: "They trying to fuck with us," she said bluntly. For Sis, this wasn't just an accident or thoughtless giving – it reflected how some outsiders saw the village itself. "People think we're trash, so they bring us trash." While it was entirely possible the box had been packed indiscriminately or mistakenly, for Sis, the meaning was clear: the residents of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu were not seen as people worth helping, but as objects of scorn.

Resisting Dehumanization Through Relation & Reclamation

If one of the chief ways those experiencing houselessness endure mistreatment is through distance and dehumanization, then one of the most powerful antidotes is through connection with others. Residents expressed that their views of the houseless changed not just because they found themselves on the streets, but because they bonded with others who themselves did not embody the stereotypes that they once held. In getting to know other people – in building *pilina* with them – the flattening and stereotyping of others gave way to a fuller picture of humanity. Stereotypes are rooted in a judgment of others without knowing them; by knowing others, these dissipated.

Another powerful way that Kīpuka 'Aineamalu resisted dehumanization of outsiders is through the repeated affirmation of personhood within the village. Terry's words to Sis in this chapter's introduction – "You're still a person" – capture this, as did signs at the entrance to the village during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep outsiders away, reminding them, "because our lives matter too." Such affirmations were more than just words; they were reclamations of dignity and personhood. Cookie, the village's leader, long fought against the reductive ways in which people view the houseless, particularly when outsiders referred to the village as a *shantytown* or suggested its residents are irreparably broken. "We not broken. We make mistakes, just like everybody else. We just people." By emphasizing residents are "just people," Cookie rejected the idea that houselessness defined residents entirely or made them less deserving of respect or dignity.

Aunty Pua pointed out to me that even though those in the village would often admit to their struggles with addiction or other issues, this did not mean that they were flat stereotypes:

You cannot find the people that we have in this village anywhere. They're unique. They're...they're the best. I mean, they're good people. Ya know, they got flaws...so what? Who don't? Ya know *laughs*. But ya know the t'ing I really love about them is even if they do dope, they smoke weed, they do whatever they do...they're truthful about it. Ya know? They don't hide it. Ya know, they're truthful about, "Oh yeah, I smoke dope." Ya know. Do you ever think about getting off of it? "Yeah, but I don't think I'm ready." That's as truthful as you can get with these guys. I give them props, ya know.

Rather than defining people by struggles, the village made space for their full humanity – honoring the honesty, complexity, and *pilina* that grew when people could be seen as more than their flaws.

For some residents, this affirmation of personhood went even further – not only did they assert themselves as equally human, but they argued their experiences gave them a kind of na‘auao (*wisdom*) and ethical clarity many housed people lack. Eva, for instance, pointed to how those in the village live with a stronger sense of gratitude and practicality than those who are housed, saying, “People who have housing and other things take stuff for granted...They find a puka in a blanket and throw it out. People here would say that it is a good blanket and sew up the hole in it.” Rather than viewing their resourcefulness as a sign of hardship, Eva saw it as a sign of wisdom – one valuing sustainability over waste.

Aunty Pua expanded on this, arguing that housed people who rush through life without appreciating what they have could learn from the resourcefulness of the houseless:

I’m thinking in ma mind, oh, ya know, if the United States actually – people in the United States or the government – would actually slow their lives down, they could make sense of these simple things that people are putting together. Ya know, things to grow, ya know? It’s simple ya know like, us guys...we take recycled things and we make ‘em beautiful. Ya know, trash to treasure kinda things? But these are things that you would never think. We’ll take pallets and make it into a beautiful table. And now you have this on YouTube where they show you how to make tables and stuff.

For Pua, this ingenuity was not just about repurposing discarded materials – it was a critique of a world that is quick to discard everything, including people. Rather than simply rejecting the way the world viewed them, residents like Eva and Pua actively redefined what it meant to be houseless and afforded the status of being houseless a dignity often denied – and unseen – by those beyond the village’s pallet-fenced border. Their pilina extended beyond human beings to a relationship with the items and resources around them that the housed were simply unable to see.

Changing Perspectives, One Person and One Clean-Up at a Time

While residents of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu pushed back against dehumanization they experienced (or expected to experience) from outsiders, they also recognized that these harmful perceptions are deeply ingrained in broader society – including within their own families. Like Pua and Roxy in Chapter 1, many residents recalled how their ‘ohana disapproved of their life in the village, refusing

to visit because of their own preconceived notions about what a “homeless encampment” would be like. Some residents took it upon themselves to change these perspectives, beginning with those “closest to home.”

Sis, for example, shared with me how her mother, who long disapproved of her living in the village, was hesitant to even set foot in a park where houseless people gathered, telling me that “she didn’t like that I live like this.” Having grown up well-off in nearby Nānākuli, Sis’s mother struggled to accept her daughter’s circumstances, but that changed when her family hosted a gathering at a nearby beach park, and her mother was persuaded by her other children to attend and go into the village. After spending the day with her daughter and seeing the kaiāulu’s sense of community firsthand, her mother changed her mind. Soon, she began visiting regularly to spend time at the village building pilina with Sis and others. “People think all kine of things about us,” Sis told me, “but we are just people here like anybody else,” echoing Cookie’s sentiment.

This shift in perspective was not uncommon. Even Cookie experienced such a transformation with her late father. Initially, he “hated da idea” that she was houseless, unable to reconcile it with the stable, middle-class life he had provided her as a child. But as he spent time in the village, his view began to change. Cookie encouraged him to simply “come cruise” – to observe, without judgment. Eventually, he became an active presence, reading his Bible to residents and even going tent to tent to hold small Bible studies. Through his own experience, Cookie said that he came to “understand them.” Such shifts in understanding were a form of resistance in themselves. When family members moved past ingrained biases, they challenged broader societal narratives that reduce houseless individuals to their circumstances. By bringing ‘ohana into the village, having them build pilina with residents, and allowing them to witness daily life, residents reshaped the way their loved ones – and, by extension, their communities – viewed houselessness.

This commitment to changing perceptions was not limited to personal relationships; it extended outward into the broader Wai‘anae community. While houseless people are often viewed as transient – literally *kuewa*, or wandering vagrants – Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu resisted this perception by intentionally building pilina with both people and place. Through acts of communal *kōkua* (*service*)

and visible stewardship of the land, residents challenged the assumption that houselessness meant placelessness. One morning, as residents prepared for a beach cleanup at a neighboring park following a sweep of houseless people there, Rae wrinkled her nose at having to “be pickin’ up those shishi napkins” (*sanitary napkins*). But Aunty Pua shut her down immediately, telling her, “It is this kind of community service that sets us apart.” The message was clear: through *kōkua*, they affirmed their *pilina* to place and demonstrated their relationship to ‘āina was deep, as committed and as meaningful as any housed community’s. Their *kōkua* made possible what is often denied to houseless people – a sense of rootedness, a right to be part of the landscape, and treatment from external institutions and individuals that was *pono*.

The village’s community engagement efforts further reinforced these claims. Their annual Halloween event invited local families to bring their *keiki* to trick-or-treat in the village, creating opportunities for new *pilina* between residents and their housed neighbors. The *kaiāulu*’s annual backpack drive welcomed families from across the Westside to pick up school supplies, signaling that the village was not insular, but actively woven into the fabric of the community. Residents could frequently be seen in bright yellow shirts emblazoned with the village’s name, providing supplies to others experiencing houselessness all down the coast, or cleaning public spaces. These efforts extended care outward – not only building *pilina* with the broader community but deepening their visible relationship to ‘āina with acts of stewardship. Through these everyday practices of *kōkua*, Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu grounded itself in place, making clear that *pilina* with land is not predicated on homeownership or permanence, but on relationship, responsibility, and care. Their survival as a *pu’uhonua* depended, in part, on being recognized as caretakers of both people and place.

One of the most striking examples of outreach as a relational strategy was the village’s first open house in 2019. Uncle Freddy recalled how, to his surprise, hundreds of people attended, many of them Wai’anae residents who previously knew little about the village beyond rumor and hearsay. “Turns out a lot of those people were from Wai’anae, who didn’t know anything about the village other than what they had heard.” By opening their “doors,” Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu created opportunities to further build *pilina* – forging new connections, building trust, and softening the

stereotypes that isolated them. Whether through one-on-one interactions with family members or large-scale community events, residents understood that building pilina was not only about belonging – it was about survival. Rather than being seen as an encampment on the margins, they made themselves visible as a stable, caring, and deeply rooted part of the Westside community, connected to one another, to their neighbors, and to the ‘āina they called home.

Healing in Remembrance and in Relation

When I first met Uncle Freddy, one of the first things we talked about was carpentry, but the first topic he *gushed* about was Sis. The two of them had been together for 25 years, 17 of which were spent on the ‘āina that became Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu. He spoke feverishly of happy times – how he taught her to ride a bike when she turned 30 – and somberly of hard ones. A few years before we met, Sis had suffered an aneurysm and heart attack, followed by open heart surgery and a stint of cryostatis that took away 14% of her heart function and left her with lasting cardiac issues. So when she was hospitalized again that May – that same hospital stay Aunty Terry and I saw her later return from – it was not entirely unexpected. “We don’t fret no more,” I remembered Freddy telling me when Sis had another health emergency in October. “She died and came back. Don’t let things bother us anymore.” We thought she would be fine. She would come back.

Sis died on October 10, 2021 at only 48 years old, not even five months after Freddy sent her off in that ambulance without knowing how she would be treated by the medical team that would receive her. The cardiac issues that shuttled her off to the hospital finally led her heart to give out, although it would ultimately be Freddy’s decision to remove her from life support that let her ‘uhane (*soul*) wander its way up the Westside to Ka‘ena and leap into pō – the ‘Ōiwi place of spirits.

In the days that followed, residents cut and glued cardstock, yarn, and popsicle sticks into multi-colored lanterns that were strung up around the entire kaiāulu in her memory. “Unable are the loved to die, for love is immortality,” one had written on it; and on another, “We all die; the goal isn’t to live forever; the goal is to create something that will.” There were others, less generalized, meant only for Sis: “Thanks for being my neighbor, and love you till the end of the earth. Until we meet again;”

“You are in a better place now, my sister;” and “Now who going to drink with me and who going to be my partner in crime?” That one made me smile. And then there were the hardest of them: “I’m sorry for not being there,” written by an anonymous hand; or the one written from Freddy’s heart, “My Best friend, my Bestie, most of all my Baby Mama. Now what am I suppose to do without you? Until we meet again. Love and miss you.” That one made me cry.

Sis was not the first person the kaiāulu had lost, and she would not be the last. Aunty Pua, the keeper of the village census, told me once that over the years, more than fifty people had died while living at the village, each one leaving behind an absence that the community refused to let fade into nothingness. Cookie believed that dignity did not end in death, nor did pilina. Unlike the morgue, where unidentified bodies were cremated and scattered anonymously at sea, Cookie ensured that each resident who passed was acknowledged, remembered, and mourned as someone who had been part of the village’s ‘ohana. “We honor our people here; we don’t want them to just be a number,” Cookie told me. “We take care of each other here. Isn’t that what we supposed to do?”

A week after Sis’s death, residents and friends of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu gathered for sunset at the cove on the furthest makai point of the village, that same place where she would often come to collect shells and her thoughts. We brought lanterns down to line the pallet fence skirting along the village seaside, kaleidoscopic boxes set aglow with flameless tea candles as ka lā (*the sun*) glowed red as it neared the horizon. Residents offered stories of their pilina with Sis like makana (*gifts*) to her spirit: of how she was there for them, how her smile made their days better, how her kindness made going to the donations tent feel not shameful, but welcome. There were pule (*prayers*) and mele (*songs*), both Hawaiian and haole; tears and laughter, and we cast her memory to ke kai (*the sea*) once the darkness began to settle, even as we still held our bond to her close.

The vigil was not just an act of remembrance; it was an act of healing and aloha. This moment, illuminated by soft lantern light and laughter, was an extension of what Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu itself provided to many: a space where people could be held in their grief, rather than left alone in it. This is what had been denied to so many residents in their lives before the village. In Chapter 1, we saw how institutions, systems, and even family members had relationally harmed them – how residents

were punished for needing help, abandoned when at their lowest, or stripped of dignity in moments of crisis. Here, at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, that cycle began to be broken. The memorial for Sis was not just a farewell; it was a reaffirmation of care, connection, and community. It was a counterweight to the dehumanization that so many had faced – a declaration that their lives and their bonds matter, that they are not disposable, that their presence here has meaning.

Sis’s passing illuminated something more to me: that in Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, people could be remembered not just for how they struggled, but for how they lived and who they were to others. In Chapter 1, Gina reflected on how death on the streets becomes something you learn to detach from – how people grow numb to loss because caring too deeply can be destabilizing in a world shaped by survival and layered with histories of relational harm. These experiences often lead to fierce commitments to independence and emotional distance. But here, in the steady presence of others who stayed – who showed up for one another again and again – that reflexive detachment could soften. Sis’s life and death were marked not by disappearance or numb acknowledgment, but by recognition. People grieved because they had come to know her – not briefly, but across time. They built pilina with her through the everyday rhythms of shared life: talking story, laughing, arguing, caring – and they mourned the old version of it when she was alive even as it reformed anew in her death. The vigil did not erase the pain of loss, but it made space for it and wrapped it in the kind of care made possible only through the village’s enduring, relational field. That possibility – of grieving with others, not apart from them – was a quiet testament to the pilina and care that the village made possible, and what, for some like Sis, made it home.

Conclusion: Living Care, Living Connection

Care at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu wasn’t incidental – it was the connective tissue that made the village in its form possible. In a world that renders houseless people invisible or unwanted, the village offered a counter-structure: one rooted not in compliance or control, but in the daily labor of striving to live pono – ethically and relationally – with one another. Through pilina built, kōkua given, aloha expressed, and kuleana assumed, Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu built something rare in experiences of

houselessness: a stable, intreconnected community where people could receive care without surrendering autonomy, and where dignity was extended not as a reward, but as a premise.

This structure was not fixed, but emergent – adaptive, and forged through relational struggle. The forms of pilina (*connection*), trust, and kuleana that sustained the village did not arise despite instability – they arose from within it. In some ways, it was precisely because residents shared histories of abandonment, betrayal, and institutional neglect that certain survival strategies – distrust, detachment, domination, and disengagement – were not treated as individual deficiencies but recognized as familiar, even necessary, forms of self-protection. These were not reasons to stereotype as a collective, but to hold space and care in relationship for individuals. In a village made up of people who had largely, in some form, learned to keep their distance in order to endure, these instincts became legible not as moral failures, but as part of the moral terrain. What emerged was a relational system not built on idealized notions of community, but on a shared recognition of harm – and the possibility of care that could still take root within it.

Throughout this chapter, care is shown not as a policy or a plan, but a relational ethos – a substance through which social life was practiced and made meaningful for residents and the collective alike. From guiding Jimmy along kiawe bean-covered trails to collectively mourning Sis at the cove, residents enacted a moral world through their relationships with one another and with place. This care informed the structure of the village as a whole. It created the space in which leadership emerged, conflicts were mediated, and trust could be slowly repaired – not perfectly and not by everyone, but in enough measure to hold a community together and expand relational possibility for those in it. This community included those like keiki, kūpuna, and people with mental or physical issues who are often otherwise marginalized even within houseless settings – people whose needs are frequently overlooked or managed through control rather than care. At Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, they were both included and valued – shaping how care was distributed, how kuleana was shared, and how pilina deepened through everyday acts of support and presence.

And yet, as the previous chapter showed, trust among residents – or in the village as a whole – would not be automatically or easily built. Many residents arrived weary and wary, their willingness

to open up shaped by lives marked by abandonment, betrayal, and institutional harm. The village could not erase these histories. But through repeated, reciprocated interactions – walking someone home, fixing a broken tent, sitting down to talk story – that wariness could shift and soften. Pilina offers a different framework for understanding trust: not as a leap of faith or a singular decision, but as a depth of relation built slowly through continuity and presence. What mattered most in the village was not whether one trusted easily, but whether pilina had been built strong enough, and held long enough, to make it possible to accept care — even when doing so meant making oneself visible in ways that could reopen old wounds. And yet, as care became possible, so too did dignity, participation, recognition – and an evolving sense of self and self-worth.

In this way, Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was not simply a place where people survived — it was a place where identity was reshaped. The pilina-building practices that unfolded were also forms of identity work (Snow & Anderson, 1993). People who had been reduced by outsiders to stereotypes – *addict, failure, criminal, drain* – came to be known through their acts of care, through their presence, through the pilina they built with others and with the village as a whole. As Mahina described, the outside world often looked at the village and saw “just homeless people,” not a community. That gaze, internalized over time and informed by a larger social imaginary that residents confessed existed in their own mind’s eyes, shaped how many residents saw themselves. But in the village, that identity could be challenged – not through denial or distance from houselessness, but through deepened relationality and affirmations of personhood. Through beach clean-ups, backpack drives, open houses, and everyday acts of aloha, the residents of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu made a claim: not just to land or shelter, but to social value, belonging, and the right to be seen.

These everyday enactments of care, trust, and pilina form the core of what relational sociology illuminates: that society is not composed of static individuals or abstract systems, but of evolving relational fields. The moral ecology of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was not maintained simply by formal rules, but by everyday commitments between people and to the collective – to watch the keiki, to sit with a neighbor in crisis, to keep quiet during the agreed hours, to share what little one had. These were not random acts of kindness; they were the structuring relations of the village, the fibers

of a social world held together not by enforcement but by building pilina and behaving towards others in ways that were pono. That moral order was not guaranteed; instead, it was always being negotiated, always fragile, always at risk of fray. This was the moral leap many had to take.

The village's structure reflected this. It was not a stable system, but what dissipative structures theory identifies as a reconfiguration through instability – a collective form held together by regularly adapting to internal and external pressures. Cookie's leadership embodied this most clearly. Her authority was not derived from position, but from charisma – and not only the theatrical kind Weber theorized, but a relational charisma built through consistent acts of living pono and building pilina: showing up, caring deeply, and seeing others' mana before they identified it themselves. She was not followed because she commanded obedience, but because she made people feel seen. That kind of leadership – relational, grounded, affective – offered something many residents had rarely experienced: the sense that someone in power might actually treat them with care.

The 'ōlelo no'eau that opens this chapter – *'ike aku, 'ike mai, kōkua aku, kōkua mai: pēlā iho la ka nohona 'ohana* – captures the spirit Kīpuka 'Aineamalu worked to embody: to recognize and be recognized, to help and be helped, to live as a family not by blood but by pilina. In many ways, the village was a living expression of this ideal, built through countless small acts of seeing, helping, and caring across difference and distance. But as this chapter has shown, such an 'ohana – such a shared life – was not automatic, nor guaranteed. It was something continually built, strained, repaired, and remade through the everyday work of relational care. Pilina held the village together, even as the tensions between autonomy and collective life made that work uneven and fragile. It is within this tension – between recognition and withdrawal, between kōkua freely given and kōkua demanded – that the moral life of the village can be broadly understood.

Not everyone participated in the village's shared rhythm. Autonomy, as this chapter shows, mattered as much as care. Many came to the village seeking freedom: from judgment, systems, demands, and harm. They respected Cookie, often followed her lead, and built pilina with trusted section captains. But many kept their distance from organized events, avoided leadership roles, and guarded their solitude. This wasn't indifference, but protection – forged through years of

surviving systems that extracted, surveilled, and failed to deliver for them. Kīpuka 'Aineamalu worked, in part, because it made space for both: for those who stepped into kuleana and for those who stepped back. It honored boundaries not in spite of care, but as a core aspect of it.

But what happened when those boundaries began to blur – when the village required more involvement, more hours, and more visible displays of commitment, especially in the face of outside scrutiny and the move to more formalized housing? What happened as the village, in its growing pilina with those beyond its fences, emerged into the public as a revered, almost mythic model of care and, consequently, as a sort of movement? What happened when an ethic of care started to feel less like pilina and more like pressure? As this chapter has shown, the moral life of the village was built through care – but it was also always held in both relation and tension with autonomy. When that balance began to shift, so too did the social fabric.

This chapter traced how Kīpuka 'Aineamalu built a world from relational care – pono practices, small acts of kōkua, the slow accretion of trust – but it also sets the stage for what happens when relationships grow strained. Pilina, after all, is not built in the absence of conflict. It is what holds through it, what allows people to stay in relation even when care feels scarce. The next chapter traces what happened when that endurance was tested – when trust frayed and leadership faltered, and when the very structures that once sustained the village began to strain under their own weight.

CHAPTER 3

THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE FUTURE

“A’ole e ‘ōlelo mai ana ke ahi ua ana ia.”

