Beyond the numbers: Tracking the Impact of the Pandemic On IE Communities

Setting and Methodology

Over the past decade, Ontario has become one of the largest hubs for the logistics (the packaging and movement of goods) industry in the country. Just thirty years ago, there were 1,600 warehouses in the region, creating 140,000 truck trips daily. Today there are nearly 4,000 warehouses covering more than 1.5 billion square feet, including parking lots, and an estimated 95,000 daily truck trips (Uranga, 2023). In 2022, the logistics industry created 24,400 jobs in the area. In 2021, it created 27,400, according to John Husing, an economic consultant who specializes in logistics in the Inland Empire. Median wage ranges from $18.57 an hour for warehouse workers to $24.93 for drivers(Uranga, 2023). This is almost $5 below the California average for medium hourly pay. Because of the difficulty of these jobs, the turnover rate is incredibly high. In a 2017 study done, it was found that the average turnover rate for warehouse workers in counties with Amazon fulfillment centers was 100.9 percent(National Employment Law Project, 2020). This study categorized workers as being “disposable” according to Amazon, stating that “Amazon relies on an extreme high-churn model, continually replacing workers in order to sustain dangerous and grueling workplace demands”(National Employment Law Project, 2020). This style of employee treatment is not just specific to Amazon, much of warehouse work practices the same inhumane treatment.
The Warehouse Worker Resource Center (WWRC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving working conditions in the warehouse industry in Southern California. Their mission statement explains, “The Warehouse Worker Resource Center builds worker power through education, advocacy, and collective action to improve working conditions for the hundreds of thousands of warehouse workers in the Inland Region and Southern California. We organize warehouse workers to end exploitation and support a strong, healthy community that is able to transform its relationship with the logistics industry. We do this in the service of warehouse workers gaining control over their workplaces, and holding corporations accountable to the people and the environment so that our community can thrive.” WWRC understands that the logistics industry is rapidly expanding in the Inland Empire and workers are being continuously exploited and mistreated. They also understand that with this rapid expansion, there is room for an immense amount of politicization, organizing, and building community. By creating a strong community of workers, the Inland Empire can and is leading the country in the fight towards warehouse worker power.

WWRC has many programs set up to create community, provide social services and build political awareness. Some of these include their La Escuelita Viva, or the Living School events, which serve as educational workshops on topics chosen by the community, as well as a monthly health fair, where WWRC collaborates with other local community organizations to spread health awareness to the IE community. Unfortunately the pandemic paused many of these programs. With the dangers of social gatherings, in-person events halted and sustaining an online community proved to be challenging. One of WWRC’s current goals is to reestablish some of the community power that was lost during the pandemic.
The project that I am a part of is building off of the work of last semester’s CASA fellows, Elena Hockensmith and Sami Gottsegen. Last semester CASA fellows worked to create a community profile. The goal of this was to create a well-rounded narrative of folks that live in the Inland Empire, focusing on what their assets and needs are and how they have been affected by COVID. They developed three different interview guides, one for individual interviews: one for community partner organization interviews, and one for group interviews. These interviews are intended to serve as a way to build a community profile that is full of real life experiences and stories. Elena and Sami, stated their goals as making these guides to secure more sustainable research that can be long lasting and revised to adapt to current WWRC projects in the future.

This semester Deo, Daisy, and I have discussed how to move forward with these guides. We want to continue forward with this community profile, but want to make sure we are doing so in a way that fits in with the current WWRC campaigns, and will be beneficial to the community. In planning how to conduct this research we have kept some major ideas in mind. One is making sure we all know how we are defining community. We have had many conversations laying out the need to build community power, but it is important to be intentional about who we are talking about when we talk about community. Obviously we are thinking about warehouse workers, but because of the nature of the logistics industry and the constant turnover rate, this could mean anyone from a past warehouse worker to someone who is considering future employment in a warehouse. This framing of intentional community definition has led us to understand how it may be beneficial to focus on more of a geographic community of the Inland Empire.

