‘STILL WE RISE’
Critical participatory action research for justice

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(one voice) We have abandoned the shadow to proudly speak our minds to challenge ‘commonsense’, which claims that we are apathetic and careless.

(another voice) It is obvious we will not melt into the pot, but rather will savour our flavours in a bowl of pico de gallo.

(one voice) We are, most importantly, the people who make up Utah.

(one voice) We share the same land, breathe the same air, live on the same soil. Why are we not treated the same?

(all) We have come – our time is now! Today! Not yesterday!

(one voice) We are rejecting the crumbs that we have been given and demand that we be given a piece of the pie – a piece with which we will nourish our communities and counteract the hunger that we have been plagued with.

(all) We are hungry! Hungry for change!

(one voice) Meaningful change!

from We the People, a spoken-word piece performed by Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective

Taking up space in the rotunda of the Utah State Capitol, we performed the spoken word piece We the People (excerpt above), demanding our rights in loud, sing-song voices, claiming home, a sense of belonging and community. Referring to the first line of the US Constitution, we rearticulated what this means through the lens of immigrant experiences. In our participatory performance, we joined those organizing for migrant justice across the US (and the world), whether on the frontline calling for an end to attacks on immigrants, protesting at detention centres and senators’ offices or working behind the scenes to care for and support each other, engaging in a quiet politics of transformation and resistance (Askin 2015; Solorzano and Delgado Bernal 2001). Bearing in mind the wisdom of the anti-apartheid movement, ‘Nothing about us, without us, is for us’, we engage with critical participatory action research (PAR) to address structural injustice through collective knowledge production and activism.

The political economic context of globalization is experienced by many as a state of ongoing crisis. These are harrowing times indeed. Undocumented immigrants are under threat, including community members and the extended family with whom we research, create, and work alongside. This crisis is not new, but it has deepened exponentially over
the past few years. Stark images of children at the US–Mexico border sleeping in cages and separated from their families, the growing military presence at the border, the amplification of aggressive xenophobic rhetoric and the US government shutdown over funding the border wall stake out the contours of the ongoing crisis. Within this context, Appadurai (2006, 168) argues that researchers’ ‘right to research’ is the right to ‘systematically increase the stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings’. With a commitment not only to study injustice but to do something about it, we are inspired by the participation and action of immigrant young people and their families, who work together in order to open up an expansive conversation about what kind of world we are fighting for. With the knowledge that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde 2003, 2), we are committed to doing research differently, in a way that honours our whole selves, our culture and our community. Drawing upon our work with the Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective (https://maacollective.org), an intergenerational social justice think-tank based in Salt Lake City, Utah, we discuss the relationships between critical PAR and activism drawing on specific projects.
In what follows, we offer a brief overview of critical participatory action research (PAR), exploring the principles of this epistemological approach and the commitments involved. Next, we discuss the productive tensions between theory and practice in our work focused on the concerns of immigrant communities.

Critical participatory action research

Offering a meaningful framework for researchers committed to social justice and change, critical PAR is an epistemological approach to collaborative knowledge production that draws upon feminist, critical race and Indigenous theories, community development and legacies of grassroots organizing, antiracist and social justice movements (Delgado Bernal 2001; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 2005; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado 1983; Du Bois, 1898; Hale 2008; hooks 1999; Horton 1990; Kretzmann and McKnight 1996; Smith 1999; Torre et al. 2012; Tuck 2009). Tracing interdisciplinary lineages from around the world (in particular, Latin and South America), PAR is informed by wide-ranging thought from across the social sciences, including liberation theology, critical pedagogy, psychology, sociology and geography (Bell 2001; Bunge et al. 2011; Bunge and Bordessa 1975; Cammarota and Fine 2010; Fals Borda 1979; Fine 2017; Freire 1997; Hale 2008; Hart 1997; Lewin 1948; Pain and Kindon 2007; Torre et al. 2015, 2017; Torre and Ayala 2009; Zeller-Berkman 2014). Feminist geographers have played a critical role in theorizing PAR as an alternative ontology, drawing on situated knowledge and taking seriously what it means to do social science (Mrs C. Kinpaisby-Hill 2011; Askins and Pain 2011; Breitbart 2003; Cahill 2007; Cameron and Gibson 2005; Donovan 2014; Elwood 2006; Gilmore 2008; Katz 1994; Kesby 2005; Kindon et al. 2007; Nagar 2014; Pratt 2003; Pain 2004; Pain et al. 2011; Pratt 2010; Ritterbusch 2019). Recognizing the connectedness of knowing, doing and being, critical participatory praxis may potentially destabilize binaries of theory and practice to offer ‘an alternative ontology of theorizing’ that moves between social constructions and embodied and emotional experiences (Mrs C. Kinpaisby-Hill 2011). What this looks like in practice is a process that starts with the investigation of personal experiences, moves towards social theorizing and structural analysis, and ultimately, action, as will be described in more detail.