Fire will never say that it has had enough.

- #225, Mary Kawena Pukui, *‘Olelo No‘eau
Hawai‘i Book of Proverbs and Poetical Sayings*

Kiawe is a curious tree. Branches that twist this way and that stretch eventually upward to unfold into a thick canopy of tiny leaves fanning out from their branches to look almost like ferns, each chlora-filled piece one by one blotting out the sun on days when the inside of a tent is not a shelter but a sauna. Before she died, Sis would work alongside other wahine (*women*) and wander the kaiāulu collecting big baskets of bean-shaped pods that fall from its foliage every day, then send them off at shift’s end to the Westside uncle who paid them for the protein-rich pods he processes into energy bars and flour. At Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, kiawe is a protector from the elements, a source of income, and a natural cover to disguise and direct passersby’s attention away from the camps settled beneath them. It offers kākō’o (*support*) and pu’uhonua (*shelter; refuge*) to its fellow residents. Kiawe is a reminder that pilina is built not just between people and community, but between place and the other things – spirits, ocean, trees – that populate it.

And yet, it is to your detriment if your pilina with this invasive cousin is not so strong as to forget that kiawe is kolohe (*naughty*), with its long, hard thorns that fall off just like those bean pods to pierce straight through your slippahs and into your foot. After Aunty Cookie acquired the land up mauka and the pandemic finally passed, we would work on weekends to clear collapsed kiawe branches, healing the ‘āina from a dumping ground for the neighbors’ ‘opala into a place for people to eventually come home, as Cookie would always say. One workday, I heard little Jone yelp from behind a bush and found him holding his foot up in the air. I pulled thorns of all kine sizes from his slippahs, but as I was walking away to get back to work, a thorn stabbed so hard into my foot that by the time I got home that night, the bottom of the sock inside my shoe was a caked crust of red. I forgot for just a second how kolohe kiawe is, but that pain is not easy to forget.

That thorn came to mind when I spoke with Gina in the park, gazing up at a kiawe tree hovering above our heads. Gina was telling me about how much the village had changed in the time since she began to visit, and then live, there; how much better it had gotten. Up until that conversation, I'd assumed that the village had always functioned the way I'd come to know it – with a commitment to pilina, aloha, and pono as its motivating ethos – but Gina corrected the error of my understanding that morning, telling me that before they would “fuck you up” if you got on the bad side of those close to Cookie who had the run of the place, and they would just “tear people’s camp down... [or] choose who gets kicked out” based on nothing other than their preferences, suspicions, and whims. It was only in recent years that things grew kinder and more caring. This was the village I had come to know – the one shared in Chapter 2, where pono, pilina, and relational healing were not just felt, but formed part of the operating structure of the village as a whole. In this iteration of the village, residents could rest easier. Punishment, when it was doled out, was based in rules centered around fairness, not determined by whoever crossed someone in a position of authority.

And yet, wherever there is a bean to feed, there is a thorn to harm. Like that memory of the hole in my foot, memories of the individual and collective past punctured through the present of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu and risked jeopardizing its future. Residents' coping strategies of distrust, detachment, and domination did not just go away when the kaiāulu pivoted to a kinder, more humane model; nor do the memories of residents who were mistreated within its pallet-lined fences in the past. It turns out, the pain of those many thorns are not easy to forget. For those who spent their lives navigating abuse, neglect, and disregard, trusting Kīpuka 'Aineamalu as it became something more structured – more like the very institutions that failed them before – could sometimes feel like folly at best, stupid at worst – even if the rules were applied more fairly and with greater emphasis on care. Many residents weren't sure if this new system would truly serve them or just become another version of the harm they already knew. Was it shade or thorn? For those who came seeking autonomy – the freedom to live as they wanted, without constant fear of a sweep – the very structure that made a relatively free and independent life more stable could also feel like a threat to that freedom. It was a fragile balance, and one that increasingly had trouble holding.

The transformation of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu into a more structured community did not resolve its central tensions between individual autonomy and collective order – instead, it exposed them. As the village became more visible and more heavily scrutinized by outsiders, the quiet understandings that governed participation began to shift. Leadership, under pressure to maintain the village’s stability and legitimacy, began asking more of residents – security shifts, clean-ups, visible contributions. For some, particularly those who came seeking freedom to live unbothered, these changes felt like a breach of the very autonomy they came to protect after a life of relational harm. What was once a pu‘uhonua grounded in voluntary kuleana began to feel like something more rigid. The care and pilina of Chapter 2 that held the village together didn’t disappear, but it was no longer the only thing significantly shaping things. Something else was afoot.

These shifts brought to the surface questions that had always been quietly present: How much structure is too much? When does the effort to hold a community together risk pulling it apart? And what happens when the pilina that once sustained shared life begins to fray under the weight of obligation, just as the need for unity grows stronger? This chapter traces the slow renegotiation of governance at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu – not as a dramatic rupture, but as an unfolding process in which the balance between kuleana and autonomy, care and control, was constantly in motion. Like the kiawe that shelters and scars in equal measure, the village offered both shade and thorn – and learning to live within its tangled branches would require more than just rulemaking. It would require tending, trust, and pilina that does not just grow overnight.

From Survival to Structure, From Fear to Care

2006-2012: Early Days Under the Kiawe

By the time I arrived at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu in early 2020, the village had already undergone more than 15 years of transformation. What began in the mid-2000s as a scattered encampment tucked in the kiawe had slowly, unevenly evolved into something structured. Cookie was at the center of that shift from the beginning. She arrived in 2006 after leaving another beach park with her partner Cassia and quickly introduced a basic set of rules – keep the noise down, show respect,

no stealing – all designed to stave off sweeps and avoid the kind of chaos she had seen elsewhere. “Never like let da place get like dat,” she once told me. These rules functioned as a kind of tentative collective agreement – not built on shared values or deep trust, exactly, but on the shared desire to stay. They didn’t require people to surrender their autonomy, but they did create a structure where individual choices were weighed against the risk they posed to the whole camp. The few dozen people who lived there built the place into their home.

This period – **from 2006 to 2012** – was marked by minimal outside scrutiny, a basic structure, and a small set of rules enforced with clarity, if sometimes harshness. Expectations like “respect” weren’t defined in writing, but in a small encampment becoming a community, their meaning was modeled through Cookie’s presence, reinforced in shared experience, and negotiated within the close relational fabric of daily life. Pilina grew in proximity in a small community.

2012-2016: New People, New Scrutiny, New Ways

In 2012, a major sweep of another beach park sent a wave of displaced residents to the shoreline encampment that would later become Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu. The arrival of new people, who had not lived under the rules Cookie had long enforced, reshaped the daily rhythms of the place. Fights grew more frequent. Small thefts became common. Trash piled up. Complaints from nearby residents mounted, as did pressure from state and harbor officials. For the first time, officials explicitly warned that the entire encampment might be cleared if conditions didn’t change.

In response, Cookie stepped up further, and the encampment adapted. Cleanups of visible ‘opala (*rubbish*) were organized – not just to appease officials, but to restore a sense of care for the land and one another. Cookie divided the camp into sections and named Sis and Pua – trusted long-timers she had built pilina with – as section captains. Conversations with state officials and neighbors became more regular, if still uneasy. These changes weren’t yet a formal system, but they marked the emergence of a new relational structure – an effort to weave pilina within a growing population. With so many new people now living under the shade of the kiawe, relationship-building was essential – not just to maintain stability, but to reestablish a shared ethic of co-existence.

Still, as structure took shape, its moral core became harder to define. *Respect* had long been the village's guiding rule, but its meaning had been relational – taught and reinforced through the pilina that was possible to build in a small encampment. Now, with a larger, more diffuse community and rising tension, *respect* became both more important and more contested. What counted as disrespect? To whom? And with what consequence? Cookie continued to invest in relationships, modeling care through presence and consistency. But she and her section captains weren't the only one defining or defending the community's norms. Her 'ohana – many of whom came there seeking pu'uhonua in the place where she was in charge – took it upon themselves to enforce boundaries more directly and more harshly. For them, disrespect wasn't just about noise or theft – it was personal – about tone, eye contact, perceived slights. With many having endured their own histories of relational harm, they responded with force when they felt threatened or disregarded – sometimes preemptively, sometimes disproportionately. *Respect* remained the dominant rule, but its interpretation shifted with proximity to power, and enforcement grew more uneven as a result.

Waina, reflecting on those years, emphasized how belonging was conditional and enforcement was swift – often unspoken, but understood through action:

Back then...there was no lahui [*nation*] like how they say now. You had to be in the hui [*group, circle*] in order to... how would I put that? You gotta do what they say or you gon' be out. No ifs, ands, or buts; if they don't like what you're doing: gone. They don't give a fuck what you say, what you did. They just gon' take your tent down and you out, and you never do nothing wrong. Just 'cause they never like you.

Gina echoed this memory, recalling how fear – not kōkua or compassion – often held the community together. Enforcement wasn't carried out by everyone, but by those closest to Cookie, particularly Reina, her hānai daughter, and Rae, whose 'ohana became deeply embedded in camp life:

You didn't want to get on Rae's bad side or Reina's bad side or they'll fuck you up. And that's how it used to be. People didn't have a choice. They used to tear people's camps down, they choose who gets kicked out.

Another resident put it even more bluntly: "It was fucking crazy."

But punishment didn't always mean being kicked out. Some people were hit and allowed to stay, while others were forced out. There was a kind of relational calculus in play – not just about

who violated rules, but about who could still be protected. Violence, in this context, wasn't just about asserting dominance; it also entailed mitigating risk before it escalated. Enforcement functioned as a form of preemption – a way to contain a problem internally before it invited external scrutiny that put the whole camp and its self-determination at risk, as had already happened in 2012. I remember one night I was in the village and a resident teenager did something that nearly got him jumped by outsiders. When he returned, a livid Cookie pulled him into her tent and gave him lickins – a beating punctuated with the words, “I do this because I love you.” In her logic, the blows weren't just a consequence – they were a warning, a lesson, and a shield. If she didn't act, a cruel world would. As Cookie often said, “Nobody gonna save us but us.” In that framing, care and violence weren't opposites. They were interwoven – not ideal, but sometimes, in her view, necessary. That same logic also punctuated violence in the village of this time – it was also a form of collective protection.

This period – **from 2012 to 2016** – marked a reorganization of the village's relational field in response to strain. As the population grew and scrutiny from outside intensified, the moral clarity of earlier years gave way to more diffuse and contested forms of authority. Respect remained the central rule, but its meaning shifted – shaped less by shared experience and more by proximity to power. Enforcement grew harsher and more uneven, often carried out by those closest to Cookie, who interpreted threats through the lens of past harm and acted quickly to contain risk. Structure deepened during this time, but so did the moral ambiguity of what it meant to belong.

2016-2020: Compassion Comes to the Fore

The dualist structure from 2012-2016 – where harsh enforcement coexisted with care – was held together, in large part, by Cookie. The pilina she built with residents helped soften the sharp edges of control. Cookie checked in on people. She noticed who was slipping and asked why. She brought food, sat down at tents, and talked story without needing a reason. Her leadership didn't come from position alone – it came from presence in people's lives. More than that, it came from impact. People saw her doing what needed to be done – making the village cleaner, safer, more livable – even when the steps to make it that way were harsh or uneven. She didn't just model care;

she acted on it. Care was always part of the village – not as a stated policy, but as a lived ethic, grounded in pilina and embodied most consistently by Cookie herself.

Still, that rhythm was fragile. While the village imposed harsh consequences for certain violations – like intense violence, dumping rubbish near the road, or drawing the kind of attention that might trigger a sweep – most residents were otherwise left alone, with room to live quietly on one’s own terms, so long as you didn’t cross an unspoken line. But the anxiety was always there. The line between autonomy and transgression was never clearly marked, because the most important rule – respect – was not clearly defined. As Mahina put it to me one day, “We usually just do our own thing.” That wasn’t a rejection of community so much as a way to stay safe. In a village where power moved more through proximity than process, and where punishment could come swiftly if you landed on the wrong side of someone close to Cookie, keeping your head down became a way to stay. People valued the independence they found in the camp’s stability – but that same independence often manifested in a lack of communal participation. In a system where involvement could make you vulnerable, staying at the edges was a kind of protection.

In 2016, another sweep was threatened, jolting the village into a moment of reckoning. It had survived since 2012 through harsh enforcement and strategic avoidance, but that alone would no longer be enough. In the aftermath, the community gave itself a name – Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu – and took further steps to formalize its presence. A nonprofit was established in 2017, and the possibility of relocating to a new parcel of land brought a new kind of visibility. But this shift wasn’t just about appearing legitimate to outsiders. It was also an internal recalibration. Harsh tactics had created compliance, but not connection. Many residents had grown wary of one another, retreating into autonomy rather than investing in collective life. To build something more cohesive, leadership began to elevate compassion – not just as a moral value, but as a practical strategy for renewal. Cookie’s steady presence and pilina-building had long offered an alternative to fear-based control. Now, that ethic moved closer to the center. If the village was going to survive and grow – especially under the spotlight of public scrutiny – it would need not just rules, but relationships.

As new rules were introduced – security shifts, *kōkua* (*community service*) hours, intake procedures for new residents, shared *kuleana* – the emphasis began to shift from reactive enforcement to proactive care. Respect remained the central expectation, but its meaning grew more consistent and less personal. Instead of being interpreted through proximity or mood, respect was increasingly institutionalized through rules and agreements about acceptable behavior. Compassion began to be preached not just as a value, but as a corrective: a way to soften the sharp edges of enforcement and guide those in leadership to show grace, not retaliation. The proliferation of rules didn't eliminate power imbalances, but it did help constrain some of the more subjective and volatile forms of discipline that had previously governed daily life. *Pilina* and *kuleana* were no longer just personal ethics; they became embedded in the village's structure and rhythm. This marked a reorganization of the village's moral center – from one held together by the fear of crossing lines, to one that tried, however imperfectly, to draw people into something shared.

The village of 2016-2020 – this was the phase of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu I stepped into when I arrived off the bus in early 2020 – a village shaped increasingly by structure but grounded in care, where autonomy and *pilina* had come to coexist more comfortably. Rules were in place, but they were interpreted increasingly through the lens of compassion, not control. Cookie's ethic of care had moved from individual practice to collective value, and the rhythms of daily life reflected that shift: people checked in on one another, *kūpuna* were looked after with dignity, and leadership was increasingly tied to *kōkua* and *kuleana* rather than fear or force. It wasn't utopia – boundaries still existed, trust was still hard to build – but the community I came to know was one where dignity was not something to be earned, but a premise from which everything else flowed. This was not the village of chaos and control described by residents looking back on earlier years. It was a village held by presence, *pilina*, and the steady work of making care feel possible. Furthermore, the *mauka* property on which to relocate had been secured – and on the day I arrived for the first time, the first residents moved up to the land. Things seemed to be looking up.

And yet, beneath the surface, something was rumbling. The same structures that stabilized the village – rules, responsibilities, systems of shared *kuleana* – were stirring unease for some. The

ethic of care, expressed through pilina and presence, was also increasingly embedded in policies and expectations that grew as the population of the village increased, in an effort to fold newcomers in gradually rather than experience the rapid disorientation of 2012. Some saw this development as progress; others were more skeptical. Aunty Roxy, reflecting on the changes she had witnessed since arriving in the mid-2010s, gave voice to this:

That was only one rule, and that was respect. Now we got choke rules. That rule, 'respect,' it says it all, ya know? It says it all. That's why Mamas only just want have that rule. And, I guess uh, more and more, I guess, people - different people - were come in, ya know, move in. And I guess things has to change.

Others were cautious of the changes because of their own histories there. As Gina noted of many residents in the village who had been there through the most tumultuous times:

Ya know, the older people who have been here for like – Uncle Bud – all them who have been here for a while, ya know, and the people who have been living here for years and knew how it was before, like, compared to now. They're skeptical, and they were right to be, ya know.

These residents had lived through the years when order was kept through force and even, for some, been harmed themselves – and they hadn't forgotten.

A new chapter was beginning to take shape. Care remained present – as shown in Chapter 2 – but alongside new tensions. The relational field was shifting again – not away from care or pilina, but into a more complex terrain, where care and control were no longer easy to distinguish.

The Shift Toward Communal Accountability

For much of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu's early history, individual autonomy wasn't just allowed – it was generally respected. Many residents had lived through experiences of institutional control, broken relationships, and personal trauma. Being able to live on one's own terms felt essential, even healing. But that freedom had limits. The village had emerged and reshaped many times under threat, and the rules and structure that took shape early on were designed to protect it. They centered around respect: for others, for the plot of land, and for the fragile possibility of the village itself. As long as someone didn't violate those expectations – or provoke those who enforced them

– they were largely left alone to live as they pleased. For some residents, that balance between freedom and respect was what made the village feel pono – not perfect, but right enough to hold.

Uncle Cudgy was one such case. For nearly a decade, he lived quietly on the periphery of the village, amassing piles of belongings and ‘opala (rubbish) in and around his camp. His hoarding – while extreme – was unaddressed, not because it was unnoticeable, but because it didn’t spark conflict and wasn’t viewed as actively endangering the community. Much of the rubbish was buried or tucked away, shielded from the outside view. It didn’t provoke complaints from neighbors, and it didn’t draw attention from state agencies in the way that roadside rubbish that had accumulated did. So long as no one in leadership was personally bothered and no officials were breathing down their necks, the troves of buried trash remained just that – his.

But pressure had long been building. The Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) flagged concerns about ‘opala as far back as 2012, especially around the ‘opae (shrimp) holes and other culturally significant features of the site on which the village sat. What changed after the 2018 sweep threat wasn’t the existence of scrutiny – it was the stakes. The village was told they *had* to leave the makai site – a reality which dialed up in intensity once the mauka property was secured in 2020 and pressure grew knowing that the timeline for the makai site was fixed. With these intensifying shifts, everything that was once tolerated, ignored, or buried out of sight became a liability. Cudgy disappeared under the cover of night, his reasons never disclosed — but what he left behind was more than just abandoned property. It was a risk for everyone.

During a clean-up in mid-2020 organized in part to appease DLNR, Ace stood at the edge of the site, shaking their head at the sheer scale of what had to be removed. Cleaning it was “really nasty and stuff” – we both recoiled as ants and cockroaches scattered from a bag, while Aunty Eva let out a yelp at finding a buried, decaying trash bag filled with feces, pulling her hand back in disgust. “Uncle Cudgy’s,” she grunted when Ace asked whose camp it had been. She gestured around the area: “That’s how big he had this area, had so much shit. That’s how bad it was.” She meant that both figuratively and literally.

What had once been dismissed as Cudgy's personal choice – an individual mess, not anyone else's problem – had become a communal emergency. Cleaning it up wasn't about setting a new standard or earning long-term recognition. It was about survival in the short term – doing just enough to avoid immediate removal, to quiet the scrutiny, to buy time. The state had already told the village it would need to relocate; that wasn't in question anymore. What was in question was how soon a demand for relocation would come, and whether collective action could delay it. The labor was intense, the stakes uncertain. But everyone knew: rubbish, once buried, was now exposed – and it had to be moved, fast.

The work didn't stop with Cudgy's site. There was trash everywhere – buried deep, left behind, accumulating slowly over years – and it all had to go. Furthermore, camps nearest to the high school had to be taken down so that the school could begin work to build out their new facility. The pressure to relocate, to respond to DLNR, and to keep the village intact even temporarily demanded more than encouragement. For years, kōkua hours, clean-ups, and dumpster fees had existed in theory, but participation was voluntary, uneven, and typically enforced only in response to individual infractions. From 2016 onward, the village had moved away from harsh, subjective enforcement – embracing compassion and pilina over punishment. But that shift, while necessary and healing, also left few tools for addressing collective inaction when care alone wasn't enough. What had once been a matter of personal preference – like whether or not you helped – was now being reframed as shared obligation. If people wanted to retain the freedom to live at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, they had to take a more active role in preserving it. There was a lot of rubbish, and it needed a lot of hands.

For some, the change was appreciated. "I've been here all together five, six years," Waina told me. "It's gotten better from the first day I moved here." Mahina echoed this sense of improvement, describing a shift in how the village felt:

I can say it's become more of a 'community.' As far as everybody getting together to do things, ya know, get things done. I respect this community now. Everybody getting involved. Back then, that usually would never be happening. There's only so many people in here, that's why, so everybody did their own thing... can't say I don't like it. But yeah we still getting used, getting used to it. 'Cause like I said before...don't have to worry about the outside people coming in and telling us what to do and ya know? But, at the same time, there's more structure now.

