DECOLONIAL EXPERIMENTATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Learnings from Mayan Indigenous Host Communities

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Abstract

Global South and Indigenous communities often represent the contexts of international service learning (ISL) programs. However, rarely are the effects of historical colonization and the potential colonizing impact of Global North visitors being investigated. Central to this article is our story as Global North and settler-Canadian researchers who are learning to experiment with decolonization as a theoretical framework for ISL research. We offer an account of the development of an encuentro (symposium); a culminating event for a four-year study, in which Guatemalan and Nicaraguan host community members share of their experiences as Indigenous hosts. The findings reveal challenges in future ISL research in such contexts and offer ideas about how institutions and organizations may develop ISL in ways that honor community visions of reciprocity.

Focusing on Community Impact in International Service Learning

Research on the impact of international service learning (ISL) on student participants including our own work (Balzer, 2011; O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2013) and that of others (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Kiely, 2004; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002; Ogden, 2007; Pompa, 2002) has been a growing field of study. As with much research, ours had mixed beginnings. Because of opportunity and curiosity, we have travelled; because of a belief in social justice and a responsibility to live well in the world, we were drawn to ISL; and because of growing awareness of our position as settler-colonists and the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples in the Americas, we began to question our previously held worldviews. What began as a conventional research project, examining the impact of ISL experiences on secondary school students, validating opportunities to travel and connect with the Other, morphed into a realization that we were the Other in these contexts.

We brought with us power and wealth that had the potential to undermine local communities and perpetuate existing power imbalances. Broadly examining the literature on the topic reveals that there is comparatively little research conducted focusing on the impact of such experiences on host communities and organizations (Brabant, 2011; Crabtree, 2008; Erasmus, 2011; Larsen, 2016; Sutton, 2011). This omission constitutes an important gap that we sought to address in a recently concluded study. Identifying an emerging field of study, we hoped to learn alongside literature that shares these aims, taking into consideration Bringle and Hatcher's (2011) suggestion that "identified community needs" (p. 19) should be a central component of their definition of ISL, the absence of which, according to Crabtree (2008) and Erasmus (2011), raises the issue of neocolonialism if student engagement in the host community is dismissive or disruptive of local practices. More recently, Larsen (2016) has highlighted the lack of problematization of the underpinning "values, knowledges and assumptions" of ISL (p. 10), and while representatives of Global North sending agencies insist that they enter into rewarding partnerships with their Southern counterparts (Dear, 2012), the literature, while asserting the importance of such practices, and often espousing reciprocity as a central tenant, ultimately lacks evidence of such experiences from Southern partners and communities.

Indigenous Communities, Resource Extraction, and Problematized Research

Our experiences working ISL programs and these observations form the background and set the focus of a four-year research project in which we contributed as members of a broader research team offering a connection to four Mayan Guatemalan communities who participated in the previous study. Our ongoing relationships with these communities and the fact that they all identified as Indigenous, we would realize, transformed the project by bringing to light the importance of decolonization. The project culminated in August 2017, when residents from the four Guatemalan communities as well as residents from four Nicaraguan communities gathered for an *encuentro* (symposium) to discuss their experiences hosting ISL participants from the Global North. This *encuentro* was intended to be a concrete expression of decolonizing theory. This theoretical framework was intended to provide a lens from which to understand the ways colonialism and the imposition of Western Eurocentrism has impacted these particular Mayan host communities as it relates to ISL. To provide a bit of background, as a result of marginalization and discrimination exacerbated by political conflict and violence, these communities in the context of Guatemala have been forced "to drop out and reside in 'internal colonies' with little or no hope of upward mobility" (Kanu, 2006, p. 8). Local exemplars in each of these communities have responded to these internal colonizations through the creation of grassroots organizations that aim to promote sustainable and developmental goals such as employment, improved education, food security, and health measures (Howard & Henry, 2010; Sabas, 2016).

These social justice initiatives have often been interconnected with the work of NGOs, which though hopefully beneficial to the grassroots organizations, may further complicate the colonial and neocolonial relations of power in which these communities find themselves. Despite and sometimes in spite of their experiences working

with NGOs, the grassroots initiatives may be seen as expressions of *decolonization* as Indigenous communities seek self-determination and identity reclamation. This is an important detail for our study and for this article as we are awakening and deepening our understanding of the necessity of relationality in working toward decolonization: seeking first to understand the ways in which communities are already working toward their own liberations. We will say more about this learning as we further outline our self-situatedness.

