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Welcome to the Alternative Breaks Fall Newsletter for 2014! It’s been an action packed semester for the program, and even as school is winding down, movements toward change are picking up speed. As the Newsletter Team is patching together all the submissions and content, the Winter Trips are preparing to embark on their journeys through service and entering community, students sit studying in forts of textbooks to prepare for final exams, alumni are building careers with the intention for social change, and participants, Break Leaders, and Directors alike are taking to the streets to stand against injustice in its many manifestations.

The layers of inequality within our society are thick, and there are many of them. From the international treaties like NAFTA that bankrupt our neighboring nations, to the impoverished agricultural laborers that fled their homelands to work in our fields; from the mass media that displays Ferguson protestors as a violent mob, to the officers that beat teenagers with their hands raised in peace; from the city development commissions that plan for condos where once stood mixed income projects; there are no threads of the human tapestry that are not burned by Oppression. As people connected deeply by our work and through our hearts, the pathways we take to social change are many. Whether it is through activism, community-engaged scholarship, direct service, or policy change, there are an infinite number of ways that social change can be made. In Alternative Breaks, it starts with the Self, and continues with the Us.

Since the start of October, participants in the three Winter Trips have been learning about the institutions and structures that uphold injustice, all through different lenses and with different focus. Magnolia Project, a ten year old trip that was foundational to the Alternative Breaks program, has been studying the history of New Orleans, the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, and the infrastructural inequities along race and class lines that have led to continued poverty and injustice in that place today. Meanwhile, in the Food Justice and Storytelling DeCal, students have been co-learning the art of carrying and sharing stories; stories of hunger, of farming, of land reform, of change toward a food system that gives everyone something healthy and nurturing to eat. The Urban Pathways trip is coming to understand poverty and human health through the study of the US Healthcare System, current reforms (PPACA), and social determinants of health.

In a few short weeks these trips will be entering communities with hearts open to hearing a different kind of knowledge: the truth of community members. Participants will travel to New Orleans, farms in the Bay Area, and inner Los Angeles to do service. Some will be returning home, others will bear witness to familiar injustices in a new place, and many will be experiencing the world in a radically new way.

At the start of November, the Spring Trips got a taste for what next semester holds by connecting with our local communities through the November Day of Action. All 12 trips visited local Community Partners in Okalond, Berkeley, and Albany to engage in direct service. Groups participated in clean-up efforts of the Berkeley Marina, in crafting picket signs for protests, in farming at the Gill Tract, and in rebuilding homes for elders.

Here on the Cal campus, many of us have been pursuing change with peers from the Alternative Breaks space. From the student led sit-ins of Wheeler Hall to the incredibly powerful demonstrations of solidarity with Ayctzinapa to the BSU (Black Student Union) organized shut-down of campus food courts, the people and communities of Alternative Breaks have been moving and shaking, each of us paving a pathway to justice, learning from our peers, and from the stories of movements past that are still the movements of today.

Perhaps in time we’ll find that it is not many pathways to justice we are paving, but that each of us is merely laying a stone on the same path. The oppression of one is the oppression of all, and as the walls of the systems begin to crumble, so too will the walls that have been colonized in our thoughts. As we are buckling down for the long study til final exams, as we are opening our minds to the knowledge of systemic inequities, as we are organizing action, as we are educating our families, as we are learning from our elders, as we are marching, as we are writing, as we are living and breathing, we are awakening.

We are moving to Conscious Action.
Get Involved with Alternative Breaks!
Alternative Breaks relies on grants, fundraising, and donations to maintain an affordable program for as many students as possible, regardless of their financial situation. Throughout the years, we have managed to provide highly subsidized trips to many students, but we would not be able to do so without your support!

$25 = Financial aid scholarship
$50 = Course materials for a trip
$100 = Communal housing for a week
$500 = Feeds 14 students for a week
Donate online at: https://give.berkeley.edu/egiving/index.cfm?Fund=FU0993000
Daniel came to New Orleans from Westminster, California, where one of the highest concentrations of Vietnamese people is located, to the other place with the highest concentration of Vietnamese people in the country: Village De L’est, a neighborhood in New Orleans East, colloquially called Versailles. Before Hurricane Katrina hit, poverty levels in Versailles were higher than the national average. After, poverty doubled (now 37%), the population halved, businesses closed, including the only grocery store in the zip code area. Five years later, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill further devastated already polluted marine and coastal ecosystems of the Gulf. Nearly one in three Vietnamese of New Orleans East worked in the seafood industry, and as aquatic life suffered, so too did the livelihoods of the Versailles community. Around then is when Daniel moved out. Having recently graduated from UC San Diego with a BS in Mammalian Physiology, he was looking for a way to live with a purpose, and came to Versailles to volunteer with the Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation (MQVN CDC).