Part of our methodology has been thinking about how we are responding directly to the needs of the community, rather than imposing what we believe they should need. Through
conversations with Deo and Daisy, two organizers at WWRC, I have learned that WWRC is in contracts with the government to do research on COVID in the community. They also have explained that this research will be done regardless and they (WWRC) want to be the ones controlling the narrative rather than outside governmental agencies. When we think about doing research that is focused on the impacts of the pandemic, we have been careful to also make sure that this research focuses on what the community wants to focus on. While statistics on vaccinations, for example, may not be the main priority of the community, paid sick leave could be. At the forefront of our mind remains the question of how do we talk about current public health and economic issues in addition to or in relation to the issues that are in people’s minds? In doing research on the impact of the pandemic, we have focused on the areas of most priority for the community, while balancing the requirements coming from government grants and other funding aspects.

Another large part of our methodology has been the co-creation of knowledge with the community. As we move forward with these interview guides it has been very important that this is to be a dialogue rather than us extracting information from the community. That is why we decided on holding a community event rather than only a focus group. Through much thought and consideration about our goals for this project, we decided that having any event to kick off the Escuelita events again would be very powerful in having a mutual conversation about what the community knows and what they need. Through this community event, community members would get a chance to share their stories and experiences so that WWRC can gather information to better inform their work to organize and develop leadership. WWRC will then follow the more traditional Escuelita structure of some sort of presentation on a community-decided need. We
discussed this event focusing on the policy that affects folks during/post-pandemic. With the “state of emergency” ending, certain benefits will also be revoked, which is a key part of the pandemic that will affect our community base. This event will function as a way for all of us to develop knowledge we can use to grow as an intentional, capable community. Through community members' reflections on the pandemic and the sharing of current policies and their effects, we can co-create knowledge of and about our community, understanding the impact of the pandemic beyond what official statistics and reports tell us. In this process, we will also build more community, which is a key element of WWRC as a whole. WWRC does just provide resources for folks, but also works to politically frame folks' experiences. Through sharing stories and lived experience with an organization fighting for worker power and respect, it can become easier to contextualize these experiences within a larger political context. As we all talk through our stories together, while at the same time as mapping community needs, assets, and resources, a greater connection is felt between individuals' lived experiences and the work that WWRC does.

WWRC’s desire for international political movement building is a large part of this research’s methodology. As I touched on above, WWRC’s goals are not only to provide community members with resources, but to actively change the circumstances that created the need for those resources as well. In “Social Service of Social Change,” a chapter in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* by Paul Kivel, Kivel writes about how social services without social change, can actually create more harm than good, as they feed into respectability politics of “helping people get ahead” rather than “get together.” (Kivel, 2007) Social services without social change does not address the root of issues, it does not mobilize people to take autonomy
over their health or work, it perpetuates the problematic tendencies of charity. Money or resources are given to the oppressed but no power is actually transferred. WWRC recognizes this and that is why all of their actions and resources have explicitly political framing. In terms of this research specifically, connecting community member’s stories and experience in a larger framing of understanding why they aren’t getting paid sick leave, affordable health care, safe working conditions etc. is essential to politicizing people. Deo and Daisy have explained that they want to create this community profile and hear about people’s needs and assets in the IE, to build community in order to build political power. While the information we learn and hear about might not be explicitly political, we are approaching this project in a political context, and hoping to politicize people throughout the project.