Furthermore, of particular importance for the Guatemalan participants to share at the *encuentro* were their stories of *epistemicide* (Santos, 2014) and subsequent journeys of reclamation of Mayan Indigenous knowledges. The histories of violence—whether they be physical or epistemic—experienced by the Mayan communities differed in ways from the Nicaragua communities in the study and cannot be overlooked as they have profoundly affected their perceptions of education and contributed to a weariness of programs like ISL that are perceived of as external and disconnected to community aims. Estrada (2012), a Mayan Indigenous scholar, unpacks some of the complexities present, making specific note of the way the relationships between "nation building, citizenship, democracy, and development tie back to the issue of knowledge production" (p. 73). National curriculum development in Guatemala has traditionally tokenized Indigenous peoples' participation (Estrada, 2012, p. 68) and excluded Mayan ontological and epistemological perspectives, which situates these communities as foreign, although they reside within the national education systems borders.

Parallel to this, the history of resource exploration and extraction in Mayan regions (Deonandan & Dougherty, 2016) and the lack of consultation between government and Indigenous communities exacerbates feelings of disregard and generates worries of further exploitations and displacements. In fact, one community in Guatemala received visitors claiming to be ecotourists who were incognito working for mining companies. Examples such as this are of paramount importance when considering bringing outsiders such as Northern ISL participants into these communities. Interconnected and further problematic is the growth of the development industry in the last decades in Guatemala, sometimes responding to the injustices created by resource extraction (Balzer & Heidebrecht, 2017), accompanied by the growth of ISL programs that focus, sometimes myopically, on student experience (Jefferess, 2012; Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012) and too often cater to the objectives of NGOs and their stakeholders rather than the trajectories of, for example, Mayan communities reclamation efforts. This kind of development work could be likened to "colonialism in sheep's clothing" (Walsh, 2014, p. 9), and within the context of Guatemala, it is also hard to ignore how entangled this work is within the history of U.S. interventions (Grandin, 2004), the exclusion of Indigenous voices within the Guatemalan national education curriculum, and the previously mentioned experiences of deception some communities have encountered.

Understanding the context and particularities of each of the communities within the larger frameworks of colonialism, globalization, and neocolonialism is helpful in developing sensitivity to the ways that research within these communities may either be misconstrued as similarly problematic or may, in reality, become further expressions of neocolonization. One of the sensitivities to develop is, as Kovach (2009) highlights, becoming aware of the all-too-common reality that Indigenous communities "are being examined by non-Indigenous academics who pursue Western research on Western terms" (p. 28). Considering this, we wished to interrogate the way that the Western academy and research methodologies have represented colonialism (see Wilson, 2008,

pp. 45–52) for many Indigenous communities. Such research often "called into question Indigenous peoples' humanity" (Henhawk, 2013) in a blatant disregard for reciprocity and, furthermore, by focusing on knowledge as something to be extracted. One of our fears for the process of research was to echo the issues related to community experiences with resource extraction industries. Given the embeddedness of education research within colonizing institutions where policies often shape the research/researched relationship in asymmetric ways, we found Larkin, Larsen, MacDonald, and Smaller (2016) provided a helpful perspective as they wonder what this means for "service learning" and "our desire to conduct research on our impact on our host communities" (p. 23). On this we also find Kovach (2014) provides some insight, highlighting that research in such contexts, as we have outlined, is often riddled with *directionality*; the primary beneficiaries of such studies being institutions, organizations, or persons from the Global North is due in no small part to the reality that research involving Indigenous peoples is "highly fundable" (p. 104). In light of this, it became clear for us as researchers in the midst of a project that included Mayan communities that committing to decolonizing research meant, in part, expanding the focus of the decolonial efforts, shifting the traditional focus from results and findings toward process and relationality. It is this framing that informs the remainder of the article, and we hope it becomes clear that our intent is to tell the parallel stories of the communities' contributions and our learnings as researchers. In this way, we hope that this article provides a glimpse into our growing understanding of a way of doing research that aims to offer reciprocity in process and in its hoped-for outcomes.

