APPLYING REFUSAL WITHIN ALTERNATIVE BREAKS: RELATIONAL PRAXIS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

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Abstract

Alternative Breaks (AB) allow students to connect with diversity and social justice; however, the literature centers the experiences of White students in ABs. This article focuses on an identity-affiliated AB for Latine(x) students attending a PWI in Utah that's documented and analyzed through plática methodology. The authors work from a decolonial and abolitionist paradigm and draw from the logic of refusal as a framework for ABs to confront the corporate and colonial nature of higher education.

Introduction

Our research began as an idea on centering identity-affiliated programming in service learning[1] opportunities like alternative breaks (ABs) particularly for minoritized and racially minoritized[2] students at a predominantly white university (PWI) in North Central Utah in 2022. This study occurred within the context of book bans and threats to minoritized scholarship while also being formed at a university that manipulated data to espouse narratives of growth from Latin American communities in higher education and positive DEI PR of improving retention rates, when in reality so many Latine(x)[3] students and educators/practitioners felt and knew otherwise and

1 It's important to note that while all ABs are service-learning opportunities, not all service-learning opportunities are ABs.

2 We use the term "racially minoritized" to note that race and ethnicity and the categories that result from such language are imposed on our communities, creating systems that depend on racial terms and categories, and we use the term again in the paper to refer to what is often known as BIPOC communities.

3 No term can truly encompass the complexity, beauty, and harsh reality of the Latin American diaspora; however, we felt that "Latine(x)" would be appropriate in that "Latine" has emerged from the contexts of Latin America along with ties to Spanish language usage, and while "Latinx" is oftentimes referred to as an academic preference and not directly informed by community, it grants space for non-binary and Queer identities to be involved in the conversation of Latinidad. Nevertheless, we consistently use "Latine(x)" to refer to any student or educator in this study from the Latin American Diaspora, because that is the language we used with each other and that's what connected us (Salinas, 2020).

dealt with issues of belonging as a result (Hurtado et al., 2015). In reality, it became a common understanding amongst Latine(x) students and educators/practitioners that the university or its diversity, multicultural, inclusion, and equity centers did not help in building community; instead, we would connect on our own through varying offices and centers to be in relationship with one another and carve out our own spaces. These experiences and events pushed us to search for resources and learning outside of campus to help us get access to further knowledge and liberatory tools, and prompted us to ask ourselves: how would exposure to a well-founded Ethnic Studies program outside of Utah impact Latine(x) students in a PWI in Utah county? What we participated in provided answers to our question, but also produced new thoughts around the importance of relational praxis in higher education and how that praxis intentionally refuses the structural elements of higher education that impede racially minoritized students' abilities to locate one another and form healthy communities and to form deep, authentic relationships with educators/practitioners (Hurtado et al., 2015).

In this paper, we share the story of 16 minoritized students and HESA[4] educators/practitioners participating in a spring alternative break to a university in California that specializes in Ethnic Studies and racial justice (14 students and 2 educators/practitioners). We began the alternative break with all three of us being employed through a university program in Central Utah (one of us was a full-time employee and the other two were student leaders). The office itself had undergone a transformation that moved it from a service-oriented and leadership program that espoused White saviorism with no diversity to an equity and justice-based leadership program with a minoritized-majority presence.

Prior to this transformation, ABs put on by this office had centered and catered to predominantly White, wealthier, heteronormative students coming from a locally dominant religious background. However, one of the strongest outcomes of this trip is that there was a complete transformation in who started attending ABs. For example, because of the relationships from the educators and students involved, the trip ended up hosting 13 Latine(x)[5] students, one White queer student, and two educators (one who was a Black Queer woman and another who was a Latino cisgender man who is also one of the authors in this paper). The students represented a variety of queer identities along with numerous countries of heritage such as Honduras, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Brazil. Some were AfroLatine(x) or a mix of racial identities within Latin America. They were born and/or raised in the U.S.

In this piece, we begin with the neoliberal and colonial structuring of higher education in our literature review, particularly on service learning and civic engagement within the university that frames university systems as not inherently humane or designed for relationships and community-building. Instead, via a decolonial and abolitionist lens we view universities as institutions born from coloniality and recognize that they are devised from anti-Black and settler logics, which translate to physical, interpersonal, and psychological violence against racialized and minoritized bodies (Dancy et al., 2018; Grande, 2018; Patel, 2021; Stein, 2021, 2020; Wilder, 2013).

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5 The agreed term that the students and educator chose to refer to themselves as a collective.

Next, we utilize a Chicana Feminist theorizing of pláticas as our methodology to valorize the stories of our students, educators, and researchers as sources of knowledge to create theory and build a type of relational praxis. To do this, we sketch out the story of our AB, pláticando (storytelling) our relational praxis through our conceptual framework which is refusal. Refusal is a theoretical concept from Indigenous scholars and the spectrum of the Black radical tradition that puts forth a political alternative that refuses recognition from colonial, capitalist, and dominant systems and opens up pathways to imagine decolonial systems that center relationality (Coulthard, 2014; Grande, 2018; Simpson, 2014; Zembylas, 2023). There are other contributors to the concept of refusal, but we highlight these two origins because they greatly informed our research. In addition, we use refusal as articulated by Andean scholar Sandy Grande who weaves together multiple theoretical positions on refusal to discuss what it means to refuse the university as an ethic and ontology that confronts recognition-politics and seeks to "work 'within, against, and beyond the university-as-such'" (Grande, 2018, p.51). We chose refusal as a conceptual lens because we felt that Grande's points of refusal as collectivity, mutuality, and reciprocity speak to our intentions of working within, against, and beyond the university to carve out community in a place that isn't designed for it (the university). More importantly, we point out moments in our AB storying where collectivity, mutuality, and reciprocity occur and become part of a shared communal ethic amongst participants, educators, and researchers. Lastly, we offer a researcher reflection that happens almost three years later where we plática (storytell) on the design of the AB, our intention in publishing our work, the university, the community we started with and where we are now, and our final thoughts on refusing the university as a relational praxis.