Putting the emphasis upon process, PAR recognizes the power of knowledge produced in collaboration and action, whereby community members can ‘make meaningful contributions to their own well-being and not serve as objects of investigation’ (Breitbart 2003, 162). PAR shifts accountability to how research might be ‘of use’ to communities (Fine and Barreras 2004) outside the ‘ivory tower’ and ‘beyond the journal article’ (Cahill and Torre 2007). Critical scholars suggest that we need to be wary of broad applications of the term ‘participation’, as it masks tokenism and the illusion of consultation that may, in fact, advance dominant interests (Arnstein 1969; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Kesby 2005). This critique is especially important as the rhetoric of participation dovetails with the neoliberal agenda’s emphasis upon local control and personal responsibility, offloading obligations onto communities who ‘participate’ and take on the work of the state (Cahill 2007; Harris 2005; Purcell 2006; Wilson 2004). This concern is exacerbated when participation is presented as a set of techniques rather than as a political and epistemological commitment to working with, not for or on, communities. A critical PAR approach centres an analysis of power, ‘taking into account that all people are embedded within complex social, cultural, and political systems historically defined by structural inequalities and privilege’ (Public Science Project, n.d.), as we discuss further below. For us, this involves countering the logic of global neoliberalism that shifts the accountability
for economic inequalities to undocumented immigrants. In our analysis, we join critical scholars who plot the intersections of neoliberalism, dispossession, racism and xenophobia in analyse of racial capitalism (De Genova 2013; Gilmore 2002; Loyd 2012; Melamed 2015; Pulido and Lloyd 2010; Robinson 2000). This is the contradictory and slippery ground upon which we locate critical participatory theory and practice; not as an ideal but as a fraught, urgent engagement of ideology, power, politics and context that is in conversation with activist movements (Cahill 2007).

**Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective**

Over the last decade, the Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective has developed under the leadership of young people who are committed both to each other and to sustaining a creative alternative space of community-based participatory action research and activism. We engage in liberatory, critical PAR. By putting the emphasis upon the critical, we signal our commitment to documenting and challenging ‘the grossly uneven structural distributions of opportunities, troubling ideological categories projected onto communities, demonstrating how science has been recruited to legitimate dominant policies and practices’ (Torre et al. 2017, 2012, 171).

The Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective centres the critical insights and understanding that young people bring to understanding their everyday lives within an intergenerational, multi-racial community context. Each year, approximately 10 to 25 young people aged 14 to 20 participate, representing ethnically diverse backgrounds (Latinx, Chicano, Mixed race, African-American, Asian and White). While our work has focused on many issues, ranging from community development to media representations to sustainability issues, among others, what has remained consistent over the years is the ongoing concern about immigration rights, specifically focused on undocumented students’ educational rights and resisting what we call the ‘school-to-sweatshop pipeline’ (Cahill et al. 2016, 2019; Quijada Cerecer et al. 2019). Our conceptualization is informed by the framing of the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’, which sheds light on how punitive policies target students of colour to push them out of school and into the criminal legal system (Bahena et al. 2012; Fasching-Varner et al. 2016; Morris 2016). The ‘school-to-sweatshop pipeline’ tracks how immigrant students are steered into a shadow state of exploitative labour practices (including a denial of rights and protection), from mowing lawns to taking care of other people’s children, unregulated construction work and seasonal farm work (Alvarez Gutiérrez 2016; Pratt 2012; Pulido 2007; Reyna Rivarola 2013; Varsanyi 2008). Reflecting a dialectic of dreams and dispossession, the ‘school-to-sweatshop pipeline’ conjoins with the activist DREAMER movement of undocumented students at this precarious political moment when DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and other rights are under threat as immigrant communities are targeted (Alvarez Gutiérrez 2015; Cahill et al. 2016; Delgado-Bernal and Alemán Jr 2017; Diaz-Strong et al. 2014; Gonzales 2011; Patel 2012; Reyna Rivarola 2017).