Decolonial Experimentations

We begin with our part of the story, wherein, at the time of developing the *encuentro,* we were also mindful of the implications embracing decolonizing theory as it relates to the design of such an event. Tuck and Yang's (2012) *decolonization is not a metaphor* was a guiding mantra, specifically their note that "when metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory" (p. 3). Considering this and in light of the very active grassroots examples of decolonization being undertaken by communities, integrating decolonization as a theoretical framework within the study sometimes felt like an inauthentic attempt to be intentional. It was difficult to draw connecting lines between the trajectories of the existing social justice initiatives within the communities and the goals and impact this research project might contribute. This is something we have continued to wrestle with as a research team, wondering how to design research that is not simply full of great intentions but that is resonant with the participants' own hopes and goals. Tuck and Yang's critique is pertinent and has led us to consider the ways decolonization challenges Western researchers in the choice, design, and presentation of methodologies when working with Indigenous communities. This is especially true for researchers, such as ourselves, who are implicated by our settler-colonial lineages, which we understand to be "intrinsically shaped by and shaping interactive relations of coloniality" (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, & Corntassel, 2014, p. 2). As a distinct form of colonialism, settler-colonialism may be conceptualized as a "structure," one that has been and is imposed upon Indigenous peoples with the goal of separating them from their lands for the "creation of settler spaces for settler collectives" (p. 8). This framing resounds true in our experiences living in "settler

spaces" within our home province of Saskatchewan in Canada, where the storied history of settlement too often obscured the history of displacement of the Indigenous peoples. With this in mind, a point of decolonization, for ourselves, is to become awake (Dewey, 1938) to the power of the structure of settler-colonialism to shape our imaginations in ways that capitulate to the virtues of development and modernization and where Eurocentrism, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism are deeply intertwined and normalized (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

This task is something we wish to undertake for our own liberation from how settler-colonialism has, if we are honest, shaped our imagined possibilities of what experiential education and education research might look like. Similarly, in doing so, we also hope to gain a new perspective from which to see the ways ISL research and practices are often caught up in relations of power, implicitly replicating and mimicking settler-colonial structures. Drawing connections between these learnings and the hoped-for decolonizing research of this project in Guatemala meant for us developing a new vernacular that made space for *decolonial thinking*, which is a term we borrow from Mignolo and Walsh (2018), who define it as learning to see "two sides of the story" (p. 112). Decolonial thinking reveals two competing stories in the context of the Mayan communities that participated in this study. First is that of modernism, with its promises of wealth and progress through the growth of the mining sector and hydroelectric projects, is an imposed narrative and one that we recognize ourselves as implicitly caught up in as researchers who are also representatives of our Canadian nation (Howard & Henry, 2010). Second, is that of colonization, historic and ongoing, which show connections between the stories of land dispossession and marginalization suffered under Spanish colonialism, American interventions, and the growth of the mining sector and hydroelectricc projects. Modernism is a story of good things to come, of progress, and an idealization of capitalist expansion seen most explicitly in globalization as a common good, whereas coloniality is the story, or stories, of things often hidden by the former and once uncovered reveal wounds, oppressions, and inequalities of peoples' experiences.

So far, we have learned that decolonial thinking is, in part, about seeing both sides of the story of a place and, in part, about allowing the now-revealed aspects of the story that were previously ignored or forgotten to reshape us. Learning about the once unrecognized yet widespread and embedded neocolonial "social grammar that permeates social relations, public and private spaces, culture, mentalities, and subjectivities" (Santos, 2014, p. 26) is a continual task in decolonial thinking, which for this research project meant learning about our own histories and about the histories of liberative struggles of the Mayan participants who were a part of this study that we have, however incompletely, outlined above.

Our efforts to integrate decolonizing theory in our research was not a simple endeavor. It was not a matter of adopting certain methods or using certain key words or even writing explicit plans into our proposals. Swardener and Mutas (2008) articulate this challenge:

> It has become clear that what makes decolonizing research decolonizing is not an adherence to a specific research method or methodology. Decolonizing research does not constitute a single agreed-upon set of guidelines or methods. . . . Decolonizing research does not have a common definition. . . . Decolonizing research is defined by certain themes and defining elements and concepts that arise when researchers engage in what they describe as decolonizing research. (Cited in Henhawk, 2013, p. 33)

Throughout our project we could best describe our efforts as *decolonial experimentations.* Therefore, the remainder of this article is littered with aspects of self-facing, how we learned to think *decolonially* (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) as a result of being involved in this project.

