MIGRATION
LETTERS

Mula Sa Masa, Tungo Sa Masa, From the People, To the People: Building Migrant Worker Power through Participatory Action Research

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the possibilities of Participatory Action Research (PAR) producing ethical and nuanced knowledge that contributes to developing Filipino migrant workers' capacity for sustainable political organizing. We discuss our projects with Filipino migrant organizations in the U.S. and Canada. We theorize on the potential of PAR with migrants who are part of highly precarious workforces in global cities. Additionally, we, as immigrant women of colour and scholars, highlight the tensions between academic ethos that prioritizes a rapid 'publish-or-perish' culture and the ethos of PAR, which puts into place collaborative processes that can be at odds with the 'tempo' of academic work. We highlight the tensions between the academic and reproductive labour of PAR, with the latter being seen by many academic institutions as an 'inconvenience' impeding productivity.

Keywords: *arts interventions; coproduction; discomfort; encounters; youth integration.*

Introduction

This article is a collaboration between two Filipina immigrant, scholar-activists in the United States (U.S.) and Canada. We examine our use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology in our political organizing and academic work. Our parallel paths as scholar-activists allow us to examine the logics of inquiry in the co-construction of knowledge between academic and community partners. Additionally, we share the unique experience of being women of colour on the tenure-track. In these similar conditions of work and commitment to movement building, we offer our insights on using PAR as a methodology towards supporting migrant worker organizing and also to insist that immigrant women of colour in the academy can and must find ways to produce knowledge that frames our communities, and thus ourselves, beyond victimhood. We argue that strategies to build migrant worker power through collaborative research processes must center the political goals of worker-led organizations. Still, these projects must be crafted with an idea of equity towards organizations and also towards scholar-activists who are contending with academic institutional timelines as well.

In this article, we offer insights on conducting PAR projects with migrants who are part of highly precarious workforces. The democratization of research processes relates to the social realities in which migrant workers are already culling together resources for practical survival, and more importantly, solidarity and political conscientization. Then, we identify the ways in which PAR offers migration researchers both theoretically-rigorous and community-engaged knowledge

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about the lives of migrant workers and the institutions that produce their precarity. All the while, we underscore the perceived incompatibilities between rigid academic schedules and the use of PAR as scholar-activists. Lastly, we discuss the potential of protraction in PAR as a theory of change in movement-building and in migration studies.

Operationalizing PAR with Filipino Migrants

Defining Participation. For us, PAR is both a methodology and an organizing strategy (Fox, Mediratta, Ruglis, Stoudt, Shah, and Fine 2010). We democratize the decision-making process by working with migrant communities on determining research aims, choosing a data collection method, designing a recruitment plan, and conducting and analyzing research. The process serves the political and organizing perspectives of grassroots, community-based organizations advocating for the rights and welfare of Filipino migrants. Hence, the objective of the research process and project is not just to create new knowledge (Lykes and Mallona, 2008). It also includes creating democratic space in which migrants can exercise leadership, acquire analytical tools and research skills, and apply it to the issues they face (Gilhooly and Lee, 2017). When we orient PAR into a broader political movement, the work of the project is ultimately geared towards mobilizing workers towards sustained collective action. This means that a singular action or product is not the end of the project or our collaboration with worker organizations. Rather, the impact of opening up this democratic space is also a scholar-activist commitment to the sustainable incorporation of research and action in the rubric of building migrant worker power.

Defining Action. The action dimension of PAR that we are committed to does not come after we have collected, analyzed and written up the data. By demystifying the process of creating new knowledge, we begin with critiquing the structures of knowledge that is valued societally: who is considered experts and the implications of prioritizing the knowledge of the intellectual elite (Billies, Francisco, Krueger, and Linville, 2010). Similar to the Downtown Eastside's "Manifesto for Ethical Research" (2019), where they stress that 'peer' researchers are "equals" to both community members and academic researchers and as such, should not be treated as tokens (2019: 9), we believe that migrants themselves are experts who should have shared ownership over the research project. The training of migrants in research skills and methods (both quantitative and qualitative) shifts the idea of who holds knowledge in our society. It is an opportunity to draw from the past experience of Filipino migrants, who are often educated and had professional careers in the Philippines, and involve them in a process of changing their outlook on their own worth and expertise as they transition to low-wage, precarious workers in the U.S. or Canada. We consider our insistence on participation and collaboration in these different phases of the research project as a crucial part of the "action" that democratizes knowledge and enacts building solidarity across all participants.

Defining Research. In our work, we understand research as a process and a tool to arm the communities we serve with information they need to change conditions of exploitation and oppression (Cahill, 2004). As scholar-activists, it is important for us to be in conversation with academic and intellectual bodies of work. Here we define the term, "scholar-activist" following Melissa Ann Nievera-Lozano's explication of this embodied identity as a practice and ethic, "…where she sees empire (the power or damage of coloniality); she works to expose it, trouble it and undo its harm. She is about the disenchantment of empire; she is about seeking and setting up the conditions for decolonization particularly in the institution of the university—this critical site we work to dismantle while building our power, our name, our identity and our livelihood within

it" (Nievera-Lozano, 2019, pp. 325-329). This contradiction and positionality allows us to acknowledge that both the research process *and* product can also be used to advance political organizing goals such as supporting a basis for campaigns or building leadership capacity in communities (Guishard, 2009), and contributes to our own academic livelihoods. In doing so, we can reorient the research process towards an ethical, non-extractive dialogue and collaboration with partner organizations and social movements (Tuck, 2009).