As scholars who have been working together for the past decade, we note how our Collective’s questions, concerns and consciousness have transformed in response to the changing political context and public debate at local and national level and as aggressive attacks upon immigrants have increased. Committed to the guiding principles of critical PAR, we shift what we define as ‘problems’ off the backs of individuals and onto the structures, systems and policies (Torre et al. 2012). Paying attention to how we frame the unit of analysis, we document how ‘the global and the intimate intertwine’ (Pratt and Rosner 2012) in young immigrant students’ everyday lives at school. For example, in our theorizing of the school-to-sweatshop pipeline, we trace how
the production of ‘illegality’ (De Genova 2002) functions dialectically to produce a disposable (and deportable) reserve of labour while obfuscating the role of global neoliberal restructuring policies (e.g. NAFTA) (Cahill et al. 2016). At the same time, our inquiry considers the deeply personal experiences of the political (Pain and Staeheli 2014) – what it feels like ‘living in this skin’ (Gonzalez Coronado 2009) – as global neoliberalism informs young people’s subjectivities and aspirations, as expressed by undocumented student Rafael in his reflection upon ‘learning to be illegal’ (Gonzales 2011):

I am smart. I am hard-working … But the moment that you shut me out, you cut my arms and legs off, and I cannot move. And there is nothing left, sometimes, but a feeling of desperation. Because then you are reminded that you don’t belong here.

In the context of state-sanctioned dispossession and violence (another way we might theorize the impact of the ‘production of illegality’), we co-create a social and shared context for witnessing each other’s private experiences of discrimination (Cahill et al. 2019; Torre et al. 2017). And crucially, collectively we take action to transform oppressive conditions. Informed by an ‘ethics of care’ in its most profound sense (Bartolomé 2008; Cahill et al. 2007; DeNicolo et al. 2017; Ellis 2007; Gilligan 1982; Valenzuela 2000), critical PAR reflects a deep respect for relationships, humanity and collective well-being (Cahill et al. 2007; Tuck and Guishard 2013).

As activists and scholars engaged with critical PAR, we are in conversation with social movements and elders in our communities, who share insights through testimonials and counter-stories of survival (Delgado-Bernal et al. 2012; Solorzano and Yosso 2001; Yosso 2013). Centring an intersectional racial justice perspective, we engage in what Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) identify as ‘transformational resistance’, embracing diverse strategies of engaging in structural critique, including critical PAR. What this means is that our forms of resistance include engaging collectively in inquiry and reflection, working behind the scenes and caring for each other in ways that are often under-acknowledged in activism. While at the same time, organizing and demanding our rights, standing on the frontlines of protest. Critical PAR is not, in this sense, separate from the other ways in which we are active and engaged in our community.

Critical PAR emphasizes how we are mutually implicated in each other’s lives, engaging our diverse standpoints and differential relationships to structural conditions (Torre et al. 2017, 467). With a shared commitment to migrant justice, we work across our differences within an intentionally diverse and democratic space of inquiry: what María Elena Torre (2010; Torre et al. 2017) identifies as a ‘participatory contact zone’ (cf. Askins and Pain 2011). This encompasses ‘excavating disjunctures rather than smoothing them over in the interest of consensus’, as they provide insight into critical insights about the larger social and political dynamics at play in the research (see Public Science Project n.d.; Torre et al. 2017). Attending to our intersectional relationships and positionality involves valuing and foregrounding the wisdom and concerns of those without documentation while strategically working with the (unearned) privileges afforded to those born on this side of the border.