The Encuentro: Preparation

In what follows we will share how a commitment to decolonial thinking helped shape the design of the *encuentro* as well as the interpretation of the findings and conclude by making some observations about the nature of reciprocity as it pertains to host communities' experiences of ISL. Something that we hope shines through the writing is our sense of hopefulness and excitement as we recognize the liberating potential of embracing such thinking; readers might not find final answers or bold claims, but we are hopeful that they may be able to see the analysis and conclusions from our perspective. However, with this in mind, we readily admit to the desire embedded, or perhaps trained in us and our writing, that prefers generalization and universalization. Instead, our commitment to decolonial thinking invites particularization.

We also preface the story of the *encuentro* with our thankfulness for the diversity of our team, which consisted of members from the Global North and the Global South, most notably Xochilt Hernandez and Ramon Sepulveda, who both consider Nicaragua home. The conversations we had together as a team naturally led us to critically wrestle with the role of knowledge frameworks that undergird our assumptions in terms of how to design and conduct research. A clear example of the value of such conversations came a year before the conclusion of the study when Xochilt Hernandez inspired the idea of the *encuentro* as a way of giving back to the communities. This idea emerged as a result of creating decolonial cracks (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), and, as Hernandez emphasized, this was a natural extension of one of the central aims of the study, which was to "re-define the colonial dynamic between researcher and researched" (X. Hernandez, Managua field note, August 6, 2017). Hernandez's and Sepulveda's increased investment in this project in the final year was a critical factor in its various successes, and while we were unable to create space for their collaboration in this article, we have chosen to include their voices as best we could in the following sections.

The Encuentro: Design

The plan for the *encuentro* involved the hiring of four local facilitators, who through consultation with the communities over the course of several months would create a schedule as well as provide leadership for the event. The facilitators were hired based on the connections of trust they had developed with the research participants in the four Guatemalan and four Nicaraguan communities. Reflecting on these consultations, Sepulveda, who also played the role of one of the facilitators, highlighted some key values and practices that would influence the design, including Mayan ceremony, the choice of contextually relevant and relationally grounded methods, and the "non-involvement of Northern academics" (Managua field note, August 6, 2017). Hernandez too outlined

the key conversational methods (Kovach, 2010) employed, shown here in an excerpt from our field notes (Managua field note, August 6, 2017):

- Group Integration—bringing people together from diverse backgrounds to prep for discussion. Ice breakers, Southern contextual practices (i.e., ceremony), presentations on communities.
- Non-violent and Effective Communication—after bringing participants together, it is important to develop a sense of consensus around how dialogue with the other is going to happen. Dynamicos (icebreakers)—connections with others, short explanation graphic about communication.
- World Café—a participatory technique used for brainstorming—allows all participants to contribute to all elements of the conversation—dialogue is distributed equally, increasing the chance of participation.
- Theatre of the Oppressed—a tool for digging deeper into themes and exploring alternatives through the use of arts (alternative communication).
- Knowledge Mobilization—presentations of theatre of the oppressed to outside group of NGO workers for the purpose of mobilizing the knowledge created.

Hernandez added that the community consultations further deepened trust, which was the foundation that led to the possibility of such an *encuentro* and, therein, a greater openness of participants to discuss their experiences. Sepulveda explained the impact this had on data collection throughout the project, saying "we saw evolving responses in our research participants—at the beginning there were limitations in collecting data due to colonial power dynamics . . . the first interviews in this research project from community members were 'shallow'" (Managua field note, August 7, 2017).