For Mahina, the growing structure was welcomed. People were no longer just acting as individuals; they were participating in something larger, something that felt like a real community, even if under duress from outside. While *kōkua* had long been practiced more informally, the emphasis on shared responsibility as a result of external pressures made some, like Mahina, feel like the village was becoming even more of a community – and this, in her view, was a positive adjustment. *Pilina* built between people and with the village was now manifesting in action.

But for some, this shift felt like an imposition; the rules which were framed as protection and safety from external threats felt like restrictions. What leadership saw as a necessary step toward sustainability, others saw as an infringement on the autonomy they had long been accustomed to and which they came to value as part of their life in the village; a sign that things were no longer *pono* in the way that they understood them to be but growing increasingly imbalanced. Sure, people expressed *aloha* for one another and took care of each other – but this was motivated by a general sense modeled by Cookie that caring for others had value, not by a mandate that one *had* to care. Such relationality had profound value, but it was informal, even if widely respected. This was something different; and for some, it was something to be resisted.

Resisting the New Normal

By the time *kōkua* hours and clean-up days were becoming increasingly mandatory in mid-2020, the village was becoming no longer just a place where people lived – it was a place where people were being asked to invest more frequently, more regularly, and in more organized fashions. And not everyone wanted to – or, at least, not everyone wanted to be forced to invest or care in the ways and to the extent now expected of them. The growing list of expectations didn't simply create more work; it exposed a deeper rift: people's attachments to the village were not all the same. Some, particularly those in leadership and those who had lived at the site since before the big changes of 2012 – were deeply invested in sustaining it as a functioning community. Others were attached to the freedom it offered – to be left alone, to live without judgment, to survive on their own terms in a relatively stable environment. And that freedom was being encroached upon.

A tension was clear: even as the growing structure of the village had, at times, created a safer, more stable environment for those who lived there over time – for instance, in the creation of nightly security duties to keep trouble away – many resisted engaging with that structure since it required them to put the community increasingly before themselves. For those who had survived adverse treatment, abuse, and houselessness through a dogged individualism, this was a difficult – and often unwanted – reconciliation to make. They wanted to be left alone as they had been in previous years, when they weren't bothered because they weren't a bother. That had been the operating norm of the village for a long time, and how they avoided scrutiny or harm within the community. Now, things were changing. They were not just being asked to agree to community rules – they were being told more and more what to do and how to do it.

RT summed up this resistance and resentment bluntly: “We all houseless. Now one houseless telling another houseless what to do?” For her, and others like her, the idea of being required to contribute – to be told what to do by someone who was in the same position as her – felt like a contradiction of the very freedom the village was supposed to provide. It felt like a form of disrespect in a village that had been built around respect. As we sat staring at the ocean, she wondered aloud whether a place where she could exist without the constant expectations of others was even real. It was not that RT had not built pilina with some people in the village – I regularly found her sitting around in an old pickup truck talking story with Aunty Denise. But even if she cared about others and offered kōkua in her own way, she wanted it to come from her own choice – not from obligatory requirements. In her quiet wondering about a fantasy of somewhere freer, it was clear to me that her attachment to the village had limits. Within a few months of that conversation, RT had left the kaiāulu, striking out to find that mythic place of fewer obligations, fewer ties that bind.

For longtime community contributors, the new expectations weren't seen as a betrayal but as a long-overdue correction. As Sis pulled weeds near the makai storage area one day, she watched other residents pass by without stopping and shook her head. “You'd think somebody that lives here, if they go by and see somebody doing this, they would help.” When I offered kōkua, she declined – I wasn't a resident, and I'd “done enough” already by helping her in the donations tent

that morning. Her frustration wasn't simply about the physical labor; it was about what counted as belonging. Helping was an expression of pilina – not just between individuals, but with the village itself. Taking up kuleana for the land and for shared spaces demonstrated care for the collective, and by extension, a rightful place within it. While many residents had built strong pilina with one another personally, pilina with the *collective* – with the idea of the village as a living whole – was less consistently felt. Some saw communal responsibilities as someone else's kuleana, not their own. Requiring people to contribute revealed this tension: where pilina with individuals had long been nurtured and even given the village the moral-relational structure discussed in Chapter 2, pilina with the collective remained uneven, and in some cases, shallow.

As collective kōkua became more structured and expected, it introduced a new dimension of strain even among those who had strong interpersonal pilina. Contribution became not only a way of affirming connection to the village as a whole, but a test of interpersonal relationships. At a clean-up, Eva, who otherwise spoke warmly of Katie, remarked, “Katie never ever comes neither” – not out of personal animosity, but out of frustration that even trusted friends were absent when kuleana called. Nicole, looking over the remnants of Cudgy's old camp, muttered, “If more of dem would come out, it'd go faster.” Carol criticized entire sections of the village for neglecting their kuleana, while Carl, a newer resident, lamented that “good people” were being “outnumbered” by “users.” These frustrations weren't rooted in a lack of pilina between individuals; they emerged precisely because pilina existed, and the expectation that it should extend outward into collective contribution was becoming harder to meet. Structure organized communal acts of care, but it also complicated interpersonal relations – introducing a layer of judgment, resentment, and disappointment onto bonds sustained by informal, interpersonal rhythms of mutual support.

Who is the Village For?

The deepening rift between autonomy and collective kuleana – and the differing attachment that those in the village had to it as a collective – did not just emerge through shifts in daily labor or expectations around kōkua – it also played out in how residents reacted to the impending mauka

relocation of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. In community meetings, Cookie and other leaders framed the move as “going home,” an opportunity for greater permanence and self-determination – a chance to build a lasting pu‘uhonua on land free from state control. This framing also shaped how relocation was presented beyond the village, creating the impression for outside observers, funders, and the general public that the entire community was unified in its readiness, excitement, and desire to move mauka and begin this new stage as a collective front.

But for many residents, the move mauka represented a kind of loss. In theory, mauka relocation promised greater safety, yet it also symbolized something else: increased structure, more shared responsibility, and collective oversight. These were the very things that many residents who most actively resisted involvement in community activities and kōkua feared most encroaching upon their lives. The proposal to relocate brought to the surface the same tension that emerged in response to increased expectations of mandatory labor: not everyone had built the same level of pilina with the village as a collective. Some felt attached primarily to the freedom it allowed – the very means through which they had received care from the collective, being left alone to come into communal life as they saw fit, and as they felt most comfortable with.

Gina explained that this wasn't ambivalence – it was commitment to a particular way of life. “There's a few that choose to be in this situation and like being in this situation,” she told me. “They don't want to leave. They like how they live here now. They like the freedom of it.” For those residents, the harbor had never been a stepping-stone toward something else – it *was* the thing. It was where they had carved out autonomy, security, and survival on their own terms.

Even the speculative details of life mauka – shared spaces, chore rotations, clustered housing – felt like signs of unwanted change. As I was interviewing Rae for this research, Gina – who was taking care of Rae's daughter that day – noted that “there's gonna be chores... Like sign up, maybe like a sign-up? You might sign up for bathroom, or shower... I'm not sure how they're gonna do it.” While no formal systems were yet in place, even the anticipation of routine made some residents uneasy. For a long time, the village allowed people to avoid each other if they wanted. Mauka, it was feared and expected, would require them to engage more. Mahina expressed concern that the

standardization of housing would clash with the individualized structures people built for themselves over years. “Everybody has their own camp here,” she said. “But every camp is different. The size, the way it is. And up there, everything is gonna be the same... That might be hard for some people.” She laughed as she ticked off names: “I know Tariq will have a problem with that... He went and made his own little extensions. I know Chip is gonna have an issue with that too, ‘cause of all the shit he has, ya know?”

For others, resistance to relocation had less to do with future rules and more to do with *present* pilina – not with people, but with the land itself. Gary, for instance, had no plans to leave. “That’s where his girl passed away,” Gina said quietly as we talked, trying to keep her words out of earshot of others. “He don’t wanna do that.” Gary’s primary bond in Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu wasn’t with the governance structure or collective project of the village. It was to the place where love and loss had shaped his everyday life – to the ‘āina itself. While in Chapter 2, Sis expressed that the support of the community was strong enough to pull her away from the ocean, other residents – not just Gina – told me that there was no way Gary would leave. Roxy offered a similar reflection. “Most of the people down here don’t wanna move,” she told me. “They feel this is their home.” She herself was open to leaving – but only for the sake of her children and grandchildren. “We’ll have to let them live in a better environment, a better place, you know? A house, with hot water and electricity... Things they never did have before.” For her, the move was a sacrifice – not a clear improvement.

Even those who saw the move as necessary weren’t sure how to feel about it. “I’m not looking forward to it,” Mahina admitted. “It’s a new place, a new environment; it’s different, it’s change. Change is scary.” She paused, reflecting on what made the village feel like home in the first place. “Maybe it’s the village, the people, and the location, ya know what I mean? But if you take one of those away – like location – maybe the village and the people aren’t gonna be enough for it to feel like home anymore.” Mahina’s hesitation revealed something deeper: the sense of home in Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was not just about people or place alone, but about the delicate, interconnected web of pilina between individuals, the collective, and the ‘āina itself that defined the village and residents’ experience of place. For residents who had built hard-won stability at the village after sometimes

years – if not decades – of shifting from place to place, disrupted from sweep to sweep, the anxiety was not just about moving – it was about whether the fragile web of pilina between people, place, and community could survive the shift, and what would remain in its stead.

The tension around relocation did not reveal a lack of care for the village or their fellow residents — it revealed a divergence in what the village was to those who lived beneath the kiawe and behind those pallet fences. For some, Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was a collective built through care, labor, and mutual responsibility. For others, it was a space of escape – valuable precisely because it allowed them to maintain stability and autonomy away from the people and institutions that harmed them. The proposal to move mauka forced these conceptualizations and relations into conflict, just as the tensions over how to respond to increasing external scrutiny brought them to the surface. Residents weren’t just being asked to relocate. They were being asked to reattach – to trust, to participate, and to belong in ways that some never wanted and still weren’t sure they could. And for those who did not want to move, the expectations that came with relocation – the clean-ups, compliance, communal labor – felt even more tenuous. If the mauka land wasn’t their future, then the village’s investment in that future wasn’t necessarily theirs to share.

A Village Without Cookie

Not everyone believed in the growing structure of the village or felt impassioned to participate in the shift toward greater communal kuleana. While kōkua hours and clean-ups were becoming more formalized, participation remained uneven and buy-in was far from universal. Even Mahina, who praised the changes and their effect on the community, admitted to not coming out for required service, asserting that because she did not bother anyone, it was not a big deal:

To be honest, I haven’t been getting my community service...if they did enforce it heavily, my ass would be fucked up...and I don’t really go to community meeting. But, but then again, I don’t bother anybody, ya know what I mean? I stay at my own camp. I do my own thing.

And yet, those who resisted still occasionally came out – and many did so because Cookie did. Her steady presence, built on years of quiet pilina built with residents, brought people into spaces

and events they often otherwise avoided. Cookie didn't need to guilt or command; her authority was built in pilina, not position. She checked in on people, fed them, helped them navigate crises – often without anyone else knowing – and that care built something enduring. I witnessed residents I never saw come out emerge from their tents when Cookie was helping out with community kōkua – joining in, lending a hand, sometimes just standing nearby. They didn't show up for the rules; they showed up for her. Even in a moment of growing fracture – where care felt increasingly caught up in the budding institution of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, and expectations felt imposed – Cookie's pilina with residents still carried power. It didn't erase the rift between autonomy and obligation, but it softened it. For some, her presence made participation feel like care, not compliance.

And then, at the tail end of 2020, Cookie moved from makai to mauka.

She didn't disappear by any means – she came down almost daily for meetings, check-ins, and events, remaining an important and visible part of village life – but she no longer lived full-time at the harbor. There were practical reasons for the move: the whole mauka move was at risk after a few incidents between the neighbors and the residents who first moved mauka, culminating with the residents' dog biting someone:

I say to them, you still *[inaudible]* why the dog should stay alive? You guys making my life hard. I say everyt'ing we do, this fuckin' person could took from us. That's the only reason why I made that decision I'm going up.

Cookie had poured everything into the village for the last fifteen years of her life – had held off at least three sweeps and seen the village through the transitions necessary to prevent them. She was not about to see all of that go by the way because of a dog bite. She was a believer – the chief believer – in the value of the village to those who lived there. She was needed, and she went.

Cookie's move didn't cause the fraying of village participation, but it made a growing tension over obligation and autonomy, as well as the personal differences in relating to the village, harder to ignore. Her presence was never just about authority, but about pilina – and pilina is inherently relational, unable to be transferred to others because it is built and grown in the unique relationship between two entities. As Gina put it, "It takes a long time to build trust. I think, I think Mamas has

built trust with a lot of people.” And now, that person who some people had grown to trust through pilina built, who provided a relational reason to be involved, was not around as often.

Leaders felt the shift— not because things collapsed, but because the already fragile thread of participation frayed even further. The tensions around relocation, the uneven buy-in, the differences in how people understood and related to the village – all of it already made engagement a delicate dance. But now, even the minimal compliance that leadership could once count on began to falter further. Without Cookie physically present at all hours and times, her relational gravity was harder to lean on. Kālepa captured this shift bluntly:

They don't make it a point to come out and participate. Even for a neighbor. Some barely can make 'em to the damn meetings. And yet meetings is no more than an hour, little bit more. But...let alone to even ask about putting in their eight hours for community service and, um, you know, security and that kine thing.

This was a deeper rupture. It was no longer just a matter of people failing to contribute to collective projects – it was that the ethic of showing up for each other, the everyday pilina between neighbors, was also breaking down. Haukea, reflecting on what had changed, tried to name it in a community meeting that Cookie was unable to make:

We just gotta work together. I mean...we all used to look out for one anoddah. We all used to make sure that our neighbors was doing okay. Even when we all knew that one was sick, because the other one was visiting, making sure that that person was okay. What happened?

No one responded. The question hung in the humid air, unspoken but deeply understood. It wasn't just that Cookie was gone. It was that, without her, the care people once offered had nowhere to land. What remained –meetings, hours, expectations – felt even more like unwanted commitments.

The shifts weren't just visible in attendance or participation; they showed up in tone, in attitude, in how people did the work – or didn't. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Kīpuka 'Aineamalu's outreach program, once a source of pride and a living extension of its core relational values of care, pilina, and kōkua. As part of a greater restructuring toward visible displays of kuleana and cohesion following the sweep threat of 2016, the outreach program had been established, in which residents brought toiletries, supplies, and support to other houseless individuals along the Wai'anae Coast –

not as charity, but as a gesture of care and a way to build pilina. Outreach had always been about connection: stopping to talk story, checking in, asking what people needed, seeing others as more than recipients. It had never just been about the drop-offs.

But in Cookie's absence from regular outreach shifts, that ethos began to hollow out. Outreach still happened – supplies were still delivered – but something deeper shifted. Haukea, frustrated by what she was witnessing, described to Cookie one day how outreach had devolved into a "hit and go" operation, abandoning the relationship-building that was central to the effort:

...and that's how it's been, that's how it's been lately. I would say, couple months after you [Cookie] stopped coming with us? Now, that's how it's been – it's, uh, *beep beep beep!* Wait five minutes. Oh, nobody coming out? We out next one.

Rather than stepping out to engage with people, the outreach team remained in the van, honking the horn, waiting a few minutes, and then driving off. They did not ask people what they needed, nor took the time to understand their struggles. Instead, outreach was shifting toward reductionism: treating people not as unique individuals, but as a generalized population to be managed:

...nobody wants to do that and saying, "Do you need anything? Do you need any clothes?" No ask if they need anything – just, take whatchu call their, info and pau, be out. That's how it is now. And I'm like, so basically we not Outreach. We just drop offs.

It wasn't that residents stopped caring. But without Cookie's presence to model a different rhythm – one based in patience, listening, and reciprocal pilina – many defaulted to something more familiar: efficiency. The very forms of impersonal, institutional behavior that residents had been harmed by – quick judgments, detached transactions, care without connection – began to seep into village life, not imposed from the outside, but recreated from within:

...we not building relations, we not doing what Outreach is supposed to do. We, what we doing is, we just go...it's like we dropping off. We drop off and then no build relations, no see how like, what the people *need*. Ya know like, sometimes when I still talking to da clients, everybody still wait like, "*Hello, you pau?*" Ya know, and then after, get, get to a point where I have to stop doing what I have to do because, oh, the car gon' go.

For Haukea, this wasn't just disappointing – it was a sign. What was happening in Outreach was happening elsewhere in the village. An ethic of relational care that came to define the village's

relational field by early 2020 was becoming harder to sustain under the weight of increased formal obligation. Without Cookie's constant relational presence, more and more residents treated kuleana as a checklist rather than a commitment. The Outreach team still delivered supplies to those who needed them, but the meaning behind the act – the intimacy and dignity of it – was faded.

And even that, Haukea noted, was often performative. Cookie might have been gone from the day-to-day, but when she *did* show up, participation surged – same for Outreach as for clean-ups. People came out. They helped and cleaned. They suddenly seemed to be on board with the vision. But when she left again, so did the effort.

Mamas, you gon' watch. Because, because when the Outreach know that, know you going to step in, then, then it's gonna be like, *Oh we're, we're gon' do stuff that we don't, we don't normally do* because you're there. It's gonna be all like, *Ho, Mamas was here so we gotta dis, we gotta do dis, we gotta do dis*. Ya know?

This wasn't about fear or even chiefly about performance. Residents showed up for Cookie not because she enforced care, but because she embodied it. When she wasn't around, there was little relational reason left holding things together – no daily reminder of *why* the work mattered, no steady force to reinforce that kuleana wasn't just a rule, but a *relationship*.

The absence of Cookie from constant life didn't create this tension – it just made it harder to ignore. Residents were already pulling back and questioning why they should invest in a system that increasingly felt more obligatory. But without Cookie's constant presence – her way of making kuleana feel lived, not imposed – that tension sharpened. And so, the question shifted: not whether people would participate, but how leadership should respond when they didn't.

Holding Together What No Longer Holds

By the time Cookie moved mauka, the village was already under strain. The growing demands of relocation – and the external scrutiny that came with it – had begun to reshape not just how governance functioned, but who it was for. Many of the structures that came to define daily life at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu had emerged in part responding to outside pressures: from state agencies, from neighbors, from potential funders of the move. And while the shift toward greater transparency,

coordination, and shared kuleana brought benefits – cleaner spaces, less conflict, more consistent care – it also affected what it meant to be a resident. As the village gained some notoriety as a model of grassroots governance and a potential solution to the O’ahu houselessness crisis, it increasingly took on the shape of a movement – one not just physical up mauka, but sociopolitical. For those who once lived quietly on the margins of the village, who contributed in their own ways but never signed up for a fully organized system, rising expectations that accompanied this shift felt less like an evolution and more like a form of conscription. They hadn’t agreed to be part of a movement. And they certainly hadn’t agreed to be governed by one.

As the stakes grew – from state negotiations to the public visibility of the mauka move – so too did the pressure on leaders to make everything work. Cookie’s relocation created a new kind of strain among already resistant residents, and leadership responded by leaning more heavily on tools of enforcement to accomplish what must be accomplished. The no-show list — a long existent but rarely invoked method of tracking those who showed up for communal kōkua – began to be used more often and more seriously. Residents who missed mandatory kōkua or security shifts were now being monitored and, in some cases, compelled to make up the labor. One Sunday, several people on the list were bussed up to the mauka property for Make a Difference Day, where they spent the morning doing manual labor. The mood was bitter and Nani, Cookie’s cousin who oversaw the effort, did little to alleviate it. On a speakerphone call with Cookie (who was off-island) at the end of the day, she declared loudly for everyone to hear: “Yup! They coulda did more.” Rather than acknowledging that people contributed, she shamed them for not doing enough. “Everybody was bitching and complaining,” one resident told me. “Tension is festering and building.”

Other leaders tried to lean on the pilina they had built instead. After a community meeting, Rae shouted for Zach to sign up for pantry duty. When he groaned and suggested the morning shift, she laughed and called him out with personal knowledge of his behavior: “Nah, your ass gonna be sleeping in the morning.” He groaned again, acknowledging she was right – and signed up. These exchanges could still work, but fewer people were coming out, and even once-familiar interactions were starting to strain. With limited participation, leaders found themselves scrambling – trying to

catch people where they could, relying on the strength of their existing pilina, and using whatever leverage they had. Cookie remained the exception. “It doesn’t help that Cookie isn’t pushing this clean-up,” Carl said one day when barely anyone came to help clean up rubbish by the ravine. But Cookie wasn’t around as often, busy with details and meetings about the mauka relocation. Without her constant presence, even leaders who cared deeply for others found themselves enforcing lists, chasing compliance, and carrying burdens that no longer felt shared.