Literature Review: Service Learning, Alternative Breaks, and Ethnic Studies

Our purpose behind the AB was to give students a chance to encounter a well-founded social justice program like Ethnic Studies, that was unlike anything at our university. According to Niehaus and Rivera (2015), ABs are a branch of service-learning opportunities on campus that often facilitate student encounters with diverse communities where they have a chance to do direct service. They write that ABs are often, "short-term, immersive service-learning experiences where small groups of students engage in community service during their academic breaks" (2015, p. 211). However, critiques of traditional AB models around direct service describe how they tend toward the development of saviorist attitudes, poor relationships with underserved and racially minoritized communities and that they tend to cater to White, hetero-normative, and economically privileged students. These critiques have impacted AB programming in interesting ways (Bowen, 2011; Crossland, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2012; Niehaus & Rivera, 2015; Novick, Seider, & Huguley, 2011; Seider, Huguley, & Novick, 2013; Van Engan, 2000). For example, there has been an increased willingness to engage complex social issues on ABs, an increased commitment to relational work (Bowen, 2011; Jones et al., 2012), and a stronger drive to increase students' multicultural competence (Ference & Bell, 2004) by offering students a chance to have positive cross-racial interactions (Niehaus, 2017). While the demographics of Ferrence and Bell's study are majority White, we chose to include it because it shines light on the historical and current realities of these types of service-learning experiences.

Contemporary scholarship on Ethnic Studies in educational settings demonstrates its value and impact. A preliminary article by de los Ríos et al. (2015) offers specific case studies describing critical race pedagogies and the way they worked to increase student self-efficacy, civic engagement, student retention, and overall student performance.

The inclusion of a social justice-minded Ethnic Studies program as a core element of the AB experience positively mimicked the historical civic-engagement nature of ABs and their service-learning component. However, problematic aspects of that history require unpacking. For example, the history of civic engagement in higher education has complex beginnings that are still being contested today for it "is shaped by the history of a movement seeking to reclaim the importance of political and democratic participation as a cornerstone of what being a citizen means and as a central purpose of higher education" (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016, p. 1). These ideas are being contested as we enter an all-encompassing neoliberal era where the university is regarded as a career-driven space.

An important note on the study of ABs and service-learning experiences is who attends them and why. Our research valorized the experience of racially minoritized students that visited a community on an AB that shares the same racialized background as them. Niehaus and Rivera (2015) share various findings that describe how racially minoritized students often do not experience community-building or bonding opportunities through ABs (Seider et al., 2013). They write that ABs have a "small benefit to White students volunteering with racially different communities [but hold] a much greater benefit to Students of Color volunteering in racially similar communities" (Niehaus & Rivera, 2015, p. 219). This assertion builds on the work of other scholars who argue that when racially minoritized students have the chance to do work in communities similar to their own, they are able to engage healthy modes of self-perception and identity development (Bowman & Brandenberger, 2012; Dunlap et al., 2007; Holsapple, 2012; Jones & Abes, 2004; Mather et al., 2012; Renn, 2012).

The major distinction between these ABs and ours was that our AB did not ask racially minoritized students to engage in direct service. Instead, we asked students to engage in a deeper, self-reflective, curricular study. This along with the deliberate centering of the experiences of racially minoritized students work to distinguish this piece from other scholarship on the value of ABs in higher education.

Methodology: Pláticas

Pláticas allow researchers to engage community ways of knowing through conversation and dialogue from community stakeholders. While the term plática (Spanish for to speak or converse) is sometimes seen by itself as a method—something void of "theoretical or epistemological perspectives," basically a style of interviewing (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 106). Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) provide a lens based in Chicana and Latina feminist scholarship that grounds the collection of data to lived experiences and knowledge from the body. In other words, Chicana and Latina feminist scholarship extends pláticas to "the importance of alternative sources of knowledge and the intellectual theorizing that takes place...," particularly within the context of the intersectionality present within and throughout Latinidad or the cultural wealth and multiplicity that is Latin

American culture (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 107). Within the process of plática, it becomes critical to not just use dialogue as a means to collect data; instead, plática also becomes a space to create theory, build knowledge, and deepen relationships while being grounded in the complexity of Latin American identity—a methodology and not simply a method. That's why it felt different when we as researchers asked the participants attending the AB to participate in the study, if we could plática with them and not just interview them. Instead of solely researching, we were now seeking to co-create within our community with the hope of creating change.

Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) highlight five ways in which pláticas are positioned as methodologies rather than simply methods of data collection:

1) Plática draws from Chicana/Latina feminist theory.
2) Participants co-construct and contribute to knowledge.
3) Plática reveals connections with experiences and research inquiry.
4) Pláticas represent a potential space for healing.
5) Pláticas are based in reciprocity, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity.

Plática as methodology requires a sense of openness and vulnerability that makes the researcher accountable to community stakeholders and seeks to trouble the hierarchy that can exist between researcher and research participant which are reflected in the epistemological foundations of the tenets. In fact, each tenet of plática was honored and reflected in our experience. In the first tenet where plática draws from Chicana/Latina feminist theory, this suggests that the experiences of researchers and research participants are centered as intersectional minoritized and racialized bodies and how those realities guide research. For example, all of our participants, including ourselves as researchers, centered complex intersectional identities within the Latin American diaspora as part of the knowledge creation and research process. These experiences are what led to our questions and eventually us theorizing from our lens to produce more theory on the AB as well as each other. In other words, we built knowledge and theory from our bodies to create praxis.