Creating space for community voices to affect the design of the research project was an important pivot point. Those of us from the Global North were learning to embrace an openness to surprise (Lugones, 1987) and a growing comfort with taking on the role of something that could be equated to *midwives* as we supported and encouraged the facilitators throughout the development process; this was an attempt to respond directly to the desire for the non-involvement of Northern academics during the *encuentro*. We were thankful to hear, post-*encuentro*, one of the Guatemalan participants reflect on their experience and make specific note about the backgrounded role of the Northern academics, which they likened to the "role we sometimes play when we host in our communities" (Ed, focus group, August 6, 2017). This represented a departure from the habitually infused hierarchical structuring of research relationships and provided an interruption that Hernandez articulated as an act of decolonization:

the fact that you (research team) took into account the voices of us local researchers made a huge difference. Coloniality is directional and maintains structures of power. The fact that Northern researchers listened to Southern researchers, the fact that we engaged in debates, the fact that we openly discussed these things is different. (Managua field note, August 7, 2017)

We heard similar affirmations during a focus group debrief of the *encuentro* with the Mayan participants who pointed out that the "process of giving back" in research is "really important to us" (Feli, focus group, August 6, 2017), and that while there was a skepticism about "why you wanted to do research" with the communities, it was the *encuentro* that helped them realize it was not to "expose the other—it is to learn from each other and become better people" (Ana, focus group, August 6, 2017). We didn't have the language to articulate this at the time, but reflecting on Mignolo and Walsh's (2018) conceptualization of decolonization, we recognize now that the current of decolonial actions flows toward deeper connections and hoped-for reconciliation.

The Encuentro: Findings

In the several years leading up to the *encuentro*, local researchers had collected data in the communities through interviews and focus groups. Our initial analysis of this data revealed six themes, which we ordered based on the frequency they were mentioned. This was our initial ordering:

- the monetization of the ISL experience;
- the unequal burden placed on host village women during these visits;
- the locus of decision-making with respect to making practical and programmatic arrangements with the host community;
- the social impact influenced in part by historical memory as communities work through their traumatic pasts while building a future;
- meeting the needs and desires of guests; and
- and curiosity about the post-visit impact on Northern guests.

The *encuentro* gave us the opportunity to present our findings to 28 of the participants who had been a part of the study and invite them to speak back to our analysis. Throughout the various sessions of the three days, we embraced the midwife role with the goal of not further influencing the process beyond the presentation of the above, our initial analysis. Participants were given the opportunity to engage with our conclusions and offer their suggestions and wishes for the future of ISL in their communities. As community members identified *their* priorities, the following ordering emerged (our initial ordering in parentheses):

- the locus of decision-making with respect to making practical and programmatic arrangements with the host community (3);
- curiosity about the post-visit impact on Northern guests (6);
- the social impact influenced in part by historical memory as communities work through their traumatic pasts while building a future (4);
- the monetization of the ISL experience (1);

- meeting the needs and desires of guests (5); and
- the unequal burden placed on host village women during these visits (2).

The community-led re-consideration of the importance of the data was a helpful corrective, a cultivating of *conocimiento*, an "insight" (Anzaldua, 2015, p. 1). Prioritization of community voice in the development of the local ISL experiences became paramount. This insight resonated with experiences we have had over the years as planners, leaders, and observers of ISL programs where the goals and objectives of the experiences have typically been determined by the leaders or sending organizations from the Global North. Usually, in consultation with a coordinator in a host country, arrangements are made with the community to meet those goals and objectives. Consultation with the community is, sadly, often minimal in this planning process. Language and access to reliable communication networks are an impediment to planning, but the current model is reflective of the marketization of ISL, a model that the research participants critiqued. Although most communities recognized the financial cost associated with hosting ISL students, one community refused to accept payment; in their assessment, monetary exchange meant that they were selling a service and therefore were relinquishing control.

The community members recognized that the sending agencies were invested in ISL for specific academic and social reasons; however, the communities also invested in ISL for specific purposes. These purposes varied by community but, within the Mayan communities, were always interconnected with the decolonizing activities already happening. Three different community goals were identified as important aspects for future ISL programs: space to share about their culture, that is, developing community connections and building relationships as well as offering experiences that demonstrated their resilience through storytelling and the opening of their homes; developing an ecotourism industry and supplementing community income; and building advocates as Indigenous and marginalized communities. If these goals are promoted as a basis for ISL and when aligned with the decolonization efforts of the community, ISL programs may represent further opportunities to develop agency for communities. Understanding the objectives of both the hosting and sending groups becomes important in ensuring that the correct matches are made and that the two groups are not working at cross purposes. In order to do this, trust is needed, communication must be fluid, and reciprocity must be co-defined.