This had increasingly deleterious effects on leadership. When care and pilina had become more central to how leaders were chosen, many stepped forward not out of ambition but because they were known, trusted, and deeply embedded in the relational life of the village. But as the work of leadership became less about care and more about accountability for work that needed to be done, that relational grounding proved difficult to sustain. The very qualities that made someone a good leader in the 2016-2010 period – presence, pilina, familiarity – were no longer enough for the job. Section captain positions rotated frequently as those in the roles found the work to be too much to handle; by mid-2021, I no longer knew who would show up to the Tuesday leadership meeting when I came off the bus. Leadership, once rooted in pilina, began to default to position. Kuleana became detached from relational ties. Authority drifted into obligation.

Some stayed not because they believed in the system, but because they couldn’t walk away. Reina, Cookie’s hānai daughter, hadn’t asked to lead – but she did, out of love and unspoken debt to the woman who had taken her in when her own parents could not. “Fucking full-time job, 24-hour job living here,” she muttered one morning, cleaning up after a party Cookie had scolded her for others hosting. Her words captured a shift I began to notice across the village: kōkua and especially security shifts were increasingly described as “work” – not as shared kuleana, but obligations to be endured. About six months after Sis passed, Freddy was asked to step into a leadership role. He declined, telling Cookie he needed time to focus on himself. Even so, he was made co-captain – a growing pattern in which those who gave a little were expected to give a lot more.

Thus, the loss of autonomy wasn’t only affecting residents; it pressed on the leadership too. Expectations had grown for everyone. Leaders no longer just offered residents kōkua or stepped

in when needed – they were asked to manage systems, hold others accountable, and navigate the emotions of a village under strain – and, increasingly, many were struggling to keep up with the load. Gina, who was close to many in leadership, named the tension plainly:

I think some people need to reevaluate why they're doing it. And maybe if this is something they want to do, ya know? Or is this something forced upon them? Or if they're feeling obligated because Mama asked them? Ya know, when you do something because you feel obligated, as opposed to doing something because you want to do it – the way you fulfill that role comes across a lot different. If you're obligated – if you feel obligated like you have to, you're forced to – you're not gonna do things as, as, as exceptional as you would if you were in it for the right reasons, ya know?

Her observation pointed to a deeper tension. Pilina with Cookie could made leadership feel like a shared kuleana – a natural extension of relationship, rather than a burden. But as demands rose and autonomy narrowed, even strong pilina could strain under the weight of expectation. It wasn't that leaders cared less; it was that care, when fueled primarily by obligation rather than by genuine, living connection to the collective, could wear thin. In a moment of intense transition and mounting pressure, fulfilling kuleana required more than loyalty to one person. Without the grounding of pilina – not just with Cookie, but with each other and with the village as a whole – leadership roles often became exhausting performances, carried out not with joy, but with resignation.

While few leaders openly rebelled, some responded in a quieter way: they just stopped showing up. These absences did not go unnoticed. At one leadership meeting, someone asked what should happen if captains failed to show up. “Gotta have consequences,” Nani said flatly. “Nobody gonna follow a leader that don't show up to their meetings.” The solution was simple: “take it to Mamas.” Even as leadership was framed around kuleana and community, there was a quiet shift happening – leadership was struggling to be sustained primarily in pilina, so it was increasingly coming back under Cookie's authority to assign and replace roles. Where leadership had evolved to be rooted in relation between resident and captain, it was now taking on shades of the past, easily conferred and revoked, less about connection and more about position – and very often framed by Cookie's ongoing authority in the village. Even Nani, calling for accountability, hinted at the growing burden of leadership on her. “Everybody's a leader,” she said at a captains' meeting with a laugh, though she admitted to everyone that she had been “trying to get out of it” herself. The comments landed

with the group – not just because they were true, but because they reflected a deeper unease about how many felt trapped by titles, obligated to perform rather than relationally sustained.

As leaders grew more overwhelmed, they also grew more inconsistent – enforcing rules they themselves didn't always follow, like mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic. These contradictions chipped away at the moral grounding leadership drew from. If rules weren't modeled with integrity, they were perceived not just as violations of autonomy, but signs that kuleana was no longer tied to trying to treat residents in ways that were pono. As Rae put it:

The actual people that drive me crazy is the leaders. The leaders who don't do what they're supposed to do. Who keep breaking the rules. Ya know, not coming out to help out with anything. And pretty much all they do is complain about the people. That's the ones that drive me crazy.

As connection became more strained in leadership, obligation began to take up greater space. Dealing with the immense pressures of relocation, leaders often resented residents for not stepping up; some residents, in turn, resented leaders for the demands placed on them and the perceived erosion of their autonomy. Others quietly noted the gap between expectations and example, feeling the weight of obligations modeled but not always embodied. Participation gave way, in some cases, to avoidance; frustration quietly threaded through spaces once anchored by shared kuleana. While care still surfaced in everyday interactions and moments when Cookie was near, it increasingly competed with a feedback loop of blame and fatigue, where both leaders and residents felt pulled away from the connections that had once grounded their commitments. Leadership now asked for more than many could readily give — not only from others, but from themselves.

Leadership as Presence, Not Just Authority

If Cookie and the way in which residents came out for her demonstrated anything, it was that leadership was never just about governance – it was about pilina. People didn't show up for rules or mandates; they showed up for people they felt cared about them, and who they, in turn, cared for. Cookie didn't just direct the village – she was present in it, woven into its daily life. She knew individuals' histories, their struggles, and what motivated them, often before they could name it

themselves. This style of leadership, rooted in aloha and steeped in a deep commitment by Cookie to live and treat people pono, did not demand participation through rules alone; it invited it through relationship, an invitation to trust, and example.

But as leadership shifted away from the more relational model and became more focused on enforcement under rising pressures, that foundation began to thin. Leaders, many of whom were pulled into their roles rather than seeking them out, found themselves stretched – and investing emotional energy in residents who resisted kuleana or openly criticized leadership became harder to sustain. When, at a leadership meeting, Haukea suggested that those in leadership “praise that kine people” who come out to contribute because they “had a hard time getting tem out” and “we have to let them know we appreciate it,” some expressed their agreement, while others scoffed. That was their responsibility, some said – why should we praise them for what they are required to do? For some in leadership, kuleana was now firmly in the realm of transactional obligation, rather than part of a relational web that needed attention and care from both parties to sustain.

Yet relational engagement wasn't just a leadership ideal – it was a necessary part of internal relational repair. Many of these same leaders were once those who ran the village through fear until (and even, at times, beyond) 2016, controlling some and punishing others who resisted their informal authority or were deemed disrespectful. Their past strategies of domination left a residue of harm that still shaped how some residents related to them, especially as tensions rose and demands grew. In a community that had come to accept as part of its kuleana advancing healing from harm, leadership could not simply function; it had to embody care, seek balance, and invest in pilina. Gina saw the consequences when it didn't:

You know, you show you care, people are gonna care. If you don't show you give a shit, they're not gonna give a shit, you know? And Mamas – she might be out front, and of course, as soon as they see her cleaning, then they'll come out and clean too, ya know what I mean? If you care about their lives – what's going on in their lives – they're gonna care about what's going on in 'Aineamalu...They'll be more than willing to come out and clean and willing to come out for mandatory stuff if you just give a shit.

Her words pointed to a deeper breakdown: when leadership became detached, transactional, and reactive, it compromised the care that had come to hold the relational field of the village

together – and it resurfaced, the distrust and disengagement that many had arrived in the village with. Haukea, who was among the first residents to move mauka, saw this disconnect firsthand when she was visiting the village and suggested to Kālepa that a captain should step in to mediate a domestic dispute in their section. Kālepa’s response was telling – she dismissed the idea outright, telling Haukea, “They got no time. They don’t make time.” The work of nurturing balance – of acting pono with people and between leaders and residents – was increasingly set aside. As relations became more vertical than horizontal, pilina became harder to sustain.

To Haukea, this was frustrating because she had seen the opposite approach work. As a former captain, she made a point to build pilina with her residents, learning from Cookie that trust could only emerge from engagement and care. “My meetings, e’erybody talk,” she recalled, remembering how even after months away, her former residents still greeted her with familiarity. She took the time to listen, talk story, create a sense of connection – and because of that, people responded and contributed to upkeep of their section. But that was increasingly no longer the norm. Instead, many leaders had grown distant, focused on enforcement over engagement. Instead of making time for residents, leaders often viewed building pilina as secondary to logistical pressures.

Leadership wasn’t just struggling to get residents involved – it was also failing to provide clear, consistent direction. Decisions made in meetings often failed to reach the broader village either because the leader did not share the information, or because section residents would not show up. This left people frustrated and confused. Even the basic rules about visitors contradicted, with conflicting policies posted around the village. One wooden sign, hand-painted in large blue letters, read, “No outsiders are allowed in here after 4:30 PM – KEEP OUT,” but only a few feet away, another sign stated that visitors were allowed but had to leave by 9:00PM. The contradictions weren’t just an inconvenience – they undermined the legitimacy of leadership’s ability to govern. Residents who asked for clarification were often given different answers depending on who they asked, were told that they were the problem, or were dismissed outright.

The confusion extended beyond visitor policies – residents often misunderstood expectations for labor, clean-ups, and relocation efforts because instructions were either not communicated or

were directly contradicted by leadership. A conversation between two frustrated residents summed up the issue:

1: We were told here at this meeting right here to bring the metal to the front. Who told you not to?

2: I don't know...

1: Brah, that needs to be fuckin' said! That's what I mean!

Misinformation and poor communication bred further resentment. Many residents stopped caring about rules altogether, convinced that even if they tried to follow them, leadership would either change their minds or fail to enforce them anyway. Rules over those last several years had become less arbitrary in their enforcement, but now, even what they were felt like it was always shifting.

A Fire Rages and the Strain Deepens

External actors had long shaped life at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, but in this era of the village – as the wholesale mauka move loomed in the near-future – things felt different. It was not just that pressure from outside dialed up tensions inside over autonomy, pilina, communal responsibility, involvement, respect, and care. It was that, increasingly, those external actors stepped directly into the village – inspecting, evaluating, and – in both subtle and overt ways, rendering judgment on not just the village's readiness, but its worthiness. Compliance with these external actors wasn't just a strategy for avoiding sweeps anymore; it had become a condition of continued existence and shaping future. Residents who once lived under the radar now found themselves not just required to participate, but at times, were put on display. As Mahina put it:

You got these tours walking through here all the time looking at us... That's kind of weird for me. It's like, 'what not to do when you grow up,' or 'this is where you gonna end up'...But do whatcha gotta do.

What was once a struggle to survive on one's own terms was now a demand to perform cohesion and a degree of acceptability politics under watchful eyes. The balancing act between autonomy and collective responsibility that was stretched thin frayed even further. And when a fire tore through the village in September 2021, that tension exploded into view.

By the time the fire occurred, the village was already under the scrutiny of the Honolulu Fire Department because of a fire a few months earlier. Flames had spread from one resident's area to another's, and although residents acted quickly to contain the blaze, the fire department still got involved. Fire extinguishers, which had been concentrated in the village pantry, were mandated to be distributed throughout the village. Yet aside from this, the attention from HFD after that initial fire was minimal, especially compared to the severe response from the latter fire.

The second fire occurred during a car wash event, a rare moment when many of the village's residents were offsite. Two residents lost everything. The suspected arsonist, a man named Jeremy who had been evicted from the village, allegedly set the fire as an act of revenge. Multiple witnesses reported his involvement, and some said he had admitted to starting the blaze. But when residents attempted to file a report with the police, they were met with indifference. "Why we not considered human?" Cookie asked bitterly at the time. "We had eyewitnesses. We told them exactly what happened. But the police wouldn't even do the report." The fire did not just attract the attention of the authorities but opened the village up to institutional treatment that was not pono – instead, it was dehumanizing and disrespectful. The refusal to acknowledge the village's suffering or accept their testimony as legitimate was compounded by what happened next. In the days after the fire, as the Honolulu Fire Department (HFD) arrived to assess the situation, several residents overheard one firefighter make a chilling remark: "We should just let this place burn."

The words stung – not just for their cruelty, but for what they revealed about how the village would continue to be maligned no matter what rules and regulations they put in place, no matter how many times they welcomed in the community, cleaned up rubbish, or drove their outreach van down the Westside distributing toiletries to other houseless people; and no matter how much they gave up their autonomy for the good of the collective. It was a moment of confirmation for many residents, reinforcing the long-standing belief that institutions like HFD and the police did not and would never view them as people worth protecting. To these agencies, Kīpuka 'Aineamalu was an inconvenience – one that might be better off erased. Rae, among those who heard the comment, expressed outrage at how the village was dehumanized:

The part where they say they're not gonna stop the fire next time? That's messed up. We do have people who do pay taxes in this village...We have kids and kūpunas in this village. They're just gonna let the fire burn? So, if the fire ends up killing any one of our people, is anything going to happen to them for just standing there and letting it burn and not trying to help put it out?

Despite the hostility from HFD, the village was now expected to comply with newly implemented fire safety regulations in order to continue operating and existing. Furthermore, pressure was on everyone as a collective – much like it was with pressure from DLNR. As Pua told Minnie as they anxiously watched firefighters go through Minnie's encampment during the first major inspection: “One no pass, all no pass. We all go down as a village.”

What was once an informal, resident-managed system of fire prevention was now subject to increased external control. HFD issued widespread mandates, requiring all gas tanks to be moved to designated storage areas and restricting fires after dark. What was framed as a safety measure had immediate consequences for daily life. Residents like Gina who worked or had unpredictable schedules found themselves struggling to prepare meals within the newly imposed limits:

I'm not glad to see that rule about the fires going to 10 o'clock because a lot of people don't cook before 8. Ya know? And they're shit outta luck 'cause they won't get to eat! Ya know, and I'm one of the people; I work until seven o'clock and sometimes I work after that and I forget to fucking cook before 8 and I'm fucked!

Beyond practical implications, compliance required a shift in the village's governance. Leadership was now responsible not just for enforcing rules set by the village, but those dictated by HFD; and residents were expected to conform. Inspections became a source of stress and tension. Firefighters walked through the village, entering into and checking camps for violations, issuing warnings, and demanding that residents remove flammable materials from their homes. For some, this new level of oversight felt indistinguishable from the institutional control they had sought to escape and which increasingly defined life in the village – a disrespect of their personal space. Rae expressed how this was affecting leadership in particular, who held kuleana for both their own spaces and the public areas of the village, showing the strain that leaders found themselves under because they could not motivate residents to come out and offer kōkua:

Them coming to inspect is very irritating 'cause us as leaders gotta go and go clean up in areas, and we hardly ever have time to clean up our own areas and make sure that we're ready for the inspection ourselves. Which is what I deal with every time. I never ever have time to clean my tent.

Leaders like Nani, already frustrated with the burden of village maintenance before the fire, found themselves in the role of enforcers, pressuring residents to comply with HFD's demands in order to avoid further consequences. "Tomorrow we hauling rubbish out of Section 6," she yelled at a sparsely attended community meeting. "People gotta help, 'cause inspection coming and you guys gotta work with us!" The expectation was clear: if the village did not conform, it would be deemed ungovernable. And if that happened, there would be no negotiations – only displacement.

For some residents, the new fire safety rules felt not just like an imposition on their autonomy, but like arbitrary, bureaucratic obstacles. Pua questioned the logic behind HFD's mandates:

My property is big: 50 feet by 70 feet. I wanted to keep my fuel on one side and my generator on the other, since that would keep them 20-30 feet apart. But they told me I couldn't. I had to put my fuel in Cookie's old kitchen. How is that safer? You put all the fuel together in one place, that's more dangerous. One fire gon' take everything out.

Beyond safety concerns, the new regulations created logistical challenges. Kūpuna and disabled residents, who were incorporated into the village's web of care, were now expected to haul fuel across the village, an exhausting and physically demanding task. And with fuel stored in communal spaces, theft became a new worry. Residents who had once been responsible for their own supplies now had to rely on a centralized system that did not always function smoothly, with leadership that many did not believe would actually keep an eye on these collected resources.

Eventually, the village passed its fire inspection – but not without significant impact on morale. Heightened scrutiny from HFD subsided, and compliance was no longer an immediate crisis. But the impact of the fires lingered in the frustration of those forced to change their ways, as well as in an increased level of internal scrutiny from those who had pitched in on those that had not. Waina complained to me about this one day:

We all clean up our own shit buckets. We - you not out there clean...that means if you're not clean - if you're not doing that, you clean up your own mess, you're not even helping during the cleanup. Where are you? You cannot even clean that?

That means you not cleaning out there when we're cleaning. So you're not doing shit at all. That's not fair.

The village had come a long way from turning a blind eye to Uncle Cudgy's 'opala hoarding. Over time, the ethic of mutual care that had once defined daily life was joined – and sometimes displaced – by expectations of formal participation. As communal labor became more structured and closely monitored, some residents experienced a shift: participation no longer always felt like a voluntary expression of kuleana, but sometimes like an obligation measured by compliance. The village had always had tension between individual autonomy and collective survival, stretching back to the influx of newcomers in 2012. But as outside scrutiny intensified with the looming mauka move, the flexibility that once allowed pilina to grow in its own ways narrowed. Kīpuka 'Aineamalu had endured external pressures before. Now, it was the quiet strain on internal relationships that posed a different kind of challenge. Would this great experiment in governance survive itself?

That Which Was Stolen

“What have you had taken?” I asked Aunty Pep one day when we were sitting together with one another a few months after the fires. We had been talking for a while about her life and the village – about how she came to live there when she and her husband were swept from the beach park, about her deep friendship with Roxy and Liora, you know – *da kine*. But when I asked that question, she grew somber. Soon, she was crying.

My bag, with all my fucking papers...this little trunk case, with all my fucking stuff, all my personal stuff I had. My bag, I always used to carry 'em around...and my brother gave me my birthday necklace. That was in there. My grandkids' pictures. Them was all together. Everything. Everything that I tried to build up for me – took 'em. And he look at me after, and tell me – “No Aunty.” He call me Aunty!...I really pissed 'cause he call me Aunty and look at me...and then they gonna do nothing? That's fucked up...

Cookie's nephew Chief, who lived in the far back corner of the village, was stealing. It wasn't one or two things – it was a spree. People saw him crossing paths and entering tents, rummaging through belongings, walking away with things that weren't his. Some items resurfaced, returned only after confrontation. Others were gone for good – amped (*sold*) or dumped or who knows what

happened. Residents like Pep whispered their frustrations, their disbelief. Leadership, which readily stepped aside when the fire department entered people's tents in the name of compliance, now hesitated to stop Chief from waltzing in on his own accord. For Aunty Roxy, the reason was obvious: "Because they're family. I'm being straight up...everybody here knows that."

In my time at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, village leadership leaned heavily on the idea that the village was a family bound by mutual care and responsibility. During the earliest days of COVID-19, Ke'ao reminded residents to look out for one another, saying even something as small as "just saying hi without an attitude" could uplift someone because "that's what families do – we uplift." When the village struggled to mobilize for fire inspections, Cookie urged residents, "We supposed to be one village here, one family, not separate. We need to stand!" Reina and Pua echoed this often, telling residents that Cookie thought of them as her family. These reminders were more than rhetorical appeal – they were framed connection and pilina as the foundation of village life. Family was not a metaphor but a call to relational kuleana: to see one another not through rules or requirements, but through ties of care, recognition, and shared responsibility. In invoking family, leaders didn't simply ask for compliance; they asked residents to invest emotionally in one another, to sustain the village through everyday acts that built pilina over time.

For some, this wasn't just talk – it was real. Aunty Roxy described the village to me as a family because "everybody helps each other out...sitting down together, eating." Family was care. Family was showing up for one another, in small ways and big ones. But if family was about care, then why was it sometimes hard to get leadership to engage with residents? Why did "family" seem to be invoked mainly when sacrifices were necessary – more security, more kōkua, more willingness to comply for the good of the whole – but not when protection was owed? *Family* at the institutional level could feel like it had become a tool, something used to extract, but not to return. And while the idea of family was being used to justify sacrifice, Cookie's actual family – Chief – was not being held to account. Rules that applied to everyone else vanished when it came to him. People had already lost possessions to theft, but now they were losing something more – the belief that fairness existed at all, and that respect remained central to the village. Rae didn't sugarcoat it:

That's what the people are saying. This is exactly what they're saying: 'Cookie's family can do whatever the fuck they want. Break whatever rules they want. Steal from anybody and nothing will ever happen to them.' That's what the people are saying.