The second tenet of co-constructing and contributing to knowledge positions research participants as very much involved in knowledge co-creation and holders of knowledge in the research process and not just informants of reality. In our experience, all of our participants had a hand in crafting the experience and research leading to a process and praxis that was very much co-creative and co-contributive to our research. In other words, this work could not have been completed without them and our continued relationships. The third tenet of revealing connections with experiences and research inquiry positions lived experiences as part of the research and knowledge creation process, which allows for anything that may deviate from the research agenda to be engaged as knowledge and research. This was reflected in our willingness and ease to follow the students in whatever they wanted to talk about and build theory together and this was particularly the case when shared cultural backgrounds allowed for further insight and stronger relational possibilities to strengthen our research.

The fourth tenet engages the subjective reality of interpersonal healing as part of the research process where both researcher and research participant engage a healing journey together. This happened numerous times in

our AB, where in the midst of us all pláticando, we became emotionally bonded and experienced healing collectively. Again, our shared backgrounds and willingness to be vulnerable with each other for the hope of a better world informed our research and also helped us envision new modes of being to one day craft that better world. And lastly, the fifth tenet, which is researcher reciprocity, vulnerability, and reflexivity, is at the core of our work with pláticas and this particular study because as researchers, we learned to not view the students and educators involved as participants or objects to be studied, but as humans engaging with difficult processes and complex emotions. Our ambitions pushed back on scholarly or academic outcomes and centered our collective hope to create a better world for ourselves and many communities. As researchers, we honored that practice and belief by involving ourselves in the research and dismantling any researcher-participant hierarchy. We resolved to be part of the process in creating theory and praxis for our community.

It is important to note, however, that as a methodological inquiry, we organized our data collection design in four rounds or iterations of data collection. The first round of data that informed our research was the real-time prompted conversations we held with students on the trip. These conversations began with questions about the topic of study (Ethnic Studies), but organically became about the experiences of racially minoritized students at a PWI, of the children of immigrants, of members of a diaspora. For this part of data collection, we had field notebooks on hand where we could take notes after our pláticas (storytelling and conversing). We would gather together later in the night to pláticar, compare notes, and reflect on the experiences. Student participants would add to our notes, ask questions, and theorize experiences with us, which also provided opportunities to breach participant and researcher hierarchies and dynamics.

The second iteration of data collection asked student participants to reflect regularly about their experiences on the trip and the questions they had through daily prompted journaling sessions. These moments of journaling would happen after an event of our program such as a tour of Alcatraz prison and witnessing the Indigenous art installations of the AIM occupy movement or during more informal occasions such as after dinner when we all would pláticar and think about implications for our home in Utah. After the AB, we collected these field journals and located trends and themes in the students' writing that included a feeling of isolation before the trip, the experience of feeling seen and understood on the trip, and the desire for safe affinity spaces back home.

In the third iteration of data collection, we held a virtual plática with Zoom between ten student participants and the trip leaders three months after the trip that lasted a little over an hour to share our findings and reflect on our relationships since returning. We, as researchers, were able to record the virtual plática and take notes and reflections afterwards and again, pláticar amongst ourselves to offer additional highlights, and discuss how we should organize and analyze the material. Finally, our last iteration didn't happen till almost two years later as we sought to finalize edits for our publication when we held another plática amongst ourselves as researchers where a question was posed about the AB and refusal: did we practice refusal as articulated by Grande in our AB? This last plática was an attempt to reflect on an experience that happened several years ago and think through relationships maintained and the outcomes of that work on the university, which made us push back on such a linear question and instead proceeded into a plática that encompassed the tenets all over again such as healing, vulnerability, reflexivity, co-creative of knowledge, and more. This last plática shows up in the context of

drastic political and societal changes a few years later and doesn't really offer a concrete response but instead provides strength to our investigation of the importance of radical and deliberate affinity, identity-based university programs for racially minoritized students that rely on educator-student relationality and a refusal of dominant colonial, neoliberal, and hierarchical university structures. Next, we offer a theoretical background into the conceptual framework we intend to use to analyze our data and produce insights that speak to how refusal played out in our AB.

Conceptual Framework: Refusal

As a form of praxis, Indigenous scholars and activists have theorized and engaged in refusal as a way to assert that Indigenous life continues in the face of erasure and dispossession. Coulthard (2014) and Simpson (2014) approach refusal as a means to both challenge recognition-based efforts to address settler colonial structural violence that reproduces colonial power relations and to emphasize Indigenous sovereignty, relationality, self-determination, and resurgence. At the same time, the logic of refusal shares conceptual contexts with the Black Radical tradition and fugitivity thinkers in that instead of popular modes of resistance that are based on direct oppositional tactics, the focus is on "...abstention, a disinvestment from rules of engagement. [Refusal] is a declaration of limits, a repeal of consent" (Bhungalia, 2020, p. 390). As a political ethos, refusal becomes a means to deny the state or other institutions authority over and access to the body, mind, and spirit, altering our relationship with societal institutions while also opening up space for radical futurities and relationality. For example, Kelley (2016) notes the acts of student activists on campus but also implores them to ask why they seek belonging in an institution that would fail to love them as they are.

Refusal of the institution can also be the intellectual and material pursuit of alternative ways of being *in* but not *of* the university (Harney & Moten, 2013). Fugitivity thinkers, Harney and Moten (2013), build on the idea of being *in* and not *of* the university by critiquing the professionalization of the university as a form of refusal and that doing so opens up spaces to engage an undercommons that espouses study, struggle, and relationality. So instead of simply seeking to cut off relations with an institution as refusal, it is also a creationary mode of being in that by refusing or ignoring that which is, one can have the space and freedom to *be* something and somewhere else.