Positionality

Within this research, it has been important to understand my positionality as an outsider of this community. I am a white, twenty-one year old queer student at Pitzer college, who does not speak Spanish. I have extremely different lived experiences than other people at WWRC. As I navigated this, I was sure to continuously self-reflect on the ways I was involved with WWRC, and how I was adding instead of subtracting from their spaces. I have been a part of the Claremont Student Workers Alliance for the past two years, and so having some knowledge of labor organizing in the Inland Empire was helpful coming to this space. I am also a student organizer with other abolitionist campaigns at the Claremont Colleges and as I have gotten involved in this work fairly recently it was an incredible learning experience to work with Deo and Daisy, understanding what organizing as life work can look like. Finally, I am a human
biology major, focusing on health and healing from a disability and abolitionist framework. This was an identity I brought into my research, as we had many conversations on how we define community health in terms of the pandemic. I had many conversations with Deo specifically on how we can incorporate disability frameworks into the research, thinking about the connections between disability, debility, and work leading to larger conclusions about what community members can strive for when they think about a healthy community.

Again, constantly revisiting the ways my identities affect the way I act in spaces was very important through this journey and helped to ground me in my stake, why this is important to me, and the ways in which different types of liberation are bound together.

Lit Review

I want to begin with what feels like the most rational place: the understanding that we, as a country, are in an extremely unique and pivotal moment in history. Heading into year three of the COVID-19 pandemic we, collectively, have had to re-evaluate our ways of interacting and caring for our communities and the world. Our country has had to develop a politic around sickness and death as it was moved to the forefront of our minds; what we were willing to sacrifice, and drawing from Foucalt’s theory of biopolitics, who we’re willing to let die. The most vulnerable members of our society became ever more clear as those who bore the brunt of the pandemic. Those of us who are frontline workers, had no option of moving virtual and slowing down, and in turn, kept the economy and our society going through a very dark time. In this literature review I hope to formulate a political landscape that contextualizes the current upswing in U.S. labor movements within the pandemic. While warehouse working conditions
have been horrifying, to say the least, for the past decades, COVID shone a light on these daily abuses, bringing the conversation into a more public arena. With the state of emergency now projected to “end” where are we leaving our most vulnerable community members? We saw the ways that government intervention through stimulus checks, access to free medical services, funding for community based disaster responses all benefited essential frontline workers and other vulnerable populations. With these services now being cut, it is past time to understand the death tolls and pain inflicted by the pandemic, as not isolated events, but the culmination of deep systemic issues that will not end with fewer COVID infection rates.

I want to touch on some of the current discourse having to do with our government's response to COVID-19. In a recent article in the Atlantic, Céline Gounder, an infectious-disease physician, a senior fellow at the Kaiser Family Foundation, and the editor at large of Kaiser Health News critiqued the U.S. government’s response to the pandemic as individualizing an institutional problem. Our government has narrowed in on a “boost, boost boost” strategy, encouraging the most COVID-conscious Americans to continue getting their booster vaccines. Dr. Gounder explains that this response does little to address any of the systemic issues of who is suffering the most from COVID and why, relying on biomedical interventions placed on the individual. (Gounder, 2023) This then perpetuates the cycle of individuals with access and means seeking out prevention and treatment, while others are blamed for not doing so. This blame, Dr. Gounder argues, serves to absolve government officials of responsibility to do more. (Gounder, 2023)

With the U.S. government currently in the process of declaring an end to the public health emergency, it is important to understand the discourses happening that counter what our
government is publishing. Dr. Gounder’s article provides a lens into some of the political discourse happening that contextualizes the government's response to the pandemic, which defines it as an isolated event that can be “fixed” on an individual level. It is important to note that the COVID pandemic is not over. For the past six months, the U.S. has averaged 300 to 500 COVID deaths a day. The idea of living with COVID has become a euphemism for accepting around 150,000 additional deaths a year. (Gounder, 2023) Because there has been a push to individualize treating covid (i.e. getting vaccinated, wearing masks) this still leaves us with an immense mortality rate. While a comprehensive, society-wide approach to COVID might mean focusing on air quality, making sure everyone has access to health care, rethinking work environments that force constant exposure and tax the body to produce a weaker immune system, this has not been prioritized. As the state of emergency ends, so does our collective care for marginalized groups that have been made the most vulnerable. It is important here to note that the individualizing of COVID prevention also pertains to people that can afford luxuries of having virtual options within their profession. As WWRC works with warehouse workers particularly, this was never an option. The conditions of the warehouse, which already have been proved dangerous on multiple accounts, continue to become more hazardous.