"They're becoming more family," Pep continued through tears. "Their family is running this. So, whatever he does over there, they're family – they listen to him. That's not right."

For Auntie Roxy, the hypocrisy was glaring. She saw leadership act swiftly before, enforcing the village's zero-tolerance policy on stealing without hesitation even when there was no 'evidence.' With Chief, they asked for proof but refused to say what kind of proof would be sufficient. When they wanted someone gone, no proof was needed – yet when it was one of their own, it became an impossible standard to meet. The same institutional patterns that drove many to the village and that had gradually disappeared within its borders – unfair rules, shifting expectations, impossible compromises – were now reappearing. The sense that Kīpuka 'Aineamalu was different – fairer, more protective, more just – was being thieved away alongside people's belongings:

When you are caught stealing, you are immediately relieved of your place. You gotta go. Now it's 'I need proof. I need proof.' How much more proof do you need? This whole village – people who live in this village – knows and sees this person doing 'em.

Rules were meant to keep people safe from harm, not from accountability. Rae could see what was happening – rules were applied differently based on who you were. Chief didn't even deny what he had done – he admitted to stealing, repeatedly, sometimes even leading people to the stolen items himself. If that wasn't enough proof, what was?

Every time he gets questioned, he admits to stealing it. That's my thing... why is he still here? That's what I was just about to say. Can't Cookie use that as evidence? He's admitting to it. He'll literally walk you to his tent or to whoever he wen' amp 'em to and he'll show it, and give it back. That should be evidence enough. I guess not.

What had once been unthinkable – that a person could openly steal from his neighbors and remain – was now happening in plain sight.

For those whose belongings were stolen, this wasn't just a violation of personal autonomy and security – it was a betrayal by the very system they had sacrificed for, a sign respect had hollowed

out of the village. Residents had agreed, albeit reluctantly, to abide by the rules – security shifts, kōkua hours, compliance with governance meant to protect them. Newcomers, bringing in baggage and belongings like residents before them, were asked to sign contracts agreeing to these rules – rules that implied, if not promised, structure and security, forming a base on which pilina could begin to be built between individuals and the collective community. But when theft happened at the hands of Cookie's family, structure remained firmly in place as security vanished. People who followed the rules lost what was theirs, and nothing was done. Rae, responsible for explaining the zero-tolerance policy on stealing to new arrivals, had no good answer:

The main question to ask about is the zero tolerance – no stealing. They could be in here for like, what, maybe a week? And someone has already stole from them. And that is the number one rule that they initial on the contract. So they come and ask, 'What do we do about stealing?' They thought it's zero tolerance. How do you answer that question?

There was no good answer, because the truth was unavoidable – what had been stolen was not just possessions, but the belief that the rules existed to protect everyone.

For many residents, Chief's thefts weren't just about stolen belongings – they told them who was safe, and who wasn't. While most people in the village had to watch their backs, keep track of their possessions, and live with the anxiety of whether they would be punished for not showing up, Chief – who rarely if ever came to community functions or kōkua – moved freely to do as he chose. His actions weren't met with consequences, only excuses. Gina saw it for what it was:

He always has an excuse for why he steals from somebody; always a reason, always a reason, ya know? But it's because he's safe to do it in here. Whereas if he does it out there, he could get hurt...That's why he's stealing – because he's safe. And he knows nothing's gonna happen to him. Period.

This was a strange inversion of pilina, where one could harm because of the ties one had built. The same village whose residents protected, aided, and humanized the most vulnerable among them now left all its residents vulnerable. They were not just frustrated – some were afraid.

Aunty Roxy saw the consequences of this neglect clearly. People were even more unwilling to step out onto common paths to perform required duties or sit around and talk story, knowing that stepping away from their belongings for even a short time meant risking theft:

How can you have them do security? We got our leads up front, right, in order to do security? They don't want to do security because they're afraid their stuff's gonna be stolen. They wouldn't even go to no-show because their stuff will get stolen, no matter what.

Security shifts, meant to keep the village safe from outside threats, now felt meaningless when internal threats went unchecked and unaddressed. The very governance meant to provide stability was instead making people more vulnerable, compounding feelings of frustration over the ever-increasing demands on people's time. Now, those demands – the same obligations – were actively putting people at risk of harm.

Even those who once felt secure in the village questioned what safety meant. People whispered about the dangers of speaking up, of pushing back too hard. The old days of the village proved how quickly aggressive enforcement could escalate, how retaliation could be swift. If rules were no longer being enforced, what else could unravel? Rae referenced raised fears that Nani, who over the course of the village's existence had become known as one of the chief arbiters of control when she would be “let off her leash,” would do damage again:

If they mouth off to Nani, she's gonna call her sons and they're all going to come and attack the person that mouthed off to her. They're scared of the repercussions that's gonna happen when they open their mouth about any one of 'em.

Even if violence as an active means of enforcement had largely faded to the background, residents had not forgotten what was possible. In a village where pilina was meant to be the foundation of mutual care and accountability, the memory of past harm was a reminder of how fragile trust built from it could be – and how quickly relational bonds could be strained when pono was not upheld.

For years, Cookie was the stabilizing force that turned the village away from chaos and violence and toward care. Her leadership was never rooted solely in formal authority or rules – it was built through pilina. She sat with people in their grief, celebrated their survival, took in their children, and treated their struggles as shared kuleana rather than private failures. Through her lived practices of aloha and pono, she built bonds strong enough to hold the village together even in moments of crisis. It was this web of pilina – patient, personal, and persistent – that allowed Kīpuka 'Aineamalu to pivot so many times across its history: from a scattered encampment into a governed community,

through sweeps, setbacks, and the pressures of public scrutiny. Cookie's relational leadership gave the village the flexibility to adapt without fracturing. People didn't follow her because they feared her or because the rules demanded it – they followed her because they believed she cared for them, and because that care was shown, day after day, through action. But now, as people watched her do nothing about Chief, as they whispered about what might happen if they spoke up, and as they found themselves afraid to act or even follow the rules for fear of what might happen, the legitimacy that Cookie long embodied – and the village's fragile cohesion – began to quietly yet unmistakably erode.

The betrayal wasn't just that leadership failed to protect them – it was that Cookie, the one person who fought for them, was now allowing relational harm to come to them in ways both interpersonal and institutional. Pep told it straight: "If we cannot solve that main situation that we have and still have, nothing's gonna work. 'Cause it's not fair to others, if one can keep doing 'em and it's okay." Her words captured the deeper fracture: without mutual care, reciprocal kuleana, and a constant tending of relationship – there would be no real village to sustain. There would only be individuals, surviving side by side, but no longer bound together. As Aunty Pua told me, "What happens when we move and there aren't any people?"

For Roxy, the growing fear and doubt in the village was palpable. She spent years believing in the collective project of the village, in the idea that people looked out for each other here and Kīpuka 'Aineamalu was different from the institutions that failed its residents in the past. When she and her family moved to the village, Cookie took in her keiki – to the point where two of them called Cookie *Mom* too. Roxy talked about relocating mauka. But when she spoke about the situation with Chief, her voice carried a deep sense of disillusionment:

People in here is afraid – some people is afraid – to say anything because they might get hurt. I not gon' stand for that... Cookie needs to do what is right. Even though that's your family.

Chief stole more than belongings – he took something harder to replace, because pilina was built mutually over many, many years – often with resistance, sputtering starts and stops, and against a tide of personally held coping strategies that told many residents to stay wary of connection. This

was the foundation of a quiet confidence that people like Roxy had placed in Cookie, in the village, in the belief that this place could be different, that the sacrifices they made and the time they put in would be met with respect. Would they get that belief back? What would happen to the village? And what would the mauka land – to which they were all expected to move – become if they didn't?

As Aunty Pep wiped away tears, her soft, mumbling voice broke under the weight of what felt inevitable if nothing changed:

They need to...they need to solve this before anybody goes up to the land. 'Cause if not, and he's going, everybody's fucked – including the land...We never gonna feel safe. And then he gets the upper hand....and nobody can stop him.

Conclusion: From Fire & Ash, Autonomy & Order

The fire at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu did not begin with the blaze that consumed two campsites – it was smoldering long before. Not with flames, but with pressure; with slow, compounding weight. Governance, grounded in relational rhythms, had grown more formalized. Not in a single turn, nor through some dramatic replacement of care with control. Instead, it was a shift that came through accumulation – of asks, of lists, of expectations and inspections, of obligations that once emerged from pilina but were now increasingly decoupled from it. Care never vanished. It still pulsed through the village – in shared meals, quiet kōkua, the watching of one another's keiki, the tending of kūpuna. Outreach still happened and talking story still unfolded every day under the shade of the kiawe. What changed was not the presence of care, but its anchoring. What was once held together chiefly by pilina – by the relationships that made rules feel reciprocal – was now increasingly held up by obligation, fatigue, and uneven enforcement. What once made kuleana feel like belonging now began, for many, to feel like burden.

From 2016–2020, the village gradually cohered around an ethic of care – less hierarchical, more compassionate, still imperfect, but grounded in Cookie's steady presence and a shared desire for something pono. But that era of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu also had its limits. There were few tools to sustain collective participation when care alone wasn't enough. When external demands grew – relocation logistics, DLNR scrutiny, fire department inspections, funder pressures – the strain grew,

too. Expectations intensified. Autonomy, once respected as a baseline, was encroached upon – not by outright control, but by a slow tightening and expansion of requirements, the routinization of effort, the unacknowledged toll of constant giving. Even leadership felt it.

Cookie's move mauka marked a turning point – not because she disappeared, but because her constant presence and anchoring rhythm were no longer as accessible as they had once been. People still cared about each other, but they had fewer reasons to show up and more reasons to withdraw. The pilina Cookie built with residents softened the sharp edges of accountability. When bonds became less immediate, what remained was a system still running – but more brittle, more tense, more dependent on enforcement than it had ever needed to be when trust that was built over many years between the person in charge and those who followed was far more intact.

Chief's thefts made that tension undeniable. They didn't rupture the village – not entirely – but during my fieldwork, they were the points of some of the strongest strain and exposed what was fraying. Residents had been asked to surrender pieces of autonomy – sign contracts, show up for shifts, invest in collective life. But when they were harmed by someone close to leadership, the system failed to protect them. The rhetoric of family – once used to signal mutual care – sounded different now. Cookie's nephew remained while others were evicted for less. Respect no longer felt evenly distributed and trust, already hard to come by, buckled. With it, a question returned: who is this village for? This was not a collapse. The system didn't break, but it strained and wavered. Its moral grounding felt harder to stand on. Dissipative structures theory tells us that systems evolve through instability, but it does not promise they move toward justice, toward what is pono. Relational sociology reminds us that rules alone cannot sustain a community when the ties that give them meaning begin to thin. At Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, what was once held together by shared investment was increasingly held together by coercion, resignation, and uneven effort.

And yet, beneath the ash, there remained embers. Care continued. Pilina was not erased even as it flickered. What people built was shaken, but not undone. What faltered was not just a structure, but a belief: that the village was still held by shared vision, that kuleana was still guided by care, that leadership was still grounded in the pilina that gave it its shape in this period. What settled at

the end of my time in Kīpuka 'Aineamalu was uncertainty – not just for the future, but for belonging. The kiawe still gave shade to the community – and its thorns still pricked. The question now was not whether the village could survive. It was whether it could still be a place where people wanted to belong – where kuleana and healing might again emerge from the pilina people built together and valued as a whole, and where governance might once more hone closer to care than control.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN THE TENTS & THE TRAILS

“I ka wā ma mua, ka wā ma hope.”

The future is found in the past.

- ‘Olelo No‘eau of Moloka‘i

Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was meant to be a place where people could hold onto what was theirs. Residents arrived with whatever belongings they managed to carry through years of instability – clothes, blankets, photographs, small objects of meaning. They built their camps in ways that suited them best, arranging their spaces for comfort, privacy, and protection. Aunty Frances, her fragile legs bowed out and her hunch strong, did not double the pallets of the foundation, wanting to keep steps into her tent to a minimum. One largely unseen uncle – whose name I never learned – took ripped up old American flags and lined his entire tent with them – but out of patriotism or protest, I never learned. Haukea’s camp, which Kālepa’s ‘ohana took over when the former moved mauka, was nearly a proper house – four walls built by her husband from pallets and spare wood, with an extension for the kids. Cookie’s place in the front of the village sprawled – all the better for residents, keiki and dogs to sit down and talk story inside.

The ways people structured their living spaces mirrored the ways they carried their histories. Many arrived after years of harm – abuse, abandonment, mistreatment by people and institutions who promised help but often deepened a sense of dispossession and hurt. These histories shaped how people moved through the world. Some learned to detach, to trust no one. Others learned to dominate, to take action before someone else could take from them. And some, after years of being treated as disposable, simply came to expect that anything they had could be taken away at any moment. That was certainly the case when police sweeps came through beach parks uprooting people like Aunty Roxy and Aunty Liora or the entire community that was folded into Section 6 of the village after being swept from Mount Lahilahi; and what could have happened if the village itself had been swept and not spared in 2012, then 2016, then 2018, ripping Mahina and Chip away from not just the piles of rusted out bicycles in front of their place, but from the place Chip called home. The place so many of the village’s residents called home.

But at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, there had grown hope that this place could be different. Here, people could set down what they carried. Here, they could build something stable.

What emerged over time, and over struggle, wasn’t simply a settlement, but a form of relational order – held not chiefly by policy or hierarchy, but a collective choreography of independence and interdependence rooted in pilina. The village in my time with them from 2020-2022 operated in a delicate balance. Residents were afforded a certain degree of personal autonomy – the ability to live as they saw fit, to build homes and relationships on their own terms. But that autonomy was made possible, and protected, by a structure that moved between them. Stepping beyond their own tents and onto the well-worn paths of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was an act of care and commitment – one that some residents understood, even if to different degrees, as necessary to protect the communal autonomy of this common home. These paths, running between tents, were not just routes but responsibilities, living spaces where kōkua was offered for the community to endure. Security shifts traced them so often at night that some no longer needed a flashlight, their feet knowing the way, their presence maintaining the safety of their neighbors. Kālepa came out to sweep them of debris, while Sis and her group of wahine cleared kiawe beans until she leapt into pō.

It was precisely because people stepped away from their own spaces to fulfill these obligations – because they walked these paths not just for themselves, but for the collective – that care could flourish on those same trails. These were the same paths where Aunty Pua spotted Emmy coming back into the village and held her heavy head on her shoulder, reassuring her that she would be okay. Where Gina would haul water for kūpuna who struggled to do it for themselves. Where Rae’s two-year old daughter would be found toddling away and returned safely to her mom. Where Terry told Sis that she deserved better, because she was a person – and where lanterns of love hung in line after Sis became an ancestor. These moments weren’t isolated acts of goodness – they were part of the village’s emergent coherence, held together by pilina found and built alongside a delicate equilibrium of trust held between people. These were where small, daily acts of kindness could take root, because a movement of governance made space for a movement of care. The paths between tents were a balance of structure and freedom, obligation and connection. They were the living

infrastructure through which a new, kinder order emerged – not imposed from above but maintained through the dynamic circulation of care and kuleana.

But then the balance shifted; the paths were repurposed as the village was told, one final time, that the paths would be taken over by someone else as they moved mauka, away from this place that had become their home. The trails through the village were walked more often with frustration and resentment as residents were increasingly conscripted to haul rubbish, carry out bags of former belongings, drag out old wood, and roll bikes toward the designated pickup point. DLNR required more cleanup as the mauka move loomed large, and so people adjusted, taking time to walk the trails with whatever needed to be discarded, coming out for kōkua – especially when Cookie would call on them. Some saw it as just another task to keep the village in good standing until the paths were no longer theirs. But others stepped onto the paths less often, reluctant to be seen and pulled into yet another obligation. The trails still carried the rhythms of daily life, but those rhythms were changing, shaped by expectations that had not come from within, but which those in charge had to respond to, expecting more, tracking more – and seemingly caring less.

Then came the fires. The same trails residents selflessly ran across to toss water onto the flaming tents of fellow residents now brought the boots of antagonistic firefighters that tramped into people's camps and tents to search for items that had often made houseless life easier and more bearable. Leadership followed, stepping over thresholds they once would have respected, deciding what could stay and what had to go. What were once private spaces – carefully arranged, shaped by personal histories – were left exposed in the aftermath. It was not just objects that were laid bare, but the things people carried with them for years – the coping mechanisms, the small attempts at security, the fragile sense of control they managed to hold onto. And as those thresholds were crossed, so too were the boundaries that once stabilized the village's relational flow. What once moved in rhythm – autonomy and structure, privacy and shared labor, within a web of pilina – now stuttered under the weight of new demands.

Then, as the social system teetered, Chief began to steal.

His thefts did not occur in a vacuum – they arrived as a bifurcation point. The village had faced strain before – past thefts and fires, massive influxes of new residents, former residents who lied to the public and threatened the legitimacy of the entire project – but the village had always found a way to respond, adapt, restabilize, always buoyed by Cookie and the pilina she built with other. This time felt different. The pilina that made the village cohere did not regenerate as easily, as quickly, as willfully from residents; nor did the trust in Cookie, who – at least initially – did nothing to stop the harm from continuing. The care that once flowed through night patrols and shared meals stuttered and stalled. Tension pooled like mud instead of moving like rain. People pulled back. The coherence that held the village as more than the sum of its parts – that formed a collective with which people could build pilina – began to dissipate into atomized individuals who could not leave their tents, lest they come back and find that yet another possession, and yet another belief in the village, had been taken from them.

People came to Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu carrying what was left of their pasts – worn blankets, old photos, late loved one’s possessions – the things they could hold when so much else had been taken from them. They built their homes around these things, believing they were safe – that in giving back, that which they held would be cared for. But now, as theft spread through the village along and across the paths and tents of the village – when that which seemed private was allowed a very public violation – those carefully assembled lives were being unraveled again, the mementos dumped in rivers, tossed in ‘opae holes, and sometimes never seen again. And in the places where those things were – where memory once lived – what emerged was a long shadow of hurt, distrust, and detachment. The very things people came to Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu to escape were creeping back in. With a strained rage rising beneath her tears, Auntie Pep told me as I tried to comfort her:

Just was starting to have stuff of my own, my personal things that I was building – here comes one asshole. Takes it all away and now I gotta build up again. That’s why I no like coming out. To meeting, to talk about. Where, who get anything to say? Might not bother them, but it bothers me – cause it was *my* stuff. ‘Cause I respect their personal things. Like Sherri and Todd, they just moved in here. He ripped her off – all her personal things from her mom – and her mom just passed. She was crying...screaming, screaming. And they don’t do nothing...It’s fucked up.

What would come next was unclear. The paths that held the rhythms of care were now walked more warily. The tents that offered sanctuary had been crossed, entered, emptied. What was stolen were not just things, but the connective tissues that linked village structure to pilina, governance to dignity – the fragile but hopeful belief that what people built here – by hand, by heart – could last.

And yet, nothing was fully lost. The grief, fear, and anger were real, but so too was the memory of what was made in this place: something stitched together not by systems, but by people, pilina, and living pono. If Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was still a kaiāulu, still more than the sum of individual parts, then it would not be because it avoided pain, but because it, like the residents who made it home, had survived pain before – and might still survive it again. It would not happen through control or compliance, but the restoration of relations between them and the fragile labor of collective repair, by the commitment to going at this together not because they had to, but because they chose to.

Policy Implications

As I write this from my desk on O‘ahu in March of 2025, the policy and political landscape around houselessness in the United States is rapidly unraveling. Social services are being defunded. Housing programs are being undercut. Federal support for the houseless is in retreat. Under the second Trump administration, carceral responses to poverty are gaining traction, and Housing First has begun to stall in support, funding, and practice. The Supreme Court’s *Grants Pass* decision has further eroded protections for the unsheltered, allowing cities and counties to penalize people simply for existing in public – sleeping, resting, surviving – when no other options are available. The United States has effectively criminalized houselessness even as the structural conditions exacerbating its prevalence – housing shortages, stagnant wages, income inequality – seem bound to accelerate in increasingly neoliberal times. The result is a system that punishes people for conditions it produces and refuses to remedy.

This is unfortunately not a moment of institutional reform. It is a moment of abandonment – of both support infrastructure and protection of the civil liberties of houseless people. At the very time when the number of unsheltered people is rising, the systems meant to support them are collapsing.

What remains is not a safety net, but a hollowed-out apparatus that increasingly serves to manage visibility rather than meet need. The homelessness services system may now be a dissipative structure in its own right: reorganizing not toward justice, but toward disposability.

