Beyond Critical Communication Pedagogy

Pláticas with Latinx Youth

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the possibility of Critical Communication Pedagogy outside of traditional classrooms through a critical and performance ethnographic approach from 15-months of data collection. Specifically, the author embraces the Chicana/Latina feminist methodology pláticas to co-create space with Latinx high school students who have experienced the foster care system. Through sixteen pláticas, the major themes explored include interrogating power, embracing embodied knowledge to question civility, and examining culture and identity. Additionally, the author embraces critical auto/ethnography to grapple with the tensions that arise for her, as a communication scholar, embracing a radical approach to laboring with youth beyond the classroom.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the youth who trusted me with their stories. I look forward to continuing platicando for decades to come! I also dedicate this to Daniel C. Brouwer, whose consistent love and care made this possible. This one is for you!

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CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE STAGE

I entered graduate school, specifically my doctoral program, unsure about what I was doing. Just one year prior, I had lost my job at the institution where I had completed my bachelor's and master's degrees. Because this institution was sponsoring my work visa, I was facing uncertainty about my future. After learning that I had just two weeks to return my work permit and leave the country, I realized there was little I could do. It was 2016 and I was just a few months shy of my 20th anniversary migrating to the United States from Mexico. After completing all my education from third grade on in the United States, having five different types of visas, and spending thousands of dollars in immigration fees, it was time to go home. Home. Home?

I spent the first month at my grandfather's house, the place that seemed the closest to a semblance of home. I was sad, confused, and curious about where the future would take me. Without an agenda or set list of things to do, I turned to a series of books that I brought with me. Reading feminist scholars like Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and bell hooks helped me to process what I was experiencing and how I was feeling. Like hooks (1991), I turned to theory to make sense of the pain I was experiencing. I felt distant from the strong community I had developed in Arizona and found refuge in the pages I was reading. I did not know how to define home, but these readings provided a sense of comfort that I was longing for. I spent the following seven months reading, traveling, and writing through my experiences. In this writing, it became evident that I was ready to go back to school. But in what? And where? The uncertainty continued, but I knew I wanted to focus my studies on power, community, and working towards a more just world.

I began my doctoral program in 2017. "You are clearly a critical scholar." I did not know what this meant; I was taken back by the certainty with which the director of my

graduate program spoke these words. How could he be so sure? What was he seeing in me that I did not see or understand in myself? I navigated the first year of my doctoral program full of regret and doubt. "Why did I choose this program instead of the other I was accepted into? What am I doing here?" were some of the questions I asked myself over and over again. Still processing the immigration whirlwind of the year before, I felt as though I had made a mistake. I continued to take courses and focused on those that were taught from what my professors termed a "critical perspective," which I learned focuses on power and knowledge, dominance and resistance, and culture and performance (Ono, 2009). I found comfort and refuge in a professor's office. He would sit with me and demonstrate what I would eventually come to understand as an ethic of critical love (Calafell, 2007; Calafell & Chuang, 2018; Calafell & Gutierrez-Perez, 2018), creating space for me to belong and offering critical mentorship. Although I did not think of myself as a rhetorician, experiencing this type of support from Dan Brouwer eventually prompted me to ask him to be my advisor. Working with him challenged my thoughts and understanding about faculty-student relationships, as I felt the care with which he approached me and our encounters. This care extended beyond institutional requirements and may at times been illegible to the university. The care I experienced through and with him formed a non-normative kinship practice in and out of the academy, one which has ultimately allowed me to pursue academic and community work on my own terms.

Although a critical perspective was not new to me, as I had explored these topics in my education and community work, I began to learn how to *behave* like a critical scholar. I asked questions about white supremacy and heteronormativity, slowly sharpening my own critical tools. I was unapologetic about the politic I was developing, bringing this perspective into conversation any chance I could. The more I learned, the sharper my tools became, and the more likely I was to use them. Raising my eyebrow

each time I spoke, I paid close attention to the readings we engaged in class, always ready to critique what was before me, the perspectives that were excluded or ignored, the way power functioned, and the way language was used. I began to embrace the art of critique in my engagement with others, quick to pull my sharp tools out and highlight what was problematic about another person's arguments. "How could they not know how wrong this is?" I thought, as though I had been born knowing everything I did, and as though I never made mistakes. This performance of criticality became easy as I lodged critiques from the comfort of a college classroom with little praxis in community beyond the academy. In looking back, my early embodiment of criticality lacked compassion, self-implication, and direction. I critiqued, but then what? I was unsure of the next steps—or that there were next steps at all.

I have spent the last six years trying to figure out what it means to dedicate life to a critical if not radical[1] politic, yet I realize this search began much earlier in my life. In the last few years, I have been grateful to develop and sustain a community of radical academics and community members interested in grappling with this same question. Together, we have engaged abolitionist readings to refine our politics, strategically participated in service opportunities to push departmental dynamics, held each other in care and accountability, and supported one another in our pedagogical and community encounters. One of the greatest lessons I have learned through this process is the importance of developing and centering community and relationships in all that I do. Working to challenge the isolationist design of the academy, I choose to engage these

1. I understand the term 'critical' as a heuristic that is used across disciplines which accounts for structures of power and seeks to generally improve them.
In contrast, when discussing the term 'radical,' it is imperative to articulate the values/ideas that shape a radical position. I am specific in naming humanization as the root of the radical politic I discuss. I take my lead from Hayes and Kaba (2023) who articulate radicality as "A leap toward allowing yourself to believe in the possibility of our collective survival—and to believe that even if we don't make it, we are still worth fighting for, to the last breath" (p. xv).

spaces relationally and to embrace a humanizing approach in my endeavors. But what does this mean outside of the ivory tower? While our community is purposeful, for example, in refusing state or university recognition (e.g. clubs, organizations), part of the question we must and do grapple with is how to do critical if not radical work beyond the university—especially as educative spaces are being targeted by conservative politicians and fascist politics across the country—while within—not of, as Moten and Harney (2004) remind us—academe? My experience building critical community, particularly in light of recent and emerging fascist policies, is constitutive of my journey developing a more radical politic, which sets the foundation for this research project.

Project Introduction

Given the gravity of the ongoing sociopolitical and cultural context, communication approaches to pedagogy, teaching, and learning require an intervention; one which centers the experiences of marginalized members of society and one which divests from the very institutions which have shaped and *limited* the lives we live—often through research. As academics, our response to this moment may lead us to explore the role of the academy as we fight for change. This may involve us focusing on the classes we teach, the service commitments that seek to make our institutions more welcoming or inclusive, and/or pursuing scholarship that embraces critical approaches. But what happens next? At what point do we move our work outside of the ivory tower?

Reviewing the scholarship focused on pedagogy in the discipline of communication has led me to identify a gap in the literature: critical pedagogical projects and theorizing that take place outside of traditional classroom spaces. Critiquing the direction that the field has taken in the last three decades, *Communication Education's* current Editor Rudick (2023) argues that communication and instruction scholarship must break free from the cycle of mediocrity that has characterized this published work, and thus offers seven criteria for future scholarship. I focus on context and similarly to

recognize that “learning occurs in places beyond formal, dedicated spaces for teaching and learning” (Rudick, 2023, p. 206). Following his recommendation and inspired by the important contributions from scholars aiming to radicalize pedagogy in communication (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019; LeMaster & Mapes, 2019; LeMaster & Mapes, 2020; Mapes & LeMaster 2020; LeMaster et al., 2022), this dissertation project aims to explore the possibilities of liberatory pedagogy outside of the classroom. For me, this dissertation project is part of my personal grappling with what it means to live out the radical politic I have been working to develop while navigating the settler institution of higher education. I aim to explore what it means to do pedagogical work beyond classroom spaces and to perform pedagogical work with liberatory ends and in light of both liberal and fascist political constraints. To accomplish this, I turn to youth who have experienced the foster care system and in so doing develop critical approaches to communication pedagogy to account for our disciplinary impact beyond individuated classes. The remainder of this introductory chapter includes four parts. First, I provide an account of the sociopolitical context that animates the choices made through this project. Second, I offer a review of literature of critical approaches to communication pedagogy. Third, I provide a review of the foster care system, as this sets the stage for the population with whom I labor. And fourth, I close the introduction with a preview of the dissertation. When taken together, this dissertation advocates for culturally sustaining approaches to communication pedagogy with marginalized youth outside of traditional classroom spaces.

Context

To say that people living in the United States are witnessing a rise in fascism may sound extreme to a largely liberal public; however, the last several years have demonstrated a shift in local, state, and national politics. While some may argue that social and political issues are unrelated to classrooms, as classrooms are thought to be “neutral” or “objective” under the liberal paradigm of education, it is imperative to

acknowledge that classroom spaces are always already political (Freire, 1970). The social and political issues shaping society impact all aspects of educational institutions, including the experiences of students and teachers. As such, it is imperative to convey the current sociopolitical climate as it directly shapes classroom contexts across the United States and beyond. We continue to witness the murder of Black individuals at the hands of police, the targeting of migrant communities by state legislators, the violence lived by land and water protectors, the growth of the prison-industrial-complex which disproportionately targets communities of color, and the discursive and material attacks on queer and trans communities. More specifically, there has been an exponential increase in legislation targeting access to abortions, queer and trans rights, migrant communities, and communities of color. As of March 31, 2023, more than 650 pieces of legislation targeting queer and/or trans communities have been introduced across the United States in 2023 alone (Movement Advancement Project, 2023). These bills target gender-affirming care, drag shows, bathroom usage, and the rights of trans students—and in some cases trans educators—in schools (Sprayregen, 2023). According to Alexander, Baldwin Clark, Reinhard and Zatz (2023) over 560 anti-CRT[2] measures were introduced from 2021-2022 by government officials. The rate at which legislation targeting marginalized communities and targeting spaces of higher education is such that this review will likely be out of date tomorrow.

Questions about where the sudden target on critical educative spaces emerged have circulated, leading people to consider the long-term effects of the Trump presidency. In September 2020, then President Donald Trump introduced Executive Order 13950, prohibiting federal entities from offering trainings related to matters of

[2] While the acronym CRT stands for Critical Race Theory, a subdiscipline in Legal Studies, state and national legislators have used the term to refer to "divisive concepts," typically those related to matters of race, ethnicity, or sex.

race and gender, which he characterized as “harmful ideologies” and “divisive concepts” (Hinger & Haus, 2020). Though president Biden rescinded this order less than four months later, during his first day as President, EO 13950 has had a strong legacy (Alexander et al., 2023). While it may be easy to assert that Trump’s presidency introduced these attacks, it is imperative to acknowledge that these policies and their attending ideologies are not new. One could point to several historical examples of the attack on educational spaces; however, I will focus on a more recent example specifically situated in the sociopolitical context of Arizona where I live and labor.

In 2010, after a couple of failed attempts, Republican legislators in the House and Senate were successful in passing HB 2281, known as the Ethnic Studies ban, which was then signed into law by Republican Governor Jan Brewer (Ochoa O’Leary et al, 2012). I vividly remember being at the Arizona State Capitol in May 2010 protesting a different law that the Governor had just signed, SB1070, known as the “show me your papers” law allowing police officers to request documentation from any person they suspected of being undocumented (Ochoa O’Leary et al, 2012). After one week of protesting under the beaming Arizona sun, we received the news that Governor Brewer had signed the Ethnic Studies ban into law. Feeling frustrated and defeated, I stood with friends in a circle discussing the content of this law and what it would mean for us—those students who were directly impacted by these interwoven policies. HB 2281 barred school districts from teaching courses that: 1) promote the overthrow of the U.S. government, 2) promote resentment toward a race or class of people, 3) are designed primarily for students from a particular ethnic group, and 4) advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals (Prohibited courses; discipline; schools, 2010). Ochoa O’Leary et al. (2012) offer an analysis of the bill’s four provisions, pointing to the lack of clarity and specificity found throughout the bill. They affirm, “the bill establishes a precedent that is likely to affect other ethnic studies departments, other school districts,

programs other than ethnic studies, and eventually higher education" (Ochoa O'Leary et al., 2012, p. 93).

A little more than ten years later, and we are witnessing the very outcomes these scholars warned us about—many of the same rhetorics used a decade ago are used in contemporary policies. For example, Arizona Governor Hobbs recently vetoed SB 1305, a bill that barred K-12 public schools from educating students on race-related matters, including, "that an individual by virtue of the individual's race or ethnicity, is inherently racist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously" (Weiss, 2023, para. 14). While Hobbs vetoed SB 1305, there is little doubt the same policies will not continue to emerge to ensure education in Arizona is largely post-racial, which is to say complicit in white supremacy.

These political tactics are not new, and if the last two decades have taught us anything it is that we need to rethink our relationship with the state as the sole means of providing the support and care we need to survive. Rather than understanding "the system" as "broken," we must recognize that it is working exactly as it was designed: to oppress members of society who fail to align with the purity logics of white supremacy. The violence that constitutes marginalized life in U.S. America is undeniable, particularly given the rise in legislation targeting rights and access coupled with increasing reports of physical and sexualized violence experienced around the country. As academics, our impulse may be to turn to our institutions and to our roles as educators to combat the injustices we are witnessing. However, the rise in legislation targeting educational spaces threatens the potential of this approach. Said another way: What happens when liberal channels of support no longer exist? As a critical pedagogue, I believe in the potential of educative spaces to contribute to the transformation of society, specifically the role that education can play in developing our collective critical consciousness. It is time to move our commitments as critical scholars outside of the ivory tower and into the

communities to which we belong. This project centers the potential of critical pedagogy by removing it from classroom spaces and into community contexts to possibilize alternative modes of learning. In the next section, I turn to pedagogy in the communication discipline before shifting to the foster care system.

Pedagogy in Communication Studies

To begin, I detail the emergence of two related fields in the discipline of Communication Studies: instructional communication and communication education. While these fields are closely related, establishing the points of divergence is important as they were frequently conflated in early scholarship. According to Lashbrook and Wheeles (1978) instructional communication is, "the study of communication variables, strategies, processes, technologies, and systems as they relate to formal instruction and the acquisition and modification of learning outcomes" (p. 439). Focusing on the function of communication in various disciplines (Simonds, 2001), the roots of instructional communication date back to the early part of the 20th century, when the communication discipline began to establish itself as a distinct field of study (Richmond & Frymier, 2010). However, it was not until the 1970s that instructional communication was recognized as its own area of study, specifically at the International Communication Association in 1972 (McCroskey et al., 2010). Soon after, the expansion of instructional communication continued with the formation of an interest group of the Eastern Communication Association Conference, a division of the Speech Communication Association (now known as the National Communication Association), and the development of the first doctoral studies program in Communication at West Virginia University (Richmond & Frymier, 2010). The early and predominant focus on the "science of teaching" (Scott & Wheeles, 1977, p. 496) includes a specific research emphasis on areas like communication apprehension, teacher power, teacher credibility, humor, verbal aggression and argumentativeness, assertiveness cues, and nonverbal

immediacy (Simonds, 2001; McCroskey et al., 2006; Richmond & Frymier, 2010; Morreale et al., 2014).

While instructional communication focuses on the role that communication plays in teaching across disciplines and contexts, communication education scholarship focuses specifically on the discipline of communication, that is "how to best teach students to improve their communication knowledge and skills" including areas like interpersonal communication, public speaking, and small group communication (Morreale, et al., 2014, p. 346). Despite the distinctions between these two fields, they share a common history, with publication outlets like *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (f.k.a. *The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking*), *Communication Education* (f. k. a. *The Speech Teacher*) and more recently *Communication Teacher*, for example. Scholars across both areas use a variety of methodological perspectives in the research process including empirical or positivist approaches that embrace systematic explanations of observable phenomena (Simonds, 2001), interpretive, also understood as the student mediated paradigm (Morreale et al., 2014), which is grounded in a relational perspective and meaning making in classrooms, and finally critical approaches, also known as the culture-of-the-school paradigm which focuses on the ideological aspects of classroom learning and the ways in which they impact students and teachers (Morreale et al., 2014). While some scholars argue the merit of each paradigmatic approach and the complementary—rather than contradictory—relationship between paradigmatic approaches (Simonds, 2001), the majority of research conducted in instructional communication and communication education since 1970's embraces a positivistic approach: creating hypotheses, utilizing surveys to measure and assess, and developing models and frameworks that could be applied across varied contexts (Myers et al., 2016). However, Sprague's critical scholarship published in the 1990's offered a pivotal shift in the study of instructional communication and communication education.

Sprague (1992) asserts that instructional communication scholarship has been unable to respond to "the most urgent communication concerns of educators" and as such has failed to "live up to its early promise" (p. 1). In an effort to expand the future of instructional communication, Sprague offers a series of poignant critiques about the shortcomings of instructional communication research focused on matters of epistemology, ontology, and axiology. More specifically, she argues that instructional communication research relies on information transmission communication models and teacher-centered models that fail to account for the context of schooling, its purpose, and the role of power beyond a tool that teachers use to discipline and control students. Challenging the status quo of this research, Sprague asserts, "Our discipline's strength has always been in its understanding that knowledge is neither given nor arbitrary. What counts as 'Truth' grows out of rhetorical interaction in a community" (1992, p. 12). From this foundation, Sprague explores critical perspectives to instructional communication. Shaped by the work of education scholars Freire (1970) and Giroux and McClaren (1986), Sprague articulates that knowledge is socially constructed, incomplete, and ever-changing (p. 18). Additionally, she highlights the role of language in the expression of social and cultural identity and in the constitution of reality. In a later piece, Sprague (1993) emphasizes the need for a "renewed and reinvigorated study of teaching of communication" (p. 106). Shifting the focus of her later essay from instructional communication to the field of communication education, Sprague posits that communication education has failed to keep up with the theoretical advances in the discipline of communication. She generously offers a set of six guidelines to shape a discipline-specific pedagogy.

Sprague's critical work was not without criticism. For example, Rodriguez & Cai (1994) argue that it is normal for scholars to split into silos based on epistemological assumptions and that critical scholars should not make judgement on research based on

the criteria of a different paradigm. In her response, Sprague (1994) urges us to shift from simply thinking about epistemology and to instead question matters of ontology, or the nature of reality. Sprague proceeds to critique the ways in which instructional communication scholars fail to account for the interpretive nature of aspects of the research process, instead discussing it as factual and distant from the researchers. She does this by focusing on the way language shifts through the research process. It is because of Sprague's critical work in the 1990s and her push to challenge the underlying assumptions of instructional communication work—which sought to measure a reality through research that focused on variables understood outside of a historical context—that several subfields of critical approaches to communication pedagogy emerged: fields that focus on the relationship between power and communication, the role of performance in pedagogy, the place of critical reflexivity, and the centering of marginalized students and perspectives in the communication classroom. I will now unpack each of these rich pedagogical traditions in communication to reveal their interconnections as grounded in criticality if not radicality.

Critical Performative Pedagogy

A performance approach to the study and praxis of critical pedagogy offers an important entry point into understanding the ways in which our bodies, as students and teachers, are always already politicized in classrooms (McLaren, 1988; Pineau, 1994; Warren, 1999). Pineau (1998) establishes that performance pedagogy is, "a location, a way of situating one's self in relation to students, to colleagues, and to the institutional policies and traditions under which we all labor" (p. 130). Centering the body and embracing the knowledge with which individuals enter the classroom as a point of departure is a core aspect of a performance approach to pedagogy. Building on Pineau (1994) and McLaren's (1988) critical theorizing, John Warren (1999) advances a vision of performance pedagogy that embraces *enfleshment*. Pineau (2002) describes

enfleshment as, “the process through which a body acquires certain habits over a period of time” (p. 44). After time, these look to be natural rather than created and performed through culture. Centering issues of power, authority, learning, knowledge, teaching, and experience, Warren (1999) asserts that performance pedagogy recognizes all learners and educators as full human beings (p. 258).

Pineau (2002) generously offers an agenda for what she terms “critical performative pedagogy” (CPP) as focused on three main points. First, CPP must acknowledge the ways that power and privilege have material impacts on our bodies in order to put our bodies in action in the classroom, and ultimately, in the social sphere (Pineau, 2002, p. 53). Second, CPP should “develop research that accounts for how particular bodies present themselves in the classroom” (p. 53). Finally, Pineau drives us to consider how teaching performatively may occur regardless of subject or area of study (p. 53). Of note, Pineau asserts the presence of performance as a critical methodology that has the potential of being integrated at all steps of the learning process. Pineau’s students continue to develop CPP in innovative ways that demonstrate the potential of embracing a performance approach to pedagogy (e.g. Huber & McRae, 2014; LeMaster 2018; Huber & McRae 2019; Mapes & LeMaster, 2019; Huber, 2020; LeMaster & Mapes, 2020; Mapes & Ascher, 2023). The critical community I have helped to craft and sustain in Arizona have joined me in crafting CPP approaches to pedagogy (Labador et al., 2021; Cortés et al. 2023). For example, LeMaster and Terminel Iberri (2021) use CPP as a framework for students and educators alike to stage difficult pedagogical encounters with the purpose of rehearsing communicative interventions against oppression. This work is meant to be situated within specific sociopolitical contexts and offers an opportunity to intervene in oppressive discourses in the communication classroom and beyond.

Critical Communication Pedagogy

Fassett and Warren's (2007) groundbreaking book theorizes critical communication pedagogy (CCP), which names communication as a unique and important lens through which to build and engage critical pedagogical praxis. Through their work they name the unique contributions that communication offers the study of pedagogy, as they articulate a language of critique that, "accounts for how communication creates and makes possible our ability to see and respond to inequalities" (p. 3). Importantly, they outline what they conceptualize as ten commitments of CCP:

1. In CCP, identity is constituted in communication.
2. CCP understands power as fluid and complex.
3. Culture is central to CCP, not additive.
4. Critical communication educators embrace a focus on concrete, mundane communication practices as constitutive of larger social structural systems.
5. Critical communication educators embrace social, structural critique as it places concrete mundane communication practices in a meaningful context.
6. Language (and analysis of languages as constitutive of social phenomena) is central to CCP.
7. Reflexivity is an essential condition for CCP.
8. Critical communication educators embrace pedagogy and research as praxis.
9. Critical communication educators embrace-in their classrooms, and in their writing, within their communities, and with their students, research participants, and co-investigators- a nuanced understanding of human subjectivity.
10. Critical communication educators engage dialogue as both metaphor and method for our relationships with others (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 39-56)

Developed from the belief that education is a critical site of intervention in an oppressive and dehumanizing society (Fassett & Rudick, 2016, p. 7), this body of

scholarship emphasizes the presence of hope, urging that "we can and must work together toward a better tomorrow" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 58). Fassett and Rudick (2018) have since reconceptualized the commitments across three themes: 1) communication as constitutive, rather than representational, 2) social justice is a process, rather than a utopic end, and 3) the classroom is a site of activism and interpersonal justice, rather than prep for the 'real world' (Fassett & Rudick, 2018, p. 5-11). This thread of pedagogical thought, and the development of CCP as an emerging subdiscipline, was made possible by Sprague's critiques in the 1990's. Acknowledging that communication had yet to grapple with its role in critical pedagogy, Fassett and Warren (2007)—like Sprague—draw on the work of scholars outside of the discipline including Freire (1970) and Giroux (1999) to push against the ways in which instructional communication scholarship conceptualizes of identity as a series of variables rather than as co-constituted through dialogue and communication, and of understanding schools and research as reproducing social and economic inequity. CCP is a political project that embraces social justice as a goal (Fassett & Warren 2007).

Numerous scholars have taken up CCP to theorize the experiences of marginalized individuals and perspectives including international instructors (Chen, Cummins, Saindon, & Zhang, 2022), Black men (Cummins & Griffin, 2012), Black women (Hall & Bell, 2022), Women of Color (Calafell, 2010; Calafell & Chuang, 2018), queer and trans folks (LeMaster, 2019; LeMaster & Johnson, 2019), borderland theories (Gutierrez-Perez, 2016), and critical race theory (Simpson, 2010). Others have embraced this framework to critique and reconceptualize practices of assessment in the classroom (Kahl, 2013; Ashby-King, Iannacone, Ledford, Farzad-Philips, Salzano, & Anderson, 2022; Kahl, Atay, & Amundson, 2022), while some provide praxis-oriented manuscripts for those interested in embracing CCP in the classroom (Golsan & Rudick, 2018; Lawless, 2018; Rudick, Golsan, & Cheesewright, 2018; Hall, 2020). Despite the critical

theorizing that has been published since the emergence of CCP, some scholars argue that more needs to be done.

For example, Frey and Palmer (2017) acknowledge that developing students' critical consciousness is important, however, they advocate for an approach that "not only helps students understand and critique," but also empowers them to "change social injustices" (p. 364). They advance Communication Activist Pedagogy (CAP), which aims to respond materially to social injustice by having students collaborate with community members and activists to address social issues (Frey & Palmer, 2014). Despite the introduction of this framework nearly a decade ago, Frey and Palmer note that *Communication Education* has not published much work in this area of pedagogy. Regardless of this critique of CCP from CAP, other critical pedagogues in the discipline of communication have embraced CCP as a point of departure from which to expand and theorize specific subdisciplines in communication as they intersect with pedagogy; examples of this including Critical Intercultural Communication Pedagogy and Queer Communication Pedagogy to which I will turn to each next.

Critical Intercultural Communication Pedagogy

Another important area of inquiry in communication pedagogy has been Critical Intercultural Communication Pedagogy (CICP). This approach to pedagogy builds on the vital work of Nakayama and Halualani (2010), whose edited volume *The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication* specifically demonstrates a critical approach to the study of intercultural communication and puts it into conversation with Fassett and Warren's (2007) theorizing of a communication pedagogy and Freire's (1970) approach to critical pedagogy. Noting the gaps in literature that connect critical intercultural communication and CCP, Atay and Toyosaki (2018) edit their anthology *Critical Intercultural Communication Pedagogy* with the goal of nurturing "a space for pedagogical discussion and innovations" shaped by critical intercultural communication

studies, embracing embodied praxis, and highlighting challenges for pedagogues at all levels (p. ix). Atay and Toyosaki (2018) aim to build on what they consider the most important commitments of CCP as articulated by Fassett and Warren (2007): reflexivity and dialogue. Through their edited volume, several scholars who embody intersectional difference offer important contributions to the defining, doing, understanding, and thinking about and though critical intercultural communication pedagogy. A critical point articulated in the introduction of the anthology is that CICP functions inside and outside of educative spaces, "by blending the demarcation between them" (p. x).

Important contributions have so far included a focus on the connections and intersection between CCP and CICP (Sandoval & Nainby, 2018), self-reflexivity (Toyosaki & Chuang, 2018), the place of historical trauma in the classroom (Mendoza, 2018), and questions of ethics and activism in pedagogy (Cooks, 2018). Other significant contributions have focused on interrogating neoliberalism in higher education (Jones & Calafell, 2012; Chen & Lawless, 2019), critical love (Calafell & Chuang, 2018; Calafell & Gutierrez-Perez, 2018), and silence and pedagogy (Hao, 2010; Hao, 2011). Just as CICP aims to extend CCP by focusing on critical intercultural communication, queer communication pedagogy also uses CCP as a point of departure for theorizing. LeMaster's (2018) chapter in Atay and Toyosaki's (2018) volume explores queer failure as one way to realize queer communication pedagogy, offers a connection between these two pedagogical frameworks, and effectively reveals that there is much overlap between these subdisciplinary pedagogical areas.

Queer Communication Pedagogy

Queer Communication Pedagogy (QCP) bridges CCP and queer communication studies by placing specific attention on representations and performances of gender and sexuality in educative contexts. QCP aims to challenge and resist "Compulsory cisheterosexual and normative practices and curricula" that oppress queer and trans

folks in the classroom (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2019, p. 2). QCP specifically poses cisheterosexuality as a problem (Atay & Pensoneau-Conway, 2019) and is committed to "the liberation of gender and sexual nonnormativity through the abolition of carcerality" (leMaster, 2021, p. 3). In engaging this work, pedagogues must be willing to implicate ourselves in order to unlearn and let go of normative understandings of gender (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019). While much of the work in QCP emphasizes classroom spaces, it is important to note its potential outside of them.