PAR with migrants follows Dorothy Smith's call for "institutional ethnography" (2005) as a project of mapping systems of dispossession through the experiences of people who are subject to systems of power (Krueger-Henney, 2014). Against the grain of big data and demography, PAR with migrants prioritizes migrants' knowledge about the institution of migration and Philippine labor export that disqualifies the metrics of capital and development, an insistence on the sociopolitical context in which Filipinos migrate (Lykes, Hershberg & Brabeck, 2011). Rather, it makes migrants' experiences of hardship and triumph, oppression and empowerment, difficulty and creativity, legible in understanding the dynamics of migration in globalization.

We follow scholars who urge immigration researchers to consider using PAR because migrants' experiences and ability to shape research questions about the very lives we are examining can enrich the theoretical frames of migration that might not take them into account (De Tona, Frisina, and Ganga, 2010).

PAR with Migrante San Francisco, Migrante Alberta and the Alberta Workers Association

Migrante-International, founded in 1992 in the wake of Filipino migrant workers' anger and frustration over Filipina domestic worker Flor Contemplacion's death by hanging in Singapore, advocated for the needs and interests of migrant workers. Following its establishment in Manila, Migrante-International chapters were founded in other cities. Migrante-San Francisco was founded in 2012 and Migrante-Alberta was founded in 2013. Filipino migrant workers needing support led to the establishment of both organizations.

On the one hand, in San Francisco, the Workers Rights Program in the Filipino Community Center (FCC) saw an uptick in the numbers of Filipino migrant workers dealing with wage theft. They were owed back wages in the hundreds and thousands of dollars because their employers failed to pay for overtime hours or illegally deducted pay without notice, violating minimum wage laws. Most migrants seeking support were women working as caregivers, with a small percentage working as retail workers. These workers became community researchers and collaborators. Organizers at the FCC identified that when migrants are not aware of their rights in the workplace, regardless of legal documentation, many of them tolerate exploitative circumstances which include wage theft. FCC needed information about the basic conditions of various workplaces, specifically private homes or residential facilities for care work.

On the other hand, in Edmonton, Migrante-Alberta organizers observed that there were many Filipino migrant workers who faced housing problems. At this time, the Canadian government reduced the numbers of temporary foreign workers in the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) and banned the restaurant industry from hiring such workers. In addition, the 'cumulative duration' rule, which was announced in 2011 and took effect in 2014, was also in place; this rule stated that migrant workers could only be in Canada for four years and would then have to leave the country for another four years before being allowed back into the country. The restrictions that were

placed on the TFWP made migrant workers who wanted to stay in Canada vulnerable to abuse from illegal recruiters, who charged migrant workers 'recruitment fees' so they could continue working (in some cases illegally) in the country. Overall, these policies severely hampered the security of migrant workers in Alberta, leading many to become undocumented. Migrante-Alberta saw that in order to better advocate for migrant workers, it needed to understand the specific modes of housing precariousness that migrant workers faced.

These respective contexts led to the pursuit of PAR projects that critically examined migrant workers' situations. In San Francisco, members of FCC's Workers Rights program and academics like Dr. Robyn Rodriguez and Francisco conceptualized a PAR project whose objectives would be to increase the capacity for political leadership and organizing with Filipino migrant workers in San Francisco. Through "The Care Project," they began to organize two-month long weekly research training modules. This culminated in the use of *kuwentuhan* or talk-story (Francisco, 2014) over coffee (or *kapihan* in Filipino), which became the project's main form of data collection. Kapihan was conceptualized by community researchers who were mainly women whose definition of "safe spaces" were their kitchen tables where the sharing of food and coffee as an exchange that signaled comfort. These gendered spaces defined by Filipino patriarchal culture and their paid domestic work also doubled as spaces for truth-telling and lesson-sharing.

In Edmonton, members of Migante-Alberta partnered with Whitney Hayes from the Alberta Workers Association and with Tungohan to examine housing precariousness among migrant workers. Following research training seminars that were given over the span of two weekends, the research team - which consisted of academics and migrant activist community researchers such as Marco Luciano and Whitney Hayes - decided to pursue a qualitative research project using one-on-one and focus group interviews with individual migrant workers and with service providers. Although more structured than *kuwentuhans* in that researchers followed semi-structured interview questions, the underlying ethos of creating a safe space for research participants both to share their experiences and to collectively learn lessons prevailed.

In both projects, students and professors provided support by providing technological assistance with recording devices and taking notes, but community researchers led the conversations with migrant workers about the conditions that they faced. In this process, all parties including organizers at service-providing institutions, migrant workers and academics had roles that played to their strength. All of them had a chance to assert their needs and expertise by defining the objectives of the research project, bringing in formal academic training in research methods, and conducting interviews with migrant workers themselves. In the process of learning about one another's lives, migrant workers realized that the experience of exploitation, wage theft and/or housing precariousness was not just their own individualized issue but that of their community.