In this political and economic climate, communities like Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu are not outliers; they are early signs of what happens when people are left to build their own systems of governance, care, and protection – not in ideal conditions, but in the absence of meaningful alternatives. During its most coherent period, the village functioned not primarily because of institutional oversight, but because of pilina. Residents showed up. They took kuleana for the land, the village, and each other. But even this hard-won coherence was fragile. As relationality thinned and the scrutiny of outsiders intensified, the same community began to fracture under the weight of its own survival. The lesson in this is not that informal systems cannot endure. It is that they should not have to endure alone – especially in a political climate that seeks to dismantle them while offering little in return.

What follows are not idealistic policy proposals, but relationally grounded imperatives drawn from a community that tried – and, in many ways, succeeded – in surviving and thriving with limited resources and extraordinary care, to care for its people in ways that formal systems often fail to do. Communities like these are built for this moment – not the one we wish we lived in. They offer hard-won knowledge about how to endure amidst abandonment, how to build trust where systems have broken it, and how to imagine futures even when institutions cannot.

Build the Material & Relational Conditions for Trust

Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu operated for years with limited infrastructure – no electricity beyond individual generators, no water access within the village itself, and limited rubbish pickup. And still, a functioning community emerged. What made that possible was not just physical space, but social trust, pilina, and shared investment. But even these can only stretch so far. When trust began to erode – when kōkua became obligation and care was not returned – relational life frayed. Material support cannot replace relational grounding, but it can sustain it. At the very least, it can keep people from having to choose between meeting their basic needs and showing up for each other.

- **Fund core infrastructure without requiring formalization.** Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu never had internal electricity or clean water delivery, but even modest support – a dumpster to haul rubbish out, comfort stations – helped reduce burnout, preserve dignity, and make daily life more sustainable. Core infrastructure like waste removal, sanitation, and water access should be provided as a basic necessity that allows for community development, not made contingent on nonprofit status or formal, legal recognition. Communities deserve access to essential services without needing to prove their legitimacy.
- **Invest in presence, not just services.** Pilina is not built through programs or services alone – it is built with time, consistency, and reciprocal engagement. In Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, trust grew because Cookie showed up without condition: talking story, checking in, hauling water, living pono in daily life. Pilina deepened when people invested in each other’s lives without expectation of immediate return. As a researcher, pilina was built the same way – not by extracting stories, but by returning, helping, and becoming part of the everyday fabric of the village. True presence cannot be scheduled or rushed. It requires showing up without agenda, listening without judgment, and demonstrating kuleana through action. If policy is serious about fostering trust and relational healing, it must invest not only in services but in people who can be there – consistently, meaningfully, and with the commitment to return.
- **Pair material assistance with slow, voluntary repair.** Many residents arrived carrying deep relational harm – from institutions that promised help but demanded compliance, from shelters that controlled rather than cared, and from personal histories marked by betrayal and abandonment. Some stepped into roles of leadership and trust; others remained guarded, choosing protection over vulnerability. Trust did not flow automatically with material support – it came, if at all, through time, choice, and consistent acts of pono behavior. Healing could not be forced, and relational repair could not be standardized. Policies aimed at community building must recognize that dignity and recovery require honoring individual pace. Therapeutic support, mediation, and community practices of healing should be readily available, encouraged, and modeled — but never mandated. True relational repair, like pilina itself, can only emerge when it is freely chosen.

Recognize, Support, and Protect Community-Led Systems

By the time Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu achieved more formal recognition as a village, governance was already underway. Residents had rules, systems of accountability, and relational structures that made daily life livable, however imperfectly. What gave those structures coherence wasn’t external training or oversight, but pilina built within the community: people listened to Cookie, and to others like her, because they showed up and stayed in relationship with others. As the community came under scrutiny, some of those systems were later formalized, and others affiliated with outside organization, but form did not precede function. What mattered most was that people believed in those leading them. Policy must start from that premise.

- **Ensure informal communities can access support before formalization.** Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu functioned as a village long before any formal nonprofit affiliation. Its strength came from relationships, shared kuleana, and self-organization — not legal status. Formal incorporation later helped open doors to land and funding, but it was not what made the village viable. Communities like this often build governance, rules, and care networks before they ever build formal structures. Policy must recognize and respect these early forms of organization, offering support based on demonstrated relational and communal function rather than waiting for bureaucratic milestones. Waiting for formalization before offering help risks undermining the very work communities have already done to sustain themselves.
- **Support leaders who are already embedded in their communities.** Cookie wasn’t trained to lead — she grew into leadership through daily acts of care, presence, and pono conduct. She didn’t seek authority; she earned it by showing up, listening, and living alongside those she supported. Many communities have individuals like her: resolving conflicts, distributing supplies, holding people accountable, and quietly building trust over time. These leaders do not need to be replaced by professionals or those with formal credentials — they need to be resourced and sustained. Support could include stipends for community work, access to mental health care and peer support networks,

administrative assistance, and training offered as invitation rather than requirement. Leadership should be strengthened where it is already flourishing, with investments that recognize relational trust as the foundation for lasting governance.

- **Avoid overwriting care-based systems with institutional models.** As Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu grew more visible, external expectations grew – as did strain. Funding partners and agency representatives often sought to impose structure, accountability, and hierarchy in ways that unintentionally undermined the village’s own internal systems. Even well-meaning interventions can disrupt pilina when they ignore the ethics of how governance already works. Where systems are strong, policy should build around them – not over them.

Center Autonomy, Dignity, and Structural Accountability

Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu worked best when people felt seen, respected, and left to live on their own terms – so long as they did no harm others and upheld kuleana to the community. But over time, that balance eroded. As external scrutiny intensified, leadership enforced rules more rigidly to meet increased expectations. Residents who once participated freely began to disengage. Kōkua felt more compulsory. And those most invested in care began to burn out. This wasn't a failure of values – it was a system strained under pressure. Autonomy and communal survival fell into tension, but they don't have to be opposed to one another. Policy can support both: the right to live with dignity, and the conditions that make collective life possible.

- **Design systems that respect personal autonomy, even in shared structures.** Some people want community. Others want distance. Both need room to breathe. Structures that force participation – in shelters, programs, or housing – often replicate the same coercive dynamics some people experiencing houselessness sought to leave behind. Residents at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu did not just want space; they wanted to live alongside partners, children, animals, and those that made them feel human in a world that often dehumanizes them. For many, being told to leave a pet behind was a deal-breaker. Policy must recognize that

autonomy includes the right to maintain relationships – human and nonhuman alike. Not everyone will want the same thing. That has to be part of the design.

- **Understand dignity as a relational practice, not a service.** What made people feel affirmed in the village wasn't just food or housing – it was being greeted by name, being trusted with kuleana, and being asked for input. Dignity came through daily acts: listening, asking questions, refusing to talk down to one another. It was relational, not transactional. Policies must recognize that dignity cannot be handed out one-way; it is built through pilina – reciprocal, mutual relationship – where both sides invest in one another and creating something between them. Service providers cannot expect openness, participation, or accountability without offering it. Pilina requires genuine presence, ongoing commitment, and a willingness to see the full humanity of those we work with. Training for staff, outreach workers, and administrators should treat these relational practices not as "soft skills," but as essential tools for building trust, relational accountability, and sustained engagement. Without pilina, services risk replicating the very alienation and harm they aim to heal.
- **Recognize that disengagement is often exhaustion, not failure.** When some residents at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu stopped participating – missed kōkua, skipped meetings, avoided clean-ups – it wasn't always about apathy; it was sometimes about survival. People were caring for sick relatives, managing addiction, living with untreated trauma, or too tired to keep giving. The system frayed not because values disappeared, but because the weight could become too heavy. Policymakers must resist reading withdrawal as moral failure. If participation is the goal, support must include time, rest, care, and kōkua.

Reframe Legitimacy, Shift the Narrative

Kīpuka 'Aineamalu was never just about "housing" – it was about recognition. What residents built was not only physical shelter, but social legitimacy: a space where people were known by name, respected, and seen as more than a set of failures; and a village that became known as a place of refuge on the Westside. And yet, public narratives still often reduce homelessness to addiction, mental illness, or personal choice while casting these communities and "tent cities" as

inherently chaotic, unsanitary, or criminal. These assumptions undermine systems that residents create to care for themselves and for each other. If policy is to meet the moment, it must stop asking how to make people more governable – and start asking what kinds of relationships and conditions make dignity, trust, and participation possible.

- **Redefine noncompliance.** Not everyone will accept help when offered. Not everyone will say yes to shelter. That does not mean they don't want safety or stability – it often means they do not yet trust the conditions under which it is offered. In contexts shaped by longstanding harm, distrust is not dysfunction; it is a reasonable, protective response to relational betrayal. Trust must be earned, not assumed. In Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, legitimacy did not come from authority alone – it was built daily through pono conduct, visible kuleana, and the slow, patient work of relational care. Trust emerged from pilina: mutual investment, sustained commitment, and demonstrated responsibility over time. Policy must move away from viewing noncompliance as a personal deficit and instead recognize it as a mirror, reflecting when systems fail to foster genuine pilina. Building trust demands consistency, accountability, and ethical behavior, not just offers of service. Without these, compliance is neither meaningful nor sustainable – and often, neither should it be.
- **Tell better stories.** Sociologists, journalists, and policymakers must challenge narratives that frame homelessness as a result of personal failure – whether through addiction, mental illness, or otherwise. These are not unimportant factors, but they are not self-contained. Many residents at Kīpuka 'Aineamalu struggled with substances, mental health, or disengagement from formal systems – but those struggles were often rooted in structural and inflicted interpersonal adversities: childhood trauma, punitive schooling, inaccessible health care, intergenerational poverty. The question is not whether someone has suffered, but *why*, and what supports were or were not there when they most needed them. What makes communities like Kīpuka 'Aineamalu remarkable is not that people survived despite these forces, but that they built something coherent in the midst of them. That coherence deserves to be seen and supported.

- **Expand what counts as success.** When someone swept the trails between tents before sunrise, hauled water for kūpuna, or comforted a crying neighbor, they were participating in governance – if governance is understood through a lens of relational care. When Cookie sat with someone in the dark and listened, she was making policy. Yet these forms of labor rarely show up in official metrics. Success should not be measured solely by compliance rates, program enrollments, or exits into housing, but also by the presence of pilina and relational strength. Metrics of success might include: the number of people regularly participating in communal activities without formal obligation; the frequency of peer-led conflict resolution rather than external intervention; residents' reported feelings of safety, care, and trust in their neighbors; the willingness of residents to seek help from within the community; and the consistency of informal kōkua networks. True community strength lies not in administrative outputs, but in whether relationships are deepening, care is being reciprocated, and trust is becoming easier rather than harder to offer. This is where healing comes from. Policy must be accountable not just to managing people, but to nurturing the conditions where pilina and collective resilience can take root.

This dissertation does not present Kīpuka 'Aineamalu as a universal model, but it does show that in the absence of formal support, people can build systems of governance, care, and accountability. These systems are fragile, but real. In the current political moment, implementing many of these recommendations that require resource allocation may be difficult or even impossible – but difficulty does not negate intention. Communities like Kīpuka 'Aineamalu already exist, and more are likely to emerge. The question is whether policy will treat them as liabilities – or recognize them as sites of knowledge, adaptation, and care that deserve protection, not removal.

Emergent Order & Sociological Insight

In addition to the aforementioned policy recommendations and insights, this dissertation offers both empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of sociology. Empirically, it offers a layered,

longitudinal ethnographic account of a houseless community that is not static, romanticized, or pathologized, but alive, messy, and complex – shifting, self-organizing, and internally contested. It brings new insight into how relational care, governance, and legitimacy are constructed and fractured in the relative absence of formal state structures. Theoretically, the dissertation engages and extends frameworks of relational sociology, dissipative structures theory, and charismatic authority, offering a model for understanding informal communities not as passive outcomes of marginalization but as dynamic, adaptive systems whose coherence emerges through fragile and ongoing relational hana (*labor; work*).

Empirical Contribution

This dissertation offers an empirical contribution to the sociology of homelessness by tracing how houseless people collectively organize social life beyond the institutional gaze – how they construct, maintain, and lose forms of moral and relational governance through care, charisma, kinship, and withdrawal. Building on a rich tradition of homelessness ethnography (Desjarlais, 1997; Duneier, 1999; Gowan, 2010; Stuart, 2014), it advances a new line of inquiry: relational care does not supplement community governance but is at the root of what makes such governance possible. Through longitudinal, immersive fieldwork at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, this work documents how relational order is constituted, tested, and undone – not through formal rules or institutions, but through pilina held together by presence, repetition, and mutual recognition.

In their wide-ranging review of homelessness research, Lee, Tyler, and Wright (2010) note that much of the field remains divided across explanatory domains: individual vulnerabilities, structural inequality, and institutional response. This work builds a bridge across these domains by showing how structural conditions (e.g., abandonment, criminalization) shape personal dispositions (e.g., withdrawal, hyper-autonomy), which in turn form the building blocks of a communal relational field that is collectively negotiated and profoundly unstable, especially at points of strain or bifurcation. Rather than isolating individual behavior from broader forces, this study reveals how relational

strategies are collective products – the outcomes of social patterning under stress – and how those strategies shape care and withdrawal within a community setting.

Chapter 1 advances a contribution to the sociology of homelessness by challenging the common assumption that houselessness itself is the catalyst for adaptive strategies like distrust, withdrawal, and self-protection. Much existing literature implicitly treats the onset of homelessness as the moment when survival strategies are formed, but this research shows otherwise. People do not arrive at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu as blank slates. Instead, they bring with them long histories of interpersonal abuse, institutional betrayal, and systemic displacement. They carry what Comfort et al. (2015) describe as a complex matrix of exclusion and suffering, marked by fractured family ties, untreated mental illness, and bureaucratic abandonment. Residents like Roxy, Rae, and Mahina do not develop "distrust" as a reaction to life on the streets; they embody a deeply conditioned form of relational vigilance – what Levine (2013) frames as learned distrust rooted in repeated betrayal. By tracing how relational orientations precede houselessness and shape communal life, this study expands homelessness scholarship to recognize the durable, transhistorical nature of relational harm – and the ways it continues to structure not just individual survival, but collective possibilities.

This work resonates with Gowan’s (2010) insight that survival under conditions of structural abandonment leads to moralized modes of self-protection. But where Gowan focuses on identity narratives of men navigating institutions in the homelessness services system in San Francisco, this study offers a feminized and care-centered relational frame, focused predominantly on women, kūpuna (*elders*), and keiki (*children*) who build pilina with each other despite experiences that have taught them not to. This adds to the sociological conversation on how harm not only breaks down social bonds but reshapes the conditions under which new ones can be formed.

This work also complicates existing scholarship on identity work among unhoused populations (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Anderson et al., 1994), which often frames identity reconstruction as a response to the ruptures of homelessness itself. The experiences documented in this chapter reveal that many of the emotional repertoires, coping strategies, and modes of relational withdrawal that later manifest in identity work do not originate with homelessness, but are carried forward from

histories of relational betrayal and exclusion. This research pushes analysis beyond the moment of housing loss, showing that identity practices among houseless individuals are not simply reactive or situational, but are deeply shaped by enduring, cumulative trajectories of harm and adaptation and the self-image (and wounded self-confidence) that often emerges through that harm.

As Orrico (2015) argues in her ethnography of the boardwalk market, trust is a rare and unstable public good in precarious spaces. This research demonstrates how people entering Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu challenge their own learned coping strategies of distrust, detachment, and domination to participate in community life – a sometimes painful and slow process shaped by past ruptures and the pervasive presence of ongoing uncertainty. What is offered in this research is not simply a narrative of trauma, but a portrait of the fragility of relational possibility, a baseline that the following chapter shows must be laboriously and regularly rebuilt through daily acts of care.

Chapter 2 shifts the lens from inherited harm to emergent structure, showing how the residents of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu construct a functioning system of moral governance through what Sennett (2012) calls the “craft of cooperation.” Here, governance is not achieved through coercion or contract, but through embedded *pilina* – care, presence, and accountability mutually forged through daily labor. Aunties like Cookie and Pua perform this work not only as individuals, but as central figures in a relational web whose authority rests on consistency, authenticity, and relational depth. This complicates the notion of *charismatic authority* by showing that legitimacy arises not just from mere magnetism or magnanimity, but from being known, counted on, embedded; and living pono.

In this, the work extends the insights of Stuart (2014) and Herring (2019), who examine informal governance and encampment rulemaking, but who often center masculine-coded forms of authority (e.g., enforcement, banishment, control). While these forms of authority are relevant to the long-term history of the village discussed in Chapter 3, this research shows how care-based governance operates through moral obligation, repetition, and presence, often mediated by women. These are not soft forms of power – they are the primary means through which stability is generated; all the more evident when fractures begin to appear in their reduction. Gina hauling water for kūpuna, Pua comforting those who are mentally unwell, Cookie organizing ASL classes for the community –

these are the acts that hold the social world of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu together and gave daily life meaning and shape.

Building on but extending critiques of individualized and instrumental models of trust (Baier, 1986; Hardin, 2002; Cook et al., 2005), this research advances pilina as a distinct relational framework. Unlike classical theories that conceptualize trust as an individual act of calculated risk-taking (Simmel, 1950; Luhmann, 1979) or even more processual approaches that center cognitive suspension (Möllering, 2001), pilina reframes relationality itself as the primary condition. Trust in Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu was not a bounded decision made at a single point of vulnerability; it was nested within pilina – ongoing, mutual, place-based connection that endures even when trust wavers or is not yet built. This reframing aligns with, but also deepens, more recent relational accounts of trust (Scheman, 2020; Cook & Santana, 2020) by offering a culturally grounded, collective model rooted in ‘Ōiwi values. Pilina emphasizes that relational fields are not simply settings where trust is earned or withdrawn, but are dynamic structures continually built, strained, and repaired. In contexts of houselessness, where relational fractures are pervasive and where survival often requires distrust, pilina offers a more expansive analytic lens: one that captures how relational connection persists, adapts, and anchors collective life even amid precarity. In doing so, this dissertation – deeply indebted to ‘Ōiwi values systems and the generations of ‘Ōiwi who carried them forth – contributes a theoretically and culturally grounded expansion of trust theory, one that moves beyond dyadic vulnerability to center enduring collective and land-based relationalities.

Moreover, this chapter expands on the empirical terrain covered in “Stories from the Streets” (Wasserman & Clair, 2010), which documents the moral schemas and values of houseless people, by offering a spatial, embodied account of how moral norms are enacted through shared infrastructure that touches on work by human geographers. The village paths – swept, walked, patrolled, ambled down by keiki – are sites of responsibility and recognition. Care is not just in manifest in intentions or acts, but in physical movement, presence, and repetition. It is through these paths that the village coheres.

Beyond internal dynamics, this research also advances a contribution to theories of identity work and social movements by showing how Kīpuka 'Aineamalu engaged in collective identity formation not just inwardly, but outwardly, through deliberate relational outreach. Residents did not simply survive stigma; they challenged and reshaped it by asserting themselves as a community rooted in pilina, stewardship, and shared care. Through community cleanups, open houses, events like Halloween gatherings, and acts of public kōkua, residents created new moral narratives about themselves – not as isolated individuals experiencing homelessness, but as a cohesive collective embedded in and responsible to 'āina and community. In this way, the village enacted a form of collective "identity repair," akin to Snow and Anderson's (1987) concept of identity work, but extended across a community rather than within individual self-presentation. This work also aligns with movement scholars like Polletta (2002) and Ganz (2010), who show how collective identity is not a given but an active, ongoing achievement – often under strain. In Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, pilina was both a political and ethical project: an insistence, through everyday action, that the village and its residents were not disposable, but belonged. This expands the sociological understanding of relational movements, showing that for marginalized communities like Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, building pilina outward is not ancillary to survival – it *is* survival.

Chapter 3 traces the arc of governance transformation within Kīpuka 'Aineamalu: from early reliance on coercion and domination, to a more compassionate, care-centered model of leadership, and – at the time of my ethnographic observation – toward routinized enforcement in response to external scrutiny. It builds on and complicates sociological work on houseless communities that explores how internal order emerges in the absence of formal authority (Gowan, 2010; Stuart, 2014; Herring, 2019; McElroy & Poe, 2021), by showing how governance in such spaces is not linear, but cyclical and unstable – reorganized through shifting internal dynamics and institutional proximity.

