

2024 Summer Research Reflection

“A Journey of Miracles: My Research Experience in Maui”

Nathan Li

*2024 Laidlaw Scholar, University of Toronto*

Research Advisor: Dr. Megan Youdelis

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From conception to completion, this research project has been a surreal experience. This incredible journey all began with a family vacation during the holiday season of last year. My family of four, currently scattered across North America, decided to meet up in Maui to celebrate the holidays together. Upon arriving, I was immediately captivated by Maui's remarkable natural sights, sounds, and wonders. However, I was even more fascinated by the opportunity to learn more about the people and their stories. I had been made aware of the wildfire in Lahaina in early August from social media posts by a few friends, but much like everyone else, the event quickly faded from my day-to-day thoughts. Knowing that my time on Maui was limited to a week, I made a commitment to proactively immerse myself in Hawaiian society and culture as much as I could. Fortunately, I was able to visit some old friends made through volleyball who lived on the island and spend time with them and their families. They introduced me to many unique and beautiful practices and values upheld by Hawaiian people, and I had the opportunity to "talk story" with some older family members who shared their wisdom and spoke about how the fires had affected them and the island. I spent the remainder of my time visiting cultural and historical sites, seeking to learn as much as possible. In addition, I tried to engage in conversation with as many locals as possible, from random beachgoers to cashiers to candidates for county council. Every conversation left me more interested and curious about all things uniquely Hawaiian.

Upon returning home, I recalled the exceptional opportunity presented by the Laidlaw Scholarship mentioned to me by my friend, a former Laidlaw scholar, and immediately started contacting professors and crafting a research proposal, eager to return to Maui for in-depth research.

I reached out to Dr. Youdelis, who teaches Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Toronto and the University of Guelph, who graciously agreed to supervise my research and guide me through the process.

After refining my proposal and completing all the necessary steps for the Laidlaw application, I was thrilled to learn that I had been selected as a member of the 2024 Laidlaw Scholar cohort. Under the guidance of my dedicated Laidlaw coordinator, You Jia, the reality of my research plans began to take shape. I started drafting invitation and interview guides, searched for accommodation in Maui, organized my finances, and applied for research ethics approval.

The ethics approval process was intense, involving a detailed 13-step application and over a month of continuous communication with various offices to clarify the requirements before finally submitting my application. Remarkably, I received approval within a week of submission, without any need for revisions—a rarity, I'm told. With approval secured, I was ready to commence my research.

I began my preliminary research by consuming as much literature and media as possible as well as identifying leaders and activists who could potentially participate in my research. I began compiling a list of potential respondents and began sending emails and messages to them as invitations to participate in my research. This part of the research was especially nerve-racking as you're just sending emails out into the void with no idea of whether you're going to get a response or not. Fortunately, within two days or so, I received my first response and it was an

acceptance! An Indigenous scholar from the University of Hawaii Maui College was willing to schedule a time to meet with me. This news was incredibly encouraging and motivated me to reach out to more people which kept the ball rolling and more and more people agreed to help me in my research endeavour.

Simultaneously, I secured a reasonable living arrangement and completed the process of signing a one-month lease, alleviating another major concern.

Soon enough, July rolled around and it was time to get on a plane to spend the next 4 weeks in a totally foreign place. A night's sleep before I was scheduled to leave, on Canada Day, a west jet mechanic strike cancelled my flight to my layover and Vancouver and with no end in sight, I frantically tried calling the travel agency to make new arrangements but since it was a national holiday, it was to no avail. I decided the best course of action was to book a new flight with a new airline that departed the day after. The next day, With only a backpack and a carry-on in hand, I made my departure to the airport and began the 12-hour journey. After a few airline movies and some conversation with some seat neighbours, I arrived at my home for the next month.

I had an interview scheduled with an educator the day after I arrived so I was hoping to settle in quickly and get ready for the day ahead. Unfortunately, upon arriving at my house, I found out that I was locked out so I left my belongings in the garage and decided to explore the neighbourhood. After walking less than 100 meters, I stumbled upon a community center right around the corner with some aunties sweeping inside. I felt an inner nudge to go in to talk to

them and find out more about what they do so I did and I was instantly welcomed warmly with the offer of food and water. I told the group of aunties about what I was up to in Hawaii and they were amazed and immediately escorted me to the back office of the director of the community center who was a pastor who was intimately involved with the issues I was hoping to research and a pillar of the local community. Within a few hours of being on the Island, I had already found an incredible new respondent for my research with so much wisdom to share. The sensational spontaneity did not end there. In my 4 weeks spent on Maui, nearly every day I met a fascinating new person with a story to tell and had a great willingness to sit down and share. When I did not have a scheduled interview appointment, I spent my time at the community center doing my part in serving the local community by cooking, cleaning, fundraising etc. And as I continued to do interviews, I ran into no hiccups and every conversation left me with a deeper desire to learn more. The roster of participants I gathered covered such a diverse portfolio that I was able to gain insights from a variety of positionalities, Historical, cultural, economic, immigrant, and residential. Hearing from these different perspectives helped me to develop a better holistic understanding of how Hawaiian people feel about the issues that matter to them.

By the end of my fieldwork, I had formally interviewed 10 participants and had countless undocumented conversations along the way. The incredible thing about Hawaiian and indigenous knowledge is that it is so rich however it is not documented in the same way Western wisdom is therefore if you want to learn, you have to learn by directly tapping into the generational tradition of passing down knowledge orally. As my time in Hawaii drew to a close, I was filled with a wealth of new knowledge and profound connections. Despite the sadness of departing from the incredible friends and mentors I had gained, I left enriched and grateful. With a heart

full of memories and insights, I boarded my flight home, ready to share my experiences and findings with the world.

After arriving back home, getting settled and fighting off jetlag, I began the task I was dreading. The tedious work of writing and editing my final paper. However, my research mission was clear: to elevate and disseminate the often-overlooked experiences of Native Hawaiian people. The vast and fascinating array of information swirling in my mind initially made it challenging to find a starting point, especially since all the themes I wanted to explore seemed interconnected. However, as I organized my thoughts, the ideas began to coalesce, and I found my writing rhythm, increasingly excited about the potential academic impact of my findings.

Reflecting on my research journey, I can only describe it as incredibly seamless and blessed. Despite a few minor hiccups, the process felt almost effortless, and the experience was profoundly enriching. I couldn't have imagined a better way to spend my summer. It has been the honour of a lifetime to conduct this research and contribute to the understanding of Hawaii's native community. I am hopeful that this endeavor will have the significant impact I envision and am eager for everyone to read the final report.

Thank you to everyone who supported me on this remarkable adventure, and thank you for taking the time to read this reflection.

Best regards,

Nathan