An additional reference to how logics of refusal take place at the university, Grande (2018) writes:

> I examine emergent scholarship on the politics of refusal as a field of possibility for building co-resistance movements between the Black radical and critical Indigenous traditions as well as others committed to refusing the settler state and its attendant institutions. (p. 51)

Grande argues refusal at the university is about relational networks that are born and strengthened through the learning and practice of Indigenous knowledge. In a practical way, Ambo (2018) writes of refusal as caregiving for practitioners in students affairs that invoke familial and tribal ways of being in places where those ethics are

silenced or marginalized. For Grande, this could potentially revolve around three core principles of refusing the university: first, commit to a collectivity that refuses individualized praxis; second, commit to a reflexivity that is answerable to the community you are a part of and which you intend to serve; lastly, commit to mutuality, which moves relationality outside of capital, which does not rely on exploitation but sees familial relatives in one another, particularly in the case of land. Indeed, Grande's intent in writing "Refusing the University" is an invitation for racially minoritized educators and students to (re)relate and in doing so, honor the theoretical origins of such work.

Therefore, we apply refusal as a framework with Grande's three aims—collectivity, reciprocity, and mutuality. Our mode of analysis uses a more detailed accounting of the AB with quotes, notes, and reflections as part of our discussion and findings. In this mode of analysis, we'll use the full account and highlight Grande's three aims of refusal. Grande's three aims of refusal will be coded in the following way: collectivity or the confronting the university as a non-individualist project; reciprocity or community accountability; and mutuality or a radical relationality that defies the colonial divide of forces like race/ethnicity, student/teacher hierarchy, gender, etc., and especially a relationship to land. As mentioned, the next section offers a more detailed accounting of our experience and reflections, in other words, it tells the story of our AB while cutting in modes of analysis that are drawn from the data.

Pláticando our AB: Findings and Discussion

To tell the story of what happened on this trip is to say more about the relational potential of programs and experiences that are intentionally crafted for racially minoritized communities on campus. To highlight this, we offer a quote from a Central American student who said, "it was probably one of the first times I've ever felt like I didn't have to explain myself in any way. I felt very seen." From the 12-hour drive to sitting in discussion groups to crying and laughing over shared experiences, we left the AB with new relationships and a stronger sense of who we were.

Sunday

Spirits on the trip were high the night we left. Everyone was excited to squeeze into two suburbans on this particular adventure. Students and educators were eager to take a moment outside of the university to learn together, but not just solely about ethnic studies, which was the intent of the AB. Rather, everyone had a yearning to simply explore a well-known campus outside of Utah. As we journeyed, students began to pláticar amongst themselves during the ride and when we stopped for food or gas. It was a 12-hour trip with lots of discussion and rest. Some students and I were riding up front and began pláticando about the university, how we felt about it, and the purpose of our trip.

"I'm glad we're doing this," remarked a student riding up front with me. "It feels like something we need to do, something that will help us and the people on campus out." "It'll just be nice to get out," said another

student right behind the passenger seat, "I just need to get out of here and see something different." When asked why they needed to feel that, they replied, "I'm just tired of everything that happens on campus. We literally fight for everything, we're supposed to have everything with DEI, and yet it's never what we want." The student who first mentioned how glad they were to be doing this responded with, "I know, but I think it can change. That's why we're doing this. To change it all."

This type of sentiment highlighted what Grande points to with collectivity and reciprocity. For instance, we note collectivity because all of them came to understand that changing the university could not be done by one single individual. It would take a community. We also noted reciprocity because in the end, everyone noted that we were doing this for our communities. Not ourselves. This kind of ethic would carry out time and again throughout the AB.

The initial stage of our journey centered on similar sentiments in that inequity on campus was incredibly visible, and while it was felt, everyone seemed relatively positive that change was possible. Campus realities like poor community-based programs, the lack of racially minoritized faculty and staff to reflect the university's growth among those same communities, no academic programs that engaged the Latine/x experience, and a well-marketed DEI campaign with no tangible outcomes were among the many concerns happening on campus with no serious attempts to address them. DEI would often come up as the answer, but after heavy advertising and countless awards, students and educators on campus often asked, where was the change that DEI marketing and awards suggested? No one knew, but as some of the remarks suggest, as initially demonstrated, students had faith that everything could change by committing to programs like the one we were doing now.

At the end of our drive, the discourse of *change is possible* carried throughout the journey and students brainstormed all kinds of ways they could change some of the things they were encountering such as more funding for Latine/x students or building stronger community spaces for themselves. It went on and on and overall, there was strong energy around feeling anything was possible. When we did reach our location and unpacked, the lead researchers and educators involved asked everyone to reflect in their journals about their purpose of joining the AB. We commented that we knew the official purpose, which was to introduce our students to a well-founded ethnic studies program outside of UT, but we wanted to know why they personally wanted to participate in the AB. These were some of the comments that stood out to us in their journals:

> It feels very strange and unusual seeing this much people all from one place come together to want to learn one thing so bad. It's like a shared experience having all of us here. Not knowing much about our ancestors or histories, but willing to learn and having all of that fusion to want to learn. I really hope that this trip brings us all together so that when we get back home we all have a safe space within one another to have conversations about our own/shared experiences.

> I believe I am here to learn more about ethnic studies and what all is taught within ethnic studies. I believe ethnic studies could contribute to making minority groups feel welcomed but also make a minority group more educated about inclusivity.

> I have been exposed to White ways of thinking and from a young age, I could always poke holes in their knowledge because they never stopped to think about people who weren't like them. This ignorance can be fixed in future generations. By implementing ethnic studies we are opening the eyes of many.

> I am here to learn about my people and ancestors. Growing up, I guess looking back at growing up, I wish I learned more about where I came from. I think ethnic studies can help, so we just have to figure out how we can bring it back to campus.

Overall, these journal entries point to the way students realize that there are problems with their university and its impact with their community, but they also align with Grande's understanding of collectivity in that again, changing anything inequitable about the university would be a collective effort, not an individual one. Furthermore, there is a hope that change is possible by bringing a program like ethnic studies on board. There were other journal entries that indicated similar tones of working through campus to bring about systemic change by creating new programming and feeling this was possible through the university, but because of space, we've chosen to include these few. While students had developed material and grounded critiques of the university from their own experiences, they still felt the university could bring about systemic change with a few adjustments, namely academic programming.