For example, Atay (2016) emphasizes the role that QCP can play in challenging oppressive discourses and media framings regarding LGBTQ lives, particularly offering QCP as a response to the Pulse night club shooting in Orlando, Florida (see also Gutierrez-Perez, 2021; Tristano, 2022). Extending QCP, LeMaster & Johnson (2019) elaborate on trans-affirming pedagogy as a project that challenges and seeks to change the normative ways that society expects individuals to communicate gender identities. Their critical theorizing extends QCP by focusing specifically on the experiences of trans folks in the classroom and to challenge what we (all) think we know about gender. LeMaster and Mapes (2019) theorize liberatory pedagogies which question mundane communication practices in pedagogical contexts and with the goal of eradicating the prison industrial complex. They argue that performative pedagogy offers the "necessary relational grounds for liberatory pedagogy that occurs across time and space with a sustained focus on structural forces" (p. 69). Centering queer worldmaking, relationality, and embodied abolitionist praxis they assert, "Abolition is queer worldmaking is QIC praxis" (p. 74). Finally, a recent contribution in QCP comes from Brandley and Labador (2022), who assert that a vital aspect of QCP is challenging allonormativity, and thus, they introduce an asexual affirming pedagogy. Specifically, asexual affirming pedagogy focuses on challenging allonormativity and creating and sustaining educative spaces that are affirming of asexual people.

The areas of critical performative pedagogy, critical communication pedagogy, critical intercultural communication pedagogy, and queer communication pedagogy have a valuable place in communication pedagogy as they each advance important theorizing related to power, reflexivity, minoritized communities, and marginalized approaches in Communication Studies. Rather than understanding them as competing subdisciplines, these represent a critical shift in communication education, a shift that was first made possible by the germinal work of Sprague (1992,1993,1994) among others. These distinct but overlapping areas have set the groundwork for early scholars like me, who aim to continue to explore the possibilities that emerge when we center matters of liberation and justice in educational pursuits as opposed to classroom maintenance and control as that seen in earlier (and current) forms of communication pedagogy scholarship. These four areas, along with current pedagogical projects which will be detailed below, offer yet another entry point from which I can reimagine pedagogy outside of traditional classroom spaces and *beyond* critical communication pedagogy as it has been developed so far.

Current State of Pedagogy in Communication Studies

The pedagogical frameworks described above have reinvigorated the study of pedagogy in communication, offering vital approaches that emphasize the particularity of sociopolitical contexts in education and that center the experiences and ways of knowing of marginalized communities. Despite the critical theorizing that has taken place since Sprague's (1992,1993) germinal essays three decades ago, there is still much work to be done. Bringing attention to the work published in *Communication Education*, Myers, Tindage, and Atkinson (2016) highlight that of the research methodologies utilized in publications between 1976 and 2014, less than 10 of these embraced a critical perspective (p. 33). In contrast, more than 500 manuscripts were written and published from a quantitative and/or post-positivist perspective (p. 33). Additionally, they note

that the most common design utilized in these publications was survey research design, followed by experimental design (Myers et al, 2016, p. 34). Noting that, "our scholarship has yet to fulfill its promise as theoretically insightful, methodologically rigorous, and pedagogical useful field of study," (p. 210), Rudick (2022) affirms the need for *Communication Education* research that embraces different research designs, including field-based work, autoethnography, and cultural criticism. Despite this gap in the literature, I am purposeful in highlighting the recent work that has been published over the last few years, work that responds to Rudick's (2022) criteria for improving *Communication Education* research, as it offers a new and innovative directions for communication pedagogy, including continued theoretical advancement (p. 205).

In 2021, Atay, Broeckelman-Post, and Mazer edited a forum[3] for *Communication Education* focused on diversity, intersectionality, transnationality and pedagogy. The

[3] The events of the last several years have prompted (some) areas of the communication discipline to acknowledge, confront, and grapple with its intimate ties with whiteness. In 2018, Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, and McIlwain published an article titled *CommunicationsoWhite* which documented what many minoritized scholars already knew from embodied experience, that non-White scholars continue to be underrepresented in editorial positions, citations, ad published work. This manuscript, which analyzed the racial composition of authors in work published between 1990 and 2016, acted as a catalyst for a log needed discussion about the state of communication research. In 2019, the discipline experienced another rupture when Dr. Medhurst circulated an editorial criticizing the leadership of the National Communication Association for the ways in which they sought to change the process for choosing Distinguished Scholars. A coalition of communication scholars condemned the editorial through a co-authored letter, noting the way Dr. Medhurst's editorial functioned as a tool of intimidation for marginalized scholars. This letter gathered thousands of signatures from communication scholars who stood in opposition to this. Finally, in 2020, conversations pertaining to power and race peaked when George Floyd was murdered at the hands of police. This event caused a rupture in the U.S., as Black communities and accomplices had been organizing to fight racialized state sanctioned violence. This event impacted spaces of higher education and academia, as colleges, universities, and academic institutions and disciplines created and distributed statements proclaiming Black Lives Matter. In the discipline of communication, institutions like NCA put out statements, as well as noninstitutionalized coalitions of scholars (see the Antiracist Manifesto in Communication). Between the publication of #CommunicationsoWhite, the Distinguished Scholars controversy, and the state sanctioned violence on George Floyd, the discipline was forced to confront the state of Communication Studies, and the ways in which it reflects and reproduces the power dynamics outside of it. In response to this, several publication outlets utilized forums and special issues to allow for brief interventions in discourse related to race and the discipline, rather than having to wait for fully fleshed out research projects. For this reason, it is imperative to engage the content found in forums during this time as this is one way to acknowledge the interventions taking place given the sociopolitical context in the discipline of communication.

editors assert the need for an intersectional approach to communication education scholarship that accounts for the current social, cultural, and political moment which impacts our pedagogical interactions in different spaces (p. 327). Through this forum, contributing authors pose unique and important visions for this work. Advocating for a critical race feminist framework for the teaching of communication, Ruiz-Mesa (2021) demands that we challenge the canon in communication and acknowledge and grapple with the ways in which curricula hinder a deeper and more nuanced understanding of difference. On the other hand, Zhang (2021) offers their own first-hand experience as a transnational teacher to grapple with English hegemony and its impact on classroom spaces. Davidson, Mhonde, and Hingle (2021) embrace the philosophy of Ubuntu, which roughly translates to "I am because we are" (p. 336), to extend critical communication pedagogy. Finally, LeMaster and Terminel Iberri (2021) embrace performance pedagogy to stage difficult pedagogical encounters in order to rehearse communicative interventions. Extending critical pedagogical theorizing in communication studies, each piece advances a vision of pedagogy that continues to account for and respond to the urgency of the sociopolitical moment.

In 2022, Broeckelman-Post and Mazer edited another forum focused on whiteness, racial justice, and advocacy in communication studies. More specifically, they prompt contributors to grapple with the relationship between *Communication Education* and racial justice, diverse representation in communication departments across the country, and whiteness and the discipline of communication studies (p. 535). The pieces in this forum offer an array of responses to the editors' prompts, including a shift in the publication process along with the use of author subjectivity statements (Maldonado, 2022) and a concerted effort to recognize bias in the classroom in order to create inclusive curricula that prioritize contributions from students (Brammer, Martinez, Punyanunt-Carter, 2022). Importantly, Lacy and Chen (2022) propose an

intentional and sustainable mentorship praxis with underrepresented students which they term critically reflexive (co)mentoring (p. 311). Current Editor Rudick (2022), whose research has contributed a nuanced understanding of whiteness in academe, articulates his hesitation about the direction *Communication Education* has taken so far, recognizing that much of the scholarship published about race continues to be marginalized in the field *and* in the journal, as it is often featured in forums or special issues (as illustrated above), a point that is punctuated by the fact that Rudick's very critique is couched in a special forum. Despite these important contributions, as Rudick (2022) notes, we need to be able to name white supremacy and to explore its communicative dimensions across pedagogical contexts in fully fleshed out studies (p. 364).

Within the last five years, communication pedagogues have been paying close attention to and publishing about the reformist aims of the critical approaches to pedagogy noted throughout this discussion. Fassett and Warren (2007) assert that CCP is "explicitly reform oriented" (p. 52). For those of us committed to challenging liberalism with radical politics, grappling with the limits of a reformist approach requires us to explore alternative approaches that embrace liberatory ends. Noting the limits of this approach, scholars have begun to articulate the possibilities of weaving abolitionist politics into pedagogical work. Specifically, LeMaster and Mapes (2020) assert communication pedagogues are in a unique position for having a significant impact by rejecting retribution and carceral logics across foundational communication courses, which are often the cornerstones of a liberal education e.g. public speaking. LeMaster, Mapes, Stanley, Labador, Terminel Iberri, Stephenson, and Rife's (2022) agenda-setting essay traces the Western liberal philosophies that have informed and shaped the discipline of communication, and which have failed to account for anti-Indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and xenophobia. They assert that the only viable route to respond to the

precarity of this sociopolitical context is to ditch reformist approaches and instead embrace liberation (p. 167). Specifically, their essay concludes with a manifestx which re-envisions classroom spaces "as spaces where we build tools to construct worlds in which we want to live, worlds not constrained by current systems of power and domination, where students are empowered to use their communicative skills to politically organize to coalesce (un)coalitions" (p. 179). Specifically, they call for a focus on decolonization, abolition, and transnational solidarity against U.S. empire.

The scholars named over the last several pages have offered tremendous contributions to the discipline at large. The labor they have provided through published books and manuscripts, conference presentations, workshops, roundtable discussions, and (in)formal networks of mentoring and support over the last three decades, has helped to advance the discipline to account for the ways in which systems of oppression are reinforced and reproduced through communicative acts in classroom contexts. On top of that, these contributions push us to explore how we, as students and educators, can make concerted efforts to imagine alternative approaches to education. Thanks to this labor of love, I am emboldened to take this theorizing from the confines of a college classroom and explore its potential with youth. More specifically, I am deliberate in embracing critical approaches to communication pedagogy in my community work with youth who have experienced the foster care system. In the following section, I offer a description of the foster care system and detail some of the specific challenges that youth who enter the foster care system experience.

Foster Care System

At any given time, there are over 400,000 children in the foster care system in the United States (iFoster, 2020). The foster care system, also known as the child welfare system, claims to provide support to children who are removed from the care of their parents. According to the Children's Bureau website, this entity focuses on "improving

the lives of children and families through programs that reduce child abuse and neglect, increase the number of adoptions, and strengthen foster care" (Children's Bureau, 2023). A child may be removed from their home if the state determines they have experienced abuse or neglect. Once a child is removed from their home and processed, they may experience a variety of home placements which include housing with nonrelative foster parents, with relatives (known as kinship), residential treatment facility, and/or group homes (Lash, 2014). After a child enters the system, there are three ways they may leave: being adopted, reunified with family, or they age out of the foster care system. Each year, around 30,000 youth aged 18-21 age out of the foster care system and are likely to experience homelessness and unemployment (iFoster, 2020).

According to the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2018), between 70-84% of 17- and 18-year-olds in foster care express a desire to go to college. Although up to 40% of these youth end up enrolling in college at some level, only between 3-10% of them attain a bachelor's degree (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). As a result, many programs who aim to support youth in care place significant emphasis on college preparation and enrollment, often led by the idea that this will provide better earnings and opportunities (Lash, 2017, p. 85). As of December 2022, there are nearly 12,000 youth in the foster care system in the state of Arizona. Of these youth, 34% are Hispanic/Latinx, 30% are white, 17% are Black/ African America, and 10% are American Indian (Arizona Department of Child Safety, 2023). While the Hispanic/Latinx foster care population is highest in Arizona, it is important to note that the percentage of Black and American Indian youth in foster care is disproportionate to the general population of Black and American Indian people in Arizona (Arizona Department of Child Safety, 2023).

That the foster care system is shaped by racial bias and white supremacy is a matter that many scholars emphasize (Roberts, 2002; Lash, 2017; Itzkowitz & Olson,

2022; Soni et al. 2022). For example, remarking that Black communities are most likely to be disrupted by the foster care system, Roberts (2002) asserts that, "the color of America's child welfare system is the reason Americans have tolerated its destructiveness" (p. x). Similarly, Cantey, Smith, Sorrells, Kelly, Jones, and Burrus (2022) affirm that the child welfare system is an illustration of white supremacy in the U.S. that mirrors a "history of racialized social control and suppression" (p. 179). This suppression is also specifically exercised on poor communities (Roberts, 2002; Lash, 2017; Itzkoits & Olson, 2022). Scholars also argue that the child welfare system reflects other aspects of U.S. culture and history. For example, Roberts (2002) notes that the approach taken in child protection is closely connected to U.S. society's embrace of children's welfare as an individual responsibility, rather than a collective one (p. 89). In taking this approach, the system places blame for the precarity imposed on children on individual families rather than the materiality that constitutes "lived experience" (Roberts, 200, p. 99; Lash, 2017, p. 9). Additionally, scholars document the ways in which the history of the U.S. is reflected in the system, pointing specifically to Indigenous children removed from their families and being forced to attend residential schools (Lash, 2017), and state control of Black families (Roberts, 2002). Finally, queer and trans youth who are rejected by families, and as a result enter the foster care system, are put in similarly risky placements where they may experience harassment and violence (Lash, 2017).

Scholars are specific in recognizing the overlap between the child welfare system and the prison system. Noting that the racial disparity in these systems is by design, Roberts (2002) points to the incarceration of parents as a reason that youth are placed in foster care (p. 201). Lash (2017) also emphasizes that these systems are often dealing with the same children (p. 114) noting the pipeline between foster care and juvenile detention. In fact, over half of youth who are in foster care experienced a conviction,

arrest, or overnight stay in a correctional institution (Courtney et al., 2004). The serious issues explicated by scholars and activists point to the extreme harm that the child welfare system causes generally, and specifically to marginalized youth including those who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, queer and trans, and disabled. While some advocate for the reform of child welfare (Lash, 2017), others are specific in calling for its complete deconstruction. Roberts (2020) asserts that child welfare is a fundamental aspect of the U.S. carceral regime and must therefore be included in calls to abolish policing. She highlights the small movement that aims to abolish and transform the "family regulation system," which she notes better speaks to the function of the child welfare system. "Our goal is not only to dismantle the current system, but also to imagine and create better ways of caring for children, meeting families' needs, and preventing domestic violence" (Roberts, 2020, para. 12). An abolitionist approach to foster care calls for those involved to infuse an abolitionist politic into their work with youth and families. Soni, Mason, and Sherman (2022) propose an anti-racist community-centered approach related to the child welfare system. This includes: 1) a new way to measure success that challenges the idea that more is better and instead focuses on the relationships built, 2) prioritizing the intersectional structural inequalities that impact youth, 3) prioritizing healing, 4) prioritizing the needs and dignity of youth and families, 5) shifting power to impacted communities rather than agencies, and finally 6) developing feedback loops to increase community involvement (p. 98-105).

Soni et al.'s (2022) proposition aims to reform the harmful ways that the child welfare system has and continues to function. Specifically, the system has disproportionately impacted the livelihood of Black, Indigenous, and low-income communities by claiming to center the well-being of children. Additionally, Latinx youth are the fastest growing group in the foster care system (Garcia, Aisenberg, & Harachi, 2012). Specifically in Arizona, a state with a deep history of anti-immigrant and anti-

Latinx ideologies, 34% of youth currently in foster care are Hispanic/Latinx (Arizona Department of Child Safety, 2023). As a Latina communication scholar committed to the potential of educative spaces and, given the college enrollment and completion rates for youth who have experienced the foster care system, I have grappled with different ways that I may be able to work alongside youth who are in marginalized positions, those who may never enter a college classroom. This leads me to explore the potential of critical pedagogy outside of the communication classroom, and specifically how I can integrate culturally sustaining and culturally relevant approaches to laboring with youth.

Establishing My Research Agenda

Since the first year of my doctoral study, I have been working with a program that supports high school students who have experienced the foster care system. While the program's focus is to assist these students in completing their high school education and to enroll in college (more of which will be shared in the next chapter), my commitment in this space is shaped by a desire to create and sustain community. This community is one in which youth can be their full selves, and set goals they desire for their future, whether these include a college education or not. Creating and sustaining a community of care is not about "saving" anyone; instead, this labor requires reciprocity, vulnerability, and connection, along with an understanding of the structural forces that shape the lives of youth in care.

While the skills and resources I have gained through my participation in the academy have been useful through this project, they are insufficient. My involvement with this program, and others whose work centers marginalized communities, have forced me to acknowledge the limitations that come from my role as an academic. Critique is never enough; our academic work is never enough. We must be willing to step outside of the institution and *work beyond institutional legibility*; to imagine alternative futures for ourselves. We must be willing to make mistakes, to put our bodies on the line,

and to act on the very theories and politics we assert in our academic endeavors. The political moment requires more from us. This dissertation details my work with this program broadly, and more specifically my interactions with these youth. Two main questions guide my inquiry:

1. How can a culturally specific methodology be used to reimagine communication pedagogy outside of traditional classrooms?
2. In light of the contemporary sociopolitical context (e.g. rising fascism), what tensions might arise for a communication scholar who embraces a radical approach to laboring with youth beyond the classroom?

I am intentional in centering marginalized youth through this project because of the way their experiences and voices are invisibilized in society and in the discipline of communication. While these youth experience the white supremacist and cisheteronormative design of state institutions, this dissertation does not focus on that. Instead, I focus on the environment we co-created and the types of questions and topics with which we grappled as a community. While it is important to acknowledge the way power specifically impacts this population, I am intentional in focusing on the possibilities we co-create in light of the sociopolitical circumstances. Together, we work to develop and sustain a community shaped by an ethic of care. Our collective labor highlights the possibilities of culturally relevant approaches to communication pedagogy outside of classroom settings.

Preview

In the next chapter, I detail the methodological approach I took through this project, including pláticas methodology, critical autoethnography, and critical performance ethnography. Then, Chapter 2 describes the concerted effort I made

towards infusing a humanizing praxis throughout the research process. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the culture-specific mode of communication (e.g. pláticas) the youth and I co-created over a 15-month period, specifying the themes discussed. Specifically, this chapter discusses the ways in which we co-created space in order to interrogate power, embrace embodied knowledge to question civility, and reflect on culture and identity. Chapter 4 focuses on the tensions I experienced as a community member and researcher laboring with marginalized youth while navigating my own political becoming in light of the contemporary sociopolitical context. Through this chapter, I explore the areas of refusal, legibility, failure, answerability, and emotions by sharing excerpts from my fieldnotes to demonstrate the tensions I experienced throughout my research process. Finally, chapter 5 offers important lessons that can be taken from this work for pedagogues, researchers, and individuals who desire to create and sustain communities of care generally and with youth particularly. Specifically, I elaborate on the politic of care as praxis and how this can be used in different contexts.

"But first, we imagine." (Brown, 2017)

CHAPTER 2

MAPPING RESISTANT METHODOLOGIES IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

In this chapter, I outline the methodological approach I use through this project. The articulation of this methodology is an argument towards an innovative approach to qualitative research in Communication Studies. More specifically, I explore the potential of embracing culturally relevant and sustaining research methodologies when working with Latinx youth. First, I provide a brief description of critical qualitative research and the choices I make in taking up critical and performance ethnography, and critical auto/ethnography through this research project. More specifically, I describe humanizing approaches to research with youth, and the ways in which these provided a series of touch points from which to engage in the research process. Additionally, I bridge the Chicana/Latina feminist methodology pláticas and establish its need in the discipline of communication. Finally, I provide an overview of the context of this project, the methods utilized over the 15-month data collection period, and the choices made in data analysis.

Critical Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) highlight the racist/colonial history of qualitative research, a matter explicated in depth by Gupta and Ferguson (1997), who provide a historical account of the discipline of anthropology, specifically focusing on the way anthropology romanticizes faraway places to which researchers from western institutions might travel in order to observe the "exotic." More specifically, this approach was born during the colonial era and the tools of anthropological research were used to study the peoples of the lands that were colonized by Europe (Alonso Bejarano, López Juárez, Mijangos García, & Goldstein, 2019). Upon returning home, researchers would theorize about their experiences in the field including so-called "exotic others" in service

of advancing colonialism and white supremacy. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) conclude their manuscript by calling for a new approach to research, one which seeks to minimize the distance between researcher and participants in order to prevent othering and exoticization. Their call also acknowledges that in researching communities closer to home, researchers may focus on their own communities in order to theorize home and/or belonging. While dominant anthropology remains largely Eurocentric, significant shifts have taken place in the discipline that have allowed for alternative approaches that embrace decolonial, feminist, and postmodern perspectives. Because of this, anthropologists today better account for the role of power and history in shaping the realities of communities being studied, while acknowledging the connection between global problems and the experiences of local communities (Alonso Bejarano, López Juárez, Mijangos García, & Goldstein, 2019, p. 3). Additionally, these approaches call for the researcher to acknowledge their own social location and to grapple with the ways in which this impacts the research process as a whole.

My choice to employ a specifically *critical* qualitative methodological approach responds to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) who caution that "qualitative researchers must resist conservative attempts to discredit qualitative inquiry by placing it back inside the box of positivism" (p. 9). This project seeks to break the limits of the box of positivism and reimagine qualitative methods in Communication Studies. Inspired by Ulmer's (2017) proposition, "What if we expressed critical qualitative inquiry is /as love?" (p. 543) I embrace critical qualitative methods because of my commitment towards transformation, generally, and specifically towards the students who participated in this study. Indeed, adopting love as a point of departure allows me to embrace the possibilities that emerge when our work breaks the disciplinary boundaries that limit our imagination. Instead, invoking love has allowed me to "witness, engage, and labor for the people who [we] admire and respect" (Laura, 2013, p. 291). To label this project a critical

qualitative study is to acknowledge that I, as the researcher, am "historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied" (Denzin, 2015, p. 40). Denzin's insight calls on me to grapple with my own intersectional social locations in order to understand who/how I am in relation to the topic being studied, and to the participants who make this project possible in the first place. Importantly, critical qualitative research is/as love actively rejects research perspective that claim neutrality and objectivity. More specifically, Pasque and Salazar Perez (2015) articulate a series of meronyms that characterize critical qualitative research. While they acknowledge the differing ways in which critical qualitative research has been defined and taken up, they name the following as central to critical qualitative research: 1)research that is informed by past and present contexts, 2) an examination of problematizing and complicating power, 3) as instruments for social action and transformation, 4) emergent methodologically with, by, and for communities, 5) approaches to social justice that are iterative and embedded (p. 142). While critical qualitative projects can engage in different data collection tools, I take up critical and performative ethnographic research imbued with an ethic of love in my project with Latinx youth who have experienced the foster care system.

An Ethnographic Approach

According to Wolcott (1995), ethnographic study focuses on "a picture of the way of life of some identifiable group of people" (p. 188). Bhattacharya (2017) characterizes ethnographic methods as having a focus on human behavior within a specific cultural context (p. 115). An ethnographic approach allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of a specific cultural context by engaging with participants across varied data collection methods. While qualitative projects can be shaped by distinct ontological and epistemological commitments, I am specific in naming my project a *critical* and *performance* ethnography. Utilizing these specific approaches enables me to provide a vivid description about the ways in which pláticas, the culturally specific methodology,

was used to reimagine communication pedagogy outside of traditional classroom settings. In these next sections, I provide a description of critical ethnography and performance ethnography.

Critical Ethnography

Madison (2012) posits that critical ethnography begins with an "ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain" (p. 5). As a starting point, critical ethnography is interested in illuminating/highlighting unjust power relations and the conditions these create for different communities. The potentiality of critical ethnographic work is best captured in the imaginary; shifting discourses of what is to what could be (Madison, 2012, p. 10). An ethnographer has the potential *and* responsibility to highlight and disrupt such inequities. Critical ethnography is not value-free; I am unapologetic in my commitment to contribute to what Madison terms "emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice" (p. 6). Additionally, in critical ethnography, the researcher must be cognizant of and grapple with the fact that the ways in which she represents the community with whom she works can and does have an impact in the way they are treated. This, once again, requires that researchers grapple with their own social locations.

When researchers account for their *positionality*, they recognize and account for their own power, privilege, and bias through the research process (Madison, 2012). Accounting for positionality does not mean naming individual identities or aspects of ourselves, but rather marks an ongoing commitment to acknowledging the ways that we are in relation to the research we are conducting. Madison (2011) argues this reflexive labor demands our attention. One way a researcher might do this is through an intersectional lens, which implicates the ways one is simultaneously privileged and oppressed across contexts (Lorde 1984). Collins and Bilge (2016) further illuminate intersectionality by defining it as an analytic through which to understand and analyze

the complexities in people's experiences in the world. They assert that social inequity is best understood, "as being shaped by many axes that work together to shape and influence each other" (p. 3). Researchers committed to critical approaches to qualitative research should embrace intersectionality in order to account for the ways they are privileged and oppressed, while acknowledging the ways in which power is reproduced in research contexts. Jones (2010) asserts, "We must reflexively engage in a rigorous understanding of intersectionality if we want to begin to explore the complexity of our identities and create possibilities for coalitional activism and social change" (p. 122). Critical ethnography is thus a political project by design, as it seeks to highlight the ways in which power is intersectionally animated in the mundane. Madison (2009) explores the notion of a "dangerous ethnography," one which understands the researcher as a possible danger to systems of power and oppression. My approach to critical ethnography, and to the notion of danger ethnography, is shaped by my commitment to performance studies, and more specifically performance ethnography.

Performance Ethnography

A critical orientation to ethnography also lends itself to a performance approach. Noting the ways in which our understanding of performance has shifted, Madison and Hamera (2006) argue that performance can no longer be framed as simply theatrical or staged, instead they offer performance as *theory*, *method*, and *event*. Conquergood's (1986, 2002, 2013) germinal work offers important framing for the use of performance in distinct contexts, and specifically in the qualitative process. For example, Conquergood (2002) affirms the unique qualifications that performance studies possess to braid "together disparate and stratified ways of knowing" (p. 152). More specifically, his conception of performance as "pragmatics of inquiry" help to set the foundation for performance ethnography. Additionally, Conquergood (2013) notes that the performance paradigm inhibits positivist framings of culture and affirms, "instead of the researcher

presented as detached and controlling, the performative view admits the fragile situation of the fieldworker" (p. 21). In doing so, this approach aims for "epistemological authenticity" instead of accuracy (Conquergood, 2013, p. 22). Thus, embracing a performance approach enables me to continue pushing against positivist tendencies which persist in the discipline of communication.

Pineau (2002) posits that performance ethnographers engage in active participation, rather than simply observation, allowing them to attend to the embodied. Embracing the body as a site of knowledge production (Conquergood, 2013), performance ethnographers are especially equipped to respond to the layered, multisensorial context in which the research is taking place. Conquergood (1986) asserts that, "meaning is in between structures" (p. 36) pressing me to lean into the messy and complex process of engaging qualitative research, a process which typically leaves me with more queries than answers. (Tristano & Terminel Iberri, 2022). Additionally, a performance approach is especially fitting for research projects pertaining to education contexts, as performance ethnography allows the relationship between the 'researchers' and 'subjects' to shift into one that embraces dialogue, reciprocity, and vulnerability (Pineau, 2002, p. 48). In this way, performance ethnography pairs well with pláticas methodology as dialogue, reciprocity, and vulnerability are key traits of each approach.