The chapter begins with a history of the village and documents the village's early reliance on interpersonal enforcement, where leaders levied control with intimidation and proximity to village leader Aunty Cookie. This early period was defined by survivalism and enforced hierarchy, not moral legitimacy. But the threat of another sweep in 2016 marked a bifurcation point – a pressure

event that led the village to reorganize its governance structures. In response, leadership became more distributed, more relational. Gradually, more residents stepped into leadership roles not through domination or role but through demonstrated care, built pilina, and moral authority.

As Kīpuka 'Aineamalu attracted increasing attention from DLNR, HFD, funders, and service organizations – in part due to pressures tied to the mauka relocation – it became clear that relational governance alone did not fully satisfy external expectations of legitimacy. As more help was needed to sustain operations and meet outside scrutiny, formal structure was layered atop the relational field: kōkua hours became mandatory, no-show lists tracked compliance, and protocols were more strictly enforced. While these changes brought greater consistency, they also reintroduced logics of control that residents had long resisted in both institutional settings and adverse interpersonal experiences. What was once offered freely as kuleana increasingly felt demanded as compliance, encroaching on deeply valued attachments to personal autonomy. In this way, the village was not simply navigating resource scarcity but grappling with the broader tensions named by Herring et al. (2020) regarding the pervasive penalty imposed on unhoused communities.

Yet this research extends those critiques by showing that such penalty does not only emerge through overt criminalization or formal policing. Instead, it can surface even within self-organized communities, as functioning, relational governance is reshaped by external demands for legibility, accountability, and recognizable moral worth. As the village was increasingly asked to present itself as a "model" of self-governance and demonstrate progress, residents and leaders alike were pushed into forms of collective identity work that strained the very pilina that sustained them. In this, the research complicates Snow and Anderson's (1987) formulation of identity work by showing that collective identity performance under surveillance is not simply a strategy of resilience; it can also become a site of relational fracture. Efforts to maintain an externally palatable image – of industriousness, compliance, and respectability – stoked internal tensions and resentments. This study contributes to homelessness scholarship and symbolic interactionism by illuminating how the pressures of public recognition can destabilize intimate, care-based systems that allow vulnerable communities to survive in the first place.

Importantly, Chapter 3 does not frame the village's transformation as a simple case of external creep. Instead, it advances an original contribution by showing how tensions between personal and communal autonomy operate as core, unresolved contradictions within informal governance itself – even before formal systems intervene. In doing so, it challenges models that treat the drift toward formalization as primarily an external imposition (e.g., Herring et al., 2020; Lipsky, 2010), revealing how internal dynamics of distrust, protective detachment, and uneven investment can also shape collective life. Drawing on relational sociology and grounded in 'Ōiwi concepts of pilina and kuleana, this research demonstrates that refusals to participate in meetings, cleanups, or leadership were not simply acts of disinterest or dysfunction, but protective strategies forged from past experiences of relational betrayal (Levine, 2013). Similarly, leaders who reluctantly assumed roles out of obligation rather than volition embodied the emotional strain described by scholars of emotional labor and role performance (Hochschild, 1983; Goffman, 1959), showing how governance without reciprocal pilina can hollow out authority from within. By centering relational dynamics rather than institutional imposition alone, Chapter 3 expands homelessness scholarship to recognize how even self-organized communities constantly negotiate the fragile, sometimes painful balance between autonomy, care, and collective responsibility.

By documenting how charisma was routinized – and how that routinization shifted leadership from relational to positional – Chapter 3 also adds a crucial layer to Weberian understandings of authority. This case shows how charismatic authority cannot be easily institutionalized without losing its relational grounding. Even as the village became allegedly more “governable,” the cost was relational disinvestment and a gradual – if temporary – vacating of communal commitment. What was once vibrant, responsive, and emotionally sustaining began to feel brittle, performative, and extractive. This insight advances sociological understandings of how governance in houseless communities adapts to legitimacy threats, while revealing how legitimacy can fracture if authority is no longer primarily embedded in trusted relationships. The chapter goes on to extend and deepen these insights by documenting how relational governance can fracture under the weight of uneven accountability. This rupture is anchored in a grounded narrative: a series of thefts by Chief that were tolerated and excused despite clear evidence and widespread resident frustration. The case

reveals how exemptions to rules corrodes a moral economy of care, especially when leadership is unable – or unwilling – to enforce communal norms against those who are most proximate to them.

While other studies have examined the emergence of moral order in encampments (Duneier, 1999; Herring, 2019), few have documented its internal unraveling. Chapter 3 offers a rare account of how informal systems respond to internal strain – not through state repression, but through the relational erosion of legitimacy. Residents, some of whom were already skeptical as their autonomy was increasingly impressed upon, no longer believed the system was fair. Zero-tolerance policies became empty gestures. Leaders became figures of resentment rather than relation. As Orrico (2015) and Wasserman & Clair (2010) suggest, trust is a strategic and fragile good in precarious spaces. This work shows what happens when trust is broken – not just between people, but between people and the idea of community. Yet even as trust faltered, *pilina* – the deeper, enduring threads of connection, obligation, and care – remained contested but not fully severed. In tracing how *pilina* strained, frayed, and in some cases persisted even amid disillusionment, this research expands understandings of relational resilience under conditions of internal collapse.

The insight that relational withdrawal is a form of protest is also a significant contribution to the sociology of homelessness. In most studies, political resistance is framed in terms of collective mobilization or state confrontation. Here, resistance is quiet, internal, and embodied: residents and even leaders skip meetings, refuse *kōkua*, disengage emotionally. This aligns with Scott's (1985) "weapons of the weak," but adapts it for relational systems. In spaces governed by care and obligation, disengagement is not apathy nor is it simply the reemergence of learned distrust and detachment – it is an act of subtle rebellion. This narrative also contributes to Comfort et al.'s (2015) account of institutional harm by showing how internal communities can mirror the very dynamics they emerged to resist. Rules begin to apply unevenly. Power concentrates in informal hierarchies. People start asking: "Why contribute, if others are protected and I am not?" What was an ethic of interdependence becomes, for many, a field of exhaustion.

Chapter 3 also contributes to the sociology of social movements by expanding understandings of internal strain, relational maintenance, and resistance beyond formal movement contexts. While

scholars like Melucci (1989) and Jasper (1997) emphasize the emotional labor required to sustain collective identity, this research shows how emotional withdrawal and relational detachment themselves become forms of political significance. In Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, the struggle was not to scale or mobilize outwardly, but to preserve an internal moral economy against the corrosive forces of obligation. The case of the village reveals that relational cohesion is as fragile – and as politically consequential – as formal structure. Moreover, it demonstrates that even in decentralized, non-programmatic collectives like Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, struggles over legitimacy, governance, and belonging mirror tensions in more conventional movement spaces (Polletta, 2002; Ganz, 2010; Tufekci, 2017). By documenting how everyday disengagement operated as an act of resistance against emerging hierarchies and uneven expectations, this work offers an account of “relational dissent” – a quiet but powerful countercurrent that complicates dominant narratives of either unity or collapse. In doing so, it expands movement scholarship to better account for how care-based collectives fracture and adapt not only in the face of external threats, but through the internal erosion of pilina and the difficult negotiation of autonomy within shared life.

Sociologically, this research concludes not with resolution, but with the stubborn, complicated endurance that marks life on the margins. It tells a story of survival through relation, of moral order sustained not by institutions but by the daily, deliberate work of care – and of the fractures that appear when that care is unevenly given or withdrawn. It shows that informal communities can build structures of dignity and autonomy through pilina, but that such structures are always fragile, always contingent on the ongoing renewal of trust and responsibility and the reinvestment of parties in that renewal. In a field that often seeks tidy narratives of either collapse or triumph, this research resists closure. It insists on the provisional nature of relational life: a social world that persists not because it resolves its tensions, but because people choose to stay connected despite them.

Theoretical Contribution

This dissertation advances a sociological theory of informal governance and care by foregrounding the relational, unstable, and adaptive nature of moral order in unsheltered houseless

communities. Drawing on the case of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, it brings together insights from relational sociology, Weberian authority theory, and dissipative structures theory to offer a new framework for understanding how social order emerges – and unravels, often iteratively – in marginal spaces. While prior work emphasizes the roles of material deprivation, state neglect, or informal rulemaking in encampment life (Gowan, 2010; Herring, 2019; McElroy & Poe, 2021), this dissertation argues that governance is fundamentally a relational project: one produced through dynamic, affective ties that must be continuously negotiated, re-formed, and repaired.

Relational Sociology. This study advances relational sociology by pushing beyond descriptive models of relational embeddedness and toward an understanding of social life as a moral ecology. Relational sociology has long emphasized that people are constituted through networks, ties, and fields (Emirbayer, 1997; Somers, 1994), but it often treats these structures as neutral or functional rather than as ethically saturated. This research shows that relations are not merely connections across social space; they are infrastructures of care, obligation, recognition, and ethical labor. Governance, legitimacy, and survival at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu were not simply shaped by relational embeddedness – they were actively produced and eroded through ongoing moral negotiation. *Pilina* (*connection*), *kuleana* (*responsibility*), and *pono* (*ethical balance*) were not background cultural values. They were the conditions through which social life became possible. When *pilina* weakened, governance did not collapse because of institutional failure – it faltered because the moral ecology that sustained collective commitment began to unravel.

This reframing offers a critical expansion of relational theory. Rather than analyzing social action solely through the presence or absence of ties, it demands that we examine the quality, ethics, and durability of relational fields. Relations are not inert architectures within which actors move. They are living, contingent, and affective spaces that require continual tending. Care is not an ancillary feature of relational life; instead, it is a constitutive process through which relational fields are stabilized or destabilized, and in which relational nodes are remade and reworked. Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu makes this visible: governance succeeded when *pilina* was nurtured and living *pono* was made visible; it faltered when care was uneven, when *kuleana* felt imposed rather than chosen,

and when recognition failed. In this sense, relational sociology can move beyond mapping ties and toward theorizing the ethical work that sustains relational worlds.

Moreover, this research pluralizes relational sociology by bringing into direct engagement the Indigenous epistemologies of Hawai'i. Concepts grounded in 'Ōiwi 'ike (*knowledge*) and na'auao (*wisdom*) – such as pilina (*connection*), kuleana (*responsibility*), kōkua (*aid*), pono (*ethical balance*), and aloha (*love, affection, compassion*) – offer more than simple cultural context for this study. As articulated by scholars including Kanahēle (1986), Kame'eiehiwa (1992), Meyer (2008), and Silva (2004), and carried through a deep mo'okū'auhau of kūpuna (*elders*), kumu (*teachers*), and alaka'i (*leaders*) stretching back to wā kahiko (*ancient times*), these epistemological values represent fully theorized frameworks for understanding relational life. They describe how legitimacy is built or lost, how harm is interpreted, how collective responsibility is distributed, and how social worlds are held together or allowed to fray. These values do not easily map onto English-language sociological categories – and that friction is part of their power. Where much of relational sociology struggles to name the emotional and ethical labor required to sustain social fields, 'Ōiwi concepts offer relational grammars that insist on care, accountability, and the continual striving for ethical balance. At Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, pilina, kuleana, pono, kōkua, and aloha were not metaphors or ideals; they were the infrastructural realities through which governance, resistance, and survival moved.

Further, incorporating 'Ōiwi relational frameworks into analyses of relational harm in particular offers a significant theoretical expansion beyond reflecting the local culture and demographics of the community studied here. The utility of these concepts lies precisely in their ability to articulate not just what is harmful, but also what relational goods are missing or actively disrupted when harm occurs. Relational harm is therefore reconceptualized not merely as direct violence or neglect but also as a profound relational absence. These values offer a language for understanding the depth of relational injury that occurs when people are denied the recognition, care, and ethical relationality fundamental to human dignity and community wellbeing. They underscore how relational harm involves both presence of negative interactions and absence of supportive, nurturing relationships essential to individual and collective thriving.

This research thus contributes to a growing movement within relational sociology that seeks to bring ethics, affect, and plural epistemologies into sharper theoretical focus. It resonates with Baier's (1986) philosophical argument that trust and care are foundational to social life, but pushes further by empirically documenting how ethical relationality structures governance itself. It aligns with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) call to theorize agency relationally but shows that agency is not merely emergent from networks of possibility; it is shaped by the ethical vitality – or depletion – of relational fields. It engages Donati's (2011) work on relational goods but demonstrates that these goods are not evenly distributed or passively received; they are fought for, rationed, hoarded, and withdrawn based on moral judgments embedded in daily life.

Finally, this research offers an important intervention against the temptation to read relational fields as stable or naturally cohesive. Relational life at the margins – among those displaced, marginalized, or living under conditions of abandonment – demonstrates that relational fields are fragile, fragmented, and often sites of contestation as much as solidarity. Relations can sustain, but they can also strain. *Pilina* can heal, but it can also fray. Care can build governance, but it can just as easily collapse into control. Understanding this precariousness is not a limitation of relational theory – it is essential to its growth. By showing how care-based governance fractures under strain, this dissertation invites relational sociology to grapple with not only the emergence of social order, but also its slow, painful, and deeply relational undoing.

Dissipative Structures Theory. This dissertation advances a major theoretical contribution by extending dissipative structures theory into the affective, ethical, and relational terrains of informal governance and collective survival. Originally developed in the physical sciences (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), dissipative structures theory describes how open systems sustain themselves through the absorption and transformation of entropy, rather than through stability or equilibrium. While this concept has been adapted into the social sciences (Allen, 1988, 1990; Artigiani, 1993; Weber et al., 2022), it has remained underutilized in sociology—particularly in ethnographic accounts of marginalized communities. This research shows that the theory is not merely portable into sociology: it is analytically generative when reconceptualized through relational dynamics.

Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu did not develop linearly or teleologically. It restructured repeatedly across periods of disruption: through sweeps, fires, leadership shifts, and relocations. Major bifurcation points occurred in 2012, 2016, and 2018, each catalyzed by external threat but leading to divergent reorganizations internally. After the 2012 sweep threat, leadership intensified authoritarian control; by 2016, facing accumulated internal tensions, leadership pivoted to more participatory models rooted in *kuleana (responsibility)* and *pilina (connection)*. In 2018, the steadily growing pressure of external funder demands, bureaucratic entanglements, and further threatened stated action led to even greater formalization, routinizing care structures that had once been more fluid.

This empirical variation highlights a critical theoretical intervention: bifurcation points are not deterministic. A system’s reorganization is shaped not only by the force of external shocks, but by the evolving relational, ethical, and moral ecology within it. The internal state – its histories of harm, care, fatigue, and obligation – profoundly conditions how instability is absorbed and transformed. This extends dissipative structures theory beyond structural triggers to foreground the relational field as a core determinant of system reconfiguration.

This research also contributes a second major theoretical insight: dissipation is not always sudden or catastrophic. At Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, relational erosion occurred slowly, through cycles of strain, enforcement, and withdrawal. As Cookie’s constant presence reduced and external scrutiny intensified, leadership responded with greater formal enforcement. *Kōkua* became mandatory; no-show lists expanded. Residents withdrew emotionally and materially, deepening the very crisis of legitimacy leadership sought to manage. This created a recursive feedback loop: enforcement produced disengagement, disengagement necessitated further enforcement. Structure endured – but the relational foundations that once nourished it, the *wai*, dried up. This dissertation expands dissipative structures theory by showing that systems may reorganize through feedback loops of gradual relational fatigue, not just a singular visible rupture. Collapse is not the only threat to relational systems; slow hollowing can be equally transformative.

Crucially, this research departs from functionalist readings of system adaptation. Stability at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu did not signify “successful” evolution or ideal optimization. Rather, persistence

sometimes came at the cost of relational and ethical vitality. The 'ōlelo no'eau that titles this dissertation – *pū'ali kalo i ka wai 'ole* ("the taro grows misshapen without water") – captures this dynamic: form may survive, but health, coherence, and pono (*ethical balance*) may erode. Thus, this project theorizes that endurance alone is an insufficient measure of system viability. In relational fields, the quality and texture of relations – care, obligation, grace – must be theorized alongside survival. Systems can survive in distorted form, replicating harm they resist.

Finally, by grounding dissipative structures theory in the lived, affective, and ethical textures of a houseless community, this research shows that instability is not simply a technical phenomenon. It is also relational, moral, and emotional. It emerges not just from external shocks, but from the cumulative weight of compromised pilina, strained kuleana, and broken trust. In this way, this dissertation invites sociological engagement with instability not just as disorder, but as relational consequence – shaped by everyday acts of care, withdrawal, endurance, and refusal that animate life at the margins.

Charismatic Authority. The case of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu also deepens and complicates Weber's concept of charismatic authority. Cookie's leadership bore many classic hallmarks of charisma: she was widely seen as uniquely capable of holding the village together through her presence, wisdom, and moral clarity. Yet her charisma was not based on spectacle, command, or personal exceptionalism. It was grounded in pilina – in sustained ethical behavior, visible fairness, deep relational care, and her refusal to elevate herself above others. Residents did not follow her because of abstract ideals; they followed because she listened, protected, showed up, and lived out the values she preached. Her authority was not an inert status but a relational achievement – constantly renewed through everyday acts of care, recognition, and pono interaction.

In this sense, Kīpuka 'Aineamalu shows that in relational contexts shaped by personal histories of institutional betrayal and interpersonal harm, charismatic authority is not about being perceived as extraordinary in an abstract sense. It is about the capacity to remain in ethical, reciprocal relation – to build and sustain pilina with others. Among those who carry relational scars, charisma often

rests on an ability to embody consistency, humility, and fairness in the daily, relational fabric of community life. It is not just a personal trait, but a shared, emergent recognition – a relational field built over time, not merely bestowed in a moment of crisis.

However, this relational charisma proved fragile when attempts were made to institutionalize or extend it. When Cookie shifted her daily presence from makai to mauka, leadership attempted to formalize governance through stricter rule enforcement. But without Cookie's daily ethical presence, those structures ceded relational grounding. Residents, already sensitive to power imbalances, perceived a sharp difference between the relational pilina they had with Cookie and a more positional authority claimed by others. This erosion was compounded when leaders enforced rules unevenly – particularly in their protection of Chief despite his repeated thefts. The very leaders who were expected to carry forward Cookie's vision lost moral legitimacy, not because they lacked procedures, but because they lacked the daily relational practices that underpinned trust.

This reveals a deeper theoretical contribution: relational charisma is not automatically transferable to collective projects, structures, or successors. Even when charismatic leaders believe deeply in the projects they build – even when they are acting pono – relational trust they cultivate cannot simply be abstracted and assigned to institutions or successors. Trust is specific, personal, and fragile. In Kīpuka 'Aineamalu, many residents trusted Cookie, but did not extend that trust to the broader project of relocation or to the leaders she positioned to continue her work. Their loyalty was relational, not ideological. The village project could not inherit Cookie's relational legitimacy without constantly regenerating pilina through living ethical practice. Even then, the project she advanced – full relocation to the mauka property – was not adopted by everyone. For some, the pull of their own autonomy was stronger than her charismatic gravity.

This complicates Weber's theory of the routinization of charisma. It shows that routinization is not simply a technical problem of transferring authority from persons to structures. It is a relational issue. Charisma grounded in pono relation cannot be stabilized through positionality alone. It must be sustained by the ongoing reproduction of relational care, humility, and ethical action. When those conditions fray, the charismatic foundation cracks – and structures built atop it struggle to hold.

In broader terms, this research suggests that in communities marked by precarity and histories of harm, legitimacy is not granted by formal titles or organizational systems. It is earned through ethical, sustained relational presence – and it must be continuously built between parties, not even advanced from above. Charisma, in such contexts, is an innate quality and more living relationship: a collective recognition that someone moves through the world pono, with care for the dignity and autonomy of others. And when that recognition falters – when ethical relationality is compromised – the authority that once held the community together begins to erode. By showing how charisma is relationally constructed, unevenly transferred, and deeply contingent on ongoing ethical practice, this dissertation expands both Weberian theory and relational sociology. It offers a framework for understanding how leadership in care-based, marginalized communities must be theorized not only as a question of structure or inspiration, but as a daily, fragile practice of living pono within a field of mutual vulnerability and enduring pilina.

A Collective Theoretical Contribution. This dissertation advances a collective theoretical contribution greater than the sum of its parts. Through the grounded case of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, it demonstrates that legitimacy, governance, and endurance in marginalized communities are not best understood through institutional structures, rational choice, or static relational embeddedness. Instead, they must be theorized as fragile, affective, and ethical achievements – constructed, strained, and remade through the relational fields people inhabit.