We write as a ‘strategic we’, as co-founders, facilitators, current and former advisors and youth researchers of the Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective, highlighting our political stance and solidarity while embracing dissent and negotiation in our collective process. Challenging the neoliberal emphasis upon the individual, we write, research and create art together, signalling that all knowledge is produced collectively, whether this is acknowledged or not (mrs c. kinpaisby-hill 2011; Cahill et al. 2019). Our starting point is taking seriously the participatoriness of our
collective and the relationships that we have with each other. Honouring our intersectionality (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1995; Hopkins 2018) and creating a space of radical acceptance for our whole selves feels especially important as scholars and activists at this political moment, time and space. We pay attention to how the site-specificity of growing up and living in Utah informs our subjectivities, our relationships and our research, acknowledging the impact of Utah’s long history of racism, xenophobia, homophobia and conservatism associated with the Mormon Church and the history of white-settler colonialism. With this in mind, we attend both theoretically and practically to how this impacts both our research and the members of the Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective, asking questions within the framework of ethics (Cahill et al. 2007; Fine et al. 2000; Manzo and Brightbill 2007; Tuck and Guishard 2013): Who is made vulnerable by our research? Who has the ‘authority’ to represent a community’s point of view? Is there a ‘we’ within the community being represented? In what voice or language should we speak? How might the research provoke action? Which publics do we privilege or prioritize in our research? And, in what ways do we honour the integrity of our commitments to justice in the presentations of our work? (Cahill and Torre 2007).

**Caution/Cuidado: we have power**

One of the interesting things is that this image has always been interpreted as, and even called, *Caution: We have power*. In reality, the conversation within the group never headed in that direction. It was more of a ‘We are peaceful and we care about each other, our communities, our families and we have a responsibility to each
What happens when underrepresented perspectives (for example, those of women, people of colour, immigrants, Indigenous peoples) enter the academy and participate in the production of ‘official’ knowledges? Not only might they transform themselves; they may also transform the academy. This is the ground upon which new knowledge takes root, pushing scholarship in new directions, asking new questions, challenging old assumptions and looking beyond the privileged perspectives of the ivory tower (Cahill 2007). As Delgado-Bernal and Villalpando (2002) argue, there is an ‘apartheid of knowledge’ in the academy, as the scholarship, epistemologies and cultural resources of communities of colour have been consistently devalued and marginalized in the context of institutional racism. Committed to foregrounding and centring underrepresented voices in the academy, critical PAR opens up a space committed to the production of knowledge. What Robin Kelley (2018) calls, 'love, study, struggle', in all of its complexity as a 'site of contestation, a place of refuge, and a space for collective work', while attending to the contradictions of institutions as spaces of the neoliberal order (cf. Harney and Moten 2013).

Challenging what Foucault (1980) identified as the ‘subjectifying social sciences’, critical PAR has profound implications for rethinking the politics of representation and contesting epistemological violence (Kelley 1997; Teo 2010). And, as we know all too well, epistemological violence is not just an academic matter but intertwines with ontological violence (Butler 2004, 1999; Kelley 1997). As we have written about in more detail elsewhere (Cahill et al. 2019), the artwork Caution (Figure 38.2) was created in response to xenophobic attacks upon our Collective on online news comment boards. It offers an example of how our participatory research and cultural praxis open up a space for us to ‘theorize from the flesh’ (Anzaldúa 1987/1999; Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983), literally positioning our bodies to rework cultural narratives that misrepresent Latinx immigrant communities as criminal and dangerous. Instead, we turn our backs to the camera, engaging in ‘refusal’ as a ‘generative, analytic practice’ (Tuck and Yang 2014, 817). This is not just a matter of optics but a project to transform social relations on our own terms. Foregrounding our relationships with each other, we hold hands, raising our arms up in power and in community (for more discussion, see Cahill et al. 2019, 577; Quijada Cerecer et al. 2011). In our debriefing of Caution, we draw upon our research focused on resisting the school-to-sweatshop pipeline, while calling attention to how young immigrant bodies have become sites for constructing national borders and at the same time justifying the exploitation of undocumented communities (Flores 2003). Drawing connections between representations, political economic conditions and our own subjectivities and agency to make change, in our critical PAR praxis we follow Freire, who states: ‘people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which, and in which, they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation’ (Cahill et al. 2019; Freire 1974, xx).