The Strategic Organizing Center (SOC), a coalition of four large labor unions, put out a report in April 2022, outlining some of the dangers of the Amazon production systems for workers. They found that Amazon workers sustained nearly 40,000 injuries in 2022, a staggering 49% of all injuries in the warehouse industry last year.

“In 2020, at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Amazon initially relaxed work quotas to allow workers to take pandemic safety precautions. But by October 2020, even as COVID
caseloads were beginning to rise during the pandemic’s second wave, Amazon reinstated its production-focused discipline policies—just ahead of Prime Day. Amazon’s obsessive focus on speed—and the monitoring and discipline systems it uses to enforce work rates—have been the center of worker advocacy efforts over the past year.” (Strategic Organizing Center, 2022)

This study only emphasizes how warehouse workers’, especially those employed by Amazon, conditions of labor got exponentially worse through the pandemic. Warehouse workers were not afforded any luxury of slowing down during the pandemic. Their work pace increased, due to a direct correlation of those who were allowed to “slow down,” ordering online without having to leave the safety of their own homes. An individualizing of COVID prevention therefore allows an invisible shift of labor to move onto these frontline workers. They were not only exposed to COVID, as they had to work in person during the height of the pandemic, but were also endangered further as their pace of work increased, producing more workplace injuries.

This leads to the next piece of literature that has greatly informed my research and political analysis in WWRC. Jasbir Puar, a U.S. based philosopher and queer theorist, and professor and graduate director of women's studies and gender studies at Rutgers University, explores concepts of slow death and the debilitating acts of the state in her book *The Right to Maim, Dibilaty, Capacity, Disability*. Lauren Berlant, a world-renowned scholar and queer theorist situates the term “slow death” as simply, “a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life.” (Puar, 2017, p10) The idea is that as a culture we understand how to value and respond to catastrophe and death, but the constant conditions of living that are in fact slowing killing us are often kept invisible and out of public discourse. Puar is in dialogue with Berlant here, invoking the idea of the state’s right to maim. She argues that the state’s hyper
focus on catastrophe and death corresponds to the more invisible daily maiming that its citizens endure. Puar uses a framework of disability justice and Foucault’s theory of biopolitics to discuss this idea. She explains,

“Biopolitics of debilitation reveals that the propagation of such frames not only excludes those who cannot perform exceptional cultural rehabilitation or exceptional relations to disability but also works to obscure the explicit injuring and debilitation of populations, highlighting at whose expense— whose slow deaths—these frames hinge.” (Puar, 2017, p20)

This idea is essential to understanding the current work being done at WWRC for multiple reasons. For one, it situates a critique of the government’s response to COVID as a place where the state takes actions (i.e. providing stimulus checks, access to more health care) during times that have been labeled as emergency. While this is important, it lacks the understanding that policies like this would be constantly beneficial for folks working jobs that are constantly endangering their well-being. As encouraged by Dr. Gounder, we should understand that we are not through the pandemic and our policy should reflect that. At the same time, we must realize that the response to COVID needs to move past an individualization of catastrophe to a collective reimagining of welfare structures that address the root of the systemic issues at play.

Moving beyond just the effects and risks of the COVID pandemic, we must also understand that the pandemic shed light on structural issues that have been occurring for decades. In many ways COVID brought to light the dangerous working conditions of warehouses (i.e. the close quarters, little breaks, extreme heat environments etc) that have always been occurring. Through conversations with my supervisors of WWRC, we discussed that during periods of emergency it is much more likely for strong opinions to arise in public discourse, but how are we responding
to the daily abuses and maiming of the workplace when it is not as visible? By drawing on these ideas of slow death and daily maiming, I hope to be in dialogue with these thinkers in discussing how we continue to advocate for worker power in the midst of COVID and beyond. By using some of the momentum spotlighted by COVID, we can increase public knowledge of the constantly dangerous work environments that WWRC’s base is exposed to.