We traveled all of Sunday and when we arrived, rest and plática were the priority. While I confirmed plans and reviewed our schedule, I couldn't help but notice the excitement of the trip all around. Everyone was tired but happy and I could already tell how unique this experience would be due to shared racialized experiences, for better and worse. I note better because identity wasn't a deficit in the space we carved out. There was no need to explain. No need to be frustrated or fear. Instead, students and educators highlighted unique Latine(x) experiences and layered them with their own and others with comments like, "you know plátanos and tortillas be my jam, haha" or "girl! Put that dembow back on!" Each statement felt like a language that we owned and shaped on our terms with no one asking why or if it was necessary. It bounced around the walls of the house we stayed at with love and empowerment and in that moment, I realized we were no longer a "minority" at a PWI, but a presence of our own among each other. This speaks to both Grande's understanding of collectivity and mutuality in her recommendations of refusal. First, we note collectivity because of the non-individualist way in which everyone was building relational discourses amongst one another, in other words, a community was beginning to form. Second, we note mutuality because Latinidad still has its own problems in recognizing one another and bordered identities (anti-blackness or nationalist identities), but everyone was building on their differences instead of being held back by them. Difference within Latinidad became a way to bridge divides from the Caribbean to South America and then back throughout the U.S. diaspora.

This kind of environment led to a plática late at night that began with a few in the common area of the house and then slowly attracted everyone else. While we began pláticando about the trip, it began to take shape with criticisms aimed at our campus based on lived experiences or recent events that were unfolding. "We got a multicultural center. We got DEI, y pa que? For what? All of these things and none of them really help us get where

we, all together want to go," remarked one student with many nodding their heads in agreement. "Things like this need to happen," added another student, "I just don't get why this feels, just like, so hard to get." Nods and similar comments continued with an acknowledgment of the marketing and public relation campaigns for DEI that felt so pronounced but with little to no material impact felt (Sydnee Gonzalez, KSL.com, 2022). The critiques weren't just felt regarding DEI, but more along the lines of who really controlled DEI which was more university leaders and White administrators. "I don't even know if it helps to have us in these places man, skin folk don't always mean kin folk! You know?!" We came to note Grande's point of non-individuality in this context because of the connected experiences everyone seemed to align on and the constant reference to "we" versus "I" which seemed to build a kind of collective anger at the university. And as these kinds of statements continued, the plática became somber as we collectively began to ask why this was the case.

At that point, it can be argued that we began to "trauma dump," which often has negative tones in that we created a space of self-inflicting punishment, victimizing ourselves and feeling down. However, it's important to push back on that kind of discourse because in many ways it was necessary for us to get all of the tension out. Many of the students and educators had been holding in pasts of trauma and pain due to experiences on campus. Comments were shared with tears about the desire for a better life and providing such for their families, building community because of isolation, and constantly feeling like they had to assimilate to just get ahead and pushing away their own community and this last element was especially harmful for many.

"I feel like I had no one else to be around except White people," shared one student, "because of how my parents thought, but also other Latinos felt that, and so I would just smile and laugh when White kids would make fun of my people or joke around about 'illegal this' or 'illegal that' and just being here with you all is so powerful." Many of the students were growing up in a time in the early 2000s when our region in Utah had not experienced the surge in Latin American communities that happened by the time they graduated high school. For them, this was a pivotal moment in their education. To be surrounded and embraced by one another as a Latin American diaspora was a collective experience that felt both unique and empowering. In this way, Grande's collectivity and reciprocity come to mind because everyone came to realize how important it would be in the future to not be alone and to maintain a connection to a broader community that was their own, and it also became obvious that everyone felt loss in being forced to distance themselves from their communities for the sake of appearing or wanting to be accepted as more American.

Monday

We began Monday with breakfast that we made ourselves and our opening class with an Afro-Mexicana and Ecuadorian graduate assistant who was also a friend from my own grad school days. The class was a little jarring for our students in that language had been used that many were not familiar with, especially concepts that actually seemed critical of ethnic studies. It was important to note that our instructor was already well schooled in ethnic studies, but they had advanced their studies to a point in developing a conscious leaning that would expand and engage in a more critical ethnic studies that sought to critique the reliance of race as identity and

pushing forward with intersectionality, the critiques of the nation state, and more productive conversations with Indigenous studies. So for our students, it was a little difficult to want to learn more about ethnic studies, when they were encountering new intellectual critiques that could push ethnic studies over the edge. This was something I had decided to keep in mind for the next time we met with our instructor but also required unpacking later on that night.

Later that day, we began our workshopping of Equity-Centered Design, which was a founding methodology for the office that funded our trip. Design thinking is a methodology that was born out of engineering and business fields and stresses iteration towards user experiences, and Equity-Centered Design (ECD) is a reconceptualization of design thinking from Creative Reaction Labs where equity is a leading framework for the method. As the students were introduced to ECD, questions arose around the nature of systems and inequity that were mostly geared toward the things happening at the university and the ways in which certain offices (like the one that funded us) were part of addressing these things. What ECD did was contextualize the reality of systems while also highlighting the importance of agency or an opposing reality where we are able to organize and confront systems as noted in the following statement:

> I've seen other ways that I can be connected to the Center [office that funded the AB], and involved in future projects like this, because being involved in projects like this create the kind of community we've been talking about and the kinds of experiences that we've been talking about. This is all really important to me, so I'm grateful for the experience and also everybody that I met. I appreciate you guys.

While ECD may have given language on how students push back on systems, this happened because of the space we were able to cultivate via our pláticas. Another student noted, "Learning all of this is so interesting, but the fact that we can just talk about all of this has me fulfilled. Even though I don't know all the terms and so on, just talking about this with ya'll is helping so much." While knowledge was shared from formal sources with ethnic studies and ECD, it was really how we were able to pláticar with one another that helped ground knowledge into our experiences. We noted that this really speaks to Grande's collectivist recommendation as well because learning as a non-individualist or rather as a community-centric approach became a reality for so many.