When I ask Daniel how the grassroots organization that is VEGGI began, I’m a little surprised at his answer. I wonder, what was I expecting? Was I envisioning a technical assessment of community problems, a six month study conducted by an institute of sociology, phone calls to important agencies, white people in suits? I worry that I’d thought solutions could only come from somewhere above the poverty line, but maybe I just didn’t know what grassroots organizing looked like. That’s something I’d set out to do when I came here, to see the way that progress actually happens from within a community.

Daniel’s answer was simple: “I just started talking to people.” When he moved to the area in 2009, he had no intentions of embarking on a multi-year journey into creating his own nonprofit. It was only over many days of shared work, nights of shared drinks, and moments of building trust that he could really begin to hear the needs of his neighbors.

What he heard was this: There are not enough good jobs, commuting is not possible for everyone, there is still no source of fresh food for miles, and people are not looking for some handout, they want a livelihood that is their own. ‘So let’s change it,’ they decided. The planning began. Daniel spent his hours outside the CDC organizing the community, setting up forums and meetings to decide on what problems they wanted to target, and what skills they had to solve them. From this the VEGGI farmer’s cooperative was born.
During the fall semester, participants on the Magnolia Project Winter Break trip were asked to make creative education "life maps" and present them in their DeCal. The purpose of the life map assignment was to have students reflect on their educational experiences in order to personalize and ground a class discussion on the education system in New Orleans. Participants created scrapbooks, wrote poems, and made drawings for the assignment, among other methods of presentation. The following two life maps are by Magnolia Project participants Miin Choi and Mary Grace Perez.

by miin choi
Born to these country lands
I learned the country way
A life with family who understands
A life I thought would always stay

To an old school, I had went
Where books were torn and aged
Words and spelling I did resent
Every class was an invisible cage

Guided by loving hands
I bid goodbye to these country lands
The world I knew now so far away
Endless ocean cuts our bonds
We now must live the California way

I laid trapped in a new school
Where faces and words made no sense
In this new school I played the fool
My own words turned into a silent trance

In this steel cage, I sat so still
Surrounded by thorny words
In this steel cage, I sat so still
Till my identity unwound like cords

Many years soon went by
I had grown and evolved
To cast away my country origin
My native tongue had dissolved

This new me began to thrive
When the 7th year began
This new me had learned to survive
The new me became my new plan

The four teen years went by fast
Sports and clubs, I did them all
I surpassed and excelled every class
I had learned to fly, to no longer fall

Then to Berkeley did I go
I felt fear and awe
As I stared at this grand and wealthy flow
Medicine became my life and my very flaw

I felt the tension, dense and hostile
Like my skin against a poisoned claw
I held on tight and faked my smile
Here where competition is heated and raw

I remembered the native me
Who had been an alien in an alien world
Here I am again lost in a turbulent sea
An alien once more in an alien world

I began to bend and no longer soar
Began to be distorted to another will
But before I lost this new war
The me who was there remained still

The painted me slowly grew clean
The black and blues that had smothered me
Washed off to leave me in a white sheen
This country me that had been lost at sea

Nandito na ako (Here I am)
The native me
Nandito na ako (Here I am)
Brown and happy, but still yearning to be free

By

Mary Grace Perez
It all started two weeks ago, during the UCSF Regent’s protest. It was an opportunity to confront the oppressor-class within the UC system. To me the Regents represent the corporate elites that have facilitated the process of turning education into a business, in which students are simply commodities in a production process. Despite all misconceptions, this was a non-violent protest, mostly involving human barricades. Eventually, the regents did get in and at the meeting they expressed the view that they are raising tuition to increase opportunity for low-income Latino students. A far cry from reality, as several undocumented Latino students further explained at the protest. We channeled our rage into direct action which may not have prevented the regents from getting into the meeting, but certainly sent corporate power a strong message.

After returning to Cal, we felt powerful and ready to do something big. During our Magnolia project DeCal, I got an email saying that Wheeler Hall was being occupied/inhabited. I immediately went downstairs after class. I witnessed an initial group of 20 people quickly amass into a 200 person student-run space. It was breathtaking. It was surreal being in a space in which we knew a powerful movement was budding.