Decolonizing Notions of Reciprocity in Global North (settler-colonial)—Global South (Maya) Relationships

As Canadians, we are working toward reconciled relationships with local Indigenous communities and have become increasingly aware of the protocols associated with our engagements. It should have come as no surprise that Mayan Indigenous communities in Guatemala would have similar protocols that should be respected and honored. The complexity of traditional governance and current political structures necessitates patience and relationship building and, as in our case, translating our learnings from one context to another. The community-led approach to the design of the *encuentro* situated a Mayan spiritual ceremony at the outset, an invitation to

remember the long history and traditions of engagement with the land and a centering of Maya cosmology as a relational orientation to each other and to the process of research that would ensue. Too often, according to the stories of the Mayan participants, these community beliefs and values were ignored or diminished. They sensed that guests from the Global North found them quaint and superstitious rather than a reflection of Mayan peoples spiritual and historic relationship with the land. Honest insights such as this contributed significantly to this project and were birthed with the help of a commitment to decolonizing research.

Turning now to the practice of ISL, with this understanding we hope to sketch a clear—while utterly contextualized—vision of reciprocity for ISL that is grounded in Mayan ways of knowing. We are aware of the imprecision that accompanies conceptualizations of reciprocity in the literature (Dostilio et al., 2012) and are equally aware of the complexities in conceptualizing reciprocity in the context of *international* SL that takes place in Mayan communities where the history of tourism and voluntourism have plastered a layer of commodification on all relationships (Little, 2004; Medina, 2003). It is difficult to disentangle ISL from these broader and growing industries and sometimes impossible to distinguish between visitors from the Global North who travel under the identity of tourist, voluntourist, or ISL participant. This is a challenge for Indigenous communities who, as we noted above, hope for the possibility of developing relationships of solidarity with visitors in their communities. Conceptualizations of reciprocity, therefore, will remain constricted without a critical examination of how the forces of marketization (Crabtree, 1998) have affected ISL in ways that create exchange-based relationships (Dostilio et al., 2012): volunteering, helping, service, and other directional terms often used in ISL are steeped in language that draws attention to questions of efficacy and dialogues about best practices (Palacios, 2010). Even terms such as service-learning that utilize the hyphen as a way of symbolizing mutual benefit (Hernandez, 2018) may, unfortunately, become a political placeholder rather than a true signifier of a practice that facilitates the potential for reciprocity.

Decolonial thinking is again a useful guide here, like a hammer and chisel to be used to chip away at those plastered layers, exposing our contributions to epistemicide (Santos, 2014). We wish to state again that conceptualizing something like reciprocity in a universalizing way is akin to the kind of homogenized global good of aid projects found in highly commercialized movements such as "Me to We" (Jefferess, 2012). Instead, reciprocity should be understood as malleable and defined by the particular relationship one finds oneself in; it is, ultimately, co-defined. Thinking decolonially, we wish to understand the ways that reciprocity in researcher/researched relationships differs from reciprocity in Global North participant/host community relationships. Likewise, and as an extension, reciprocity will likely include different variables in Global North (settler-colonial)/Global South (Maya) relationships than it would in Global South/Global South relationships, such as those cultivated during the encuentro between the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan participants as well as between two Indigenous peoples. The commitment to indigenization that the Mayan participants brought to the encuentro, based on their experiences of oppression in Guatemala, inspired several Nicaraguan participants to re-consider their Indigenous identities. We heard the Nicaraguan participants express an appreciation for these new growing relationships, saying things like, "I've related to the struggles of others" (Juan, focus group, August 6, 2017) and "I have learned to admire many of the women I met in the communities—they have a strong sense of resistance. . . . We appre-

ciated seeing other communities resisting—it helped us realize we are not alone in our struggles" (Marg, focus group, August 6, 2017). In these examples and in our observations of these of the growing relationships between peoples who both claim the Global South as home that solidarity was a core aspect of conceptualizing reciprocity. Simply stated, the desire for ISL programs to facilitate meaningful relational encounters was a key theme that emerged as a result of the encuentro conversations between the Guatemalan and Nicaraguan participants (Managua field notes, August 7, 2017).