Tuesday

The next day on Tuesday, we traveled to a community garden organized by local students and their families that were also supported by graduate and undergraduate students, faculty, school staff, and community members. Students in our AB witnessing the collectivity of the community garden were impressed by the partnerships developed between community members, an elementary school, and university. Many of the students in our AB came to view everyone helping with the garden as community leaders and knowledge holders of land and food. This informed their own perspectives back in Utah in which witnessing Latine(x) leadership in the region we lived wasn't visible at all or not to this degree and it challenged them to realize it actually was possible as

shared by one student, "Having the support around you doesn't necessarily mean academic wise, it can mean like how we saw the garden, it was a community help. It made me believe a lot of things are possible, that I didn't think were..." The community garden showed students that organizing community didn't always have to happen within the confines of the university or that stakeholders in our communities can be leaders of programming resulting from the university, which suggested that the university should be sharing more with community groups than this reverse situation where community members send their children or participate themselves in the university to learn and grow. In many cases, the students came to see how leaders in the community garden already had knowledge that could inform the learning processes of the university as demonstrated by another student's remark in the following:

> ...it just makes sense, our people know the land. That's where they come from. My parents used to do this back home in Mexico and I'm wondering why that isn't carried on here? Schools don't do it here. There's nothing like this on campus. Maybe I should start it.

Students saw the garden as a mode of organizing outside of the university, a part of their own cultural community wealth not easily transferred to the university, but something they could embody on their own or something they could with the help of collectives. We departed the community garden and all of its leaders with examples of community organizing and a feeling that this wasn't as impossible as it seemed. This event in our AB and the pláticas that unfolded spoke to Grande's recommendation of reciprocity because not only was there a deep-felt desire to relation and work in the community, but there was also a bonding happening to land and the idea that care for the land could also mean care for humanity.

Later on, we held class at an old mission site not far from the community garden where our instructor discussed settler colonization and returned to the more advanced critique of ethnic studies and even pushed back on a particular student's comments. This was a critical point where the other educator and I decided to step in and share with the instructor that the teaching needed to be reframed and adjusted in a way that could meet the students where they were at or in other words, starting with basic principles of ethnic studies and going from there. Fortunately, the instructor received it well and committed to rethinking their pedagogy for the next day.

Wednesday

We started Wednesday with our normal course with the same instructor we shared feedback with, and to everyone's surprise the class was a success because it left us all feeling grounded with a strong foundation of the need for ethnic studies but also a good and simple introduction into racial capitalism. Our instructor took questions that led to further discussion and was able to use a digital sketching tool to visualize the way capitalism exploited bodies along racial lines leading to the outcomes we see today and provided material examples that racially minoritized students face daily on campus. Everyone felt good and rejuvenated and while the information was

still complex, it was something students were more willing to engage as shared by one of the students after the trip in the following:

> ...learning more about what does ethnic studies mean... we found out that we still don't know. So prior to going, I thought we were going to get an answer, because I had no idea of what it was. In many ways, I'm still confused, but I feel like I'm more prepared to ask the right questions. I feel like it's guiding me more to really think not only about what I do in school, but what I do in my life or with friends at work.

Most of the students had difficulty recounting exactly what could be said about ethnic studies but for the most part, they had a better understanding of forces like race and capitalism that were linked to the harms they faced on campus. In other words, they were gaining language around the systems they sought to confront. This type of knowledge development was important for many because it also demonstrated the ways in which they needed to lean on each other to both learn more and confront the issues that harm their communities. One student said, "that really clarified it up for me in a way that made me feel like this shit is impossible to solve on your own. You have to band up," he shared emotionally, "and like, take it down together, you know?" This was an important moment to highlight because with knowledge creation or development, we began to see how this work provides pathways to radical solidarities or relationality to engage violent systems suggesting that what was happening fell along the lines of Grande's recommendation of mutuality, that by understanding the systems that harm us all, solidarity becomes a real possibility to confronting power. But the students talked and theorized about it, later on they would be able to experience how something like this could actually happen.

Later that day, we were able to visit a local high school in a city where our grad student instructor facilitated their research. A room was set up for us where there were numerous stations with high school students who were paired up as research teams to interview the AB students. The high school students were able to share their work with ethnic and critical studies and present on their latest efforts at school and with the community. They then began to interview our AB students and engage in pláticas with them as well regarding their own experiences of college in Utah and ask about their learning journeys. Our AB students would eventually share that seeing this kind of energy among students from their own backgrounds and the willingness they had to engage the world critically and work towards addressing it was motivational. One AB student wrote,

> The school really brought into my mind this like amazing community, and it really made me very hopeful that we can recreate a community like that you know, which seems very impossible, just like a random like piece of like Latin America in California. And it made it very possible in my eyes, which has propelled me to believe a lot of other things can be possible.

Our AB students were not only impressed with the students that interviewed them, but were also encouraged and motivated that if it could be done in this location, it could also be done anywhere. Sure, there were material realities of smaller population numbers in Utah County and where they visited in California, but it didn't erase

the fact that our community was growing in Utah County, especially throughout the state. This moment was a defining experience for many of the AB students to commit to working with community members, particularly youth, and finding ways to make this happen through campus which really speaks to Grande's notion of reciprocity because they felt that much more accountable to their community because of the experience.

Thursday

The next day on Thursday, we had plans to visit Alcatraz to learn about Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization as another layer to ethnic studies. The drive was long, so it also provided an opportunity for our research leads to pull out a podcast that provided an in-depth history of ethnic studies. Granted, it was an assignment given to everyone before the AB but because most of the students had not had the chance to listen to it, we decided it would be a good use of time. After listening to it, the podcast really helped ground the history of ethnic studies with the Third World Liberation movement, Black liberation struggle, and radical solidarities that helped form today what we know of as ethnic studies.