Finally, as a performance scholar, I am especially moved by the potential of performative writing. Calafell (2007) frames performative writing as an opportunity for readers to not only engage the words written on the page, but "to *feel* the text" (p. 5). By writing performatively, my hope is to pull the reader in through thick and vivid description that invites them to be invested in the narratives and lives shared. Madison (2012) describes performative writing as an approach that is relational, as the writer is attentive to the reader, aiming to welcome them with affect and affection (p. 220). She beautifully articulates, "The writer's imagination evokes the reader's, and words are not

just words anymore, flat on a page, but are now images woven through meaning" (p. 223). In writing from and through my body (Madison, 2012, p. 227), I hope to connect with you, the reader, and to convey the rich moments I experienced with these youth as we co-created space through pláticas. This performative voice will also be embraced in my pursuits of critical auto/ethnography, which I detail in the following section.

Critical Auto/ethnography

Boylorn (2014) establishes that an auto/ethnographic approach allows researchers to recognize themselves as a writer and participant of their narratives, and to understand their experiences as data. She asserts that auto/ethnography "asks that I pay attention to the details of everydayness of my life, write about and through difficult moments, write to make sense of myself, write to make sense of the world, and write to alleviate the seeming discomfort that resides in topics that go unspoken" (p. 316). While enabling me to write about my everyday encounters with the students and staff, an auto/ethnographic approach also allowed me to look back at my previous experiences working with these students and put them in conversation with the now. This creates a more comprehensive look at the work and relationships I have developed with students over the last several years.

Similar to Madison's (2012) explication of critical and performance ethnography, critical auto/ethnographers are committed to politics of *positionality*. Boylorn and Orbe (2016) argue that this commitment requires "researchers to acknowledge the inevitable privileges we experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity" (p. 15). Like Jones (2010), one of my central goals is to bridge theory with activism in meaningful ways that can have material impacts for marginalized folks. In order to do so effectively, I have committed to self-reflexivity, which necessitates a level of self-implication (Jones, 2010, p. 122). Additionally, I am emboldened by Spry's (2011) work and explication of performative autoethnography. She

asserts, "Perhaps the most important element in performative autoethnography is connection: connection between selves, others, sociocultural contexts, and the language we use to articulate/represent those connections; it involves connections between personal experiences and larger social issues" (p. 52). Auto/ethnography provides a specific method from which to respond to my second research questions, which aims to explore the tensions that a communication scholar experiences when embracing a radical approach to laboring with youth. In using auto/ethnography, I am able to make connections between the tensions that arise and the sociopolitical context within which this labor is taking place. Finally, Warren's (2011) advocacy for crafting performance auto/ethnographies inspires me to "meet, through the body, through the poetic, our vision of what education should look like" (p. 142). Though this project takes place outside of traditional classroom settings, critical auto/ethnography allows me to turn towards my body and to embrace creativity in order to imagine the possibilities that emerge from laboring with youth.

Naming this project a critical and performance auto/ethnography also has implications in terms of the ways in which I engage with participants and myself as a researcher. While the approach I take in this project is specifically contextualized by power, it also takes an anti-objectivist position. Alonso Bejarano et al. (2019) articulate that a decolonial approach is anti-objectificationist, "in that it asks ethnographers to regard their study populations not as objects, but as fully equal subjects capable of becoming their own ethnographers" (p. 8). The work of educational researchers offers a useful framework from which to engage with research participants in humanizing ways. In the following section, I articulate humanizing approaches to qualitative research with youth as a means of focusing my critical and performative auto/ethnographic labor.

Humanizing Approaches

My engagement in critical and performance auto/ethnographic research is shaped by my commitment to humanizing approaches to qualitative research. Here, I draw from critical education scholars who theorize matters of humanization in service of challenging traditional positivist approaches to qualitative research. While scholars theorize humanization in different ways, Paris (2011) asserts, "Humanizing research is a methodological stance which requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of care and dignity for both researchers and participants." (p. 140). Through the design, execution, and analysis of this project, I found inspiration in Paris and Winn's (2014) text *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*. Here they provide a roadmap for scholars who labor at the intersection of academic and community work with concern for justice and equity. They name humanizing approaches as those which, "involve building of relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness raising for both researcher and participants" (p. xvi). I see this project as answering their call for new generations to continue complicating the qualitative research process.

Freire (1970) argues that all of us are in the process of becoming more fully human, thus my commitment extends to myself; just as this project embraced humanizing approaches for the participants, I also focused on my own humanization as a researcher. Too often, researchers are expected to act as objective collectors of information whose own personal, emotional, and material realities must not interfere with the research process. However, this is impossible and limits the potential for transformative research. Through this project, I actively reject the traditional distance between researcher and research project and open myself up for vulnerability. Rejecting objectivity and neutrality, I paid special attention to the ways in which I was processing my own involvement and emotions; the excitement, sadness, fear, love, and pain I experienced as I learned more about the students and their lives, and as our individual

and community relationships grew. Like Diaz-Strong et al. (2014), I realized early on that writing about and reporting on the experiences of the students was insufficient- there was, and continues to be, more that I can do (p. 17). Their work not only challenges the traditional distance called upon in qualitative work, but also pushes researchers to recognize their role in *doing* something, as these projects are not neutral or value free. The stronger our relationships grew, the more we were emotionally invested in one another. I argue this vulnerability was not only in line with my commitment to humanizing approaches, it was ultimately a strength in my critical qualitative research process that "facilitated deeper understanding of youth's lived experiences, while also allowing them to "engage the whole researcher" (Howard, 2020, p. 210). This allowed me to show up as a fuller version of myself. I stopped caring if I cried (Diaz-Strong et al., 2014, p. 11) because I knew those tears allowed me to be more human and build important connections with people I care about. The connections we were able to develop over time allowed for significant depth in the types of conversations we engaged in. Next, I describe Chicana/Latina feminisms and the ways in which pláticas methodology provides the communicative tools to realize a humanizing critical qualitative study that explores communication pedagogy outside of classrooms.

Chicana/Latina Feminism

Pláticas methodology draws heavily from the work of Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981) who center theories in the flesh which they define as, "one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (p. 19). In recognizing the possibilities of theorizing from the flesh, Moraga and Anzaldúa challenge the mind/body split often present in academic research, a split I have encountered in Communication Studies. Anzaldúa extends theorizing from the body in her germinal text Borderlands/La Frontera as she theorizes la conciencia de la mestiza. She writes, "cradled in one culture,

sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (p. 100). It is in this choque that a tolerance for ambiguity becomes stronger. It is in this ambiguity that Chicanas continue to find strength. According to Cruz (2001), "the most profound and liberating politics come from the interrogations of our own social locations, a narrative that works outward from our specific corporealities" (p. 659). In a discipline like communication, where (post)positivist research persists as a disciplinary standard, the narratives of women of color are still considered to be too political, too messy, and too "colored." Cruz pushes us to engage in a project of reclamation, one which is asserted through a politics of difference that "emphasizes local and multiple subjectivities" (p. 663). In this reclamation, we must demonstrate how systems and institutions of power, like the academy, privilege certain kinds of narratives. The resulting turn towards the body reminds us that bodies are pedagogical devices from which we can theorize liberation and resistance. Juarez (2019) has further supported a turn towards the body and away from Cartesian dualism in Communication Studies. His work advocates for "accounting for differing lived experiences that shape ontological viewpoints" (p. 13). As scholars within communication studies continue to push against (post)positivist notions of research, both Cruz (2001) and Juarez (2019) offer an important reframing away from the mind/body split that we so commonly encounter in academe to a recognition of bodies, specifically the bodies of women of color, as generative sites of knowledge production.

Chicana/Latina feminist approaches also offer an entrance into understanding the role of these epistemologies in pedagogical spaces. Particularly, the work of Delgado Bernal (2006), Elenes, Gonzalez, Delgado Bernal, and Villenas (2001), and Elenes (2001) points to the knowledges which Chicanas bring into classroom spaces. According to Elenes et al. (2001), "Chicana feminist pedagogies refers to culturally specific ways of

organizing teaching and learning in informal sites such as the home, ways that embrace Chicana and Mexicana ways of knowing and extend beyond formal schooling" (p. 597). Additionally, Delgado Bernal's (2006) work focuses on the ways that Chicana college students draw from what they learned at home along with their mestiza consciousness in order to navigate spaces of higher education. This work has been important in acknowledging and celebrating the ways in which Chicanas take up space in classroom settings and the importance of celebrating distinct forms of knowledge production. The framework detailed above offers an ethic that has guided my work, not only in the contributions I offer or the ways in which I am analyzing data, but most importantly the ways in which I engage the research process as a whole. As a Latina researcher, I too recognize that distance from my work is not possible (Chávez 2012) and instead, the closeness to my work provides a unique lens through which to engage. Calafell (2010) grapples with this asking, "How could my voice not matter when the texts I was the most drawn to were so closely tied to my cultural experiences as a Chicana? Did my position as a cultural 'insider' help illuminate meanings or, as others would argue, bias me" (p. 109)? Like Cervantes-Soon (2014), I see women's bodies, including my own, as agents of theory in praxis. A Chicana/Latina feminist approach enables me to frame this project as that which challenges cartesian dualism, embracing the knowledge that emerges from marginalized bodies, and shaping the ways in which I engage participants as agentic, whole people who are capable of theorizing. To that end, I turn to pláticas methodology grounded in Chicana/Latina feminism, to help in the shaping of my critical performative ethnographic study shaped by humanization.

Pláticas Methodology

When I first encountered Fierros and Delgado Bernal's (2016) manuscript detailing the principles that guide pláticas methodology, I was excited to learn that my way of making sense of the world could become part of the toolkit I used in my research

projects. When I think about what a plática is, not from the research I have read or the methodology developed by Chicana/Latina feminist scholars, but from my own lived experiences, I think about comfort, engagement, laughter, and honesty. Platicando is how I have learned to make sense of the world around me; it is how I have built strong relationships with the people I care about. It is how I have gotten and given consejos throughout my life, it is how I have overcome different hardships. Platicando is how I have learned to express and receive love and care. This is important to articulate because pláticas methodology is not one I just happened to come across in a class reading, instead this is part of my way of understanding the world.

Flores Carmona, Hamzeh, Delgado Bernal, and Zareer (2021) discuss the method of pláticas as a "conversational strategy to collect data and carry out research that is an extension of particular ways of knowing" (p. 1213). While this approach to research has been recently published, the authors recognize the ways in which Chicana/Latina feminist scholars have engaged with pláticas from a particular epistemological standpoint. An important point to make here is that this methodology was born from everyday practices that Chicanas/Latinas have been engaging in as part of our cultural practices. Thus, this should not be understood solely as a research methodology, but rather as a cultural practice that has been taken up by Chicanas/Latinas to engage in the research process on their own terms. Flores and Morales (2021) affirm that pláticas take place in everyday encounters and can take several different forms including cuentos, dichos and chisme (Flores & Morales, 2021). What shifts pláticas from a tool to collect data to a methodology are the specific principles that shape the process. These include 1) drawing from Chicana/Latina feminist theories, 2) honoring participants as co-constructors of knowledge, 3) making connections between lived experiences and research, 4) understanding this as a potential space for healing, and 5) relying on a relational approach that values reciprocity,

vulnerability, and research reflexivity (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p.110-114). Each of these principles aligns well with the critical and performance auto/ethnographic approach I have outlined in this chapter, allowing me to center humanization as a core of this project.

Context

Path to Success[4] is a national organization that was established in 1999, that aims to support high school students who have experienced the foster care system to graduate from high school and to be successful in secondary education and in their adult lives. This mission is accomplished through fifteen university partnerships across the United States. Path to Success at Southwest research university was founded in 2017. This is a free four-year comprehensive college readiness program that supports current or former foster youth through academic support, life skills training, and caregiver engagement. Perhaps the most important activity in this program is the yearly summer program which invites students in the program to a two-to-three-week residential camp at one of the campuses of the Southwest research university. This academy creates an opportunity for the youth to experience life as a college student. Students and staff live in university housing, eat daily meals at the dining hall, and utilize the campus fitness center. The curriculum for the residential summer program includes two project-based learning courses in math and English, college readiness workshops, a fine arts curriculum, and life skills development workshops in areas like communication, identity, community building, and managing stress and mental health. Aside from this, students participate in social and cultural activities around the city including field trips to museums, sporting events, community centers, and a community service project. Additionally, program staff lead icebreakers, teambuilding activities, and daily debriefs in assigned small groups.

[4] This is pseudonym.

This program sets the foundation for the monthly events that take place during the school year. Each month, the program offers at least two events. First, the monthly Saturday meet up, which takes place at one of the Southwest research university campuses and bring students together through teambuilding activities, life skills workshops, and presentations on college readiness. Students also have access to weekly tutoring sessions led by college students over Zoom. The second event is a monthly community service opportunity that invites students to be active in their communities. The location for this service has rotated over the years.

I first became involved with this organization in early 2018, when I was looking for a summer job that would allow me to earn some extra money. It was only my second semester of the doctoral program, and I had a difficult time finding my place. I began by attending the March Saturday meet up where I was able to meet the high school students in the program. At that time, most were Freshmen in high school, though some middle school students also participated in the program. The students were shy and appeared nervous to be on a university campus. In June 2018, I became the summer program coordinator for the first summer program, a three-week residential program that would allow these students to experience life as a college student. A total of 15 students participated along with a staff team of six professional staff, graduate students, and undergraduate students. My responsibilities as coordinator were to train and support the student staff, to connect with students and ensure they were participating and finding their place, and to put out any fires—literal and metaphorical— I came across. I had no idea what I had gotten myself into. The days were demanding and began at 7:30 am. I found myself running between different buildings on campus, greeting counselors and social workers who needed to check on students, supporting teachers and workshop leaders, and comforting students who were homesick. After “lights out” at 9:30 pm, I would lead a staff debrief and ensure everything was in order for the next day. I would

head to my dorm room each night and cry. The demands of the job were high, I was under a lot of pressure, and I was not prepared to hear the experiences of these students each day. What started as a three-week summer job soon became an integral part of my life. After completing the summer program, I continued volunteering for the monthly meet ups this program held and connecting with students during community service events. When I think about the last four years of my life, it is impossible to deny the significant impact this experience has had on me as a person, as a doctoral student, and as an educator. In many ways, this program has become my home.

The year prior to beginning my research, the director of the program, a close friend of mine, continuously asked and encouraged me to do my dissertation work with the program, and my response had always been no. I hesitated to center my academic work on a part of my life that makes me feel human and brings me so much joy. I spent countless hours questioning and grappling with the ethics of completing my project with this organization and with these students. And then, things changed. As I struggled to 'enter the field' for a project I had been working to finalize for a year, I began to realize the potential of focusing my research with a program with which I had been active for years. Currently, I am the longest standing staff member with this program. I have had the opportunity to participate in all five summer programs in addition to logging hundreds of hours of Saturday meet ups, service projects, study halls, scholarship events, and movie nights. I know the students and they know me. Rather than focusing on the problems that could arise from doing my research with his organization, I began focusing on the possibilities. Why not bridge my role as a participant to that of a researcher? Why not utilize my skills and training as a pedagogue and implement them in a space that I value deeply? The possibilities began to outweigh the fears. This is when I realized that my pre-existing connections to this program and to the students would enable me to

embrace a humanizing approach to this project, an approach that was already shaping my engagement with students in this program.

I made the choice to conduct my research with this program in the summer of 2020, a year when the world experienced a global pandemic. Our entire lives changed, and this program was no exception. Like most other in-person engagements, the summer and Saturday programming were forced to shift to a Zoom context which significantly changed the ways that students and staff interacted with one another. What were formerly six-hour in-person days made up of interactive learning, visits to the on-campus gym, hugs, meals at the dining hall, and laughter quickly turned into highly structured Zoom sessions. Most students were attending school over Zoom as well, so it is no surprise that some chose to opt out of attending programming. The greatest impact was perhaps the fact that the three-week residential program shifted to a two-week, four-hour per day engagement for two years in a row. Given the design of the summer program, this was the time when students and staff built the strongest bonds; this is no surprise since we lived on campus with students for three weeks. These shifts caused significant changes to the program, changes that resulted in difficulty connecting with students. As such, it became imperative for me to create opportunities to connect with the students with whom I had created strong relationships. When I started to think about engaging this methodology for my research, it became imperative that this be a space that I wanted to be part of. My experience within the organization before, during, and 'after' quarantine provides particular insights to the organization for the purpose of my study. Next, I outline my approach to data collection.

Data Collection

Data collection for this project took place between February 2021-May 2022. During the 15-months of data collection, I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork, taking the role of a participant observer. The first seven months of the project took place during the

height of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus requiring me to engage in fieldwork over Zoom. Program activities resumed to an in-person context in September 2021, at which time I was able to conduct fieldwork during in-person events. I kept a notebook where I jotted field notes during program activities. When I felt the notebook would be a distraction for the activity taking place (for example, during in-person events), I took notes on my phone. After the conclusion of each event, I took more elaborate notes to ensure important information was captured on the same day. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) affirm the importance of writing fieldnotes after leaving the setting because this "produces fresher, more detailed recollections that harness the ethnographer's involvement with and excitement about the day's event" (p. 40). At times, when program events required longer drives, I began to audio record my thoughts on my phone to document my observations. Additionally, I often used this as an opportunity to record analytic memos.

Aside from conducting ethnographic fieldwork *in situ*, I led a series of pláticas that invited students to "hang out and talk" without a set agenda. Much of what the pandemic took from us was the opportunity to connect in unstructured ways. These unplanned moments were my favorite because this is what brought us closer. Shifting to a Zoom context meant that suddenly all of our interactions were shaped by an agenda. Communicating via Zoom felt difficult enough, but on top of that, we were no longer able to just talk and check in with each other. This is what was on my mind when I went into the pláticas: how can we engage with each other and with a variety of topics on our terms, within the context of the pandemic?

During this time, the students and I co-created an environment that centered ourselves and our experiences. We went into each plática without an agenda or order of business. This became an unstructured time where we could connect with one another. The one thing that remained a constant was beginning each plática with a temperature

check or check in, which usually shaped the rest of our time together and the topics that would be discussed that day. Though pláticas initially felt somewhat awkward, especially learning to engage one another via Zoom, we quickly became comfortable with one another. Originally mics were muted, and people took turns speaking, but soon after everyone was unmuted and conversation was flowing much more naturally, with laughter, interruptions, and jokes. Our topics ranged but usually focused on matters of identity, Latinidad, belonging, gender performance and expectations, families, and social justice. All of this was discussed while also discussing our experiences at school, in relationships, on trips, during the holidays, and with our friends. The space became open to form, to topics, to emotions, to laughter, and to growth. While I was originally the one to propose dates for the pláticas, students began messaging me asking if we could do one on a given day of their choice. These pláticas lasted anywhere from 45-minutes to two-hours and included anywhere from one to six high school students. Over this 15-month period, I led a total of sixteen pláticas and conducted hundreds of hours of ethnographic fieldwork during the summer program, monthly Saturday meet ups, community service events, college readiness workshops, and home visits.

Data Analysis Beyond Coding

As I prepared to engage in data analysis for this project, I used otteri.ai to transcribe the audio notes and analytic memos that I recorded during the 15-month data collection period. I sat on my dining room table with the hundreds of printed pages of transcripts from each plática conducted, transcriptions from audio notes and analytic memos, three fieldwork notebooks, my set of colorful pens and highlighters, and a variety of multicolored and sticky notes ready to analyze. My first task was to engage in open coding of the first plática. After about 45 minutes of coding, I was less than a quarter into this transcript and unclear about the direction this would take me. The process felt mechanical and detached from the hundreds of hours I spent platicando and

engaging with the youth. I found myself questioning the purpose of this process and why I was engaging in it in the first place. I remembered that eventually I would have a book with hundreds of codes and that this would help me to identify the themes in my project. "Based on the codes?" I asked myself as my frustration grew. While open coding is often the place where qualitative scholars begin their data analysis, I quickly realized that this was not the right approach for my project. I felt that coding failed to capture the nuances happening in conversation, the embodied moments, the joy and frustration captured through changes in tone. Simply put, in this case, the frequency of a code would not imply its relevance or importance. Instead, I decided to scrap this approach and return to my methodological choices to determine how to best proceed.

One of the reasons pláticas methodology captured my attention was because it felt so familiar. Rather than seeing this simply as a research methodology, I understood this as an embodied practice that I have performed throughout my entire life. Additionally, I reviewed Conquergood's (2013) notion of dialogic performance which focuses on the body and embodiment as sites of meaning in field work. Doing so enabled him to establish a performance approach as legitimate and ethical (p. 8). Revising key aspects of each methodology forced me to recognize that I was trying to implement a systematic approach to data analysis when what I actually needed was to turn to my embodied knowledge and to platicar. I spent several months reviewing the written transcripts, listening to audio notes and analytic memos, and developing writing prompts to work through the content I was processing. I talked with mentors and close friends who were familiar with my project and who supported me during the data collection process to talk through and process my ideas and feelings. Additionally, in reviewing the transcripts of the pláticas, I realized part of the time we spent together was focused on rehashing topics that we had discussed in past pláticas. I spoke with the youth who participated in these and highlighted some of the topics that I identified as

coming up multiple times. This allowed me to get feedback from them and to share how I was working through the data and what I would be writing about. Thus, pláticas with the youth and with my community of support, also became part of the data analysis process.

Though hesitant about the way my approach would be received, as it challenges positivist impulses present in the discipline of communication, I was reminded of Bhattacharya (2017) who asserts that themes do not *emerge* from data *naturally*. Instead, the researcher identifies patterns within and across the data. To take the position that themes emerge is to assume that there are objective or 'true' themes that must be represented from the research. I reject the notion that there is a singular observable and objective pattern. Instead, I embrace the dialogic/platicando and trust that I am capable of weaving the plethora of nuances, voices, tensions and joy through this dissertation. I present two chapters, each of which responds to the research questions that guided my inquiry. In this next chapter, I focus on pláticas, the culturally specific methodology I used to reimagine communication pedagogy. I focus specifically on the following four areas: co-constructing space, interrogating power, grappling with the limits of civility, and analyzing culture and identity.

CHAPTER 3

REIMAGINING COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY THROUGH PLÁTICAS METHODOLOGY

I proposed the idea of developing pláticas with the students to the director of the program who agreed and expressed excitement at the possibility of connecting with students in an unstructured format. One of the things she highlighted was her belief that this would be successful given my unique position in the program. While I was a staff member for three of the residential summer programs, my role was that of a volunteer for the rest of the year. As such, my relationship with the students was different than that of other staff members. My reason for being there was to develop relationships with the youth and to provide support to them in various aspects of their lives. Vossoughi & Zavala (2020) affirm that for researchers who have pre-existing relationships with students, "the distinction between ordinary and pedagogical conversations blurs, often in generative ways" (p. 138). At this point, I realized that my positionality was something I would need to be mindful of throughout the research process. The director signed off on this part of my research and suggested that this space be one in which no staff would be allowed, as their presence may shift the power dynamics in the pláticas space and impede relationship development and community building. My task, then, was also to consider how my presence, and the way I conducted myself in the space might promote or hinder the potential of the pláticas. Given the existing relationships I had with students and the years of informal pláticas we had engaged, I knew this could be a space of connection and learning. This chapter responds to the following research question:

> RQ: How can a culturally specific methodology be used to reimagine communication pedagogy outside of classroom spaces?

The data from this chapter was collected over a 15-month period during which students and I engaged in fifteen different pláticas. This chapter will introduce readers to six

different students who participated in the pláticas at different points in time. Of these six youths, E, Dante, Dante's younger sister Crystal, and Pablo were part of the very first iteration of the summer residential program, and as such, I had close relationships with these students after years of working together. Lupita joined the program in its second year which allowed me to experience a summer residential program with her prior to the pandemic. Finally, Flor joined the program during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that all of those present, including myself, had not yet met Flor in person. This pláticas space became an opportunity for us to maintain pre-existing relationships, while also welcoming a new member of the program and building community together.

Through this time, we discussed a variety of topics ranging from issues of power and justice, high school football games and dances, and confrontations with friends and family. This chapter offers four specific areas in response to the research question above. These include: co-creating space, interrogating power, embracing embodied knowledge to question civility, and critically reflecting on culture and identity. In an effort to demonstrate the unique environment created over time, I open each theme with a contextualization of the plática that took place, describing our starting point to demonstrate the ways in which this shaped our plática, and our relationships over time. Similarly, I conclude each theme by describing the conclusion of our plática that day. In this next section, I detail the very first plática and the intentional discussion we had about expectations.

Theme 1: Co-Creating Space: The First Plática

It is 5:40 pm and I can feel the butterflies fluttering throughout my stomach. It's the first day I am hosting a plática and I have no idea who will show up. I sent an email a week prior explaining once again what this space might be like and hoping that I didn't make my email sound too formal. I wonder if I have actually lied. How can I know what this space will be like if it is a new one for me too? How can I describe something that I'm

not creating just by myself? I feel my heart beat a little faster. I realize that we are just a couple of weeks shy of the one-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic, an anniversary that represents significant changes for us individually and collectively as a community. I sit with the challenges the year brought us and wonder just how much we have lost. I cannot focus on this now, instead I shift my attention to the present moment, to the possibilities that lie in this new space. It is 5:55 and I'm the only one in the Zoom room. Tired of looking at my face on the screen, I turn my camera off and pace around my living room, asking myself what I will do if nobody shows up. I quickly remember that while this space is connected to my dissertation research, its importance extends far beyond it. Our small community is struggling, and my commitment to these students is what drives my presence and desire to be here. I am reminded of the healing potential of this space (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) and my nerves turn to excitement. Regardless of the number of students that show up, this will be great. Around 5:59 pm I notice three students enter the waiting room ready to join this plática. I close my eyes and focus on my breathing. "Whatever happens today will be enough." Upon opening my eyes, I see two others have joined. It's time to get started.

Excited to see who has shown up, I greet Flor, Pablo, Crystal, Dante and E. I ask them if they would like to begin with temperature checks, following the tradition of the program. Each student eagerly shares their number on a scale of 1-10, what's contributing to this number, and what they have been up to in the last few weeks. This is especially exciting given that E is present for the first time in several months. I witness the smiles on each student's face as they carefully listen to each other's updates. When one finishes speaking, they popcorn[5] to the next speaker and mute their mic. Every person is muted, except for the person speaking, a practice we have all been conditioned

[5] Popcorn is a term often used in the program which invites students to select the next person sharing.

to accept after nearly a year of virtual interactions. I notice the way this impacts the flow of conversation, preventing students from responding to each other in the moment as the attention continues to be on the individual whose mic is not muted.

After every student has shared, I unmute myself and begin to tell the students what I hope this space can be for us; an unstructured one where we can simply spend time together and talk about whatever is on our minds. I emphasize that they get to help shape this space, too. That although I have some prompts for us for this meeting, all pláticas moving forward will be decided on collectively. I also remind them that it is not a requirement for them to be present. Instead, this is something they can opt into if they feel like hanging out and chatting with people. Together, we will decide how often we meet. I then ask if they would like to brainstorm ideas for our future time together. Students begin unmuting themselves and typing their ideas in the chat. Flor says,

> the education system in general areas of school we all go to. I used to transfer schools a lot, so I notice just transferring schools to diff parts of Arizona, the education system isn't consistent across diff income areas and neighborhoods. I think that could be interesting to talk about.

This initial comment seems to impact the other students, as the suggestions that followed offered a similar focus on serious topics. For example, Pablo suggests we talk about how COVID-19 is impacting different schools and specifically, communities of color. Dante also interjects saying he hopes we can talk about growing up and becoming independent, since he just turned 18 years old. Other topics brought up include watching movies or shows, cooking together, and talking about relationships. I also bring into the conversation that maybe we can talk about the Black Lives Matter movement after members of the organization's advisory board, three of whom were present in this plática, made a statement for Black History Month about their support for the movement. Crystal, one of the longest members of the program, unmutes herself and says,

> When we were in person, we wouldn't just go up to each other and just talk about politics. We would check in and talk about everything. It would be good to just have normal conversation, where we talk about things we like and what we have been doing.