Relational sociology provides a starting point by emphasizing that social life is constituted through relation, but this research shows that relations are not merely networks of interaction: they are moral ecologies saturated with care, obligation, judgment, and grace. Dissipative structures theory offers a framework for understanding how systems adapt under strain, but this research shows that reorganization is not only structural – it is profoundly relational and ethical, shaped by internal vitality or exhaustion of pilina. Charismatic authority theory explains the power of personal leadership, but this research shows that charisma in care-based, harm-scarred communities is not about spectacle or singular traits – it is about the collective recognition of pono action, humility, and relational accountability.

Together, these insights offer a new sociological theory of relational authority: the idea that in social contexts marked by abandonment, precarity, and harm, social order emerges not from formal structures or rules, but from the daily, contested reproduction of ethical relational life. Governance, legitimacy, and authority are sustained only to the extent that care circulates, kuleana is honored, and pilina is nurtured. When those relational infrastructures falter – through exhaustion, perceived betrayal, or the routinization of care into control – systems hollow out from within, even if they may endure externally.

Importantly, this theoretical conceptualization does not frame relational breakdown as simple failure. Instead, it reframes it as a form of relational dissipation: the gradual depletion of the ethical and emotional energy that sustains collective life. Order may persist while meaning frays; structures may stand while moral fields erode; governance may continue even as legitimacy dissipates. Yet dissipation does not preclude regeneration. Because pilina is a living, reweavable relational web, the possibility of renewal endures even within fractured systems. Relational breakdown signals strain – but it often leaves open the potential for relational repair, for new forms of ethical connection to emerge from relational rupture. This reframing challenges theories that treat system persistence as success or collapse as finality, urging sociology to attend not only to the decay of relational fields, but also to their capacity for reformation, endurance, and future becoming. This is the history of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu – a history that continues on even into today.

Finally, by grounding these insights in ‘Ōiwi relational epistemologies – pilina, kuleana, pono, kōkua – this research does not merely diversify sociological theory. It emphasizes that Hawaiian frameworks offer vital tools for theorizing the moral labor of social life: how recognition is extended or withheld, how obligation is distributed and strained, how care moves unevenly across fields of power, relationships, and vulnerability. In this way, it calls sociology not just to expand its canon, but to fundamentally reimagine how social order, authority, and endurance are theorized – from the level of interpersonal ties to the movements of entire collectivities through instability and change.

Thus, the cumulative theoretical contribution of this work is the articulation of *relational authority* as an unstable, ethical, and affective process – one forged through the daily work of recognition,

care, kuleana, and renewal. Authority at the margins is not built through force or position; it is built through pilina – through the genuine desire to heal and help others, and in the willingness to stay in relationship even as structures strain, meaning thins, and hope sometimes falters. It is not a fixed achievement, but an ongoing, fragile, living practice: made, unmade, and remade between people who have survived abandonment and choose, still, to reach for one another. This study shows that relational authority does not collapse the moment care frays; nor does it persist unchanged when structures endure. It bends, warps, transforms. It reveals how collective life is sustained not by permanence or perfection, but by the fragile, persistent threads of recognition, obligation, forgiveness, and shared becoming. When pilina is broken, it does not simply disappear; it leaves roots beneath the surface, capable – still – of reaching for water, light, and one another again.

The ‘ōlelo no‘eau that frames this work, *pū‘ali kalo i ka wai ‘ole* – the taro grows misshapen without water – speaks not of failure, but of a deeper truth: that survival itself bears the marks of scarcity, of struggle, of resilience. The future is indeed found in the past, both for the kalo and for the community – in the crooked bends they were forced to take, in the strain that warped but did not break them, in the scars that mark them not as failed, but as enduring. In Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, as in so many places where harm and care intertwine, survival is not a straight line. It is a twisting, weathered root nourished by old waters, marred by old droughts, but still reaching, still offering life, however its shape at the time. The misshapen kalo does not return to its perfect form. It becomes something else: a record of hardship, yes, but also a testament to endurance, imagination, and the abiding possibility of pilina remade. So too, this dissertation holds that the work of relational life – even in its fractures – carries within it the seeds of regeneration. What care grew once, it can grow again. What was strained can strive forward. What seemed like it could die can in fact be the source of all life to come. We are both the wai and the waiwai. We can do it together.

CHAPTER 5

EPILOGUE: THERE'S NO HOUSE LIKE HOME

*“Mai kāpae i ke a’o a ka makua, aia he ola ma laila.”
Do not ignore the teachings of a parent, for there is life there.*

*- #2065, Mary Kawena Pukui, ‘Olelo No‘eau
Hawai‘i Book of Proverbs and Poetical Sayings*

In my earliest days at Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, Auntie Cookie told me through laughter one day that her “parents used to get pissed off” when she was young because she “used to always bring people home” when there was strife in their houses. I realized that she had always been trying to bring people home – back then, and now in the village. She would often mention to me how eager she was to bring the people of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu up mauka to *home*, to a place where no one could displace them, away from the strife of their own life of houselessness. One time, she told me about how she brought a few of the kaiāulu leaders up to the land, telling them to “take off you guys’ slippahs,” and feel their home beneath them:

You feel that undah yo’ guys feet? Just know you own dat...we doin’ it guys. I tryin’ to change yo guys way of thinking and yo’ guys way of life to better yourself. We want you to be better. Don’t you want to get better? Or are you guys comfortable with da decisions you made for you guys?

Cookie had hated to leave the harbor: “cause my goal was I wanted to be the last man to leave,” to be that one last “crazy lady in the kiawe trees,” as her kids – the kaiāulu kids – sang during the holidays one year, reimagining the 12 Days of Christmas for their home next to the boat harbor. But duty called – she had to step out, so they would step up, and she had a lot of work – probably too much work – “to make sure our people get home.”

Much changed for the home at the harbor she was no longer at day in and day out. Without Cookie there all the time, relations between leadership and residents grew strained under the weight of more regulation and fewer freedoms. Her home in the front of the village changed too – sometimes ‘Olu lived there, if he hadn’t pissed everyone off; often Kā’onohipi slept there, although with his job at Jamba Juice, sometimes it seemed like he was never there. And frequently Cookie came down from mauka and stayed again, like how it used to be, bringing along all the dogs and

Lili, Mahina's daughter who Cookie took in as her own when her mom, struggling with drug abuse, admitted that she needed help raising her. When Cookie came down, she would go to leadership and community meetings to raise the spirits of those who felt dejected, distrustful, and detached. She had a way of rousing the mana from deep within you, her passionate words like an 'oli (*chant*) straight into your 'ano (*being*).

It was around the time Chief was stealing that I started to come around the village less often, when things seemed even more in flux than I had ever seen them, even after the fires. I spent days upon days not just makai but mauka too, although my time up on the land is not really documented in this dissertation. Like all mo'olelo (*narratives*), this one is crafted – only one of many stories I could tell about the years I spent going to Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. In that time, the village became like family to me – but maybe, in leaving daily life like Cookie, I showed residents that I too had a narrow definition of *family*. I agonized over leaving just like her, but I did too. Fieldwork could not go on forever. I checked in by text frequently and in-person more infrequently than I now like to remember, and life drifted on as other things took up my time. But I always kept touch with Cookie. I remember one early December night in 2023 when she called me while I was in Waikele Premium Outlets shopping for new shoes, her warm voice with those deep, round vowels beaming through the phone to remind me that the village's annual Christmas event was coming up and I was expected to be there. I told her I would be, and I was. Familiar friends reached out and gave me hugs, telling me, "Welcome home." But then life drifted again. I didn't see the family much.

I had just come home one night in August of 2024, and was settling into a quiet evening with my partner, Logan, and our dog. A call came in; my cell phone flashed a number from earlier in the day I had not recognized and sent to voicemail, with no message left. This time, I picked up. It was Cookie's nephew, Ke'ao.

"The lady wen' home," he told me as I began to cry. "She wen' home."

Aunty Cookie died in early August 2024. She was up on the land, sitting for an interview about the move mauka after rushing from a morning meeting and with yet another one to go, when her eyes rolled back and she fell to the ground. By the time the paramedics arrived, it was already too

late. Although the official report would later say that she passed away at the hospital, those who were with her – her nephew Ke'ao, her hānai daughter Reina, and others – told another truth: she died on the land her spirit and determination had acquired, in the home she dreamed of bringing others to. After a lifetime of bringing people home, Cookie went home herself – to that final one, where the parents who once resented her for bringing people to their house would now welcome their daughter into their eternal home.

I was there at her memorial a month later, held on her birthday, nearabout in the same spot where she had passed into pō to join Sis, Marissa, Aunty Polly – all the others from the kaiāulu who had taken the exit ahead of her. The night before, Reina's best friend Alana and I spent many long hours in the hale 'āina (*community center*) boiling eggs for egg salad sandwiches that we slapped together early in the morning to give out to those coming to pay their respects to Cookie. Hundreds of people showed up – community members, legislators, Cookie's hānau (*blood*) family. Former Governor David Ige was there – the same man who threatened that sweep in 2018, only to call it off because Cooked reached out and said – let's build pilina together. Governor Josh Green was there too – a sign of the respect she earned from him. A few days later, I was on Moloka'i for work and the state flags he had lowered for her were still flying half-mast, several days after the decree was over. Such was Cookie's legacy. The entire pae 'āina bore witness to her trip home.

And among those at the memorial were the residents. Aunty Pua, her dreads tied up in a neat bun and her teeth plucked from a glass and put in white and fresh. Nani, waving me over and calling me her prodigal son – her hānai fourth, after Chip, Chief, and their older brother Chuckster. Aunty Roxy wasn't there – she moved to the mainland to take care of her ailing brother-in-law – but her daughter Rae told me that she was doing well, maybe too well, judging by how much weight she seemed to have gained when they spoke on videos calls over the phone. I sat in the back of the memorial with Rae and held her daughter Tyla in my lap throughout the hours-long service under tents in the sun-filled heat of that Wai'anae afternoon. Gina sat to my other side and Eva across from both of us, both of them dabbing at their eyes as Reina tearfully poured out her soul to the memory of the woman who had become her mother. Among the others I saw in the crowd as we

all feasted on the food that Cookie's hānau family served up after the services were pau (*done*) were Aunty Liora, Minnie, Waina. Even Aunty Pep was there.

Cookie's passing was, without a doubt, the biggest bifurcation point the village had ever faced, and what came next was anyone's guess. Already many residents had expressed reservations at moving up mauka, afraid of losing their autonomy, being subject to more rules, or just the anxiety of uprooting from a place where they had found, for the first time in a long time for many, some semblance of safety, security, and home – even when Chief was thieving about. How could the village go on without her? Who would take up the charge in her immense and incomprehensible absence? Would everything crumble, or could Kīpuka 'Aineamalu find a path forward? There was still work to be done, but what did that work look like now? As we gathered that afternoon mere spans away from the tiny homes that were still being built in her vision – and perhaps, now, in her honor – these were the big questions that lingered in the air of our collective grief.

But as I looked around and saw the faces of residents who had only a few years before told me that they were starting to lose faith in a path forward for the village, and for their own continued involvement with it, I realized even more fully something I had not understood until that day despite all my notes, all my time, all my investment, all the pilina built: the extraordinary relational resilience of those who have lived on the margins. Many in Kīpuka 'Aineamalu had been profoundly hurt – not just by systems, but by each other. They carried the weight of betrayal, abandonment, and disappointment. And yet, they came that day. They showed up. Even after the fires. Even after the fights. Even after the thefts. Even after what had felt too many like a betrayal by Cookie herself. What struck me was not that people forgot what happened – that was, assuredly, not the case – but that they had found a way to carry it and still choose to honor the pilina they had with Cookie. Still choose to grieve for her like we had for Sis. Still choose to honor the woman who had, in her own flawed and fierce way, fought for something better for them, for a better them.

Cookie's spirit was everywhere that day. It was in the 'ono egg salad sandwiches passed from hand to hand. It was in the kids running barefoot through the grass, shouting over each other to tell stories of "Aunty" this and "Aunty" that. It was in the tears on Reina's cheeks, and the quiet pride in

the voices of her hānau family as they greeted state officials who once opposed her. And it was in the tales told by residents – the ones recalling her laughter, her scoldings, her drop-offs of food and tents and dog treats, her walks through the harbor, her presence. For years, Cookie was the beating heart of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu, sometimes steady, sometimes erratic, but always pumping life through it. She was not perfect – no one is – but she was relentless in her belief that her people deserved more. A home. A future. A life not defined by the state’s definitions of worthiness or the limits of scarcity. “Don’t you want to get better?” she would ask. And she always believed you could.

It would be easy to say the village endured because of policies or plans or formal governance. But that would miss what really held it together. What held it – *and her* – together was pilina, even when fragile. It was Cookie’s ability to weave together care and command, kōkua and kuleana. Her leadership was not only about rules or schedules or funding applications. It was about presence. She sat with people when they were hurting. She escorted people to job interviews and helped place hundreds of people into housing. She told them off when they needed it. She listened, she pushed, she apologized, she made things happen. When she stepped back, that rhythm changed. When she died, the beat fell silent – for a time. But somehow, those gathered on that afternoon in Wai’anae kept the thrum humming in her honor – in her absence, and in her presence.

I don’t know what will become of Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu. That is not mine to predict. Mauka is still being built, slowly but surely. Some homes are done, others only planned. Some residents have moved up, others have said they will move somewhere else when it is time. There are tensions, griefs, bureaucratic frustrations, and an aching uncertainty about what this next phase will mean and who will lead it. But there are still dogs barking, children laughing, people stepping up into the slippahs that are too big for any of us to fill. There are feuds and festivities and arguments and reconciliations. There is still pilina. And there is still Cookie – in memory, in practice, in the way people speak about her as if she just left to run an errand. She wen’ home. She might be back.

This dissertation traced how Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu came to be – not just as a model or a solution to houselessness, but as a fiercely relational, messy, and beautiful place. But this is a mo’olelo that remains unfinished. It must be. The village goes on – bending under yet braving the heavy rains of

grief, reaching for light despite this dark new absence, rooted still in the foundation Cookie helped them build and claim, led by the teachings she gave them. The trials are not over; they may still burn and sear, but even through that heat, the kalo roots deeper, and the kīpuka's new growth may still make its way through the ash of what was and is becoming. Their future comes from the past as it always does, carried forward by those who remember, who recognize each other, who offer kōkua, and who stay. This is the hope of Kīpuka 'Aineamalu. What Cookie showed us was possible.

I'm heading home tomorrow. See you soon, family.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF 'ŌLELO HAWAI'I (HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE) & HAWAIIAN CREOLE ENGLISH (PIDGIN) NAMES, PLACES, AND TERMS

- a hui hou:** until we meet again
- ahupua'a:** land division, typically associated with a watershed
- 'āina:** land
- 'ainea:** exhausted by strain, troubled, weary
- aku:** skipjack tuna (often stripped and dried into jerky, then sold by the roadside)
- alaka'i:** leader
- aloha:** friendship, love, compassion, sympathy, admiration
- 'anae:** mullet
- 'ano:** nature, character, beingness, kind
- 'anuenue:** rainbow
- a'ole:** no
- Aupuni Mō'i o Hawai'i:** the Kingdom of Hawai'i
- buggah:** guy (*Pidgin*)
- bumbai:** by and by (*Pidgin*)
- choke:** many (*Pidgin*)
- ea:** sovereignty, or life
- grindz:** food (*Pidgin*)
- haina:** cruel
- hale:** house
- hale 'āina:** community center
- hana:** work, labor
- hānai:** adopted to, taken in by (often non-legal relationship)
- hānau:** born to
- haole:** white person (originally *foreigner*)
- hapa:** half, or mixed-race
- huaka'i:** journey
- hui:** group, organization, collective
- 'ike:** knowledge

ka'a: car

Ka'ena: northwest point of O'ahu; a leina a ka'uhane – leaping place of souls

kahiko: ancient, past

kai: sea, salt water

kaiāulu: community, village, neighborhood

kāko'o: support

kalo: taro, the older brother of Kānaka 'Ōiwi (“Hāloa”)

Kamehameha I: uniter and first ruler (King) of the Kingdom of Hawai'i

Kānaka 'Ōiwi: Native Hawaiian (“*people of the ancestral bone*”) | also: Kānaka Maoli (“*the true people*”), Kānaka

Kānāwai Māmalahoe: Law of the Splintered Paddle, a foundational law of the Hawaiian Kingdom preventing harm from coming to those laying by the roadside; important in houselessness law both in Hawai'i and globally

Kapolei: town just before the Westside of O'ahu

kapu: sacred

kauhale: village

Kawaihāpai: area on West O'ahu where the first man was formed from the earth in Hawaiian mythology

keiki: child, children

kiawe: a type of mesquite tree found throughout Hawai'i with edible “beans” and large thorns; known for the quality of the smoke for meat

kine: kind; *da kine*: “the kind,” similar to *thingamajig*, *whatchamacallit*, “*you know*”

Ki'owao: the name of a rain of Wai'anae

kīpuka: fertile area spared (and often surrounded) by a lava flow

Kīpuka 'Aineamalu: pseudonym for the houseless community of study; see “kīpuka,” “‘ainea” and “malu” for translations

kōkua: to help, to be of service, to assist, community service

kolohe: naughty, crazy

kuewa: wandering, vagrant, homeless, houseless

kuleana: mutual responsibility, charge

kuli: deaf

kumu: teacher, mentor, guide

kūpuna: ancestors, old people, elders, elderly

lā: sun, or day

Lāhaina: town on Maui largely destroyed by fires in September 2023; first capital of the Hawaiian Kingdom

lāhui: nation; often used to describe all Kānaka ʻŌiwi as a collective

lau lau: traditional Hawaiian dish made by wrapping pork and butterfish in taro leaves (lau), then steaming inside banana leaves (lau)

Lēʻahi: remnant of a volcanic crater just outside of Waikīkī and site of a popular hike among tourists; also commonly known as “Diamond Head”

Liliʻuokalani: final monarch and only Queen Regnant of the Kingdom of Hawaiʻi

Loliō Kākou: nonprofit developed by Kīpuka ʻAineamalu

lūʻau: party

māhū: person who embodies both male and female spirits, such as trans-people

Māʻili: town on the Westside of Oʻahu

maka: eye

Mākaha: town on the Westside of Oʻahu

makai: toward (ma) the ocean (kai)

makana: gift, gifts

Mākua: valley on the Westside of Oʻahu

malihini: tourist, newcomer

malu: shade, shelter, protection, peace

mana: spiritual power, life force, energy

manini: small

mauka: toward (ma) the upland (ʻuka)

Mauna Kaʻala: Mount Kaʻala, tallest point on Oʻahu and part of the Waiʻanae mountain range

mayjah: major, very good (*Pidgin*)

mea ʻai: food (literally, “things that feed”)

mele: song, songs

Moananuiākea: the Pacific Ocean

Mōʻī: monarch, or King

moku: district

moʻokūʻauhau: genealogy

moʻolelo: narrative, story

moʻopuna: grandchild

naʻauao: wisdom

nānā: to pretend

Nānākuli: town on the Westside of O‘ahu

nīele: nosy

noa: profane

‘ohana: family

‘Ohana Kōkua: island-wide volunteer network formed with Kīpuka ‘Aineamalu

‘okole: anus (*‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i*) | buttocks (*Pidgin*)

‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i: Hawaiian language

‘ōlelo no‘eau: Hawaiian proverb, saying, or aphorism

‘ono: tasty

‘opae: shrimp

‘opala: trash, rubbish

‘ōpio: youth

pae ‘āina: archipelago (*“a line of lands”*)

Pahalehala: the name of a wind of Wai‘anae

pakalolo: marijuana (*“crazy tobacco”*)

Papa: Earth Mother | also: Papahānaumokuākea (*“Papa, birther of sacred islands”*)

pau: done, finished, complete

piko: center, navel, spiritual core

pilina: connection, relationship, familiarity

Pō: the afterlife, place of souls, darkness

pono: ethical relationality, righteousness, balance of all things

pōpolo: black, African-American

Puakea Nogelmeier: the voice of The Bus

pule: prayer, prayers

pu‘uhonua: refuge, place of refuge

Pu‘uka‘ala: the name of a wind of Wai‘anae

shaka: “Hang 10” hand signal, popular in Hawai‘i

shoots: sure, okay, let’s go (*Pidgin*)

slippah: sandal, flip-flops (*slipper*)

talk story: chat (*Pidgin*)

tūtū: grandparent

‘uala: sweet potato

uliuli: blue

wā: times

wahi nānā: lookout

wahi pana: sacred place

wahine: woman (*plural wāhine: women*)

wai: fresh water (any non-salty liquid which nourishes)

Wai‘anae: town on the Westside of O‘ahu; moku comprising the Westside of O‘ahu

waiwai: abundance, wealth