The content paved the way for interest and pláticas around what it meant to build relationships with other minoritized communities on campus to achieve similar goals of justice and equity for students and their communities. However, pláticando around building solidarity or relationships with other minoritized communities on campus turned out to be complex. Everyone felt the need to do so, but at times, everyone was unsure about how exactly to go about it. For many, a lot of the other groups on campus appeared indifferent to political issues or more focused on cultural displays as a form of equity (food, dance, and entertainment). Nevertheless, it did lead to further pláticas about the nuances between groups and thinking about how to work with some of those dynamics to bring about new possibilities. For example, one student said, "cultural displays can be resistance though, so maybe we have to find ways where we have examples of defending culture is resistance. The podcast feels like a good example right?" And another student added, "But I would say we can't just assume, and I think that if we first be friends and just build community with everyone, we can find out how but together." These comments suggest that the podcast left an impact on the students and their worldview on the import of building community outside of their own racialized lens, and not only the critical need to do so, but also having discussions on how. The former comment suggests that resistance can be taught to other minoritized communities when the latter argues that relationships should come first with the possibility of co-creating resistance together. This is important to note as an alignment with Grande's demand for mutuality because the nature of our activities and learning throughout the AB introduced sentiments and ideas around building community with other minoritized groups in the hopes of solidarity with purpose.

Attending Alcatraz, however, added another layer to relationality and community building. We arrived in time for a set up about AIM's occupation of Alcatraz with numerous displays about the occupation, but also Indigeneity, decolonization, sovereignty, and more. Indigeneity is often an element critical ethnic studies scholars land on when discussing the limitations of traditional notions around ethnic studies, but for the students this was a helpful reminder that they themselves embodied settler realities and that land was something they hadn't

considered outside of the garden. One student specifically mentioned this and said, "this is like a whole other level to think about, like I'm technically on someone else's land. Someone else was destroyed so I could be here. I'm like no different than White people in that way, but it still feels different. I want to learn about that more." Tuck (2012) argues that racially minoritized bodies like Latine(x) communities may not have the same settler history as Europeans when arriving to the Americas, particularly North America, but the impact is still there when we do not realize where we are and who was removed as part of the colonial project.

Decolonization is closely tied to land and that movements for liberation must involve land and the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, which inclusion or equity projects often fail to engage. However, the experience of Alcatraz motivated the students to desire more understanding on how to better know the Indigenous history of where they lived and what happened along with thinking of possibilities of working and building community with Indigenous groups back on campus. One student also suggested, "Kinda like the community garden, I think that can help us think about who lived here before, who still does I guess, and the history of Utah County, because I'll be honest, I have no idea. Like which tribes were in Utah before anyway?" The experience of Alcatraz motivated students to consider land in their learning of ethnic studies along with their ongoing list of issues to address on campus. They came to realize a gap in their own desire for community in that they hadn't considered the impact of settler colonialism through their own university and the Indigenous communities still very much a part of campus and their region of Utah and ask what it would mean to build community or solidarity with Indigenous people which really aligns well with Grande's recommendation for mutuality since that notion was specifically born out of desire to be in better relation with Indigenous claims for sovereignty and the land that houses any campus.

Friday

On the last day of our AB, we attended the university of our instructor and met with a panel of students and educators from their ethnic studies program. This included two undocumented graduate students and a White graduate assistant. We held the panel outside on campus grounds and had the chance to ask questions and share insights. The panelists informed the students on their own research interests which tied closely to their own identities and shared the importance of doing research and committing to teaching practices that were aimed at critiquing institutions of higher education and their systems. Our AB students took a lot of this information in and got a chance to glimpse graduate students in their own element studying and working in areas that they were passionate about to confront harmful forces against their communities from within institutions, which again, speaks to the collectivist aspiration of learning as non-individualist process that is grounded into Grande's recommendation of collectivity.

The undocumented students in our group asked questions of the two undocumented grad students and got insight in how to navigate educational systems without status while acknowledging the legislative realities between Utah and California that could impact educational funding for undocumented students. A few other questions were posed toward the White grad assistant that shed light on the way White allies and

accomplices worked in solidarity with racially minoritized communities, to which he noted, "It's my responsibility to work with White communities. I gain knowledge from working with everyone here and how to take those steps, but in reality, I know it's something I have to do if we want liberation for all of our communities." This impacted the students in our AB uniquely, because we were contextualizing our experience against Whiteness and seeking healing away from the physical reality of Whiteness on our campus, but we were in the presence of a White educator seeking to be in relationship with us and letting us know solidarity with our communities meant personal reflection and accountability on his side for his community. One student recounted after the panel was over and when we were all eating together, "We've been giving a lot of shit to White folks, but honestly that was pretty cool what he meant and I'm already thinking of White faculty and students who are down with us and shit we could actually do together." This both resonated and motivated our students in realizing that while they worked consistently with racially minoritized educators and practitioners, that the possibility of finding solidarity with White students and educators could equally have just as much impact for all our communities. This was especially relevant for our only White student researcher who joined the trip because of relationships with specific members of our AB and who noted the following:

> Taking this experience as it comes and learning what I could learn from it and not stepping over that line into exploitation and into feeling like it's for my own benefit, that, like as a White person that I can, you know, learn from what people of color have built in order to facilitate and to just help their own communities, you know. I was just so astonished at what the teachers at the high school were able to build together and the kind of work the grad assistant was pursuing. You know, my issues with institutions of education and I felt so inspired and I felt like if we can get education to look more like this, then I feel like we won't miss as many kids, we won't indoctrinate the kids. I think that I went into this wanting to find some way to help build community across different backgrounds and I also went into it very aware of my own.