Her words seem to resonate with others as they shake their heads in agreement. I share that I miss the way things have been and hope that this space can provide some of that feeling-of the way things were, even if it is virtual. Crystal's comment reminds me that, "Pláticas take place in the everyday and do not necessarily follow a set script, but rather can take the form of chisme, dichos, cuentos, or other forms of oral storytelling" (Flores & Morales, 2021, p. 36). I take this time to also acknowledge that normal conversation can be hard on Zoom. "Even though we have known each other for years, the first five minutes today were awkward." Students laugh and nod their heads. I encourage us to think about how we can make this space less awkward and different than when we Zoom for our classes or program activities. Crystal's comment punctuates the importance of the unstructured design of this space. Perhaps we will not need this list of topics because what we need most is a sense of normalcy in our conversations, an opportunity to just sit and talk with each other about whatever is on our minds at that moment.

What did feel critical to me, however, was for us to discuss expectations of ourselves and each other. The fact that pláticas methodology recognizes participants as cocreators of knowledge (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 111) is one of the reasons that I believed this methodology would work well in this space. As such, it became imperative that the students have a hand in cocreating the space, since this is where we would be spending time together. This conversation began when I asked what expectations they have of me in this space. Acknowledging that perhaps they have never thought of this before, I encouraged them to take their time emphasizing once again, that they are the ones that determine what this space is and can be. Immediately after, Crystal states, "I think the way you're acting right now, like normal Ana, is what we

expect of you, like if it was just any other day. I just don't want you to be super formal." I smile and sigh with relief affirming that I have no interest in being formal either. Dante unmutes himself,

> I know sometimes you have to be a moderator or facilitator in the program, but maybe not here. Talk to us like a friend. I'm pretty sure all of us in this room see you as a friend more than as a teacher, even though we know you are a teacher, it's nice to still have that separation.

Pablo interjects in the chat, "like we ran into you at the store- that kind of catch up." These responses affirm the unstructured design of this space; aside from not having an agenda or plan for each plática, this space is not one that is meant to have a teacher or a formal facilitator. While acknowledging that those present see me as more of a friend (and mentor, a matter that has been articulated to me over the years), he acknowledges that I have a shifting role in the program, and that while I sometimes act as a facilitator, that is not what they want from me here. These comments affirm my need to engage in critical self-reflexivity (Madison, 2011; Jones & Calafell, 2012; Collier & Muneri, 2016; McIntosh & Eguchi, 2020) throughout our time together. While my role at the program often requires me to be a facilitator, there is a power dynamic present when I play that role, specifically the power to decide where to shift the conversation, what questions to ask, and how to spend our time. Given my role as a facilitator in the program, and as an instructor at the university, I realize how critical it will be that I do not resort back to that role, and that I hold myself accountable in this space to minimize the power distance that could be reproduced here. My challenge, then, became to work towards minimizing that distance as much as possible, despite the fact that this is not a traditional classroom, and I am not a teacher.

Similarly, I asked students to consider what they expect of each other. Flor begins this conversation by stating that she tries to be very careful with her words, specifically to discuss topics in a way that's respectful of other people's experiences. "But if I made a

mistake, I would want to get called out so that I don't do that again." As students nodded in agreement, I was excited that the first comment centered one another, and the desire to be accountable if harm is caused, which suggests a connection to humanization, the very ethic guiding my research approach. Dante followed this comment by expressing a desire to understand each other's boundaries. To discuss this, he brought up an example from the first residential summer program when he and E had a misunderstanding related to a joke that was told. Chuckling and nodding his head, E acknowledges that he learned a lot from that experience and how people perceived him. I take this as an opportunity to once again emphasize what this space is not, more specifically the difference between this space and the program. I do this by reminding them that they cannot get in trouble here, that they do not have to ask for permission to be on their phones or step away from the screen. Finally, I suggest that we not discuss what we are talking about here with others, with two exceptions. First, because I am a mandated reporter, I tell them that I am required to report if anyone expresses intention of harm to self or others. The students nod in agreement as they have heard this several times before. The second is connected to my research, as one of my tasks will be to write about our time together. I emphasize, however, that if they choose to participate in my research, I will talk with them about what I am writing, how I am saying it so they know and can have a say in what is included or not.

After one hour, we begin to wrap up our conversation by talking about the frequency of our gatherings. Concerned that we will have nothing new to report and share, Crystal suggests we let more than a week pass between meetings. We decide to meet every two to three weeks, depending on what is going on in our lives. I express my gratitude and share how excited I am to be here with them and invite them to share how they are feeling. I see big smiles on the screen as Pablo puts his 10 fingers up to show his

temperature is at a ten. I see others give thumbs ups and wiggle in their seats. Our first plática is completed and I am both excited and relieved.

Fassett and Warren (2007) mark that in critical communication pedagogy culture is central to the process of communication. Through this initial plática, I was purposeful in prompting students to discuss expectations of ourselves, each other, and of this space. Pláticas methodology aims to center the participants as co-constructors of knowledge (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 111). In order to honor them as such, it was imperative to recognize them as co-creators of this space as well. In discussing expectations, my hope was to be intentional in the culture that we created, so that we may sustain it moving forward (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 43). Through the remaining fourteen pláticas, the space was also shaped by our shared cultural upbringings, as Spanish language, specific cultural practices, music, and other aspects of Latinx lived experience were at the center of our discussions. Embracing our shared cultural experiences allowed us to create this space in intentional ways that honored parts of ourselves that are not always welcomed in educational spaces. While these cultural experiences shaped the way we engaged with one another, they were also at the center of our discussion and at the center of this study. In this next theme, I share the discussions we had related to power in distinct contexts.

Theme 2: Interrogating Power

It is Tuesday, April 20th and I have scheduled a plática for this evening. At the time I scheduled this, about ten days prior, I had no way of knowing how I would feel or what would be happening in the world. So now, it is Tuesday and I feel the heaviness of the world in my chest, making it difficult to take a deep breath. Earlier this day, former

police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted for the murder of George Floyd.[6] Reactions to the verdict varied across the country, with folks celebrating the conviction as a step in the right direction towards social justice, while others claimed the injustice this verdict represented. Even so, for many of us, the conviction represented a reification of a criminal justice system that is constituted in violence against queer and trans communities of color (Stanley, 2021). An hour before the plática, I also learned about the murder of Ma'khia Bryant by the hands of police. Ma'khia was a Black young woman who was placed in a foster home with her sister. After an altercation with their foster parents' older children, Ma'Khia's sister called the police to ask for help as they were allegedly threatening to stab the two sisters. Moments after the police arrived, Ma'Khia was shot four times (Bogel-Burroughs et al., 2021). Tears were packed tightly in the corners of my eyes as I thought about the students from this program. Needless to say, it was a heavy day full of emotions. Despite this, it was time to get ready for this plática, to do what I could to put my best face forward, and not allow my personal emotions to hijack the time we spent together. As soon as Dante and Flor joined the Zoom room, I noticed the usually smiling students looked down and defeated.

As usual, I ask them if they would like to begin with a temperature check. Dante begins by telling us he is at five, detailing the difficult day he had. "I woke up kind of grumpy and not feeling so hot, and I kind of almost had a mini panic attack." Concerned about his well-being, both Flor and I ask if he is feeling better and how he managed the situation. He highlights the difficulty of having a panic attack while wearing a face mask, punctuating the persistent role that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have in our

[6] George Floyd was a 46-yearold Black man living in Minneapolis, MN. After being accused of paying with a counterfeit bill, he was confronted by police and eventually murdered. While material violence at the hands of police is not uncommon for Black and Brown communities, this specific incident was video recorded and watched by millions of people around the world. The video evidence was made public and prompted significant mobilization across the country, as community members and activists demanded justice for Floyd and his family while exclaiming that Black lives matter.

lives. After thanking him for sharing, I share that I am also at a five or six and detail my complex feeling around the current sociopolitical moment, and the exhaustion I feel as the end of the semester quickly approaches. Given Dante's honesty and openness, I too feel comfortable being honest about how I am doing on this day. I then asked Flor where her head is today. She expresses gratitude for our sharing and begins sharing her owns struggles. "I don't really know where I'm at today, I'm just kind of going through the motions." Marking her temperature somewhere between a four and a five, she describes the indifference she feels towards her classes and the fact that she is failing most of them. She attributes this to burn out. Together, we sit in silence, acknowledging the heaviness of the difficulties we are each experiencing. Before this plática I felt the need to show my "best" face and to avoid taking over our time together, but the first 15-minutes of our time together reminded me that this space is not about that. It is not about set learning agendas, nor is it constrained by expectations for assessment. In this moment we refused to overlook the complex emotions shaping our presence, instead we chose to show up as our full selves, without the need to edit or offer a fictional account of our emotions. Our collective choice to embrace our relative wholeness within our first few pláticas laid the groundwork for more in-depth, intimate discussions about a range of topics. On this specific day, it enabled us to engage in a fruitful discussion about several topics including power in educative contexts.

Fassett and Warren (2007) articulate power as fluid and complex as the second commitment in CCP. They articulate, "Critical communication educators bear the responsibility of exploring power and privilege, even- and especially- if that process implicates our own work as teachers and researchers" (p. 42). It is important to articulate the place from which I understand power and how it circulates in different spaces. Specifically, I turn to Black feminist scholars to understand intersectionality. Kimberlee Crenshaw (1989) coined "intersectionality" in order to theorize the multiple

marginalizations that Black women experience at the hands of the law (p. 140). Before the term was coined by Crenshaw, Lorde (1983) insists that there are no hierarchies of oppression, a matter that the Combahee River Collective (1970)—of which Lorde was a member—previously articulated as interlocking systems of oppression. Black feminist thinkers challenge me to position cultural difference as central to scholarship—a necessary dimension for understanding the intersectional workings of cultural power. This means acknowledging that one can be simultaneously privileged and oppressed (Lorde 1984). Collins and Bilge (2016) further illuminate intersectionality by defining it as an analytic through which to understand and analyze the complexities in people's experiences in the world. They assert that social inequity is best understood, "as being shaped by many axes that work together to shape and influence each other" (p. 3). Collins and Bilge posit that the organization of power can be understood through four domains of power, calling for scholars to address how power manifests through *interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural dimensions* (p. 7). Their take on intersectionality helps to make visible distinct systems of power while drawing important connections between these systems of power.

Power in Educative Contexts

"I literally just turned in my honors history reflection. I thought, you know what? Screw it. I don't care if it fits the structure correctly. I said YOLO[7], white men suck, amen, and turned it in." Our plática began with an in-depth discussion about the state of K-12 education, and the way the pandemic has impacted students' experiences in high school. To say that they are struggling would be an understatement, both in completing

[7] The colloquial acronym for "You only live once."

their assignments and finding the meaning in doing schooling at all as the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted marginalized communities around the world. Dante and Flor are frustrated, burned out, and unafraid to show it. “Well, if you look at a grade sheet in the U.K, if you have a 56 that’s a B.” Flor’s eyebrows raise as her eyes open widely. “This is all so fake,” she mumbles as she touches her forehead and rolls her eyes. In just one minute, they have highlighted the arbitrary design of grading systems, and the fact that these vary depending on context. Though this is not the first (or last) time we discuss the topic of education or grading, I am in awe of their unapologetic critique of educative assessment, and more specifically their own experiences navigating difficult encounters in their classes. Collins and Bilge (2016) highlight schools as locations where intersecting power relations consistently privilege some students over others (p. 165). The time we spent platicando about their experiences in school enabled us to interrogate the ways in which some students, and perspectives, are privileged over others.

On this day, Dante is feeling uncomfortable and angry about what happened in his English class, a subject he enjoys because of his love for literature and writing. As his class prepares to analyze and engage the work of prominent Black scholars, his teacher prefaced the lesson by focusing on her choice to use the n-word found in this literature. As soon as Dante mentions this, I am reminded of the number of conversations I have heard over the years about teachers using the n-word for “educational purposes.” Though not surprised that this occurred in Dante’s class, I am frustrated that this particular conversation is still considered by some teachers to be relevant to educational contexts. Dante’s frustration is evidenced in his tone, as he stumbles through his teacher’s words while attempting to articulate his own feelings. “I do not feel comfortable saying it [the n-word], or with the class saying it, because none of us are in fact Black.” Dante highlights that the class in which this occurred is an honors class, which at his school means the class is largely made up of, in Dante’s words, “a bunch of white entitled

kids." While Dante is sharing this story, I notice Flor's microphone is unmuted, allowing her to verbally respond to his comments, as though this conversation is taking place in person. In this moment, I am keenly aware of the free flow this conversation is taking, and how far we have come since our first plática, where everyone's microphones were muted except for the person speaking.

Quoting his teacher, Dante's tone quickly shifts so as to mime the instructor, "Okay guys, I'm gonna be saying this word and you guys need to understand it's not a slur," he drags each letter in the word 'guys' with a mocking tone, "It is not something racist, guys, it's what people call each other so I'm gonna say it out of respect!" The Zoom room goes silent for a second, as though the outrage from the moment left us silent, until the three of us collectively respond with shock. Dante elaborates on the moments after, in which three students refused to say the n-word while one was empowered to follow along with the teacher. This part of the plática marks the frequency with which white supremacist discourse emerges in schools. More specifically, I am drawn to the refusal Dante and his classmates exercised through silence when they acknowledged the harm caused when this word is used, specifically by non-Black people. (O'Connor & Mangual Figueroa, 2017). Dante punctuates this point when he articulates that it is not "our place to say it," pointing to the history and roots of the n-word in the United States. Elaborating on this point, Dante recalls a similar encounter in which his freshman year English teacher "from the South, you know with *that* accent," was intentional about saying it "with a hard r." As Dante reflects on these two encounters across formal educative contexts, he is highlighting the ways in which our communication works to constitute our realities (Fassett & Warren, 2007), and the material harm that results from non-Black people utilizing the n-word. I find myself moved by his analysis of power, and his active refusal of his teachers' explanations.

Dante then asks Flor if this is something she has encountered at school, to which Flor quickly responds by emphasizing the difference in the types of schools they each attend. “I go to school on the west side in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood with other communities of color, most that are low income.” She explains that most of her teachers choose to work with this population, making them more aware of the impact of their words on students. I am reluctant as she speaks, wondering if or how white saviorism is present at her school. Flor then shares an experience she had in middle school in which her “Cambodian immigrant teacher got to the end of a story and read the n-word.” She begins to express the difference in this experience, emphasizing that this was followed by a lecture and discussion about racism and bias in the United Sates, one which included a focus on media, cartoons, and politics. While it seems that Flor is intentional in highlighting her teacher’s identity, she spends several minutes discussing the importance and impact of the lecture to provide context about the n-word, rather than choosing to say it for “educational purposes,” like Dante’s teachers claimed.

Accepting that classrooms are always already political (Warren, 1999; Pineau, 1994, 2002; Fassett & Warren, 2007) requires that we understand the way power functions within these spaces. In the germinal piece, *Retrieving the Research Agenda for Communication Education*, Sprague (1993) articulates that one of the guidelines needed to shape a communication-specific pedagogy is the exploration of the relationship between communication and power (p. 119). This includes understanding how communication functions to serve existing power relations. Through this plática, there was a specific focus placed on communicative encounters, namely how the use of the n-word in mundane interactions works to reinforce systems of oppression within school contexts.

Refusing simplicity, embracing complexity

Something that has become increasingly apparent the more time we spend platicando is the ways in which students seem to embrace a complex understanding of power, an understanding which frequently refuses simplistic explanations for the topic at hand. While complex renderings of power become evident in several pláticas, the students' embrace of complexity is especially present when discussing experiences at school, whether these encounters involve other students or teachers and staff. One specific example involves discussions related to COVID-19. Given the ongoing pandemic and the significant ways in which it has impacted most aspects of our lives, discussions pertaining to COVID-19 are frequent and elaborate. We discuss the impact the pandemic has had on our mental health, the way social distancing has impacted our romantic and personal relationships, the way the program has been forced to shift impeding us from developing connections like before, and the way their education has severely suffered since the start of the pandemic. On this particular day, our plática began with a discussion of mask wearing at their schools. As Crystal begins to share details with us about her current crush, Dante interrupts his sister to tell us that this crush is in his math class and always wears his mask on his chin. "Cancelled! I can't believe it!" Crystal responds.

As the conversation continues our focus shifts from the choice an individual student makes to those who are in power. This happens when Dante highlights the fact that his math teacher does not bother wearing a mask. "I guess if the person in charge of the class isn't wearing one, why would students feel like they have to?" His comment highlights the role that adults in positions of power have on students and the periperformative messages indirectly communicated through their actions. Crystal's response takes this conversation a step further by focusing on the school administration and the choices made about returning to in-person instruction. "Not only that, but we are the biggest school in the state, we are overcapacity by like 1,500 students!" Dante

follows this comment by making clear that classrooms are full, and that social distancing is impossible. What began as the "cancelling" of an individual student morphed into a complex analysis of power and the way administrative decisions made at the structural level impact their own well-being (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 189).

Additionally, Flor contributes to the conversation by bringing up "COVID parties," and asked if we had heard about them. Crystal jumps in to share that a girl in her class proposed having a COVID-19 party because her dad told her it would "make everyone immune." Crystal remarks that the same girl has also fought with their teacher about wearing a mask and with other students about the efficacy of the vaccine, arguing that *if the vaccine is so effective, there is no need for anyone to wear a mask*. Crystal adds, "But this is what her dad is telling her! And I can only imagine where he's getting that information from." Through this discussion, the students' critical insight oscillates between the individual and the structural, emphasizing that the messages are indeed circulating and could not be blamed on an individual student. Flor nuances that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted low-income communities and communities of color. Dante makes the point that he and Crystal attend a predominantly white school, "basically what I'm trying to hint at is that people here feel entitled to everything," including a refusal to follow mask mandates.

Another instance in which the students refused simplistic understanding of power came during a point in the plática where we were discussing U.S. history and issues of justice in historic context. Dante was required to choose a Civil Rights topic to present to his class at school. Passionate about the experiences of students of color in schools, Dante approached his teacher hoping to focus on Brown v. Board of Education. Rather than celebrating his excitement, his teacher minimized the relevance and impact of the Supreme Court decision and urged him to find a different example. Angry about his teacher's dismissal, Dante reflects, "I don't know, I felt very offended- she was

making a joke about integration." Taken aback by her comment, Dante highlights, "There are only four of us students of color in that class—I'm done bringing up people of color and education." Highlighting once again, as he often does, the racial makeup of his classes, Dante points out whiteness' pervasive presence in his K-12 education, not only in terms of who is present in the class, but also the perspectives and history his teachers choose to silence (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). This prompts Flor to share something she had read, which discussed that minoritized populations often like to be surrounded by people like them, sometimes prompting violence and "hatred against other minority communities." Uncertain about where her train of thought will take us, I listen closely as Flor elaborates on her position, inviting Dante to join the critique. I am reminded of Pineau (1994) who states, "We cannot enter our classrooms as learners, nor can we empower our students to experience themselves as teachers until we more fully understand the ways in which educational institutions have already politicized our bodies" (p. 21).

Flor adds, "There's this us-against-them sentiment throughout the world, especially within the U.S." Shaking his head vigorously, Dante affirms Flor's comment and emphasizes the "absurd tensions" that exist which are connected to the purposeful segregation of communities by the U.S. government. He affirms, "we all suffer from the same power, the same government." Here, Dante is highlighting what Smith (2006) elaborates as the three pillars of white supremacy as a framework to understand the distinct ways in which marginalized communities are impacted by white supremacy. Following on this comment, he emphasizes the moments of coalition between African American and Mexican American communities, "but the government keeps trying to separate us." Chávez (2012) contends that intersectional perspectives help to challenge "divide and conquer tactics" (p. 9), which Dante references above. Expounding on Dante's comment, Flor highlights the way the divide and conquer mentality continues to

manifest in contemporary issues in the U.S. political landscape by turning to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Discussing how tensions between minoritized communities manifest, Flor states,

> This is kind of similar to like the Black Lives Matter versus all lives matter movement in those that tension between-- there because, like I'm-I feel like some minorities might not feel like they're being fully represented within the Black Lives Matter movement like because-- like the Black Lives Matter movement is meant to highlight the experiences of Black people and how they experienced discrimination and injustices within America -- but then like- the way I understand it is studying the Black- Black people are able to receive justice and be treated fairly (pause) I'm able to achieve justice within America and that will trickle down to other minorities, just because-- Black people are most discriminated and most hated minority in the United States. And, just like across the world really.

Griffin and Chávez (2012) posit that, "One achieves a coalitional subjectivity when she sees her oppression and privilege as inextricably bound to others and when she cannot envision her existence and politics as separate from others' existence and politics" (p. 11). After Flor's comment above, the discussion led us to acknowledge the ways in which our liberation is tied up in one another. We cannot be free until everyone is. Or, to cite Moten (2013), "The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us" (Harney & Moten, p. 10). Throughout this plática, an intersectional framework was utilized to reject simplistic understandings of the circulation of power in schooling contexts, while acknowledging the need to build coalitions with other marginalized communities.

I jump into the discussion, "I want to acknowledge that we've talked about a lot of heavy topics today, so I would love to check in and have us voice how we are feeling." It has been over an hour and a half since we began our time together, and as our plática ends, I realize the range of topics we have discussed today: racist encounters with teachers, questions about identity and authenticity, family struggles, and issues of justice. My mind is racing as I process the depth of our discussion today. I think back on how I felt moments before this plática began, and the choice I thought I would make in

keeping my personal feelings out of the plática. However, upon hearing Dante's willingness to be vulnerable, I am happy to have chosen otherwise. Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) are explicit in naming reciprocity and vulnerability as some of the core principles of pláticas, and after our time together today, I now see firsthand why this is critical. While choosing to disclose my feelings and struggles of the day was initially uncomfortable, I see the way this reflects my commitment to humanization, both for the participants and for myself (Freire, 1970; Paris & Winn, 2014). The research process should be messy and contradictory, and if I am serious about my commitment to transforming qualitative research in Communication Studies, then I must embrace the messiness and show up as my full self, too. Honoring the principle of shared vulnerability of the pláticas methodology pushes me to continue challenging the distance expected of qualitative researchers from their projects, while minimizing the power distance between myself and the youth.

Dante begins the check-out process by sharing that he feels better than when we began our plática. "I know it's important to talk to people that I know care and comfort me about this stuff, so I feel a lot better." The exhaustion and burn out have not left our bodies, we have resolved none of the social issues discussed, and our experiences remain the same. However, the hour and a half we spent together enabled us to confront these struggles together, to remember that we are not alone. "I struggle a lot with just staying in the moment. It was nice to just be able to engage with you in this moment. I'm here, I'm here." Flor's sentiment resonates with me. "I'm barely here, but I'm here too." Delgado Bernal et al. (2018) name pláticas para desahogarse as their primary goal. They elaborate, "The literal translation for desahogarse is to undrown and it means that we are able to unload the weight of oppression we experience daily" (Delgado Bernal et al., 2018, p. 32). Though we enter the pláticas space without a set agenda, the pláticas have

become our space to undrown and connect, regardless of what is happening around us including in formal schooling contexts.

Theme 3: Embracing Embodied Knowledge to Question Civility

In September 2021, a video recording went viral featuring a confrontation taking place at my home institution's new Multicultural Center. This video featured two white men being confronted by students of color implicating them for their problematic/violent/inflammatory paraphernalia which included a "didn't vote for Biden" t-shirt and a "Police Lives Matter" sticker placed on one of the student's laptops. While one of the students of color holds their phone to record the viral video, the other student can be heard asking the two white men, "Do you know what a Multicultural space is? It means you are not being centered." Claiming that they were just there to study, one of the white students can be heard repeating the phrase "You can't be serious." In an interview with *New York Times*, Qureshi, one of the students involved, detailed her initial interaction with the two white men, asking them "Can you please put your laptop in your backpack because you are making people in this space uncomfortable" (Viren, 2022). The recording began after this question was asked and the two white students responded. This video was first posted on the Multicultural Solidarity Coalition's Instagram page, the unofficial student organization which had been organizing to establish a Multicultural Center on campus since 2018. Soon after, this incident went viral, receiving millions of views in just a couple of days and was featured across numerous conservative outlets. Less than a week later, students and I gathered for a plática.

Having participated in the Multicultural Solidarity Coalition's efforts towards a Multicultural Center on campus on and off for two years, this is a topic that I had been discussing all week and that was on my mind before the plática. As such, I decided I would bring this up during our time together to see if students had heard about the

incident and/or if they had an opinion—particularly given this would be a university at which the students will likely attend once they graduate from high school. I decided beforehand that if students were uninterested, I would not push the topic. What I did not expect was the investment that two students had in this conversation; an interest that was made evident by their impassioned responses, their willingness to question and shift their initial opinions, and the length of time we spent discussing this incident. While the "theme" of *Embracing Embodied Knowledge to Question Civility* is anchored in this plática, the topic of *intervention* was one we visited several times during our pláticas. First, I will discuss this incident by focusing on the embodied process through which students went in order to grapple with the limitations of civility before shifting to intervention.

The Problem with Civility

> The way they are stereotyped at our school, they're called social justice warriors. I think there's a difference between fighting for what you think is right and advocating for yourself and doing something because you see that it's trending and because you want to make a commotion, and I think that's what that was.

Crystal hesitantly, but directly articulates her perception of this incident, first saying, "I don't know how to explain it without sounding rude." Moments before, I shared my screen and played the five-minute video depicting the confrontation taking place at the new Multicultural Center on my university's campus. Having seen this video before, I focus my attention on Dante and Crystal as they watch for the first time. Though silent through the entire video, I notice their eyebrows raising slowly in response to the crescendoing voice coming from the men in the video. As the minutes passed, I could see their faces changing as eyebrows furrowed, mouths opened, and lips pursed. I was witness to a cacophony of emotional rollercoasters animating their facial expressions and body language. Though I was unsure of the direction this plática would take, I felt excited to hear their thoughts on what we were witnessing. I briefly questioned my role in this

moment. Should I only listen to what they have to say without expressing my views? Is it okay to challenge or affirm their perceptions? Reminded of the principles of pláticas methodology, specifically the role of reciprocity (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 114), I decided that I would participate in the conversation and share my connection to this video and the history that has shaped, at least in part, this interaction.

Affirming her stance, Crystal follows up her original comment by stating that those recording the incident did so to make a scene. She also articulates that the men in the video were initially calm, which she appreciated, "But then he got up and started being defensive, which I don't think helped his case." At this moment, I'm somewhat shocked to hear Crystal embrace the rhetoric of social justice warrior since this is not something I had heard her articulate in the years I have known her. I am curious about her use of the term, and wonder if for her, this is connected to how I have come to understand social justice warriors. According to Phelan (2019), the term 'social justice warrior' is difficult to define because of the pejorative connotations that shape the way it is used in memes, digital media, media discourse, and everyday conversations. Broadly, he defines the 'social justice warrior' as "a cultural figure that is ridiculed violently by the far right and a target of general critique" (p. 456). Remembering that Crystal attends a predominantly white conservative high school, I am less surprised that this rhetoric circulates within that environment and has made its way into her own vocabulary. Still, I am unsure about how she is using it and whether she would agree with this definition. I notice Dante's eyebrows continue to furrow as he looks pensive. I invite him to share his opinion. "Um," he hesitates. "I don't know. I kind of agree with Crystal, but it feels less…" I perceive this hesitation as a desire to be careful with his words. "I don't want to say it was deliberate, but very much so." He continues his comment by bringing attention to the "Did not vote for Biden" t-shirt one of the men in the video is wearing, and the environmental context in which this took place: A newly founded, hard fought,

multicultural center in the context of Arizona's particularly racist and xenophobic political landscape. Dante affirms that the interaction should not have gone this far, while acknowledging the provocative messaging on the t-shirt coupled with a Police Lives Matter sticker "in a place that is supposed to be a safe space for people of color." Dante's focus on the men's apparel and the environment in which this interaction took place offered an opening for me to share some of the context around multicultural centers at public universities, the specific fight at this university towards the construction of one, and my own involvement in these efforts. More specifically, I highlighted the university's articulation of their position, claiming that "all spaces on campus are multicultural spaces," a fact that had been referenced repeatedly during organizing efforts and articulated by an associate dean at the university. I also share that this video has gone viral, and that the students of color featured in it have received death threats.