It is important to note here that while this is one of our goals in this research project with WWRC, it is not a new idea. Building worker power through the pandemic has become a national trend. In 2021 and 2022, over 6,500 workers at over 250 corporate-owned Starbucks stores in the United States voted to unionize with Workers United. In April 2022, a majority of the roughly 8,300 workers at Amazon’s Staten Island warehouse, known as JFK8, voted to join the Amazon Labor Union, becoming the company’s first unionized facility in the U.S. (Palmer, 2023) Railroad employees were so close to a strike the Biden administration intervened, despite the outcry among rail unions, who felt this inhibited their ability to negotiate. (Al Jazeera, 2022) At this point in time, 71% of Americans approve of unions, the highest in nearly six decades and up from 48% in 2009, a Gallup poll conducted in August 2022 found (McCarthy, 2022). To understand this swell in labor movements throughout the U.S., I want to draw from an interview with David H. Webber, a School of Law professor of law and Paul M. Siskind Scholar, as well as the author of The Rise of the Working-Class Shareholder: Labor’s Last Best Weapon. Webber explains that unions have not been this popular since the mid-1960s. He explains why the pandemic may have had some effect on this:

“If you are a trucker, if you work on the railroads, if you work as a barista, if you work for Amazon delivering products, if you’re truly a frontline worker, then working from home is not
an option. Zoom work is an option for many people in our society, but it is not an option for many of the people where we’re seeing the greatest focus of labor activism, right? There isn’t a work-from-home alternative—they’re there together, working together in the same space day in, day out. I’m wondering to what extent just being present with each other is something that enables people to work together better and kind of do the sort of collective common good interest thing that is required to push for a labor union.” (Brown, 2022)

COVID not only shed light on those who had to bear the most risk of the pandemic, accelerating trends that were already existing. It also provided the space for those who were working in person to organize, critically understanding why they were being the most affected and building power to change some of those circumstances. Webber suggests that the pandemic sparked an internal collective consciousness of how exactly workers were being exploited and how they could stand up and push back.

Within my research for WWRC, we are focusing on experiences of community members during COVID to understand where people turned during this difficult time, what resources and systems they used in hopes to spark the type of political consciousness that Webber discussed. Part of WWRC’s mission is to build worker power. Through this literature review we can understand more clearly why thinking about the pandemic critically can build more worker power.

Data Coding and Thematic Analysis

As WWRC is a large organization with many projects at hand, Deo, Daisy and I continuously re-evaluated and re-prioritized where I would be the most useful and what research
would be helpful to continue forward with. Staying in line with the Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) framework, I kept an open mind and much flexibility during the different turns that this work took over the semester. Through the research process and the information we gathered, multiple themes emerged in WWRC’s work.

The Co-creation of knowledge and Building Community in the Process

We started the semester thinking about the three interview guides that the last CASA fellows made for WWRC. We quickly realized that because of my lack of Spanish there would be a strong barrier in carrying out these interviews. The base I would most likely be able to reach would be WWRC’s Community Partner Organizations (CPOs), as there are more English/bilingual folks in these organizations. When thinking about how to reach these people, it was brought to my attention that when conducting these interviews it would be important that the people who were being interviewed feel like they are not just giving but are receiving something in the process. The leaders of these CPOs are very busy people and are doing very important work. We would want any research being done with them to have multiple goals, not just collecting stories and data, but building community and stronger relationships that will benefit both WWRC and their prospective organization. We decided that to do this, we would hold a community event that would function as a place where members from the CPOs can share their stories, we can collectively map out the similarities and differences between their experiences through the pandemic and then WWRC will share some more specific information on recent policy related to the pandemic that affects our communities. Through focus groups, ranking activities, full-scale mapping and guest lectures, this event would culminate in a wide array of
knowledge. As we planned out the agenda, it was made very clear that we are not looking for any specific answers or stories. We sometimes do not even have the questions. As a community based organization, WWRC takes the idea of co-creating knowledge very seriously. By co-creating knowledge as a community we produce knowledge from the community for the community’s benefit. None of us have the “answer” on how to create healthier communities, but when we come together we start to generate collective knowledge on what these answers could be. Our work is not done in silos, but exists within the webs and tangles of each other’s: we discover knowledge through each other.