Students in the AB, despite most of them being from a similar racialized background, all came to be cognizant of the way in which knowledge of one's own history and community becomes a pathway to create relationships with others from various racialized experiences, even if those are with dominant identities which leads to Grande's understanding of mutuality. This particular student researcher who joined also shared a minoritized identity through Queerness and identifies as White as well, but their relationship extended through various students and because of that their circle of friendship grew larger. This is the beauty of intersectional possibilities where relationality can be a means by which solidarity is built. Race doesn't have to be the only marker by which we align and pursue goals for liberation, but it requires awareness and responsibility in that awareness. This example exemplifies that it is possible to engage in liberation struggles on and off campus not despite racialized differences but because of them. Knowledge and awareness allowed all of our students to realize that the project of liberation indeed would be one carried out as a means of relation versus in isolation.

Final Researcher Reflection

It's the end of 2024, almost 2-3 years after the AB and because of time and capacity only one of the researchers was able to close up this paper but all three were able to participate in a final researcher plática and the following is the one researcher's reflection and closing thoughts:

I was the educator and practitioner helping with the AB and writing this paper, and a lot has changed since my time at the center and being in charge of these programs, but the one thing I'll note is that many of us who participated in the AB as educators, students, and researchers are still connected to one another. We're not all best friends, but we've become connected with our own circle of friendships that intersect with others and so on.

In our final plática, I posed a question to the two researchers of whether or not what we did could be considered refusal. After a long pause, I gave my own thoughts saying things like, "Well, if we follow Grande's recommendations then yes we did because if we look at the account of our trip it's filled with moments of collectivity, mutuality, and reflexivity but I don't know because we didn't change anything either." However, that statement felt so simple and not genuine.

In late 2024, DEI has actually come under heavy legislative attack by the far right and most programming and centers grounded in anything like equity, inclusion and diversity have been closed or successfully silenced. Our own center has become more part of the non-profit and social impact industrial complex and basically another type of corporate-like space, and yet, a lot of good work still happens there and with a number of identity-affiliated centers closing, it's become a haven for many of those identities. So when I asked my question, I believe the other researchers weren't sure how to respond because refusal would have felt like more could have been accomplished, so I decided to pivot and ask something else, "let me actually ask another question, what did you all think of the experience?"

Instead of focusing on the concept of refusal and the reality of the AB, the other two researchers became personal and shared that they felt responsible for the lack of educational outcomes on the trip. It was disappointing knowing that not many of the students, to this day, understood what ethnic studies was or what its impact could be in an environment like the one we were all in now. However, a lot of those self-critiques turned out to be stronger lessons on how to help people understand material that could follow into a practical application. One researcher noted the use of the podcast as a non-traditional or academic source but that students learned better from, particularly when discussing it afterwards.

However, aside from feeling disappointed on educational outcomes, relationships turned out to be another strong element in our plática as noted by one of the researchers, "the relationships that came out of this trip were probably the point, or at least I don't know, the best end result." So while we realized that we could have done better in building learning practices that could meet students where they were and utilize new forms of pedagogy to better engage people on complex topics, our relationships felt like the refusal we took on. One of the researchers noted, "I feel like nothing has come in terms of like a political or cultural change. I don't feel like anything has come from that...but if the function was like, you know, these moments of understanding, these moments of connection, then yeah, I think that's something super real and still real." This resonated with me because the

truth is that everyone has remained connected in some way or another, which has created networks across our areas of community and university organizers. The same researcher added that if you put us all in the same room ten years later, we'd all fall in love with each other again! This meant a lot to me as I became really fixated on this binary question of whether we refused or not, which actually doesn't feel like the right thing to ask. Instead, Grande provides an outline of what is to be refused and what is to be pursued. For instance, Grande tells us to refuse recognition of the university. They also demand that we refuse selling our human value to higher ed (do not give them your soul), and refuse climbing the academic and corporate ladder. The one thing Grande asks us not to refuse, is each other.

Closing Thoughts: Relational Praxis as Co-Resistance

Most of the research behind service learning and civic engagement in higher education revolves around the benefit for students to be exposed to experiences outside of their university (Bowen, 2012; Crossland, 2020; Mann & DeAngelo, 2016; Niehaus, 2016; Niehaus 2017). Unfortunately, this same research is often centered on the experiences of White students encountering diverse communities and benefiting from these interactions (Crossland, 2020; Geertz, 2008; Mitchel et al., 2012; Niehaus & Rivera, 2015; Renn, 2012). In other words, what results is often programming built in saviorist attitudes with hardly any of the research centering the experiences of racially minoritized students in these processes. However, when we include concepts around decolonial and abolitionist agendas like refusal, as we have done in this paper, we begin to articulate new possibilities around what it means to rethink higher education, divest from its current system, and even imagine what else is possible for educators, students and our communities.

What refusing the university means and feels like is a call to action for everyone to take on a politics of interconnected movements with a decolonial agenda at the helm: collectivity, mutuality, and reciprocity. This can happen in the university, but Grande pushes us to think of it as not of the university and yet beyond it (Harney & Moten, 2013; Meyerhoff, 2019), for the purpose of "plotting the death, but not murder of the settler university" (2018, p. 61). This is a type of praxis inside campus as well as outside of it that confronts the university at multiple levels, in other words, addressing the societal causes that impact the university and also challenging how those same forces unfold on campus, two sides of the same coin. For example, this means pushing against the neoliberalization of higher ed that stresses high ROI (return on investment) on programs, and instead experimenting with the relational possibilities among students and educators. However, that also requires us to oppose efforts to privatize public spaces in the community outside of the university like our libraries, k-12 systems, and more (Cairo & Cabal, 2021; Levin, 2005). Grande adds that we should seek less for safe spaces in the university and instead create safe houses in our communities. This is an important reminder for educators, practitioners, and students in the university that they have the power to decide if their impact will just be felt in the university and end there, or we can imagine collectivity, mutuality, and reciprocity as guiding principles of interconnected movements that allows us to both refuse and dream anew at all levels of society.

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