"So, I think… obviously both parties are in the wrong." Crystal clarifies her position by discussing the issue of "extremists on both sides." I follow this up by asking how this situation should have been handled, or what could have been different, at which time Crystal introduces the importance of "kindness and civility." These are points I have become increasingly familiar with as a communication scholar. The emphasis on civility can be seen and *felt* everywhere in our discipline. Specifically, the communication department where I am completing my doctoral studies is highly invested in civility, a matter which is reinforced through the creation of a civil communication certificate, syllabi policy around civility, classroom climate, and grades, and civility as a central focus in the research collaborative in which I actively participate. By this time, I realize that Crystal and I have done most of the talking, and that Dante is muted with his eyebrows scrunched together with his hand on his chin. I can tell he is engaged in the conversation, so I ask what he is thinking. His response prompted a turning point in this

conversation, one which allowed us to grapple with the limits of kindness and civility in moments of intervention.

Dante begins detailing a recent confrontation he had at school when a conservative white student used a transphobic slur in passing. “I approached him saying hey you can’t use that word it’s considered sort of offensive. I tried to be very mellow about it, but it didn’t work.” Dante continues sharing his experience in fragments, interrupting his current sentence in exchange for a new one. I ask Dante if he thinks his approach made a difference in the interaction. He shares,

> Honestly, no. I feel like if I said anything general it was just so like—I really was trying to be chill and not expose him, not be rude or anything, and then he makes it a scene and I end up making a scene with it, too.

As Dante continues detailing his confrontation with the student, I notice Crystal inch closer to her screen and tilt her head to the side, nodding as she listens to her brother’s experience. Dante’s description highlights the limitations of civility, because although he purposefully approached the student in a calm manner, specifically trying to avoid making a scene with the hopes of educating him, he did not respond well. Dante described this fall out as, “both pumping up our chests to see who was gonna do something.” Referencing this intervention, Dante is discussing “education as a performative experience” (Pineau, 1994, p. 9), and highlighting what Patton (2004) argued about civility nearly twenty years ago, that racism and sexism (and other intersecting manifestations of power) in higher education persist under the guise of civility. Patton affirms, “civility, as it is currently constructed, reifies the White supremacist patriarchal hegemonic order” (2004, p. 81). And while civility may be understood as “a democratic good” and an “ethical practice of egalitarianism,” Báez and Ore (2018) highlight that expectations of civility are not enforced and regulated in neutral ways (p. 331), a matter which disproportionally impacts marginalized people (Sowards, 2020, p. 397). By incorporating his own experience with a confrontation,

Dante offers an embodied way to understand the limitations of civility and its connection to power, prompting Crystal to reconsider her initial response to the video.

Crystal immediately follows up Dante's comments with her own frustration, focusing specifically on the fact that Dante shared this incident with their family members, and they responded by telling him that people's minds cannot be changed, and that it is better to leave things alone. Characterizing this stance as "bystander behavior," Crystal then shares her own experiences confronting a white student at her school who called her a "bitch." Reflecting on this experience, she articulates her frustration at being perceived as "more aggressive" because she is a girl, even though guys engage in similar call-out behavior. "It's also frustrating when people use the fact that I'm Mexican, I'm a girl, and I'm younger than them…" At this time, I also share my own experiences within my Mexican family, and the way I have been told I am advocating for the right causes and ideas but doing so in the wrong way. Our experiences allow us to engage in a more nuanced conversation around intervention and civility, and why this does not work for folks in marginalized positions. I then prompt Crystal and Dante to discuss how they would have handled the situation at the multicultural center had they been there, and I am surprised to hear them both say they would have handled it the same way as the students of color did. However, they hoped that things would not get that far. Sowards (2020) conveys that matters of civility and politeness are played out through risk assessment as, "every encounter with an injustice is also a calculation of how much is at risk for ourselves" (p. 398). Dante's and Crystal's comments emphasize what Báez and Ore (2018) articulate, that for Black and non-Black racialized bodies, "civility is always already an unattainable goal, but an expectation nonetheless" (p. 332). This expectation is created and maintained by and through ideas of whiteness. When one fails to successfully engage in the expectation of civility, whiteness becomes materially and violently enforced through systems of power. In the case of the multicultural center

video, the risk resulted in millions of views, rape and death threats, and repercussions from the university.

Throughout this plática, both Dante and Crystal turned towards their embodied knowledge to process and think through the multicultural center confrontation. While Crystal's initial response seemed to reflect ideas of civility that often accompany conversations of intervention, hearing her brother Dante's experience prompted a shift in her thinking. Rather than affirming the need for civility in moments of intervention, both Crystal and Dante turned towards their own experiences in order to analyze and make sense of the multicultural center confrontation. Cruz (2001) emphasizes the importance of centering Brown bodies in education research. She asserts, "The most profound and liberating politics come from the interrogations of our own social locations, a narrative that works outward from our specific corporealities" (p. 658). Women of color feminisms offer an important groundedness here,
"A groundedness in the flesh and material realities of each day's struggles" (Sánchez & Ek, 2013, P. 17). By turning to their own social locations, specifically as a Latino trans man and Latina young cis woman, both Dante and Crystal were able to articulate the limitations of civility in their own encounters, and thus extend this understanding to another context that did not involve them.

Choosing Intervention

Another topic that came up frequently during our pláticas, and generally in our encounters during program activities, were matters of intervention. More specifically, we discussed when it was our responsibility to intervene in harmful discourse and moments of injustice. Crystal, Dante, Flor, and Pablo—those who most regularly attended pláticas and who I grew close with—seemed to have strong opinions related to this matter. This is something I learned over the years of knowing each of them, and something which became evident during several pláticas. The examples of moments of intervention ranged

from racist encounters with teachers, cissexist and patriarchal comments from family, and anti-vax/COVID denialism in different contexts. At times, the students articulated the ease with which they called someone out or intervened, and the reasons shaping those decisions. In other moments, however, the decision to intervene was a bit more layered and caused uncertainty. This topic was explored in depth in two specific pláticas taking place in April 2021 and September 2021. The fact that these conversations took place five months apart, yet focused on this general topic, suggests how salient the matter is for students. To elaborate on this topic, I will first describe a plática in which Flor, Dante, and I interrogated when it is "our" responsibility to intervene.

On this particular day, Dante is passionately detailing a major confrontation that he witnessed between his friend, a Black high school student, and a white conservative student, specifically regarding the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Dismissing the relevance of his murder at the hands of police, and the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement, the white conservative student was met with resistance from Dante and his friend. "We can't ignore this because we are literally creating history right now. This is going to be in textbooks, and we need to discuss." His voice grows louder as he recounts the confrontation during their English class. I am not surprised by this, as Dante has shared with me over the years the many confrontations he has had with white conservative students and teachers at his school. Both Flor and I are listening attentively, responding to his story with our hands, facial expressions, and vocal sounds communicating our resonant frustration. Through this discussion, a focal point becomes having to be the person to intervene and explain matters of injustice to others, including teachers. Dante brings the example of his sister Crystal, who was asked to explain to a substitute teacher a question related to immigration. Though Crystal doesn't consider herself versed in politics, she was the only Latinx person in class, a matter which seemed to justify to the substitute teacher why Crystal should be the one to

provide an explanation about immigration. Dante asserts, “I sometimes feel like I have to be the voice for minorities,” and elaborates that this topic comes up frequently with his friend. Speaking about his friend, Dante says, “he doesn’t need to educate us. It is our responsibility to educate ourselves.” I find myself pulled into this conversation, listening attentively to the way Dante articulates his frustration and perspective on the matter. This is a topic I find myself discussing often with friends, and I am excited to see I am not alone in my desire for more effective communicative interventions.

At this time, I decided to share my own struggle in thinking through the topic of intervention, specifically in my experiences as an educator. I share with Dante and Flor that I am teaching a course I designed on Latinx Communication Studies, one which I worked on for several months that encompasses my research and teaching interests and is shaped by my own experiences. I reflected that I had spent all semester discussing with students the nuance and complexity around border discourse and have shared my own experiences navigating the U.S./Mexico border and the U.S. immigration system. Despite these efforts, one of the students in the course chose to do a presentation on the “border crisis,” infusing anti-immigrant and fear-based rhetoric throughout his speech. I elaborate on my feelings, “I just keep thinking in that moment, it’s my responsibility to say something because I am the professor. But in moments when it’s not obvious who is responsible, whose job is it to step in?” Dante responds immediately, working through his contradictory thoughts. Acknowledging that it is “easier when someone helps you learn,” he eventually concludes “it should be their own.” He sees some limitations in his perspective as he articulates the frustration he feels when he is misunderstood.

Through this discussion, Flor has remained mostly quiet, communicating her feelings through her facial expressions. However, when I offer my prompt on intervention, I can see that she is eager to share her perspective. She begins by discussing how difficult this topic is, but that we cannot leave people to “just think like that” for the

rest of their lives. “They could go on to be a doctor, teacher, or a lawyer, and they have their own biases and ignorance to work through.” She affirms they may not be in a position to hear that they need to change, but they need to be told this “Just to be able to fulfill their role in society, especially if they go on to be a public servant.” Flor’s comment highlights the urgency of intervention, particularly in connection to the roles those individuals may have in society. Her comment also implies the urgency she, herself, feels in being the one to intervene, because failing to do so could have an impact on marginalized members of society, especially if the individual becomes a public servant.

I bring us back to the Black Lives Matter movement and ask what our responsibility is as non-Black people to call out anti-Black discourse. Dante responds, “I guess we should keep an open mind and provide actual information and cite examples.” Dante’s position seems to have shifted, now articulating an openness to calling out and educating others. He punctuates his point by stating, “I don’t have to be Black to understand that there is racism in the world.” I sit with this comment as Dante repeats it once again, except this time, his voice is strong as though there is no doubt in his mind about what he is saying. Here, Dante’s comment signals an important aspect of intervention, one which directly responds to our original query of responsibility and intervention. Although Dante may not be the target of anti-Black discourse, he acknowledges that one need not be Black to understand that this violent discourse exists and materializes as physical violence. As such, Dante affirms his role in calling this out, not because this is directly targeting him, but because it is violent and contributes to the oppression of others. This reflexive labor seems to embrace what Madison (2011) characterizes as “a purpose toward greater material freedom for others, beyond and extricable to the self” (p. 136). Without awareness of Fassett and Warren’s (2007) germinal work, Dante poignantly places these mundane communication encounters within meaningful sociopolitical and historical context (p. 45). Earlier in the

conversation, Dante articulated that it is each person's responsibility to educate themselves. However, this comment highlights a tension that we discuss. While he acknowledges that it is "easier when someone helps you learn," he is firm in his belief that it is each individual's responsibility to educate themselves. However, we reach the conclusion that our commitment to justice is what drives our desire to intervene in violent discourse, not the presumed responsibility to educate others.

In a later plática, matters of intervention once again surfaced. This time, Flor, Dante, Crystal, and I discuss the material consequences of intervention. While we have established our commitments to intervening when we witness moments of injustice, this conversation leads us to acknowledge the possible consequences we may face when calling out articulations of power, specifically cissexist, patriarchal, and white supremacist discourse. As an example, Crystal brings up her involvement in her school's Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), highlighting that although she is not queer, she likes being part of this organization. Flor mentions the frequency with which cissexist and heteronormative language makes its way into her high school, even though "it's 2021, why are people still saying this stuff?" At this time, Dante begins to share his experience as the only person of color in the GSA. Crystal, Flor, and I are listening closely as Dante's vulnerability is evident through his facial expression and the shakiness in his voice. "It really hurts because I'm the only one—I'm the representation of brown-of people of color and I feel so isolated." He continues to detail his encounters, and the way that his ethnic and racial identity intersect with his gender and sexuality, and the types of comments he receives at his predominantly white school. I can see Crystal's anger at the fact that her brother experiences this, and she quickly chimes in to discuss her involvement in these spaces and her role in intervening. She states, "I don't care if I'm not going to change someone's opinion if they're doing something hurtful or harmful, they need to know, even if I'm not going to change them." This comment once again affirms what I discuss

above, the commitment that each of these students articulates about their role in intervening. However, Crystal also highlights that because she is a "cishet person," she does not experience these types of comments, "and for that reason, I feel some type of moral obligation to speak up." Emphasizing the privilege she has in navigating an intervention, Crystal says, "I love you Dante, but I would rather me be the one that speaks up, because I know I would be in less of harm."

This is a difficult conversation, as all of us sit in the Zoom room feeling the heaviness of the topic. While we process our feelings around this conversation, Flor articulates that if someone was to make an anti-immigrant comment, she would feel the need to intervene, "because I know I am not an immigrant, I have to be the one to say something." She also acknowledges that she would be less likely to "experience any pushback" than an immigrant would. Our conversation highlights the relevance of one's positionality when calling out violent discourse, and the greater responsibility felt when this discourse did not target us specifically. Thus, the students determined they especially feel responsible when they know someone else's safety, specifically someone who is differently marginalized, is at risk. Explicating the framework of critical intercultural communication pedagogy, Toyosaki and Atay (2018) place self-reflexivity, as discussed by Fassett and Warre (2007), at the center of their work. Throughout this plática, Flor, Dante, Crystal, and myself engaged in critical self-reflexivity at different points in time, noting the ways in which we are privileged and oppressed depending on the context, and the ways in which our social locations impact our approach to intervention. Discussing intervention also provoked us to consider the ninth commitment that Fassett and Warren (2007) outline focused on a "nuanced understanding of human subjectivity and agency" (p. 52). In discussing civility and intervention, we were able to turn to our embodied experiences to interrogate how and why we make the choices we do when intervening in problematic and violent discourses

and encounters. By reflecting on our own choices and listening to the choices that each other makes depending on the context, we are able to be more intentional in future encounters and understand how our experiences and perspectives shape the actions we take.

"Did I tell y'all that I moved in with my partner a couple of months ago?" I prompt the students, knowing full well that this is something I had not yet shared. The truth is that I am unsure about how to tell them. It has been years since I have wanted to tell them about my relationship, but the more time passed the more hesitant I felt to do so, and the more questions arose about how they would respond. Crystal quickly replies, "A partner? We haven't heard about a partner." I sense that they are intrigued but hesitant to ask questions since we have never discussed my romantic life. "Do you want to see a picture?" They vigorously shake their heads as I scramble to share my screen. The Zoom room goes silent for what feels like a whole minute, as Flor covers her mouth and Crystal's jaw drops open. Dante interrupts the silence when he begins screaming, "WHAT!?" Pictured on the screen is me, my little wiener dog Chorizo, and my partner, who is also a staff member of the program.

The following minutes are filled with laughter and audible expressions of shock. I feel my cheeks turning red as Crystal demands, "When were you going to tell us!?" and Dante immediately repeats the question. "Now, I think?" The laughter continues as Flor says, "Wow, this is so cool!" I feel relieved as their shock turns to joy and the smiles on their faces grow bigger. Having kept this from them for so long made me uncertain about whether they would feel betrayed or left out, but their reactions seem to communicate otherwise. "I am crying tears of joy!" Dante exclaims, as he characterizes this bit of news as "the biggest plot twist." I share with them that I thought they might have had a feeling at one point. "Oh yeah, how long have you been keeping this secret for?" inquires Crystal. I prompt them to guess, and when their guesses are a few years short, I tell them that we

have been together since before the very first residential summer program. The shock returns to their faces, “No! Wait! I had a feeling back then. My intuition was correct!” Dante exclaims. As the laughter continues, I explain to them that the director at the time suggested this not be shared because it was our first summer, and as more time passed, I just was not sure when or how to share. Crystal describes this as a movie, and Flor follows up by saying, “This is like your favorite tío and tía getting together!”

This was the end of our plática, and though I was nervous to share, I knew it was time for me to do so. The previous months of our pláticas enabled us to develop deeper relationships, ones that were undoubtedly shaped by the students’ willingness to share pieces of themselves with me and each other. It was time for me to do the same. This meant taking seriously the principles of pláticas methodology, mainly the embrace of relationality, reciprocity, and vulnerability (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Sharing my romantic life now meant that they knew something others, including some program staff, did not. This now became our secret, and it became clear in the following pláticas that this brought us closer together.

Theme 4: Examining Culture and Identity

It is Monday, November 29th, and after a four-day weekend, I am excited to participate in the plática scheduled for today. Although I saw the students earlier this month, I know this November holiday can be a difficult one for many reasons, but the fact that we tend to spend this day with family can be especially draining. As I prepare for our time together, I realize this is our ninth month platicando. If memory, and research notes, serve me right, this will be our 12th plática this year. This prompts me to reflect on the year we have had together; the deep loss we have experienced individually and collectively, the difficult conversations we have had, the hours spent joking and laughing with one another, and the strong bonds we have developed. At this point, all program activities have returned to an in-person format as we learn to live with the

ongoing pandemic. Students can now engage one another in person, as things begin to feel like they once were. This means that Flor, who started the program during the pandemic in 2020, has finally met Crystal, Dante, and Lupita in person. Despite this fact, students continue to show up to these pláticas and are even starting to request them on specific days. I am overcome with a deep sense of gratitude, and while I still feel a great deal of uncertainty about the focus of this project and about the way I will write about our time together, I recognize and celebrate the way our time together has transformed my relationships with the students, and the relationships they have with one another. This experience has been worth it.

The clock hits 6 p.m. and I am happy to see four students in the Zoom waiting room. Dante, Crystal, and Flor have become the core plática group as they are the students who most frequently show up and as they have begun requesting more time together. So, when I see Lupita join, I feel excited about the dynamic today's plática will offer. While this is not Lupita's first time here, her work responsibilities make it difficult for her to join more regularly. The other students are also excited that she is joining us. We begin with temperature checks which allow students to share how they are feeling after the holiday. Between comments about tamales, sleeping, and spending time with friends, these brief temperature checks offer a look at the experiences the students had in the last few days. These include a racist encounter with family friends, police involvement in an abusive family confrontation, and gendered family expectations. After just twenty minutes together, it is clear that the students want to discuss each other's experiences, even while "coming here to forget" their own, a fact that Lupita articulates during her temperature check.

Latinidad & Authenticity

"Ana, do you know how to make red rice?" This is one of the first questions Flor asks in a plática. I explain in detail the way the mujeres in my family taught me to do this.

> First, I toast the rice in a little bit of oil, making sure each grain is kissed by the pan. I then add the cebollita and wait for its aroma to fill the room. Luego, I add the mixture of tomate, garlic, agua, and a little bit of chicken bouillon, a Mexican cook's best friend. I also like to add un chile verde y un poquito de cilantro for added flavor.

Discussions about food are a common occurrence during pláticas. While all types of food and diets are discussed, we pay special attention to Mexican food, as this is the food that has nourished each of us throughout our lives. Tamales, quesadillas, pan dulce, tacos, and dulces de tamarindo. Our love of food is undeniable, and these discussions enable us to connect on our shared cultural background. This emphasis on cultural connection also manifests through discussions of Spanish, music, cultural norms, and dichos. Together, we celebrate the customs with which we grew up; those that have animated our childhoods and shaped our identities. In doing so, we also open the possibility to critically analyze the ideologies that inform the traditions and norms with which we were raised.

What characteristics constitute latinidad or a Latinx person? What does it mean to be Latina? As someone who migrated to Arizona from Mexico, I have been in numerous spaces that grapple with these types of questions. Though most of these conversations often conclude with individuals articulating that there is no one definition, or no set of criteria that define being a Latinx person, there is always a component to the conversation in which folks feel, or are made to feel, that they are not Latinx enough. This often brings up questions of customs, language, beliefs, and life experiences, while some may claim "que lo Latino se conoce" (Rodriguez, 2003, p. 19). So, while there is not a single way of understanding latinidad, the ways in which this term is often taken up

function to include some and not others. During this plática, Both Dante and Flor express that they do not feel Latinx or Mexican enough. For example, Dante says

> I feel bad because there's times when I feel like I need a darken myself I'm just so I can feel I guess authentically Mexican because I know I can't speak Spanish or… I can barely handle spicy food um. And I mean, I love my- I guess my culture, like I love listening to Mexican music- Hispanic music and I love the parties I love the clothing. Like I love the food like I love all of that stuff, but I feel bad because I feel like I'm not authentically myself I didn't learn Spanish I'm not from Mexico, I never traveled to Mexico.

In response to Dante's comment, Flor opens up and shares a similar sentiment, discussing that she feels insecure about her race and does not feel Brown enough, that she is "conventionally attractive for an American Latina." As she continues to discuss these feelings, it seems that this comment is connected to the lightness of her skin, while also speaking to her inability to speak Spanish. Both Dante and Flor connect their understandings of authenticity to their physical appearance, and to a set of criteria or characteristics that speak to latinidad, including language, food, and music. Flor continues, "I feel like Hispanic people in America are these Brown people trying to preserve their brownness." In this moment, both students articulate their desire to feel closer to their cultural heritage, and the difficulty they have experienced in feeling this connection. An important part of this discussion also highlights the "missing pieces" they both have in their family trees. While both have been told they have Indigenous ancestry, neither is able to articulate what Indigenous communities their families belonged to. Instead, their ancestry is something they have heard about a few times from family members, without much detail or direction to learn more. Still, both Flor and Dante desire to feel better connected to their Mexican/Latinx identities, each articulating the obstacles that stand in their way including family members' rejection of the Spanish language, family members desiring to be white, and the difficulty of being in predominantly white spaces. At this point, I am reminded of several comments these

students have made in the past about our discussions about identity, and the appreciation they feel about being able to discuss this topic together. This suggests the importance of a culturally sustaining space (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017) for these students, one in which cultural values can be shared, while also interrogated. This plática allowed us to further examine our latinidad.

Our discussion continued with a series of short anecdotes we shared about our own families and the types of messages we received growing up from them. First, Dante details lessons he learned from family members about who he should and should not date. For example, his cousin made it clear to him that he should only date Brown people. Additionally, his father "threatened to beat" him if he ever dated a Black person. He retells this story with an embarrassed look on his face, hesitating to share the details of this encounter. This prompts me to share my own story which took place nearly a decade ago when I visited my family in Sonora. Upon hearing that I had a new boyfriend, my cousin's young daughter inquired about whether he was a gringo, affirming that "temenos que mejorar la raza," a dicho heard throughout Mexico and other parts of Latin America that translates to "we need to better the race." I notice the stunned look on both Dante's and Flor's faces as I recount the discomfort and shock I felt hearing this from the mouth of a child. Up to this point, our discussions around our Latinx and Mexican identities have been celebratory, allowing us to connect on our shared food and cultural experiences. This is the first we have spoken openly about the way power manifests in Latinx spaces, and specifically in our families.

Though the discussion initially focused on the way both students often felt insufficient or not Latinx enough, turning to the lessons learned from family pushed us to begin considering the way our latinidad has been defined or imposed through its distance from Blackness and Indigeneity. Similarly, we grappled with the ways our identity is constituted through communicative acts, like embracing the terminology of

Latina/o/x (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Anzaldúa's (1987) germinal text offers Chicanas an opportunity to understand the "choque de culturas" (p. 100) that we experience as a new consciousness that helps navigate and interrogate borders. While this theorizing has provided an important foundation for Chicanx/Latinx studies, and in the development of pláticas as a methodology, I argue that in this instance, it was our proximity to—and arguable intimacy with—whiteness that necessitates a critical interrogation of latinidad and the way latinidad is understood, defined, and imposed.

The conversation was uncomfortable, but it allowed us to be more critical of the lessons we have learned at home. I acknowledge to the students the difficulty of this conversation and assert my own commitment to interrogating the lessons I have learned throughout my life. Flor and Dante affirm that they, too, are committed to continuing to unlearn. Fassett and Warren (2007) name reflexivity as "an essential condition" for critical pedagogical spaces (p. 46). While a critical reflexive praxis is something I typically hear about from folks committed to critical approaches to research, a commitment I myself have made in this project, I am energized to see these students engaging to a similar praxis. In this example, both Flor and Dante talk through the discomfort they feel around their identities, including feelings of inadequacy. However, witnessing them interrogate the lessons they were raised with, and their willingness to "illuminate the (re)creation" of certain values and beliefs (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 48) enables us to continue engaging in discussions about our identities, and to recognize the agency we have in the performance and embrace of culture.

Demanding that we acknowledge and attend to the "lived experiences and biographies of the persons inhabiting a particular intersection without preconceived notions of values, ideologies, and politics," Yep (2010) introduces "thick intersectionalities" and calls for scholars to understand "the interplay between individual subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces" when

engaging in the study of race (p. 173). Yep (2015) later elaborates, outlining the defining characteristics of thick(er) intersectionalities, a move that promises a more nuanced and complex way to examine identity. These characteristics include a struggle against coherence in the study of identity, an embrace of the messiness of everyday life, an emphasis on the affective investments individuals make as they perform identity and understanding of identity as embodied and lived within geopolitical and historical contexts (p. 89). Intersectional thought marked our conversation, as we grappled with distinct aspects of our personhood and the ways in which we experience privilege and oppression depending on the context. We sat in the messiness and discomfort while questioning where ideas about latinidad, gender, race, and sexuality emerged.

Familial Gender Norms

"Ya sabes hacer arroz? Pues ya te puedes casar." Growing up in a Mexican family this is a dicho I heard frequently, one which is specifically reserved for young girls. While dichos can offer inspiration in particular instances (Espinoza-Herold, 2007), they also offer a look into the ideologies present in different cultural contexts. In this example, ideas about gender and heteronormativity are imbued in this simple, but common expression. Once a young woman has learned to properly cook this staple dish, she is ready to fulfill the duties of a wife, which include being responsible for nourishing her husband. Expectations based on gender are something with which I have personally grappled with much of my life, particularly as my feminist consciousness grew and I began making family members uncomfortable with the questions I would pose. As such, I was excited when the students expressed interest in discussing gendered expectations during numerous pláticas. One of these instances happened during a plática in which Flor, Dante, Crystal, and Lupita participated.

The conversation emerged out of a discussion about the ways our families make rice. I share with the students the dicho that I discuss above, and the frequency with

which I heard this. I notice their mouths drop when I translate each word, and I can see that Crystal is processing something as her eyebrows scrunch together. She begins by sharing some of the lessons with which she and Dante were raised, specifically during the time in their childhood that they were living with their grandmother. “You have to devote your entire life to learning how to be a wife, and maybe that’s just not it.” She details the expectations her grandmother had of her and Dante, like cleaning the house every day and learning how to entertain. She also connects to the dicho I brought up, discussing the importance of cooking and its connection to marriage and being a wife. As she shares this, her discontent is evident through the articulation of her words as she drags out each one of them, as though she is bored with these antiquated expectations.