The other piece of this is that when we co-create knowledge, we build community in the process. As we first began thinking about this project and why we are interested in community member’s experiences through the pandemic, one of our main goals was to build back some of the community that was lost over the pandemic. As much in-person organization work was cut short, many connections were lost. A big goal of this semester has been to build back some of that lost community through our event. This is when we decided to turn our community event we were planning into a kickoff of the first in-person La Escuelita Viva event since the pandemic. To give some contextualizing and historical backgrounds of La Escuelita, “WWRC and community members who lead La Escuelita foster a community space with the goal of ensuring our community is well-informed about the natural, social and political realities in which we live our lives. We seek a critical understanding of the issues at hand through an analysis of root causes and of impacts on our lives. We pursue liberatory solutions and capacity to apply new knowledge to transform our reality. We focus on the strengths we have as a community by highlighting the positive actions we can take to uplift those around us and make systemic
change.” (WWRC Website) In the past, these events sometimes functioned as “Know your Rights” events, or “Campaign Updates and Current Affairs Affecting Us” presentations. They have historically been a time where the community comes together to intentionally grow their knowledge. They have been powerful in increasing community bonds and accountability to each other, as well as increasing political awareness and politicizing individuals' personal lives. If our CPO community event could also function as an Escuelita event, we could not only invite CPO leaders, but workers and other members of the community as well. By doing so, we would enrich our understanding of the effects of the pandemic and create more bonds between other organizations in the area, as well as the populations they serve.

*Define Health and Preparing for the Next Disaster*

Since we were focusing on the impacts of the pandemic on IE communities, a question that emerged from the get-go was how are we defining personal and community health. We rooted ourselves back in our original goal of building out a more dynamic, lively community profile of the IE. When we discussed wanting more information on the health of our communities, it was in the context of this community profile. We have the official reports and numbers that the government gives about our health, rates of vaccinations, obesity, average age of death etc, but we want to look beyond this and find a more intersectional and dynamic reflection of the health of our communities. This type of reflection requires us to critically think about what we mean by healthy, and urge our communities to do the same. Deo, Daisy, and I focused on internal political education as a means to understand more clearly what a healthy community meant to us. Deo recommended I listen to Death Panel, a podcast about the political
economy of health, and read the book *Health Communism*, in which Beatrice Adler-Bolton and Artie Vierkant (co-hosts of Death Panel) examine how capital has instrumentalized health, disability, madness, and illness to create a class seen as “surplus,” regarded as a fiscal and social burden. Through reading this, as well as Jasbir Puar’s *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* we constructed our own complicating notions of health that connected the health of our communities to the workplace and the larger political context in which we live. When thinking about the health of vulnerable populations, Deo wrote, “One important concept in critical public health theories is the idea that people are being made vulnerable, put in that position through the systems that then engage them as such, and in that way define them, their place and role and value in society. How should this inform our social inquiries and social action?” (Elsie’s Fieldnotes, 4.7.23) Learning and reading these theories have been essential in building up our own understanding of how to frame the health of our communities within the questions we hope to ask. As we prepared for the community event and the activities within it, we focused on asking questions about how people value their health, and their relationship between work and health, as this is something that varies from person to person. Traditionally working class people and people of color are less likely to identify as being disabled regardless of the debilitating working conditions they often experience. Through a redefinition of health, we hope to not only understand a more multifaceted profile regarding the health of our communities, but also politicize people in the process, drawing connections between the debilitating conditions and daily maiming of the workplace and their own personal views of their health. We hope to foster the political consciousness that understands health is taken from marginalized individuals and by asking for healthy working conditions, for example, one is only asking for something that
is rightfully theirs. All people deserve a right to their health, and this understanding can help empower community members to fight for that right.