One of the most significant insights of our engagement together in critical PAR over many years is that shared inquiry and action critically creates moments in which we see ourselves in one another’s struggles. Caution was created by us and for us. Privileging our own communities, we rearticulate the dominant narrative for ourselves. We did not create this image for outsiders to think differently about who we are; instead, we focused upon our own collective agency (Quijada Cerecer et al. 2019). Similarly, reflecting upon the experience of performing We the
People (excerpt at start of chapter) at the State Capitol, surrounded by our community members who came to support us, Yvette González Coronado explains:

For me it felt like the power was in owning our stories, and in telling them from our perspectives. And I think that’s the political act itself. Implicit in the process of owning our experiences, is the process of self-inquiry. That was the transformative piece.

Through the process of self-inquiry and ‘owning our stories’, we transform our understanding of ourselves and relationships with each other. Through critical collective praxis, we ‘stitch together different ways of knowing’ (Fox 2015, 6) and consider our distinct relationships to the structural injustices of anti-immigrant racism and exploitation.

By opening up the potential for what Butler (2004) describes as ‘the constitutive sociality of the self’, critical PAR offers a process for thinking about building political community and solidarities with each other. As opposed to thinking of social and political change as happening out there and investing in others the power to transform our world, our emphasis instead is upon recognizing the power that we possess to create change in our own lives. Robin D. G. Kelley explains (2014, 93): ‘change requires a set of simple breaks in structure – structural power breaks … Perhaps most importantly of all, those breaks are also conceptual because you cannot design a different future unless you can think through the current one.’ In this sense, Kelley argues, ‘We are the breaks’. Through critical PAR, we rearticulate research, bearing in mind Audre Lorde’s provocation that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde 2003, 2). As we have written elsewhere (Quijada Cerecer et al. 2019), we engage in critical PAR not just to dismantle but to rebuild the house. While considering the publics and purposes of our research, we consider how we build, with whom and why. In this way, we ‘work the minor, to decompose the major from within’ (Katz 1996, 2017), attending to how we collectively respond to the ongoing crisis of neoliberal racial capitalism and how, in this process, we come to understand our own sense of agency as a collective. As Cindi Katz explains (2017, 598), engaging minor theory is doing theory differently, working from the inside out: ‘of fugitive moves and emergent practices interstitial with “major” productions of knowledge.’

Understanding critical PAR within this frame, we undo and rework to transform how we know and act, building our capacity to address urgent concerns in our community.

We conclude with a statement from the youth organizers of the public action ‘Still We Rise’ in Salt Lake City, Utah, inspired by Maya Angelou’s (1978) poem, Still I Rise:

We rise for the student who works against all odds to stand for an equal education.
We rise for the family that fought to live an American dream and despite the realities, continued to contribute to a society that did not accept them …
We rise because we are the sons and daughters of those who believed in you and despite the betrayals, despite the tortments, this is our home.
We rise for those who live in silence, scared to bring their struggle to light …

Excerpt from statement ‘Still We Rise’, written by Salt Lake City, Utah, youth organizers

As one of the youth activists explained: ‘We are still here. We are not going away. Our community has always had to fight for equal rights, and here we are still. We still rise.’ As scholars and activists, we look forward with dreams and visions for a more just collective future, while looking back and remembering that we are part of a long history of struggle over the kind of world we are living in; for us, critical PAR is one way that we produce knowledge in this struggle.
Caitlin Cahill et al.

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We are grateful to Peter Hopkins and all the editors for their generous work in editing this much-needed Handbook. We dedicate this chapter to undocumented immigrants everywhere who are engaged in the struggle for recognition, justice and freedom. We honour Matt Bradley (1970–2012), a passionate educator, committed activist, critical scholar and co-founder of the Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective.

Note

1 The ‘Still We Rise’ public action was organized by youth leaders from the FACE movement and Brown Berets in Salt Lake City, Utah, with the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA), Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective (MAA), Mestizo Institute of Culture and Art (MICA), Family School Partnership (FSP) and the Utah Coalition of La Raza (UCLR).

Key readings


References


‘Still we rise’


Gonzalez Coronado, Y.S. 2009. Living in this Skin in the Classroom. Salt Lake City: University of Utah.


'Still we rise'