With each passing day, I developed an intimate bond with my Wheeler-Commons peers. It felt like we could communicate just by looking at the passion in one another’s eyes. I felt pain in my chest when I would leave the space for even an hour. We had an organic unity that I don’t think I had ever before experienced. No matter what happens, I love my fellow-commoners to death and that may be the most important thing.

I don’t know how it quite happened, but I eventually found myself engaging in more and more organizing work. After receiving a massive amount of support and solidarity from different groups, we were able to organize a massive walk-out which 1,500 to 2,000 students at Cal participated in. When the chains of debt and social pressure are loosened, an unimaginable amount of power is unleashed.

This semester does not mark the end of the movement. It is also not just about students. The neoliberal privatization that exploits and commodifies students is also the same system that allows our university to be connected to the military industrial complex, prison industrial complex, and other complexes. Love and Rage have to combine to take elite power head on, but radical politics and direct action have to be central. Let’s do well on finals, but as Percy Shelley said

“We will rise like lions after slumber.”
My concept of how movements form is better described by a video clip I saw awhile back in which a man starts dancing amidst a large crowd. After a few minutes of awkwardness a friend joins, normalizing the dance, until the entire park bursts into a collective dance party. My understanding has always been that movements are built in a grassroots fashion, starting with a few people who, over weeks and months and years, spread an ideology to mobilize for change. This process is, first of all, very slow. And the slow pace makes any tangible results even more impressive, demonstrating the incredible willpower of the network of people behind successful mobilization. The way the "United UC/Open UC" formed was almost the opposite—we started the ideology at the people level, every student who was informed was at least mildly opposed or concerned, and in time, the cause lost traction, became intangible, alienated individuals and communities with conflicting ideologies/schedules/ways of being.

And now begs the question: is this phenomenon at Wheeler Hall a movement? And, if so, where is it going? What or who is it moving? One way or another, if nothing else, the people and memories and opposition are still very much alive, but without the strength, courage, and level-headedness of other movements, we have the potential to be as flighty as the media’s attention span, having burned ardently without realizing all the energy it was producing or where to direct the light. If it is really to be a movement, it must be about tangible policies but—on a wider scale—about people. That demands a power shift on interpersonal, community, and institutional levels, to move people’s heads and hearts together. That is the only action of movement worth fighting for.
MY ALT BREAKS JOURNEY
NEW ORLEANS, LA 2012
VOICE OF THE EX-OFFENDER
Redistricting for better representation
GREEN LIGHT NEW ORLEANS
Restorative Justice Practices
KIDS RE-THINK NEW ORLEANS
ZULU
VEGGI FARMER'S CO-OP
LOWER 9TH WARD VILLAGE
WHERE IS YOUR NEIGHBOR?
FAMILY FUTURE WELCOME
CENTRAL VALLEY, CA 2013
UFW
UNITED FARM WORKERS
¡SI SE PUEDE!
COMMUNITY WATER CENTER
EL QUINTO SOL DE AMERICA
VIVA LA CAUSA
BERKELEY, CA 2014
#blacklivesmatter
102 SPROUL
COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS
ALAMEDA POINT COLLABORATIVE
SOLIDARITY IN ACTION
ALAMEDA SHOCK DOCTRINE FLOODLINES
intersectionality
This space whose violence we can trace
In "campaign[s] of fear and intimidation"
apprehending imaginations
In binary blood-drops of difference justifying oppression
Nuestros cuerpos convertidos en su lenguaje

"Campaign of fear and intimidation" apprehending imaginations
Conditioning to believe that one human can be
another’s illicit antonym
Nuestros cuerpos convertidos en su lenguaje
Of contrived common sense spoken into tangible violence

Perpendicular force piercing and violating natural continuation
"A campaign of fear and intimidation"
apprehending imaginations
Enforcing rules to restrict your inhalation and exhalation
Nuestros cuerpos convertidos en su lenguaje

"Campaign[s] of fear and intimidation"
apprehending imaginations
Blind to one’s drowning reflection in the tears in
another’s eyes
Nuestros cuerpos convertidos en su lenguaje
Gripping indifference, shaking you from dreaming.

"A campaign of fear and intimidation"
apprehending imaginations
Suffocating the breath between lips that respond to letters
Nuestros cuerpos convertidos en su lenguaje
De numeros Alien, robandole huellas a nuestro aliento

Suffocating the breath between lips that respond to letters
Another binary blood-drop left where difference justifies oppression
Usando numeros Alien, robandole huellas a nuestro aliento
In this space whose violence we can trace.
Break Leader Retreat, Fall 2014

November Day of Action

#BERKELEY
CON
AYOTZINAPA
Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise
I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Maya Angelou