Throughout the semester, another theme that came up was building community to prepare for the next disaster. The California COVID-19 Workplace Outreach Project (CWOP) is a project where partner organizations have been conducting outreach activities to educate workers and employers in high-risk industries, such as the food, agriculture, and logistic sectors, on how to minimize the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace, and educating essential workers about COVID-19-related labor laws. WWRC has been a part of CWOP, which is now entering its third round of the project. As the state of emergency is ending the funding for this project has been cut from 50 million to 25 million dollars and therefore the project is becoming much less of a priority within the partner organizations. Deo and Daisy have expressed that the most important part of this project for them has been the connections they have made with other organizations that can reach workers. This type of government/institutionalized project, while important, does not always further the agenda of more radical organizations like WWRC. But learning how to use funding and resources to push forward their own agenda is a skill practiced. Fostering deep relationships with the other organizations in CWOP, Deo and Daisy explain, will be extremely important to prepare for the next emergency so that we can more quickly respond. As CWOP funding is being cut, in similar ways to most government COVID relief intervention, building community infrastructure to create more self-reliance is essential. The focus on collecting narratives with CPOs and mapping out community resources at the event we have been planning is doing the work of building up more of this infrastructure. When we think about the pandemic outside of a vacuum, it becomes clear that this will not be the only disaster in the near future.
Being able to respond quickly and with solid infrastructure for the next disaster will depend on how we critically think about our responses during the pandemic and how we can come together as a community to ask for more.

**A Marathon, Not a Sprint**

WWRC is a large organization that takes on many different tasks and types of services. Because of this, there was constant movement in the ways I contributed to their work. We spent much time developing a plan for the community event we would be holding for CPO leaders and then deciding that we want to open up the event to the larger community to not only this population. The event was pushed back on multiple occasions due the ramping up of different campaigns that WWRC was running. Unfortunately the event was pushed into after the semester ended, so I would not have been in the area. It was important to understand through the process that organizations like WWRC do not run on a student semester timeline, and therefore embracing that my role in this work looks very different than it would if I were not a student. To gather some tangible data before the semester ended we ended up putting together a form to be sent out to CPO leaders, which were a condensed version of the questions that will be asked at the community event. This form would then help to concretize the agenda for the community event, helping WWRC understand what folks would like to learn about/take away from the event. We first sent the form to WWRC internal staff to gather some internal data as well as feedback from the form. As we analyzed the responses, we came to the conclusion that we had to rework the form, seeing that much of the data was difficult to draw any real conclusions from. We did so and sent the form to CPO leaders, but unfortunately no responses from CPO leaders
have been recorded to date. This was another example of understanding that organizations that are already stretched thin will not have the same urgency to fill out a form that a student might have for the arbitrary end of semester deadline. Approaching the work from a place of flexibility has been essential in my work with WWRC. Sometimes I found it difficult to get out of a student mindset of wanting to complete a project within a certain time frame even if it were to rush the process. On multiple occasions I found myself wishing that we put on the community event with what we had, believing that if we were not fully prepared that it would be worth it. I have learned so much from Daisy and Deo, and specifically in these moments, patience. We are running a marathon, not a sprint. From people who have devoted their lives to organizing, they understand that sometimes things move slow. And that is okay. Daisy and Deo are accountable to this work, they know that if something does not happen this month, it can happen the next month. Settling into this mindset, and leaving my sense of urgency behind was essential to fully immerse myself in the work. While I will be going home after the semester ends, I feel confident that the community event will happen, and much more successfully than if it were to be rushed to my time frame.