Our plática leads us to consider the ways in which these lessons have been passed down to us. Although we grew up on different sides of the border, within different familiar contexts, and several years apart, we are quick to acknowledge that these expectations are quite similar. These are taught to us in a variety of ways, sometimes through jokes and teasing, at times indirectly based on the way other family members are critiqued, and frequently through verbal expressions. I share the frequency with which dichos are used in Mexico, and the role they played in shaping my understanding of my identity as a young woman. Because I am the fluent Spanish speaker of the group, the students are less familiar with dichos and are eager to hear an example. “Calladita te ves mas bonita, which translates to “you look prettier when you are quiet.” Outraged by this, I hear a series of audible reactions ranging from “fuck that,” to “ugh,” while Crystal covers her mouth and Lupita begins laughing and repeating “wow.” Immediately after, they begin to analyze this dicho and critique the way it disciplines young children into submission, specifically young girls. Lessons about how young girls and women should behave are ingrained in us early on, a matter which becomes increasingly evident

through this plática. By engaging in discussion about our gendered identities, we affirm that our bodies are political and a critical source of cultural knowledge (Warren, 1999).

Flor shifts our discussion as she remembers a dicho she has heard before, except this one also indirectly emphasizes physical appearance. “There’s a saying in Spanish, you know I can’t say it, but it means if you are hungry, just drink some water.” I am caught off guard and quickly taken back to my years as a young girl, and the numerous times I was pushed to drink water to satiate my hunger. I was not the only one who found herself reflecting on the past, as Dante quickly interjects with his own experience. “My grandmother used to always say that to me, especially because as a little kid I ate a lot. So, I would have to drink a cup of water first, and if I was still hungry, I could eat.” Dante’s words hit me like a ton of bricks, and I remember the numerous conversations we have had over the years related to our struggles with body image and our relationship with food. “Mexican culture can be so fatphobic,” Lupita affirms directly. The conversation continues as Crystal asserts that she has had many “epiphanies” related to this, highlighting the many comments she encountered from family members. Reflecting on the comments she states, “Why did they feel the need to comment on everything? Saying things that are deeply rooted in misogyny or fatphobia.” While the focus through the majority of this plática has been on our families, Crystal also highlights the way fatphobia also shows up among her friends and the effort she has made to intervene.

Bridging together our discussion about gendered expectations, fatphobia, and Latinx identity, Dante begins sharing his own experiences as a trans man growing up in a Mexican family. I notice Flor, Crystal, and Lupita paying close attention to Dante, nodding along as he details the intersectional forms of oppression he experiences. He states,

> When it comes to family and religion and culture, like I’m not only going to be disowned by my parents, but I will also be disowned by my culture, and by my religion and there’s so many other factors, compared to like a white person, a

> white trans person. I feel like its super isolating. I don't know, it's very sad to think about and then I get questioned, like if I do something feminine I am ultimately changing my gender, like apparently a moment, because I do my nails or I decided to do a little edge lord and put eyeliner on.

Dante continues to share the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect to create a series of experiences for him within different contexts, including those on his high school campus with other queer and trans people, and at home with his family. He emphasizes the ways that he performs his gender as a trans man, and the probing he often gets from family members like his tía, who questions him when he fails to perform traditional expectations of men. Highlighting the uncertainty he feels in these moments, he shares the questions he reflects upon when this happens. "Do I need to go yell and beat someone up to prove that I have toxic masculinity? Do I need to join a sport or something?" While our plática has focused on the expectations of women up to this point, Dante makes an important connection; that the expectations for young girls and women are created in contrast or opposition to those of men. Or, as Rodriguez (2003) frames it, identity is "about a self that is constituted through and against other selves in contexts that serve to establish the relationship between the self and the other" (p. 5). In other words, the ways in which boys and men should act are determined by a distance from the norms of girls and women's behavior. So, if girls are disciplined to be silent or calladitas, then boys and men are taught to assert their identities through power and force.

Turning to common dichos offers an entry point through which to understand what is and has been valued within cultural and familial context. Espinoza-Herold's (2007) work highlights the ways in which dichos function to "transmit intergenerational values, attitudes, and perceptions rooted in a larger cultural framework" that supports students' navigation of schools (p. 261), or what Delgado-Gaitan (1994) describes as "literacies of empowerment" and "advocacy tools" (p. 307). She argues that these

function to communicate values in a similar way that stories do. If we are to take this claim seriously, then we must look towards dichos not only to highlight the ways they encourage and empower us, but also in the way they transmit cultural norms and ideas about matters of identity, like gender, race, class, and sexuality. From a critical pedagogical perspective, Fassett and Warren's (2007) focus on mundane communication practices as constitutive of systems of oppression offer a foundation from which to interrogate everyday dichos and if or how these are reinforcing and reproducing larger social structural systems. In this case, the three dichos discussed gave an insight into ideologies related to race and gender within Mexican families. While these types of discussions can be uncomfortable and can and do implicate us, they also help us to be more intentional and aware of our everyday communication and how this may or may not reflect the values we seek to live.

Today's plática allowed us to engage in some honest but difficult conversations about our identities and the lessons we have learned from our families about what it means to be a gendered Latinx person. Together, we labored in examining the ways in which we are/have been expected to communicate our gender identities in order to challenge such expectations (LeMaster & Johnson, 2019). I realize it is now 7:45 pm, and after almost two hours together, I want to check in to see how we are each feeling. Our usual temperature check seems out of place since the conversation and jokes are continuing despite all of us acknowledging it is time to leave. Crystal mentions that next time we see each other at the Saturday meet up we can perform some TikTok dances. Somehow, Flor brings up that she is too close to the camera, and we can see her mustache. Laughing about this, I also highlight the dark hairs above my upper lip. We are still exploring matters of gender norms, except now the mood is much lighter and we are laughing at and with ourselves and one another.

Because this plática is taking place at the end of November, I ask the students when we should meet again. Flor suggests the end of December so that we can celebrate all we have accomplished and reflect on our year together. Crystal reminds us that earlier in the year, we talked about having a self-care plática, "Maybe we should do it next month?" Dante and Flor agree and the three of them begin to brainstorm how we might spend our time together. Their ideas include watching a movie or a show, doing facemasks via Zoom, talking about our goals for the new year, and eating snacks. I tell them that I plan to have self-care bags ready for our time together and that I will drop these off before we meet again. Before logging off, the youth express excitement about our December plática. Ten months together, and we are still here, growing closer and stronger in our comunidad.

Concluding Pensamientos

In this chapter, I provide a snapshot look into the plática space that was co-created with students. Through the fifteen pláticas that took place over a fifteen-month period, a plethora of topics were discussed. For this chapter, I focused on four main themes: co-creating space, interrogating power, embracing embodied knowledge to question civility, and examining culture and identity. I begin each theme with an opening narrative detailing the beginning of different pláticas that took place with a variety of students present. Through each theme, I incorporate the reflections, interrogations, and ideas offered by students and me. I conclude this chapter uncertain about whether I have done this co-created space justice and asking myself how to bring to life the unique environment we fostered together. Through this cocreated space, I have a new understanding that communication pedagogy is not only possible outside of classroom spaces, but innovative and unique as it allows for fruitful and generative discussion about issues of power and identity while detaching such discussions from formalized assessment or grades. Fassett and Warren (2007) note that dialogue as epistemic is "key

to critical communication pedagogy, given our emphasis on communication as constitutive of identity, culture, and power, and given our commitment to humans as subjects, authors of meaning" (p. 55). Embracing dialogue, in this case the culturally sustaining pláticas, enabled us to design an educative space that welcomed us. Finally, our fruitful discussions were made possible because the space was designed to *center* culture, and in centering culture we realized new ways to perform CCP beyond the classroom.

What I am certain about is the importance of the five principles of pláticas methodology played through our time together, and to my understanding of this space. Through every step of the way, students made connections between their lived experiences and the topic we were discussing (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 112), allowing us to co-create knowledge and space (p. 111) around ideas of education, intervention, civility, latinidad, heteronormativity, and gendered expectations. Perhaps most importantly, our time together highlights the healing principle that shapes pláticas as a methodology (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 113); that when people form relationships built on trust and feel that they can show up as themselves regardless of what is happening around them, they can experience the healing potential of a given community. When we center relationships and care, our leaning environments can be transformed to something entirely different. I conclude by acknowledging and emphasizing the importance of the final principle of pláticas, the role that research reciprocity and vulnerability play in this space. While traditional research approaches to qualitative research insist upon a distance between the research and participants, pláticas affirm the generative possibilities that emerge when a culturally relevant and sustaining approach is embraced.

CHAPTER 4

STAGING TENSIONS: COMMUNITY WORK AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH MARGINALIZED YOUTH

My journey with this dissertation project began in the Fall of 2020 with a meeting with program staff and leadership about the purpose of my research, and my intended support of the program. My involvement with this organization began three years prior. What was first a three-week job turned into a personal commitment to support and be in community with the students in this program. Constantly aware of my limited experience with the foster care system, I was firm in my commitment to not turn this space into a research site. However, once the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the program was deeply impacted, I was forced to reconsider my original commitment when program leadership urged me to think about directing my knowledge and resources to the community I cared deeply about. My decision to conduct my research at this site did not come easily, in fact, I spent several months in conversations with program leadership, close friends and mentors, and the students in the program.

My greatest concern was that my role as a researcher would become more important than that of a mentor and friend. I wondered how my presence as a researcher would impact my relationships with the students and program staff. Would there be temptation for me to prioritize my research over the existing relationships? I found myself grappling with concerns related to research ethics, representation, positionality, and voice. Knowing that I am not the first---nor the last---to grapple with these topics, I dove headfirst into scholarly work focused specifically on these topics. I became inspired by the radical commitments made by qualitative scholars and education researchers, who, despite the colonial legacy of academia and research endeavors (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Patel, 2016) labored towards alternative approaches that are

relational and humanizing by design. This made me feel it was possible to engage in humanizing research. In making the decision to move forward with this specific project, I knew it was imperative to intentionally engage the work of these and other scholars throughout the project who center humanization beginning with research design. As such, I diligently read and re-read humanizing approaches to qualitative and educative scholarship, engaging in the prompts sometimes found within them, free writing around the concepts discussed, and being reflexive and acknowledging the ways my efforts fell short or were insufficient. Bettez (2015) asserts that "reading and reflecting on what we read can help us ask critical questions about our research, and asking critical questions can lead us to new readings and deeper critical reflexivity" (p. 949). This was part of the commitment I made as I embarked on 15-months of ethnographic data collection with a program that supports high school students who have experienced the foster care system.

As I engaged in data collection, I found saliency in my initial concerns. Before I knew it, my fieldnotes, research notebooks, and audio reflections were filled with questions, discomfort, and tensions. Rather than seeing these tensions as reasons to abandon the research project, the tension and discomfort enabled me to complete the project on my own terms. Though I initially believed the tensions needed to be resolved prior to the start of the project, the tensions pushed me to continue grappling with matters of positionality, reflexivity, and power dynamics. For example, on April 15th, 2022, towards the end of the data collection period, I wrote in my research journal:

> Through every stage of this project, I have come to find pages inundated with tension. Tension about the limits of what I can do, about my inability to change the material realities of the teens I care deeply about, tension about the harm I might accidentally cause, or the possibility of misrepresenting the beauty that I witnessed. I have learned to understand this tension as my trusty companion, she who will never leave my side and who shows up when I need her most. The one whose presence reminds me to proceed with care, to refuse to tell the stories that don't belong to me, to shift my commitment from the academy to the community. She reminds me that hope in a different future lies not in the walls of the ivory

> tower, or the minutes spent presenting my work at a conference; but rather in the relationships we build outside of it, in the commitments we make to show up for each other, and in the everyday acts of care we choose.

Each time I attended a Saturday meet up, a community service project, a college application day, a home visit, or any other program activity over the fifteen-month data collection period, I struggled to find the "right" words to articulate what I witnessed. The following research question guides my inquiry:

> RQ: In light of the contemporary sociopolitical context (e.g. rising fascism), what tensions might arise for a communication scholar who embraces a radical approach to laboring with youth beyond the classroom?

For several months, I felt unprepared and not ready to write this chapter. I wondered how students would feel engaging my work years later, I questioned my responsibility as a researcher, I grappled with how my dissertation may cause harm to those involved. Rather than erasing these concerns, I have chosen to embrace them in this chapter to demonstrate the messy, disjointed, and uncomfortable feelings that arise in qualitative research generally, and specifically with vulnerable communities. Through this chapter, I detail several aspects of this program including pláticas, life skills workshops, community service projects, home visits, and caretaker engagement. This chapter is divided into five sections which speak to the tensions, discomfort, and skepticism felt throughout its entirety. These include refusal, legibility, failure, answerability, and emotions. Each section offers ethnographic descriptions of a specific program activity, while including excerpts from my fieldnotes to highlight the specific tensions experienced and the thinkers to whom I turned to make sense of my experience. In many ways, this chapter aims to demonstrate a critical and intersectional reflexive praxis in action, one which is messy, incomplete, and uncomfortable.

On Refusal

During the first nine months of the pandemic, I witnessed the difficulty that staff had in engaging with the students. While significant effort went into developing interactive workshops, game nights, art curriculum, and sending care packages, the reality was that the program changed drastically once it was forced to shift to a virtual format. By this point, it was clear to me that one of the greatest strengths of this program was that it offered a space in which participants could create meaningful relationships, those that were often developed during breaks in between workshops, by the ice cream machine in the dining hall, or during down time before lights out during the residential summer program. The quality of the content remained strong, as staff continued to offer life skills workshops that focused on mental health, community care, and identifying strengths and values. College readiness sessions sought to prepare students for their incoming high school year, and starting conversations about college applications, scholarships, and choosing a major. However, the limitations on relationship development and maintenance were clear. Although students participated, they expressed nostalgia for the way things once were, specifically in relation to connecting and learning from/with one another. This became part of my challenge, and one of the requests from the director of the program. How could I help create more points of connection with the students so that they can continue developing relationships with each other? This is what I was also missing from this space.

I eventually proposed developing a series of pláticas with students which offered an opportunity to engage with them in an unstructured format that lacked an agenda. Instead, students were encouraged to help shape the space, to suggest topics for discussion, to bring their thoughts and feelings, and to make this space their own. As noted in chapter 3, we engaged in fifteen pláticas that lasted between one-to-two hours each. This became a generative pedagogical space that allowed for the development of close relationships while grappling with relevant societal, personal, and familial issues.

Although pláticas are not an original component of this program, the success we were having in the pláticas prompted program staff to ask me to lead daily pláticas during the virtual summer program. I lead a daily 30-minute plática for two weeks with students who were entering their senior year of high school, some of whom were participating in the pláticas developed as part of my dissertation project. The reality is that these pláticas did not work well. The environment felt forced as I was tasked with helping the students debrief their thoughts and feelings about college. We did not have enough time to co-create this space, and my role was specifically to facilitate rather than participate like the students. One of the other struggles I had with incorporating pláticas into the official program curriculum was that not all students chose to be present, instead many were required by their caretakers to participate in the summer program to prepare for college. The required attendance shifted the space dramatically. Additionally, I grappled with the fact that those participating in the college readiness pláticas knew less about my research. Though they had consented to participating in my research several months before, I had spent less time with these students which meant they did not have the opportunity to ask questions, to shape the space, and I wondered if they would feel comfortable saying no. Wondering whether students felt comfortable saying no also shaped by ethnographic engagement during other aspects of program curriculum.

I found myself embracing skepticism as part of my approach; skepticism of my own observations, of the assumptions I made throughout the project, and of my own intentions as a researcher. The tensions, discomfort, and skepticism remain present as I write each section of this dissertation. My original intention was to have a findings chapter that would also focus on my ethnographic data collection, painting a vivid picture of life as a participant of this program. Because youth in foster care often experience changes in their home placements depending on the status of their cases, several students would engage in an activity and then be absent for several months.

Sometimes this implied a change in guardianship, and thus, the caretaker who originally consented for the student to participate in my research was no longer the legal guardian. When I began analyzing my ethnographic data, the discomfort grew and I found myself frozen, unsure about how to detail my time with these students despite the generative, rich, and critical discussions we had. Because most of the youth were minors, I questioned whether it was ethical to include them in the project given the inconsistent engagement I had with some of them, and the home placement changes experienced.

In the foreword to Patel's (2016) book, Eve Tuck describes Patel's approach as a pedagogy of pausing, "which involves intentionally engaging in suspension of one's on premises and projects, but always with a sense of futurity" (p. xiii). Tuck and Yang (2014) ask, "How do we learn from and respect the wisdom and desires in the stories we (over)hear, while refusing to portray/betray them to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze?" (p. 224). Posing this question, they theorize refusal as a way to humanize researchers and mark what is sacred or up for discussion in order to limit the colonization of knowledge (p. 225). This call for refusal isn't just about saying "no," but instead a framework through which I was able to decide the limits of what I could write about. It became a choice to listen rather than to always report. My engagement with refusal became a critical way through which I navigated several moments of tensions throughout the project, including my choice to exclude many stories from these pages.

In this project, I also engaged in a politic of refusal by rejecting the framing of youth who have experienced foster care as needing salvation. I was intentional in engaging with the youth through a desire-based framework, which recognizes the complexity of each person "who at different points in a single day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/fists/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures" (Tuck, 2011, p. 420). Said another way, a desire-based framework rejects singularity and instead embraces multiplicity. One of the ways

in which this manifested is connected to the language utilized to describe the participants in this program. Prior to my research project, I had lengthy conversations with program staff about the way we would refer to those participating in program activities. While the national organization frames them as 'scholars,' this word did not feel right to the staff and to me. Additionally, during the first summer program I witnessed a university administrator introduce program participants as "the foster kids." I remember a handful of youth made eye contact with me, rolling their eyes, and later expressing frustration about being introduced as 'the foster kids.' This interaction from 2018 continues to shape the way I think about language. For example, I grapple with this same topic in the research notes below which were written a couple of months prior to the beginning of data collection.

> January 16, 2021
>
> I recognize the ways in which students' desires, needs, hesitations, and concerns are dismissed because they are "kids." This framing of them as kids limits the way they are understood and creates opportunities for them to be pushed to the side. I have to resist this. I don't see them as kids- no son niñxs. But am I limiting the way I understand them if I label them as 'students?' Muchaches? Youth? Young adults? What do these terms measure? What is the best way to describe them?

Griffin and Chávez (2012) argue that an intersectional approach to the study of communication offers three foundational principles: naming, power, and epistemic frameworks. They encourage scholars to consider, "who is being named, what name is being given or offered, who has the power to do so, and what privileges exist that sanction this naming" (p. 17). My hesitation about calling the participants kids came from the dismissal young people often experience in society when adults assume they are 'too young to know anything,' an assumption that I witnessed in action from program staff in the past. Also, several of the participants were no longer minors so using 'kids' to generalize this population was inaccurate. Alternatively, although calling the youth students was accurate as all of them were enrolled in school, I feared that solely

embracing this framing implied that my framing would indirectly communicate an expectation of school enrollment to continue our engagements, when my commitment to these youth extends far beyond their status as students. Throughout this dissertation, I alternate between the words "student(s)," "youth(s)," and "participant(s)" and continue to be critical of the impact that naming can have on the way individuals are perceived and treated.

The last formal plática that took place as part of my research was in May 2022. The core group of students who had participated in pláticas (Dante, Crystal, and Flor) had asked for us to get together virtually since we had not met in over a month. We began with our usual temperature check ins to see how everyone was doing. As we transitioned out of check ins, Crystal lowered her voice and hesitantly says, "Wait, can you turn the recording off? I want to tell you all this because you are like my besties." Without hesitation, I stopped the recording. For the next hour and a half, the four of us engaged in a lengthy, complex, and vulnerable conversation about our lives. There is no transcription for this final plática, as Crystal chose to engage in refusal, specifically asking me to stop the recording. As a researcher, it was critical for me to honor Crystal's request, and there was no doubt in my mind that I would do so because this conversation was not meant to be captured, but rather engaged and witnessed by those who were present in the moment. Her refusal led me to continue contemplating the connection between humanizing research, refusal, and closure in the research process.

Paris (2011) posits that humanization does not end when our research does, thus implying a continued and perhaps sustained relationship with those who participate in our research projects. Since before I began data collection, I have known that my relationship with many of these students would continue far beyond the conclusion of my project. Knowing this meant that it was critical for me to consider how closing the research project might impact our relationships, and thus, thinking about departure or

closure became essential. Centering departure means thinking about how a researcher ethically leaves the communities with whom they worked (Mangual Figueroa, 2014). Refusal also includes a rejection of traditional understandings of the beginning and end of a research project. Mangual Figueroa and Fox (2020) articulate a refusal against closure, challenging the assumption that data collection follows a linear timeline. These scholars emphasize the humanizing possibilities that emerge when one embraces refusal, whether the refusal is the context of choosing what (not) to write and publish, a refusal of qualitative research traditions that have "become an invasive species, choking back possibilities for blooming" (Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022, p. 3) or the refusal to end communication and relationships with research participants once the study has finished.

On Legibility

One of the core components of the Path to Success is the focus on life skills, sometimes called social/emotional learning. While the national organization emphasizes the importance of offering life skills workshops, a specific curriculum is not expected, giving program staff the freedom to explore different subjects and approaches based on the needs and interests of the students. During the data collection period, there were several opportunities for participants to contribute topic ideas formally through check-in/suggestion surveys. Program staff also frequently prompted students in passing, or during program activities, to suggest topics with which the group might focus. Some of the topics covered included: self-esteem, goal setting, healthy relationships, boundary setting, stress management, identity, financial literacy, communication, and advocacy. The workshops took place at every Saturday meet up and every day during the summer program. These were interactive, allowing students the space to reflect on the topic at hand, discuss in small groups, and listen to a presentation tailored specifically for their age group. This content was presented by a variety of people including program staff, volunteers, university staff from other departments, and me. However, the majority of

these presentations and activities were facilitated by three people: Mandy, Simon, and me. Mandy is a graduate Southwest university who was briefly employed by the program as a youth mentor. Upon her graduation, Mandy offered to provide life skills workshops, and given her existing relationships with the students and her community facilitation work, this was a great fit for the program. Her partner Simon, who was employed at a local nonprofit organization supporting queer and trans youth, eventually became involved and offered important training to staff, workshops for students, and discussions with caretakers and parents.

To introduce community building strategies at the program development stage (Bettez & Hytten, 2013), the three of us met several times to discuss topic ideas, approaches, and the feasibility of presenting life skills workshop content in a virtual format during the peak of the pandemic. These meetings afforded us the opportunity to learn about each other's politics and to support one another in the introduction of the content in the life skills workshops. These community-building efforts were especially important given the institutional constraints under which we were laboring. Although the framework for this program comes from a national organization, the program is housed within a public university. Program staff are employed by the university and therefore subjected to university policies. Additionally, Arizona's sociopolitical climate during the fifteen months I conducted fieldwork, and the conservative politicians comprising the bulk of the state's leadership at the time implored us to recognize the need for strategy. To be clear, our respective prior experiences working across different community and university settings evoked our shared sense of hesitation, not comments or restrictions set by program staff. Our previous engagements in Arizona as critical educators working in the community, made us especially aware and cognizant of the political and historical context of the state. In other words, strategizing is requisite to doing critical educative work in this context. Though initially there were no objections or

issues with the way life skills workshop programming was taking place, there was a distinct shift when I circulated consent/assent forms for my dissertation research. The forms specifically mentioned that the pláticas I was planning to facilitate could include "discussions of identity." The caretaker of one of the students participating in the program reached out to the program director with concern. Below I offer my fieldnotes from this encounter.

> *March 16, 2021*
>
> *I am angry, frustrated, and confused. Today was the first pushback I have gotten in my research, at least from a caregiver. The consent form for my project states that during the pláticas we may cover topics like current events, self-care, and identity. A parent sent an email to the director of the program saying that she wanted to know what exactly we would cover because of the "climate today" and letting us know that her child's identity is rooted in Jesus Christ. Safe to assume this is a reference to gender/sexuality. The conversation I had with the staff was important and frustrating. "Are we offering too much of one side?" I had to ask what the other side was and the answer, of course, wasn't clear. I felt myself getting frustrated but tried to keep my cool. The tension in the room was thick. It led to a conversation about the types of workshops we're offering, the "neutral" position of the university, and the fact that we can't afford negative attention because the program is struggling with funding. I was reminded that I am a representative of the university in my role with this program, even as a volunteer and researcher. The university tries to own us in different ways, and that is of course, something I don't agree with. I'm struggling to understand my role here, and I was struggling during the conversation. Do I push the administration, and ultimately the university, to take a more radical stance, or do I continue to discuss power and injustice with the students on the low? What is the balance between the focus on structural vs. relational? These are learning moments too, ultimately pushing me to ask where my allegiance lies (the students, obvio). But how do I navigate the structures in order to provide the support they seek? Maybe I need to think of those difficult moments/conversations as potential pedagogical moments with the staff, remembering that <u>people</u> can and do learn and shift, even when the university remains unchanged.*
> *Everything we do is political, there is no in between or neutral stance. When you choose to use the right pronouns for someone, that is a political choice.*

Though this moment was not shocking or unexpected, I felt frustrated by the constraints placed on the program by the university, and even by the response program staff had to the caretaker's concern. This led me to ponder what it means to be *in* but not *of* the university (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 101). Once institutional politics became

clearer, we recognized the importance of being deliberate with our choices. We gathered for a group meeting where I shared the email that the program director had received pertaining to my research and the topic of identity. Though not surprised, Mandy and Simon shared my frustration. Rather than erasing our desire to work from a political perspective, this incident punctuated the need to strategize in order to infuse a critical politic into the humanizing work taking place. Because Southwestern university considers itself embedded in the community and committed to innovative solutions to issues of diversity and inclusion, it became crucial to turn to institutional language to frame our work. Engram & Mayer (2023) point to the ways in which institutions take up "acronyms, catch phrases, and cute slogans as performative points of reference without actually defining what these words mean" (p. 59). Similarly, Patel (2016) advocates for the suspension of the use of terms like "social justice" and "diversity and inclusion" as these perpetuate white supremacist thinking and settler colonialism. In her book, *On Inclusion*, Ahmed (2012) explains the way that diversity work functions within institutions of higher education. Specifically, she highlights the way that the logic of diversity can reproduce institutional whiteness (p. 44). That institutions of higher education exploit this language for their own benefit is no surprise. However, if the university in which we are laboring rhetorically constructs itself as a champion for diversity and inclusion, articulated both in the mission statement and values, then our task was to utilize the language of the institution to describe our work. In this case, the ambiguity around language of justice, diversity, and inclusion worked to our advantage as it enabled us to define it in service of our community goals. In doing so, workshops enabled us to carry out the mission of the institution, while infusing radical thoughts and approaches through the guise of institutional language.

To illustrate the point, consider a life skills workshop activity that focused on the social construction of society. In this activity, students were invited to paint a small

canvas depicting an envisioned society in which they created core aspects of life. Students designed flags, discussed languages, social norms, monuments of importance, the presence of grocery stores and theme parks etc. In presenting this activity to program staff, the activity was framed as an opportunity for students to see themselves as leaders in their communities, to share diverse and innovative ways of thinking, and to value inclusivity-- all ideas supported by institutional language put forth by university administrators. What this also allowed for were conversations regarding housing security, cost of living, accessible education, gender roles and family structures, shared governance, and leadership. Additionally, students discussed how conflict would be managed. “What happens if someone breaks a law and commits a crime?” This question prompted a focus on harm and the social construction of crime. Students shared their perspectives on what constitutes a crime, exclaiming that stealing food for your family should not count. Soon, students shared that all basic needs should be met on this island, including access to education (mental) healthcare, and housing. This activity only lasted for one hour and invited students to use their creativity, their problem-solving skills, and their lived experiences to imagine alternative ways to live in community with one another. This also set a foundation for future conversations related to harm, conflict, and identity.