There are, however, barriers to developing relationships of solidarity in and through ISL, which is something that the participants at the encuentro outlined and that we saw hints of throughout the findings of the study. Looking back at the data collected with this lens as our primary filter, we interpret two things to be significant. First is a move away from transactional encounters between Global North and Mayan peoples. We heard stories during the initial interviews that highlight consumer economic exchanges: families built additional showers and toilet facilities in order to meet the expressed needs of ISL participants, families traveled to larger markets in order to supplement the local produce with more exotic and protein-rich fare, and work projects that were initiated by ISL programs were redundant or underutilized by communities. Dismantling these kinds of exchanges may prove difficult as the current structures (secondary and postsecondary schools) that offer ISL are often institutionalized (Butin, 2006, 2010), and Global North participants looking for these opportunities often require greater financial capacities, which, as one insightful NGO worker in our study pointed out, constitutes the basis for "luxury education—it can't help but adopt consumerist logic" (Nance, Antigua focus group, May 18, 2016).

An overview of the literature pertaining to community impact reveals studies that examine the ways ISL benefits community partners, the institutional-community relationships, and the possibilities of such programs to create new and long-term investments in the work of NGOs and community organizations (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Reeb & Folger, 2013; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Vernon & Foster, 2002). While all these efforts represent fantastic and important areas of study, we suggest that the people who live in these Global South communities, and more so those living in Mayan communities, remain understudied, which diminishes the Indigenous ways of knowing and acts of resistance and liberation these communities are already participating in and that may provide helpful context for assessing community impact. Something we fear in research projects in international and Indigenous contexts, and even in this article, is an interpretation of community impact from a Northern analysis that subtly confuses community voice with the voices of community agencies, organizations, or the NGOs doing work in such places. It is for this reason that we wished to provide a self-facing reflexive analysis of our own research practices.

The reality remains that gathering data from those secondary sources is logistically less complex; however, something we wish to problematize is the tendency of information, analysis and findings, to flow northward. An example that hits close to home for us is that the Guatemalan participants in our study expressed their misunderstandings of ISL research, stating their perceptions at the outset of the various researchers who played a role: "Why are they coming, what do they want to know? Why are they here doing this research, what are they going to do with it?" "If they are going to do this (research) are they going to share the research with us? Are we going to have access to the information that they are taking away?" (Jas, Antigua focus group, May 18, 2016). Similar

worries were expressed regarding student participants of ISL programs. During the encuentro, it was expressed that "the community doesn't have any sense of follow-up; they see these groups as tourists and nothing more" (Feli, focus group, August 3, 2017), and there were frustrations expressed that "we really don't know what they do with the information they take from us" (Gene, focus group, August 3, 2017). In an ensuing conversation, one participant floated a question to the group, wondering what happens to students after their visits, to which someone replied with a touch of dark humor, "they forget about us" (Mary, focus group, August 3, 2017).

We find some wisdom in the words of Ana, a Maya elder from one of the Guatemalan communities who expressed a desire that "they (students) should stay in contact with us and continue to accompany our communities in whatever way they can" (field note, August 3, 2017). There is a distinct interest in building relationships of solidarity, of hoping for people to become advocates of and for their communities' decolonizing actions. When these tangible requests from communities to become advocates are harnessed by students and other participants upon returning to their homes for their own growing sense of "advocacy," it seems to us to be a demonstration of the extractive nature of learning through ISL. This, unfortunately, tends to be a common outcome of such neutered social justice efforts since Global North participants rarely speak the languages of the communities they visit, and, when combined with the oft-short-term reality of ISL programs, there are few opportunities to develop relationships of any depth. Furthermore, Global North participants often lack the knowledge and means to continue to be involved in host communities' struggles. In the cases where community organizations and/or NGOs offer opportunities to invest back, it is likely there are discrepancies between the NGO's evaluation of the Mayan communities needs and their own perception of need. Both the inability of students to develop relationships within the confines of ISL and the lack of continuity in relationships over the long-term, which is a key component of trust building, are forms of disregarding reciprocity. We wonder, skeptically, about the use of the term *reciprocity* when it is claimed by only one, often Northern, party as an outcome of ISL.