Looking Toward the Past and Future

In a conversation about the past and future that I had with a professor the other day, he told me about the conceptualization and gestures of time held by the Aymara, an indigenous group from the Andean highlands in South America. He explained that in his culture, they speak of the future as being behind them and the past as ahead. The future is something that you cannot see, but you are led by the past. Respecting and holding space for this orientation toward time, I
want to situate how I see this project moving forward with this concept. As we hopefully restart WWRC’s La Escuelita events, we can look toward the past to see everything that these events have brought to the community and what was accomplished. The UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program created an archive about how the Southern California community is facing the COVID-19 pandemic. They cite La Escuelita (online versions) as an essential part of responding to the pandemic. “La Escuelita emerged out of the direct experience of workers involved in resisting extreme heat exposure, workplace violence, precarious jobs tied to environmental damage, and lately the COVID-19 pandemic. Its growth is manifest in the type of healing education offered to a community, such as their very successful Online Health Fairs!” (WOSHTEP, 2020-2021) Although La Escuelita events have been less popular online, they have still remained an essential part of building collective knowledge through the pandemic. As we think about re-starting in person events, we can build off the work that has already been done and the community we can continue to build up. This article also mentioned the Health Fair, which pre-pandemic, was a part of La Escuelita events as well. “Three times a year, la Escuelita Viva becomes our Health and Wellness Fair, with the aim to provide educational information and participation in activities that encourage us to prioritize our health. This includes educational presentations, medical screenings and vaccines, references for local clinical services as well as housing and legal support.” (WWRC Website) Starting in person Health Fair events would be a great way to implement some of the redefining of health and wellness we critically thought about this semester. Using the tools of community based education (La Escuelita) as well as tangible solutions and resources for everyday ailments (Health Fairs) are ways that WWRC increases their organizing base for the larger goal of creating more worker power. Starting both La
Escuelita and Health Fairs in person will be an important step in rebuilding community since the pandemic, and moving forward with their larger goals. This is something that the next CASA fellows can aid in.

In terms of building up more community infrastructure to prepare for the next disaster, an important step moving forward is to think about how to create space that feels energizing and healing for CPO leaders, increasing the capacity of the ways we are able to interact. As I stated earlier, we did not end up receiving responses from CPO leaders when we sent out the survey. While this is partly due to the time constraints we had, it is also important to draw some conclusions from the lack of responses. CPO leaders as well as WWRC leaders are stretched thin, juggling many different campaigns and projects. As we move forward with increasing centralized community infrastructure, this will involve effort on all CPO leaders; to do this we must think about the ways to do so, and how the spaces we create could be healing spaces in themselves. It was clear that filling out a survey was not the best way to gather responses, as it can just feel like another task complete that is more depleting than energizing. In the future, I would recommend holding an in person event where CPO leaders could come together and discuss the ways they see their organization fitting into the larger community profile and infrastructure of the IE. Although it is difficult to get everyone in one room, having a space that creates more community and is healing in itself, I believe, would be much more fruitful and would add to not only collecting better data but to the experience of the CPO leaders themselves.

Finally, a new project I began working on toward the end of the semester was creating a Health Resource Guide. Deo shared with me a framework that they use at WWRC: change people’s perspective to change the way that people feel, ultimately to change the way that people
take action. This resource guide is an attempt to begin with this first step: change perspective.

This guide is focused on the theme that continued to arise this semester, our and our communities’ ability to critically define health. Since the start of the pandemic, public health has been one of the most talked about areas in the media, by our politicians, by the general public. This guide attempts to reconstruct the common definitions of health and healing through a multimedia collection of theory, interviews, podcasts, poems, historical examples and more. This guide is a way of looking forward to the past. We can learn from countless historical and ancestral examples of understanding the ways that people have been taught to value their health and the ways that we can push back on some of the common discourse around public health. By understanding examples of resistance, in both organizational settings, as well as personal ones, we can politicize health further, empowering people to take action against the injustice they see and feel in their embodied realities. This is a living document, that I hope to continue working on through the summer and after.
References


University Press.