There were several points at which I felt frustrated by institutional constraints and the way the university claimed particular values while doubling down on its aggressive business model. I found myself sharpening my critical tools with every encounter, yet this critique felt insufficient (Patel 2016). la paperson (2017) describes the “second world university” as ideologically committed to the transformation of society (p. 42), specifically through critique. Though insufficient, he argues that this critique offers an essential analysis. Analyzing the way the university in which we labored claimed specific values allowed us to shape discursive ambiguity in service of alternative modes

of operation. In la paperson's words, our goal was to "reassemble the colonizing university into decolonizing contraptions" fueled by decolonial desires and the possibilities for an alternative future (p. xiv)—that which distinguishes a 'third world' (decolonial praxis as ends) from a second world university (critique as ends).

On Failure

Another core component of this program, as dictated by the national organization includes caretaker engagement. Emphasizing the importance that youth in care should receive support from all areas in their lives, the organization aims to engage caretakers (including parents, family members, foster parents, siblings, and other adults in the youth's life) to provide support and resources to the legal guardians who care for the participant of the program. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I participated in a handful of events aimed at engaging caretakers including one-on-one sessions, workshops focused on communication and conflict management, and social events. Over the years, I had the opportunity to get to know some of the caretakers and learn more about some of the struggles that each family faced. Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, program staff attempted to reimagine caretaker engagement through a virtual format. Several attempts were made to conduct workshops and support sessions via digital platforms e.g. Zoom; however, unfortunately, it was rare for caretakers to attend. The reality was that offering a Zoom workshop on a Saturday afternoon was ineffective for the families with which we worked, because households often had one computer available, and the caretaker workshop was scheduled at the same time as the Saturday meet up for youth. As a result, program staff determined it would be best to continue caretaker engagement once program activities could resume in person.

While this decision was made, program staff were purposeful in keeping the lines of communication open. Caretakers were encouraged to reach out and ask for support when needed. Additionally, program staff continued contacting caretakers via email to

check in and offer resources. Depending on the time of day that a home visit would take place, we often had the opportunity to connect with caretakers for a few minutes before or after meeting with the students themselves. During this time, caretakers would share accomplishments, struggles the youth or family were experiencing, and questions related to high school completion, accessing resources from the state, and college readiness. Though home visits were created specifically to connect with students, home visits also gave program staff the opportunity to remind caretakers that the program was there to support them as well.

After each exchange with caretakers, I was diligent in taking notes, whether through written entries in research journals or analytic memos recorded on my drive home from a given interaction. Although caretaker engagement was not an aspect of the program I planned to focus on, I was purposeful in reflecting and processing these encounters as a form of accountability for myself and as a labor of reflexivity (Madison, 2011). These written and recorded entries, just as others focused on distinct aspects of the program, were filled with questions, tension, and uncertainty. Reviewing and sitting with the content of these entries during the research process was imperative, as this forced me to consider and grapple with the way I was making sense of these interactions and the meaning I was attaching to them. In turn, I experienced an inward shift to consider how I was "contemplating actions and meaning" (Madison, 2011, p. 129). Though I was initially apprehensive about contemplating actions and meanings, it provided an avenue through which to center a humanizing praxis (Paris & Winn, 2014). Embracing contemplation of this sort was uncomfortable and provided a sense of uneasiness, particularly when my language and perceptions were incongruent with the politic and values I articulated and claimed before and during the research process. The excerpt from my research notes featured below demonstrates a humbling moment of realization I had after a home visit.

November 11, 2021
I just walked into my home from doing a home visit and I feel like I'm trying to find my grounding. I feel sad, or confused? From what I can remember, the last time I saw this student was for a home visit in March, about 8 months ago. We had been trying to get ahold of him and his caretaker for several months without any response. After a few months, I decided I wouldn't contact him anymore, not because I didn't want to, but because I assumed his silence was communicating something. Last week, his caretaker finally responded saying we could do a home visit, that he was still enrolled in school, and that he was struggling with depression. We quickly arranged for a home visit today. Seeing him today was exciting. He was even wearing his program apparel and had a big smile on his face. He shared with us how bored he has been at school, which was no surprise to me since this is online and I know how he feels about virtual learning. One of his family members came out, he was playing with her curly hair while telling us how smart she is; that although she is only two, she is already potty training. He speaks of her like she is his own and I see him prioritizing her over everything else. I sometimes wonder if he does this so that she can have a different childhood than he did. I know he loves her so much. It is in moments like this that I struggle being judgmental. I see the way the state functions, the way it is racialized, gendered, antiBlack, and the way it targets low-income families. And yet, in this context, I feel myself judging his caretakers. I feel angry at them for not making him the priority, for not stepping in and allowing him to focus on school and having a childhood. I catch myself judging without actually knowing them or the specifics of their situation. I know I don't know everything, and yet I have strong feelings towards them. I claim to be a humanizing scholar, and yet I am actively dehumanizing them. Guess there are limits to the way I embrace this approach. It's a process, and not a place at which one arrives. Well, I'm in the process. I need to revisit the work of scholars that I respect, pedagogues, qualitative researchers, and philosophers who don't shy away from a realization like this. What does reflexivity look like in this scenario? Rather, how have my assumptions and values shaped the way I engage this project generally, and the individual students and caretakers specifically? How are these values and assumptions reflecting those of the state? I am failing.

Realizing the shame I felt while writing this entry and processing it for weeks after, I quickly turned to the work of scholars both in and out of communication. Sitting in this moment and with these feelings was imperative and allowed me to acknowledge the ways in which this mentality was contributing to the "maintenance of systems of oppression in mundane contexts" (LeMaster, 2018, p. 11), particularly in the context of the foster care system. My perception and understanding of the caretaker and their actions demonstrated a limitation, one which individualized a situation without accounting for the way structures of oppression function in society. Additionally, I needed to sit with my

own complicity in reifying structures of power (Jones & Calafell, 2012). Fassett and Warren (2007) articulate "a nuanced understanding of subjectivity and agency" (p. 53) as one of the commitments of Critical Communication Pedagogy. Revisiting their work goaded me to understand that folks have decisive reasons for the choices and actions they perform each day. A failure to acknowledge individual agency works to disempower others, particularly as they navigate complex systems of oppression. Though initially embarrassed and ashamed to include this excerpt, I recognize the importance of transparency and the place of humility in qualitative research *and* community work, especially in projects that embrace nonwestern perspectives, whether they be critical, decolonial, and/or feminist. Rather than seeing this failure as absolute, LeMaster (2018) helped me understand failure as a point of departure and pushed me to refine this politic. She articulates, "It is only through failure that we are offered an opportunity to realize change" (p. 17). Critical reflexive praxis is crucial to the qualitative process and demonstrating such on the page implores me to reject the notion of a 'complete' research project—that which appears to be 'clean' and 'easy' as opposed to the messiness that qualitative work requires. To engage in critical reflexive praxis moves researchers beyond recognition and awareness of problematic frames and oppressive discursive formations, and into a "commitment addressing their negative potential throughout the research process" (Collier & Muneri, 2016, p. 642). More specifically, I understand critical reflexivity as an embodied praxis (McIntosh & Eguchi, 2020) that necessitates a turn towards the body in order to move past the point of "self-reflection to often uncomfortable level of self-implication" (Jones, 2020, p. 122).

This emphasis on reflexivity also became an opportunity to consider how my presence and involvement in this program could "embrace a purpose toward a greater material freedom for others" (Madison, 2011, p. 136). There were several moments during which I felt constrained and unable to impact the material realities of the youth

with whom I was working. I recognize that systems of oppression work and intersect in complex ways and that an individual action is insufficient to address this complexity. Even so, I began to grapple with the material dimensions of my politic. Frequently interrogating the point, purpose, or impact of research, I knew that research is not the intervention always needed (Tuck & Yang, 2014). As such, I shifted my attention to the material resources I had access to as a member of the university. Inspired by Moten and Harney's (2004) and Chávez's (2017) call for critical theorizing, I questioned what an ethical relationship to the university entailed. I witnessed firsthand the financial struggles that this community was facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which also resulted in job insecurity for several caretakers. This interrogation became an opportunity for redistribution of funds, particularly for those who were in a difficult financial position. I turned and embraced the support received from community contributions for these families, which were used to purchase gift cards provided to the families struggling.

The suggestion was made to utilize funds to make food baskets for families, in order to ensure that funds were "used appropriately." I disagreed with this approach because it robbed families from exercising agency over money, food, and ultimately care. Creating food baskets also assumed that the program knew what was best for each family and indirectly made assumptions and judgements about the "right" and "wrong" ways to spend funds. And yet, this discussion offered a point of departure through which to engage in collective reflexivity, to interrogate the beliefs that informed this position and the place from which they emerged. While reflexivity is often understood through an individualized lens, I was moved by the collective possibilities in this moment, particularly the chance to develop a reflexive praxis in community with others. We made the collective decision to provide gift cards so that each family could determine the best way to spend these funds based on their specific needs. This experience reminded me

that a critical politic must be in constant flux. One never arrives at a place of being done or achieving justice. Instead, we labor individually and collectively to develop the politics that guide our lives, grappling with the daily choices we make to realize this politic, and remaining "open to failure time and time again" (LeMaster, 2018, p. 14). This, in order to imagine alternative possibilities for our futures.

On Answerability

Another important aspect of this program is community service engagement. One Saturday per month, students are invited to participate at a 3-hour community service event typically taking place from 9 am-12 pm. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, service projects were a constant and were even included in the 3-week residential program. When the program switched to a virtual format, staff and volunteers brainstormed ways that the program could continue emphasizing the importance of service projects despite the virtual format. During a virtual Saturday meet up, one of the youth mentors led a virtual service project in which students and staff wrote and decorated notes to other youth who were under the care of the state. Participants received paper, stickers, and markers in their monthly care packages. Sharing space in a virtual room, students and staff decorated notes while listening to music and chatting. Though the service activity went well by all normative markers—folks showed up and completed the tasks— it was impossible to ignore the awkward silences and the difficulty in connecting virtually. Moreover, the largely muted microphones impacted conversation flow. So difficult was the shift to online modalities that program staff determined it would be best to postpone community service projects until students and staff were able to share physical space.

The first in-person community service event took place on September 18th, 2021. By this time, the program had hosted two Saturday meet ups in person. Students and staff were excited to resume in person community service projects as it offered another opportunity for connection. This was expressed directly by both students and staff, and

something that I also strongly felt. While community service projects took place with several different community organizations before the pandemic, program staff began building a relationship with Chance—a nonprofit organization whose focus is to support children currently in foster care. To be transparent, during my time as a volunteer prior to conducting my research with this program, I was skeptical of Chance and its approach to community work. I felt uncomfortable with the way they framed their communication with students (e.g. top-down hierarchy in which students are objects), the topics they chose to focus on (e.g. making the 'right' choices in life; avoiding 'bad' paths) and what I felt were dismissive comments towards students' experiences. Upon sharing my concerns with program staff, I was encouraged to reframe my understanding of Chance, specifically as the inter-organizational relationship could open opportunities for the program and university. Remembering this conversation, which took place two years prior, I approached the community service project under Chance's leadership with some anticipated skepticism, but with a commitment to being present with students and staff.

Under Chance's guidance, our task was to prepare emergency food boxes for families in need of support. The process of putting emergency food boxes together was fun, as students and staff were talking and joking with one another. Each student was also invited to take two boxes home. After this, students were asked to join a life skills workshop presented by Chance one which focused on having access to documentation including birth certificates, social security numbers, and other pertinent information that youth in foster care do not always have access to. The head of Chance stated that not having access to these "vital documents" could lead to "risky behavior," like homelessness. The more she spoke, the less comfortable I felt. One of the youth mentors began texting me expressing his own discomfort with what was happening. We both expressed that this seemed like an iteration of the white savior trope buttressed by a lack of understanding of the youth population present. At the completion of Chance's

workshop, we were split up into two groups that focused on cooking and cleaning. As a member of the group who cooked, I worked with students to make tortillas and eggs for all the volunteers. The kitchen became a space in which cultura, language, and familia were discussed. Several students shared how happy they were to make this food and to have the opportunity to reflect on past experiences. This, they said, was the best part of community service that day, not the problematic workshop led by this organization.

At the end of the day, I brought up my concerns to professional staff and was once again told that we did not have much choice in working with Chance because the relationship with them benefitted the program and the university. Their response reminded me that although the professional staff may have had similar feelings about Chance and their approach, the fact that we (program staff) are employed by the university meant we are expected to be accountable to it, or at least to prioritize representing the interests of the university. But what did this mean for me? As a volunteer of this program, did I also need to center my allegiance to the university and therefore ignore the skepticism I felt about Chance? The excerpt below highlights my processing around this event.

> *September 18, 2021*
>
> *I feel so mixed about what happened today. I hate the way the nonprofit staff talks to the youth and the personal questions they ask them in front of everyone. One of the youth mentors, who shares a commitment to justice and equity, was messaging me during the life skill workshop and he was saying, "What the hell is this? This is insensitive; she seems not prepared. Our students aren't into this!" When I finally said that these are white women with white savior complexes, he agreed and said, "Wow, that's exactly what I was thinking." Part of what I'm thinking about is how, when we experience something like this, we can have a space to debrief with the students in the program. I know the relationship with this organization is important for the university, but how should that impact how I act and move through this space? How do I focus on the students and our relationships, rather than the institutions themselves?*

The October community service event brought us back to Chance. I kept in mind the professional staff's response to my discomfort with the organization, and decided if I

did not want to negatively impact the relationship between the nonprofit and the program, I needed to be mindful of my responses and facial expressions. As we sat in what was set up as a town hall event, I witnessed the nonprofit staff talking about changing the foster care system and framing themselves as the saviors who promised to legislate any change needed. Students were invited to share their thoughts and ideas about what they believed needed to be changed about the foster care system. When one of the students from the program offered a suggestion, the nonprofit staff began asking the student to reveal personal information about his experience. I could see the student was stumbling over his words and hesitating to share, only to be met with further questions. At this moment, I decided to step in and interrupt the discussion stating that these details do not need to be shared in a public context. The moment felt tense, and I wondered if I had crossed a line. Soon after, the student's sister asked if she could speak with me. We walked out of the room, and she expressed how uncomfortable she felt here generally, and specifically by the questions her brother had just been asked. This prompted me to also connect with her brother to check in and to explain why I jumped in. He thanked me and said he was trying to be vague but felt the staff kept pushing and he did not know what to do. I reminded him that he always gets to be the one to decide how much or how little he shares, that he has the agency to set boundaries even with adults, and reminded him that he can rely on me and others to step in when needed.

The tension I felt earlier about my response quickly disappeared. While the program staff expressed the need to keep a positive relationship with Chance, it became clear to me that my priority was the students and the relationships we developed, not Chance nor the university in which the program was housed. This is a topic with which I had grappled for several months in the context of my dissertation research. At different points during the data collection, I asked myself who my allegiance was to, what it meant to be working in a context mediated by the state, and what my presence was supposed to

do in this context. For example, after participating in a short course focused on abolition, I began to grapple with my involvement in this organization.

> *May 21, 2021*
>
> *What does it mean to try and do transformative work within contexts mediated by the state? Double mediated: youth in foster care & university context. Am I trying to engage in transformative work? Is it possible within the context that I am working in? What is my purpose for being here? Who/what do I prioritize?*

Patel (2016) articulates that we must be answerable to learning, knowledge, and context. This includes, "aspects of being responsible, accountable, and being part of an exchange" (p. 73). As a researcher who had pre-existing relationships with the students who participated in this program, it was imperative for me to consider who and what I prioritized in this context. Though I am a "representative of the university," I chose to prioritize my relationships with these students, and their wellbeing, regardless the university. One of the important questions I asked myself was, "Did I fulfill my responsibilities to the community? Did I, and according to participants, fulfill the commitments I made upon entering?" (Mangual Figueroa, 2014, p. 140). This question is one which is difficult to answer, because although I entered 'the field' in 2021, I made commitments to these students long before, commitments about centering their wellbeing, supporting their advocacy efforts, and giving them space to be themselves. By listening to the specific needs of the students— in this case, the discomfort they felt by the way they were being treated and questioned—pushed me to "refuse closure and exit" as determined the post-positivist assumptions made about research by the Institutional Review Board at the university (Mangual Figueroa & Fox, 2020, p. 228). I conclude with Hatrick's (2020) important interrogations about surviving the university, "My final offering as to how to survive the university when we are a part of it is to ask: what happens when we do the work of creating those alternate futures without asking the

institution's permission? What happens when it is the students or local community members we seek recognition and permission from?" (p. 415).

On Emotions

The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic deeply impacted the way the program was functioning. This was especially true in that it prevented staff, students, and volunteers from developing in-person relationships. Prior to the beginning of my data collection, I worked closely with program staff to brainstorm ways that we might better connect with students while abiding by university and the Centers for Disease and Control Prevention (CDC) distancing guidelines. We eventually reached the conclusion that distanced home visits would give us an opportunity to check in on students and connect with them directly. Organizing, planning, and receiving approval from the university took several months. During this time, we brainstormed ways to make the students feel seen and appreciated. We eventually decided to create bags that included candy, stickers, gift cards, snacks, and other small trinkets. We also gathered youth mentor staff to create handwritten notes addressed to each student. Though the program was limited in its opportunities to connect with students given the pandemic context, home visits facilitated a pathway to engage in meaningful interactions with program participants after almost a year of no in-person activities. These visits were approved by university leadership in the spring of 2021, just two weeks after I began data collection. The visits required that all participants wore masks and that we remain outside of the students' home, distanced.

The first home visit took place in the first week of March 2021, around the one-year anniversary of the COVID-19 lockdown. We were both nervous and excited to begin these visits. I met with program staff regularly to determine the home visit route for the week. Through we took turns driving, I would typically take the lead and pick up one of the program staff to begin our day around 3 p.m. to ensure students were done with their

school day. Though we attempted to visit students who lived in the same part of town on the same day, schedules sometimes made this difficult. As such, it was common for us to drive nearly one hundred miles each time, visiting anywhere from two to five students. These visits proved to be an important point of connection. Despite the fact that I would get home tired after 8 p.m. after driving for hours, I looked forward to these visits. Over the 15-months of data collection, we conducted dozens of home visits, traversing over one thousand miles. As we continued to visit students, I realized how this engagement was inviting vulnerability, closeness, and emotion into my connection with the students. Soon, I began to grapple with the role of emotions in qualitative research. The excerpt below provides a preview of the emotions I was processing.

> *March 18th, 2021*
>
> *Today was another home visits day with students. It took 6 hours, hundreds of miles traveled to each corner of the city to visit 5 students, and it was worth it! I feel so happy. I feel so…. tapada? So many feelings that I'm having a hard time processing. The differences we saw between the students we visited; in group homes, with foster parents, adopted, and reunified with family members all in one day. The gendered and racialized aspects of the system, the cycles that are difficult to break within a system designed to oppress specific individuals, the desire to support, to give what I have while recognizing the limitations of what I can do. Me siento llena de sentimientos y no estoy segura que hacer con ellos*[8]*. What is my role here? Now? In 5 years? Well, I'm just sitting at home crying. It was a good day, and I feel so happy that I got to see the students. Maybe it was the last visit- a student I feel especially close to. Maybe it's a frustration about not being able to change the material reality of people I care about. What is research if it cannot change or do anything for those on the margins? What is the point? What is care in this context?*

Through my education as a researcher in my masters and PhD programs, I heard conflicting information about the research process and the place of objectivity and distance. Courses taught from a post-positivist perspective emphasized the importance of research objectivity and distance from the research project. On the other hand, courses taught from an interpretive or critical perspective rejected the notion of

[8] I am full of feeling and I'm not sure what to do with them.

objectivity and emphasized the need to account for one's presence in and through the research project. Even so, most of these courses failed to discuss or even mention the place of emotions in research and how one should process or account for them. As a performance scholar, however, I understand the body as a site of knowledge production and embrace that which emerges from and within it, including emotions, as a crucial part of this project. Additionally, as a scholar committed to humanizing approaches, I recognize the need to humanize myself as well. Rather than rejecting or ignoring the emotions present throughout this project, I choose to write about them to emphasize their importance in qualitative projects and community work. This includes the many tears shed after home visits, the joy after five straight minutes of laughter after a community service project, the extreme moments of frustration connected to the constraints posed by the university, the delight when students began requesting additional pláticas, the disgust and anger I felt hen realizing how other adults spoke to and spoke about the students, and the heaviness of each student's unique situation.

As I continued to recognize the way emotions shaped my engagement throughout this project, I was relieved to find scholarly work that embraces their presence and marks them a critical point of fieldwork (Holland, 2007; Howard, 2020; Pearce, 2020). However, it was important to recognize that not all scholars who engage in fieldwork may experience emotion connected to their work. For example, Howard (2020) argues that academics engaging in research projects that are youth focused are more likely to experience vulnerability because of the relational dynamics present, and the topics explored, especially when working with marginalized youth. Specifically, they articulate that "our perceptions of what constitutes legitimate forms of knowledge may or may not introduce vulnerability to our projects" (p. 211). As someone who understands knowledge to be socially constructed, I value localized and embodied knowledge as central to my scholarly work. Additionally, my orientation towards critical work in which

social transformation and change is emphasized requires me to pay specific attention to discursive and material manifestations of power. When designing this project, I was intentional in not focusing on the students' experiences in the foster care system, or in using damage-centered frameworks (Tuck, 2009). This meant actively refusing to write about specific traumatic experiences, details about each student's case with the Department of Child safety, or specifics about the living situation of each student.

The design of this project and the embeddedness of my approach made it impossible to turn away; instead, I found myself constantly confronting the material realities of the student. My connection and interaction with these students extended beyond the scope of this project. Soon I realized that these feeling were "intersecting and overlapping" in my engagement with students, and whether I wanted this or not, these were shaping me too (Diaz-strong et al., 2014, p. 18). I specifically mark that I do not understand emotions to be "good" or "bad," instead I embrace them as part of the human experience. This, of course, does not mean that events or incidents that prompt emotions are not difficult to deal with, whether these are connected to the research itself or not. I learned this firsthand after the death of my advisor just a couple of months after I began collecting data. Upon learning about his death, it felt impossible to get out of bed. Instead, I spent the following days crying, in disbelief that he was gone, rereading emails and texts we had exchanged over four years, reminiscing about the many lessons he taught me, and wondering how I would be able to complete this project. It is difficult to explain to family and nonacademic friends the role that he played, not just in my research and teaching, but in my personal life. This happened just a couple of weeks before the virtual summer program was set to begin in 2021 and I was struggling to get any work done. I continued to participate in program meetings and home visits, realizing that my emotions were showing up every step of the way. I wrote the following words after completing home visits a couple of weeks after his death.

June 10, 2021

It's Thursday and I am sad. I am remembering that about a month ago, I shared how hard Thursdays have been after home visits. That I would come home and cry because there's only so much I can do. I'm remembering Dan's face, his eyebrows scrunched with concern, his hand over his mouth as he listened to me. He offered to sit with me Thursday nights, because he knew. And now it's Thursday and I'm sad after home visits, and I have no Dan to sit with. He's gone. And I miss him. He is the reason I didn't quit. He saw me, really me, and sat with me. He made me feel like I belonged there. Like my contributions were important. He cared about me, and he checked in. And he's gone. He was like family. I learned so much from, through, and with him. Not about some high theory, but about being present with others, about de-centering myself, about mentorship, about love and care as verbs. He's gone and I miss him. How do I write about community and relationality? I don't even know how to finish this. So, I'm crying on the couch, sitting in this moment, and wishing he were sitting in it with me.

While I don't claim to know the "right" way to do this, I, too, choose to publicly articulate the presence and place of emotions because of the potential for transformation (Diaz-strong et al., 2014, p. 17). I grappled with whether these emotions should be discussed in my dissertation, but ultimately decided to include it because it continues to impact the work I do. Rather than dismissing the presence of emotions, I recognize them as critical to the process of humanizing the researcher. Additionally, I made the decision to share this loss with the students that were participating in the pláticas. Given the reciprocity, vulnerability, and openness that developed in that space (more to be discussed in the following chapter), it felt imperative to share what was happening in my life. The students offered support and care as I navigated this situation, and in the end, I was happy with the decision I made in telling them. Additionally, one of the intentional steps I took throughout this process, before and after Dan's death, was actively relying on my friends and mentors to process and deal with emotions. Theorizing a methodology for the marginalized, Pearce (2020) marks supportive community as a necessary part of the qualitative process (p. 809). Frequently, I would reach out to close friends who are also scholars to acknowledge and process the impact that my project was having on my

well-being. At times, my support system would create space where I could sit with what I was feeling without needing to explain and without the expectation of action. At other times, these folks would help me to plan and strategize ho to address and/or resolve specific problems that would emerge. They also encouraged me to take breaks, seek professional support, and extend compassion to myself. It became clear that conducting projects like this one, those which grapple with power, which or with marginalized populations, and explore difficult topics, necessitate the presence of a supportive research community (Howard, 2020; Pearce, 2020).

Embracing Tension for Continued Engagement in the Academy and Beyond

Through this chapter, I offer a close look at the specific tensions I experienced throughout my labor alongside marginalized youth. I center ethical dilemmas as I know critical qualitative research necessitates a commitment to working reflexively through these (Bettez, 2015, p. 941), but mainly, because this is a praxis that should be centered in all types of community work. In each section, I offer ethnographic descriptions of distinct components of the program, including pláticas, life skills, community service, caretaker engagement, and home visits. Additionally, I provide excerpts from my research notes to demonstrate the tensions I experienced throughout the process. My aim is to highlight the complex, messy, and incomplete nature of critical qualitative projects with marginalized youth, specifically while maintaining a humanizing approach (Paris & Winn, 2014; San Pedro & Kinlock, 2017) before, during, and after data collection. While I do not pretend to have answers to the queries I offer above, I am committed to showing the messy context, as it can "lead to the beauty of incredible growth and discovery, of both self and others" (Bettez, 2011, p. 5). Rather than rejecting the tensions, the messiness, and the uncertainties I felt, I recognize the importance of being transparent with the aim of creating intentional space about ethical research methods broadly, and specifically about ethical ways to contend with tensions in

community contexts. Grappling with the topics of refusal, legibility, answerability, failure and emotions enabled me to engage through this process on my own terms, while remaining committed to a critical and intersectional reflexive praxis.

Although I draw mostly from qualitative scholars in this chapter, it is critical for me to recognize that their contributions are not just about research, but about humanization and community work. While the gifts each scholar offers are directly connected to the qualitative research process, these gifts are informed by specific ontoepistemic commitments that center humanization and relationality. When aiming to infuse these ontoempistemic commitments into our praxis, we must acknowledge that this extends beyond our roles as academics. In other words, these scholar's research is relevant because the foundation from which it emerged provides a roadmap about the ways one may live out the critical/radical politic they develop, whether they remain active participants in the academy or not. Rather than seeing this as a limitation, I understand that the research process poses specific roadblocks that make realizing our politics especially difficult. Documenting these tensions provides one avenue through which to demonstrate humanization in action, and the difficulty that can emerge when trying to engage this praxis because of the structures and institutions that restrict the ways we choose to live.

CHAPTER 5

CARE AS PRAXIS

It's Thursday May 25th and the warmth of the Arizona summer has greeted us. Although the temperature did not reach 100 degrees today, the dry heat on my face reminds me that we are in the desert. It's about 6 p.m. and the sun is starting to set, giving us a much-needed break for this important evening. We have just parked the car on one of the side streets after being stuck in traffic for several minutes. Dozens of cars continue to arrive trying to squeeze into any empty spot, ignoring the traffic signs decorating the road. I am keenly aware of the smells and sounds emanating from the cars around us. This is the first time I have left my house in the last 48- hours. Or is it the last 72-hours? At this point, I can't remember. All I know is that my time, energy, and effort have been directed elsewhere. My writing is not done yet, but I took a break to make it to this significant event: a graduation. My mind is filled with fragments of thoughts and theory multiplying, as a series of emotions claim different parts of my body. I have no option but to sit with them and to *feel* them. Tears are tightly packed at the corners of my eyes unable to escape but making their presence known. Butterflies exploring different parts of my stomach, as I feel their wings flapping all around. The hairs on both of my arms are teetering between lying flat and in an upright position. I am present and I am processing.