Conclusion

Let us reflect on our own growing understanding of decolonizing research and consider how Mayan epistemologies may shape conceptions of reciprocity in ISL. To frame this, we return to an important moment we observed during the *encuentro*: upon hearing the "gifts of story" (Kovach, 2010, p. 46) that each of the eight communities offered one another through presentations about their communities' history and culture, as well as political, social, and economic dynamics, there was a tangible resonance and a sense of responsibility that people developed for one another. These feelings laid the foundation for rich conversations and, therefore, a foundation upon which to co-construct reciprocity. Estrada (2005) similarly notes that "if we accept that respect and reciprocity mean more than saying "please" and "thank-you," but to challenge our actions and motives, then this means also a deep transformative process regarding how we operate in this world" (p. 51). It is worth considering how to integrate storytelling within Global North (settler-colonial)/Global South (Mayan) ISL encounters in ways that cultivate meaningful connection and understanding of one another's lived experiences. Learning *about* the struggles and moves to liberation and resilience of a Mayan community may be half the story that need

be told during ISL trips. We wonder about whether and how Global North visitors must prepare to share their stories and be capable of receiving the stories of others in more responsible ways, ways that may lead them to consider decolonial experimentations within the context of the trips in which they are participating.

By responsible, we mean to say there is something important about how "immediate" the possibilities of giving back were for the people who attended this Global South/Global South *encuentro*; stories were shared by all, phone numbers were exchanged, and a commitment to ongoing connection was established. This further problematizes Global North/Global South ISL, in which the big questi3on, claimed one of the Guatemalan participants at the *encuentro,* is that "the information they (students) receive isn't given back. . . . We need to make a formal agreement between the students and the communities where the groups commit to giving back the information to the community" (Ed, focus group, August 3, 2017). Several comments were made in this regard, one of which is worth representing here in full (excerpts from field notes, August 3, 2017):

> Woman 1: We receive groups from the basis of our Mayan spirituality. The way we host them and feed them and open our communities to them is a part of our Mayan spirituality.
>
> Man 1: I think that the community should be able to tell the sending groups what types of students they want to receive; they should have the ability to create a student profile that they think would be beneficial for the community.
>
> Woman 2: The groups don't always ask for permission to come into the community. They can come to Nicaragua without permission from the government, but we can't go to their country in the same way. Nonetheless, they need to ask permission to come into our community. It's an abuse if they do otherwise. We don't know what their motivations are. It could be that they want to come into our community and start to buy up land at a cheap price to take it away from us.
>
> Woman 3: Often times, these groups abuse the community by coming into the community without asking for prior permission.

These comments point to the necessity of clear communication, which Estrada (2005) explains in Mayan protocol "necessitates periodical visits and/or correspondence including the consultation throughout the process as regards to the knowledge being produced" (p. 49). ISL programs in and with Mayan and other Indigenous communities need to be designed in ways that respect these protocols in an attempt to claim reciprocity.

We could say that these findings require further research and that is true. However, we also have come to realize that these findings demand further practice. Even amidst imperfect structures such as ISL there are decolonial cracks that we hope to continue to work at prying apart. Co-defining reciprocity with Global North and Global South participants of ISL will be an ongoing endeavor, and each subsequent encounter will shed light on ways to grow in and decolonize those relationships. To begin, giving back may be as "simple" as distributing our economic privileges. Suggestions arose from participants of this study that this might look like a tax being taken from each Global North participant that would help fund similar ISL opportunities for Global South participants (Toby, Antigua focus group, May 18, 2016). One participant excitedly responded to this idea: "We should

make learning tours from the South to the North to learn about Colonialism!" (Nance, Antigua focus group, May 18, 2016). This suggestion represents a decolonizing act, something that requires practice and is, perhaps, a kind of education that could teach us to remain "present and alive" (Rendón, 2009, p. 66). We see experimentations such as these as being essential steps forward.

Finally, we conclude with a summary. For the Mayan Indigenous communities co-constructed reciprocity must include prioritizing the perspectives of those with less power, working to design programs that create space for storytelling, and respect for community ethics and protocols (Kovach, 2010). Reciprocity is not a product; it isn't something that can be claimed, but it may be something to be made over and over again, cultivated through decolonial experimentations.

Acknowledgments

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