I realize that I have spent the last six years doing the same things: teaching, reading, writing, working, and questioning. As my dissertation comes to an end, I am cognizant of the many changes that are just around the corner. Yesterday, I was removed from the group chat for Path to Success summer program, reminding me that this will be the first summer in six years that I will not be participating. One of the tears in my right eye separates from the pack and moves closer to the corner, ready to allow itself to be seen. In just two months, I will be leaving the place I have called home for the last 27

years. Home. This word still feels like a question mark. In just *two* months I will be leaving to begin my first tenure-track job. The butterflies move a bit faster. This is the norm in academic spaces, the path one takes when they have been ~~successful~~ lucky on the academic job market. This is what comes next, yet I can't help but feel scared, wondering if I am prepared for this next chapter of my professional life. Really, I am wondering if I am ready to leave home and all those who have become part of it.

As we get closer to the school entrance, I am engulfed by a wave of memories. The very first summer program, the cast that Pablo had on his left arm, and the plastic bag he put over it so that he could swim with the rest of the youth. I recall the emotional roller coaster I experienced during the second summer program and the hundreds of tears I cried during the three-week period. I am reminded of the way nostalgia filled my days during the 2020 and 2021 summer program, as we were forced to interact in a virtual format, struggling through muted mics and poor internet connections. Yet the virtual format encouraged us to be intentional about our connections through pláticas despite the ongoing global pandemic. Finally, the corners of my mouth begin to curl when I remember last summer, the hours I spent on the floor in the hallway of the campus dorms with Flor, Dante, Crystal, Pablo, and Lupita, eating Takis, filling the hallway with unapologetic laughs, and talking about the many things animating our individual and collective lives.

I am sad to go and to be away from the important community I have had the privilege of being part of over the last almost 6 years. While I had read about the role of departure in qualitative research (Mangual Figueroa, 2014; Mangual Figueroa & Fox, 2022) long before this project was even a thought in my mind, I am still overwhelmed by the intensity of my emotions. Perhaps because these youth were already part of my life before this project, or because the project allowed us to grow even closer. I wonder, did I

do what I intended in this project? Have I fulfilled the promises I made along the way? Unsure about the answer to these questions, I feel the warm breeze caress my face and I am brought back to presence. I turn to my partner and ask, "Can you believe it's been over five years?" We smile as we approach the gate to the football field. Dante is there waiting for us with our tickets to Crystal's graduation.

Cultivating Care

While community work has been a critical component of my life for well over a decade, entering graduate school made me feel detached from praxis as most of my time was being taken up by my academic responsibilities, including reading and writing. As such, I have been grappling for years with what it means to live the politic I am developing. As a scholar who has been trained in critical perspectives in several different disciplines, I have had the privilege to encounter a breadth of scholarship that has challenged the basic things I believe about the world and about the nature of knowledge. The important work of communication, performance, education, Chicanx/Latinx, Black feminist, Indigenous, ethnic studies, and queer and trans scholars has given me the opportunity to continue refining my politic and interrogating how I can center this politic in the choices I make in my academic work and *beyond*. Through my engagement of this scholarship I chose to embrace humanization as the point from which to perform my role as a researcher. Engaging humanization through the research process has led me to cultivate a politic fueled by *care,* one that exceeds the confines of the academy. Further, my understanding of care has been augmented and strengthened as a result of my involvement with community organizations, and more specifically, with the youth in this project. In this section, I articulate my understanding of care as an intentional praxis that requires concerted labor. Then, I discuss the implications of care on pedagogy, and

how care was centered in the pláticas space I co-created with the students. Finally, I offer a framing of care as rigor to guide critical qualitative research projects.

I come to care through praxis as informed by community organizers, pedagogues, and thinkers from a variety of disciplines and community practices. I contend that engaging care as praxis is a multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary politic that thrives in pockets and corners throughout the world. While my role as a researcher and educator pushes me to consider what care looks like in formal educational spaces, it is imperative to clarify that a care praxis extends far beyond the academy. To make this case, I first turn to education scholar Rolón-Dow (2006) who asserts that critical care is "grounded in a historical and political understanding of the circumstances and conditions faced by minority communities" (p. 104). Critical care as praxis necessitates an ongoing commitment to learning about the social, historical, and political forces that have led us to this present moment (Freire, 1970). In embracing care as praxis, we must also interrogate our own social locations which produce experiences of privilege and oppression simultaneously. Care as praxis is a commitment to our own critical consciousness; rather than turning away from the injustice that animates our world, care as praxis implores us to refuse complacency. In this way, a praxis of care is "about taking a stand" (Conquergood, 1995, p. 86) and refusing to invisibilize the way intersecting structures of oppression continue to shape our lives.

In *Let This Radicalize You*, community organizers Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba (2023) articulate the need to foster a culture of care that specifically challenges dehumanization (p. 59). At the center of care as praxis is a concerted effort towards humanization, which requires recognition of the ways in which our communicative acts, whether intentional or not, function to uphold existing structures of power and dehumanize those around us. LeMaster and Toyosaki (2023) explore the concept of an

"ally" not as a sedimented institution position but rather something one becomes "across communicative contexts that are temporally, spatially, and ideologically informed and informing" (p. 105). Similarly, care as praxis demands an ongoing commitment to humanization through communication that extends across time and space. Noting the individualism present in U.S. American culture, Hayes and Kaba (2023) contend that we must be willing to break from these norms "and commit to building a culture of care" (p. 78). In other words, cultivating a praxis of care requires that we acknowledge the ways that we are interdependent, and presses us to reject individualism in our daily engagements, including those which take place in the academy. Thus, care as praxis is rooted *in co-creating* community.

As I have mentioned throughout these pages, being in community has helped to sustain my presence in the academy and has helped me to face difficult challenges throughout my adult life. Garcia-Peña (2022) notes that community building "is almost antithetical to academia" as academia is designed to prioritize individualism and competition (p. 25). Even so, Garcia-Peña marks community as the "most effective form of rebellion" (p. 31). Building community requires a concerted labor, an ongoing commitment that refuses to be limited by the individualism present in different spaces. In other words, understanding care as praxis requires a sustained commitment, one which possibilizes alternative ways of relating to one another and to our work in our academic labor and beyond. Additionally, bell hooks (1996) asserts that, "community is formed not by the eradication of difference, but by its affirmation" (p. 265). The effort that we put towards building community requires that we understand our own intersectionally constituted social location within the matrix of domination (Hill Collins,1990) and labor towards alterative futures free from systems of domination.

Tending to Pedagogical Spaces of Care

As legislators continue to introduce and pass laws targeting the rights of the most marginalized members of society, we must continue developing and investing in communities that help sustain life for all people. We cannot count on the state to meet our basic needs, especially given the gravity of this sociopolitical reality we continue to experience. While some may argue that political matters are irrelevant to educational spaces, we must be unapologetic in naming the ways in which classrooms can and do reproduce dynamics of power and oppression that undoubtedly shape the space. This makes it impossible for classrooms to remain 'objective' or separate from the hierarchies that animate our lives. As educators, we cannot remain neutral and must be intentional in the choices we make both in and out of classrooms. Despite this reality, I am inspired by the potential of educative spaces to help develop the critical consciousness of all those involved, including educators. While pedagogical scholarship in communication studies has mainly focused on college classrooms, my dissertation project contributes to the literature on critical communication pedagogy (CCP) by exploring its pedagogical potential beyond traditional classrooms. Additionally, I extend this literature by offering care as praxis as one way to realize and extend CCP. Specifically, I do this by focusing on culture and embodied knowledge.

Over a 15-month period, I had the privilege to explore the potential of CCP outside of traditional classroom spaces. My intention in doing so was not necessarily to introduce aspects of CCP into alternative spaces, but rather to acknowledge the pedagogical moments already taking place and exploring how CCP might sustain them. This should encourage us to invest in non-traditional learning spaces as they may offer opportunities to foster critical consciousness. The youth who participated in the pláticas were not prompted to turn the space "pedagogical," or to discuss specific topics or

experiences. Instead youth were invited to participate in an unstructured virtual space where we could connect during an especially difficult and lonely time of sustained quarantine in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The sixteen pláticas that took place between March 2021 and June 2022 allowed us to co-create space in which we could interrogate power, grapple with matters of civility, and critically reflect on culture and identity. Beyond that, the pláticas allowed us to maintain and grow our existing relationships, provide support and care to each other, debrief our encounters (however serious or mundane), and to sustain community. The pláticas were forged through an ethic of care, one which necessitates humanization to be realized. Although this research took place outside of a traditional classroom, there are important takeaways that may be relevant and beneficial to critical pedagogues committed to humanizing their students and embracing care as a point of departure in traditional classrooms. Establishing humanization in classrooms requires that we center the realities, desires, and experiences of students (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017), while purposefully developing a robust learning community that centers relationality. In describing humanization, bell hooks (2003) remarks, "Dominator culture promotes a calculated objectivism that is dehumanizing. Alternatively, a mutual partnership model invites an engagement of the self that humanizes, that makes love possible" (p. 131). One of the important ways an ethic of care was centered in the pláticas space was by choosing to center and embrace culture in our engagements.

Fassett and Warren (2007) assert that culture must be central in CCP (p. 42). This commitment was at the center of the project, as I reflected on my own experiences in higher education at predominantly white institutions (PWI). While much work has been done in communication studies to bridge critical intercultural communication studies and critical pedagogy (Atay & Toyosaki, 2018), I chose to embrace a methodology that is specific to Chicana/Latina feminist theorizing as a result of my experiences

navigating higher education in PWIs. In doing so, I sought to respond to the specific population with whom I was laboring. Rather than turning to traditional methodologies, choosing pláticas allowed me to return to a practice that originated within Latinx communities and emphasized the role of communication in the process of knowledge production. According to Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016), pláticas are built from a relational principle, one which recognizes those participating as creators of knowledge, and one which connects everyday lived experiences with the research process (p. 111-112). The relational principle as described by Fierros and Delgado Bernal pressed me to be intentional about the co-creation of the pláticas space in order to affirm to myself and to the youth that we can and should shape this space in concert. Together, we recognized points of convergence and divergence within our experiences as Latinx people. Having the pláticas space not only allowed our ways of knowing and practices to be sustained, but to additionally critique aspects of our latinidad that we found to be problematic both in our individual experiences and through communication via the pláticas (Paris & Alim, 2017). The resulting conversations included interrogations of white supremacy, cisnormativity, and patriarchy within Latinx contexts, for example. While pláticas may not be the appropriate choice for all given classroom situations, taking the time to acknowledge and get to know who is present, and to be intentional in co-creating the space can shift the power dynamics that are often reproduced in the classroom. A praxis of care requires pedagogues to be willing to name white supremacy (Rudick, 2022), to discuss cisheteropatriarchy, and to grapple with ableism because these are some of the building blocks of U.S. American culture, intersecting systems that directly impact the livelihood of people navigating educative spaces. Rolón-Dow (2006) reminds us that " to care for students of color in the United States, we must seek to understand the role that race/ethnicity has played in shaping and defining the sociocultural and political conditions of their communities" (p. 104). Educators must not shy away from

discussions of systems of oppression and instead ground their pedagogy *in* discussions of systems of oppression.

I recognize that discussing systemic oppression may place those who embody difference at greater risk. I do not take this matter lightly as our sociopolitical moment has placed marginalized communities and spaces of learning at the center of political attacks. This is why it is also imperative to join and sustain a community of pedagogues committed to recognizing the classroom as a space for intervention. In discussing the importance of community building, García Peña (2022) notes that growth occurs, "through collective exchange, generosity, and kindness. It is through engaging with one another and through difference-through theorizing from our own flesh, as Latina feminist writer Cherrie Moraga invites us to do-that we become better scholars, better teachers, and wiser human beings" (p. 25). For marginalized scholars who are more likely to face backlash and violence from their radical approaches to pedagogy, this work should never be done alone, and instead necessitates collective support.

Additionally, participating in these pláticas has reminded me of the importance of centering lived and embodied experiences in pedagogical contexts. Pineau (2002) establishes that educative spaces are intentional about domesticating our bodies and "hiding the fact that we have bodies at all" (p. 45). However, critical performative pedagogy affirms that students and educators enter education spaces with a great deal of embodied knowledge (Pineau, 1994; Warren, 1999; Pineau, 2002). Rather than contributing to the invisibilization of bodies in the classroom, pedagogues should be intentional in engaging the body as a site of knowledge, knowledge that can incite critical conversations about culture and politics. Recall that though initially critical of the ways that the multicultural solidarity coalition members confronted white students at the newly established Multicultural Center on campus—citing a desire for civility and kindness—both Dante and Crystal turned to their embodied experiences with

intervention to explore the limits of civility on marginalized bodies. The experiences with which students enter a classroom can serve as critical points of departure to understand the ways in which theory and praxis are connected in our everyday encounters—and to enrich communication study through lived experience navigating our sociohistorical present. Cruz (2001) affirms, "the most profound and liberating politics come from the interrogations of our own social locations, a narrative that works outward from our specific corporealities" (p. 658). Creating a classroom space where participants are encouraged to lead with vulnerability and honesty is laborious (García Peña, 2022, p. 50); still, engaging embodied knowledges provides an opportunity for all those who are participating to reflexively interrogate their own social locations, how they are privileged and oppressed simultaneously, and how their mundane communication encounters can affirm or resist existing power dynamics in society. By centering culture and embracing embodied knowledge, educators can be intentional about infusing care and humanization in their pedagogical encounters, which affirms difference and celebrates the knowledge with which students enter educative spaces.

Nourishing a Critical Qualitative Praxis of Care

Over the last several years of my education, I have experienced encounters with fellow colleagues and faculty members who, in an effort to engage with my scholarship, apply the standards of postpositivism and inquire about the generalizability of my project. Similarly, I have witnessed brilliant scholars whose critical qualitative projects are deemed inadequate because of their sample size, receiving questions about triangulation and objectivity. I echo Denzin (2008) who declares that, "We need to remind the resurgent postpositivist that their criterion for good work applies only to work within their paradigm, not ours" (p. 321). I remain intentional in naming this project critical qualitative research, as it speaks to specific ontological and

epistemological commitments, those which are inseparable from praxis. In other words, critical qualitative projects cannot be assessed based on the criteria of qualitative projects, as qualitative projects can also be informed by postpositivist assumptions (Vasudevan et al. 2022). Rather than conforming to the dictates of qualitative rigor, critical qualitative scholars should adopt *care* as one possible criterion for their projects. A framework that seeks to define and operationalize "care" as something to be executed in "critical" projects is antithetical to the constructivist ontology and epistemology I embrace. In rigor's place, I offer care as a point from which to engage in deep contemplation and reflection about the choices we make through the research process, and the political commitments that inform these choices. In the next section, I describe how I sought to perform a praxis of care, even when I failed, in my own research.

As a scholar committed to critical qualitative research, I am intentional in engaging critical qualitative scholarship to shape the choices I made throughout the research process. Doing so allowed me to purposefully infuse humanization as the commitment that would shape my engagement with the youth specifically and with the qualitative process broadly. In particular, I knew I wanted to challenge positivistic assumptions in research as they continue to permeate communication scholarship regardless of paradigmatic approach. I was deliberate in rejecting ideas of researcher objectivity and neutrality that claim to produce "depoliticized knowledge," but ultimately support "the status quo and serves the interests of those in power" (Conquergood, 1995, p. 82), but also in embracing the already existing relationships I developed with the youth as a strength in my research design. Still, there were times when I found myself turning to traditional approaches in research; for example, coding as *the* way to analyze data. The tenants of positivism continue to dominate communication studies research, and sometimes inadvertently on many of us who were trained in the discipline. This is particularly the case in communication pedagogy scholarship—whether or not it claims

to be "critical." Conducting this project has reinvigorated my desire to challenge positivism and to reimagine critical qualitative research as a humanizing labor born from an intentional praxis of care. In this next section, I offer two important lessons that remain relevant as my project comes to an end: *leaning into the tensions* and *understanding care as rigor* in critical research.

In chapter 4, I offer excerpts from my research notes to highlight some of the tension I experienced throughout the research process. My research notes were inundated with all kinds of questions; questions about ethics, about materiality, about (re)telling stories, and about my own failures. I divided that chapter into five sections which provide nuanced details about the tensions I sensed and felt. These include tensions related to *refusal*, *legibility*, *failure*, *answerability*, and *emotions*. As this project is coming to an end, I feel as though I have more questions than answers. The tensions listed remain with me as I scribble these words into yet another notebook. For me, performing a praxis of care meant detailing, however vulnerable, the struggles and failures I was facing throughout my project. Rather than ignoring or invisibilizing the discomfort and tensions I experienced, I chose to center them throughout my research. Writing through the tensions and talking with my close friends and mentors forced me to sit with the discomfort and to find its place in this project. Like Diaz-Strong et al. (2014), I chose to name the "bad" feelings I experienced. In doing so, I shifted my understanding of these feelings from bad to simply feelings; those which are normal and valuable when engaging in projects connected to our passions and to our communities. While researchers may feel the need to "tidy up" their projects and place them into the confines of an esteemed academic journal, I contend that making the tensions visible strengthens our capacity as researchers while it forces us to question and revisit our intentions, motives, and commitments when working with marginalized communities.

Second, embracing care *as* rigor through the research process requires that we are intentional in acknowledging the way we have been disciplined as researchers, and as a result, the ways in which oppression and power shape what we know and understand about and through the research process (Vasudeva et al., 2022, p. 7). The knowledge we have co-created through our education as researchers is inseparable from the colonizing, white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal design of the academy. If we are inattentive to the history of research and the way it informs our present understanding of research, we may inadvertently reproduce harm and violence onto marginalized communities.

A praxis of care is one with which to hold ourselves accountable and to affirm our commitment to unlearning and challenging the colonizing history of the academy, a commitment to moving beyond what we have been taught—or at least approaching what we learn with reflexive skepticism and grounded in our political commitments. One of the intentional ways I performed care was by leaning into the messy rather than ignoring it. Sitting in and with the complexity of research ethics allowed me to pay attention to the nuances of the process, and thus, pushed me to reconfigure what I could learn about research when I refused to tidy it. For those of us serious about advancing critical qualitative work in *Communication Education* and responding to Rudick's (2023) criteria for research, embracing a praxis of care as rigor offers an opportunity from which to develop rich methodological projects that intentionally infuse humanization and care, and that offer important theoretical advancements (p. 205).

In this section, I offer my understanding of care as praxis, a politic I am continuing to develop. I intentionally draw from a variety of thinkers in order to attend to different aspects of my own lived experience. I detail the specific ways in which care as praxis was present in the pláticas space and through the research process. It is important to note that a politic of care as praxis is not the only way to realize humanization.

Instead, care as praxis offers one possible criterion for critical qualitative researchers and pedagogues to contemplate and reflect on the foundations and motives for their pedagogical, academic, and community encounters. I offer my own processing on care, and the ways I sought to perform care in the pláticas space and through the research process not as a blueprint for others to follow, but rather as my own way to process and challenge my understanding of research so far. Additionally, this final chapter purposefully limits details on the way care was and continues to be performed with the youth. While providing particular examples for praxis opens important conversations and can offer ideas for researchers and pedagogues, particularly as I consider how the contributions from my research may impact traditional classroom contexts, I choose to keep details to a minimum—and under advisement from my research participants who helped to co-create the pláticas space. That is, sometimes research participants don't want their secrets to be fully known—and our research is all the stronger as a result of the care we might take to ensure that privacy. As researchers, we may feel an impulse to want to know all the details involving a research project, especially because these details are often understood as proof (e.g. rigor). However, there are aspects of my praxis of care and my relationship with the youth that I actively refuse to share because, "there are some forms of knowledge that the academy does not deserve" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 230).

Reaping and Sowing: Extending Beyond the Academy

We are standing in a crowded field surrounded by hundreds of people desperate to find their graduates. The heat has calmed allowing a cool breeze to enter the area. Though not typical for a late May evening in the desert, we are grateful for the refreshing air surrounding this moment. We finally find Crystal in the crowd of graduates and greet her

with an embrace. I remember the first time I met Crystal as a 7th grader, the warmth with which she welcomed me, and the care I saw her perform each time a new youth would join the program. More than five years of laughter, tears, frustrations, and community building. Crystal pulls away and I notice the tears in her eyes. Words escape me, and instead I stand in awe of the moment we are sharing. “It means so much that you guys are here, thank you so much for coming.” This moment could feel like a goodbye, instead I know this is a closing of a chapter, one that was complicated and at times lonely, but animated by beautiful moments of community. We make plans to celebrate the new chapter we are all about to embark on, new adventures at different universities. I couldn’t be happier than to celebrate this with Crystal, Dante, and Flor.

Inspired by the important work of communication scholars committed to critical approaches to pedagogy over the last three decades, I embraced the Chicana/Latina feminist methodology of pláticas to explore the utility of CCP outside of traditional classrooms. While this project is firmly rooted in the discipline of communication, turning to other disciplines proved to be imperative in my understanding of theory, research, and praxis. If we are serious about sharing our disciplinary gifts (Sprague, 2019), we must also be willing and committed to turning to scholars outside of our disciplinary homes, those who challenge, complicate, and augment our approaches and understanding of pedagogy, research, and community work. The sociopolitical and cultural reality begs that we leave the spaces in which we feel most comfortable in order to find new possibilities. This includes the confines of the classroom and the university. If we are serious about laboring towards a more just world, one shaped by humanization and care, we must *do* more. In our pursuit towards sustained praxis, we are likely to experience discomfort and at times failure. Rather than seeing failure as the end, we must recognize it as “an opportunity to realize change” (LeMaster, 2018, p. 17). For this reason, we must also be committed to a reflexive praxis, one which is grounded in an

analysis of power, one that implicates us, and one where we are in community with others. García Peña reminds us (2022), "But most importantly, we must rebel by creating communities of freedom within and outside of the institution, by reaching out to others and forming concrete plans to sustain our work and our lives" (p. 31). Allow her words to move us to action. I conclude this dissertation with a letter addressed to the youth of Path to Success.

To my chosen family,

It's Saturday afternoon and I'm sitting at my favorite coffee shop reflecting on the last six years of my life, and of our time together. Writing from this location feels appropriate as this was the setting for many of my everyday encounters over the last several years, those which felt mundane at the time, but I now remember fondly. It's the place I would sit and question whether I was smart enough to be a PhD student, the place I would have long conversations with friends and mentors about our research projects and whether they matter(ed) in the world. It's the place where close friends and I would keep each other company through writing sessions and snack breaks. This is where I would meet my co-advisor Dan to celebrate another accomplishment. During the pandemic, this is where I wanted to be after he died, to mourn his departure and reflect on our time together. This is where I meet Lore, the other advisor I have told you about. We have spent hours here, remembering and imagining new possibilities for the future. I'm reflecting on all these moments lived and wondering how to write this letter to you. I have to be honest; I'm writing this letter with a lot of hesitation, not because there aren't a million things I wanna say to you, but because this is the first time I'm writing about our community and sharing it with others. I'm hesitant because I'm not sure I can capture what we've been able create together, the unique space we've tended to, the carcajadas we've shared, and the emotional moments we have faced together. And yet, I'm so excited to share with others what can happen when you just show up as you are; not for a grade or some sort of prize at the end, but for the connection and opportunity to develop community.

So, why write this in the form of a letter? Academics have used letters as a way to share their work while embracing the intimacy that a letter brings. Writing a letter challenges the typical, sometimes boring, academic writing that I've encountered most of my education, the type of writing many of you have encountered in your education, too. Writing this as a letter is a type of intervention- one that lets me to be creative and honest, to be vulnerable and reflexive, and maybe, most importantly, writing a letter allows me to address you, to speak directly to you. I see this letter as me continuing our tradition of the affirmation notes we've written each other at the end of summer programs. The only difference now is that there's an audience to our notes, and the hope is they can learn something from our experiences together.

I remember how nervous I was before the first plática wondering if anyone would even show up. I sat for hours thinking about how I could make this a time we all enjoyed and

how we could all be comfortable. Instead of thinking about a plan for what we would talk about, I had a couple of prompts ready so we could talk about how we wanted to spend our time together. When I asked what your expectations of me were, you were very clear in telling me that you saw me as a friend and a mentor, that you didn't want me to facilitate. From that point on, I knew my role was to participate just like you, never to plan out conversations or activities. And so, for the 16 pláticas that followed, we talked about whatever we wanted to, switching from topic to topic, from anger to laughter, from muted mics to free flowing conversation.

Normally, in an academic conference or in a research project, this would be the time where I would share what YOU learned- you as the student, as the younger ones, as the less experienced ones. But, I don't think that's how our relationship works. Instead, I am going to talk about what I learned from you, what our time together taught me.

You've shown me the importance of building a community from a basis of care. In my academic work, I read so much about teaching and care and support. Usually, this is from the perspective of a teacher or mentor to a student. Our time together has reminded me that those hierarchies are institutionally mediated and don't help us to build strong communities. Instead, you and I play an equally important role in co-creating our community, and we can show care to one another in numerous ways, ways we have yet to discover. I felt this sense of care most after Dan died two summers ago. I can't tell you the number of people who just didn't know what to say, so they said all the wrong things. But you listened, you sat in silence with me, and you showed me so much love. You've taught me that care is something we can choose every day.

You have reminded me that mentorship is a two-way street. This is something I have known, something that Dan used to tell me. And yet, you have taught me this again by showing up for me in many ways. When I first became involved with the program, I spent so much time thinking about what kind of mentor I could be to you--how I could show up for you in ways that you need, offer support for whatever you were going through, and encourage you to show up as your full self, being unapologetically you. What I didn't expect was that you would offer this to me. You reminded me that I can show up to the classroom, and to any other space, as my full self; that what I have to offer is important, needed, and unique; that my voice is powerful, and my advocacy efforts matter even when they are ignored. These are things that I have said to you many times over the years. And yet I'm realizing that you taught these to me as well, modeling what it means for mentorship to be reciprocal.

Finally, I want you to know that one of the most important things you've taught me is the importance of being present and showing up. You have done this for me repeatedly, and I want you to know that I plan on continuing to do this for you, too. Though I am getting ready to close one chapter of my life and move into the next, you have become like family to me. Despite the physical distance between us, I am grateful to know that we will continue being part of each other's lives, celebrating the many accomplishments to come and supporting each other throughout the difficult moments. This is just the beginning.

Love, Ana

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL

Daniel Brouwer

CLAS-SS: Human Communication, Hugh Downs School of 480/965-5976

Daniel.Brouwer@asu.e

du Dear Daniel

Brouwer:

On 2/16/2021 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Community Building with Youth During the Pandemic
Investigator:	Daniel Brouwer
IRB ID:	STUDY00013358
Category of review:	
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• [redacted] Letter of Support-Terminel Iberri.pdf, Category: Other; • Platicas_Community Building with Youth in During the Pandemic.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Public Speaking & Storytelling Workshop_Community Building with Youth in During the Pandemic.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Recruitment Email _Community Building with Youth in During the Pandemic.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Recruitment Script_Community Building with Youth in During the Pandemic.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • VERSION 2 IRB Protocol_Community Building

	with Youth in During the Pandemic.docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • VERSION 2-Assent Form_Community Building with Youth in During the Pandemic.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • VERSION 2-Informed Consent _Community Building with Youth in During the Pandemic.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • YouTube video script_Community Building with Youth in During the Pandemic.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;

The IRB approved the protocol from 2/16/2021 to 2/15/2022 inclusive. Three weeks before 2/15/2022 you are to submit a completed Continuing Review application and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 2/15/2022 approval of this protocol expires on that date. When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the "Documents" tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Ana Terminel
Iberri Ana
Terminel Iberri