Participation in both PAR projects democratized the decision-making processes that is often conceptualized as the sole responsibility of the credentialed researcher/academic. Instead PAR invited different community members to assert their own organic intellectualism as an important contribution to the political and research project and process. The data from the qualitative interviews became the basis for a fact sheet that was a tool for recruitment to the collective that would later become Migrante San Francisco (see Photo 1). For Migrante Alberta, the data from the project was used to lobby for better protections for migrant workers and also to recruit more members into the organization.

Scientific & Community Outcomes and Strategies

PAR Leads to Stronger Data and Nuanced Theories

Throughout our projects, we prioritized centering migrants' perspectives when identifying our main research questions, methodology and methods. Migrants created culturally appropriate and relevant data collection strategies that drew out the stories of the communities in which they belonged. This helped us develop strong bonds of trust with migrant communities, thereby enabling us to dive more deeply into the complexities of migrants' lives and thus derive richer data used towards creating theories on precarity and resilience.

For Tungohan, deeper engagement with migrant communities created a space to explore the specific contexts through which social problems such as homelessness can be understood. Although temporary foreign workers, compared to other migrant groups such as refugees and asylum seekers, may not at first immediately register as facing housing problems because they do not tend to be as visible in homeless shelters, working closely with migrant communities highlighted that they instead faced housing *precariousness*. This meant that many migrants may not be living on the streets but were piecing together extended stints with community members and short-term rentals to meet their housing needs. Hence, this project enabled an understanding of various degrees of housing precariousness but also culturally-appropriate and community-led policy interventions.

For Francisco, caregiver methods of kapihan allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the logics of why caregivers were susceptible to wage theft and the types of resilience strategies they employed despite these conditions. Rather than assuming that migrant workers are victims without agency who are unknowingly duped into accepting substandard working conditions and reduced salaries, kapihan unearthed the transnational obligations of workers to the Philippines as a type of bondage which reduced workers' bargaining power but which also, paradoxically, heightened their independence, breaking gendered norms as breadwinners for their families at home. Hence, the project presented a more complex assessment of care workers' conditions and thus enabled stronger theorizations of migrant experiences.

PAR and Migrant Worker Power

Our parallel paths in the intersection of research and movement-building is part of a transnational alliance of Filipino migrant workers called Migrante International. Headquartered in the Philippines, Migrante International is the hub for Filipino migrant organizations in over 22 countries globally, and it is also part of a vibrant social movement towards genuine democracy and sovereignty in the Philippines. Because our political work is influenced by a national liberation movement, our contributions from the diaspora—as migrants ourselves and part of migrant communities—is to strengthen the organizing capacity of our communities and understand the conditions in which we live and why we were pushed out of country. In the PAR process of learning about one another's lives, migrant workers realized not only that their experience of wage theft, and/or housing precariousness was not just their own individualized issue but that of their community, locally and globally. Although the fear of detention and deportation was a major deterrent in attracting migrants to participate in both studies, participating in both projects contributed to their political conscientization. The objective of building migrant worker power was key to our conceptualization of our PAR projects in Alberta and San Francisco. We endeavoured to change conditions locally and also be critical of our homeland's politics transnationally.

In our process of collaborating with migrant organizations, we were already deeply involved with migrant organizing and Filipino communities in our respective cities. Ensuring participation in shaping our projects often meant having migrant workers themselves identify the research questions, ensuring that these questions were grounded in migrant workers' everyday realities. This practice of reflexive examinations of the banal had simultaneous bearing on workers' examination of the systems of power that produced their migration, precarity and separation from their families in the Philippines. Instinctually, when migrant workers took the lead in interviewing fellow migrant workers, they shared their critiques of those very systems: the feeling of being pushed out of the Philippines to work abroad, the stringent and racist policies in the US and Canada, their vulnerability working and living as minoritized workers. These shared stories became a well of reasons for collective resistance.

Since its establishment in 2014, in order to co-develop research projects that allowed them to understand the issues facing Filipinos in Alberta, Migrante-Alberta has maintained ongoing ties with scholar-activists, which, as mentioned earlier, we defined as researchers who saw their research as needing to also promote social good. Their PAR project with Tungohan facilitated a clearer identification of migrant workers' experiences with homelessness and housing precariousness, thus enabling Migrante-Alberta and the Alberta Workers Association to develop more responsive programming for this group. The data from the PAR project in San Francisco became the basis for a fact sheet that was a tool for recruitment to the collective that would later become Migrante San Francisco in 2013. Migrant workers who participated became the outward advocates for back wage campaigns and even transnational campaigns to protest violence and corruption in the Philippines. In these ways, the research process conscientized workers to take the projects beyond the intellectual and academic questions, but as basis to form organized responses to their issues.

PAR's Time and Tempo Challenges for Scholar-Activists

In our reflections about PAR as a logic of inquiry in studying migrants' lives, we find that the research timeline of our projects does not adhere to the demands of academic demands for tenure. The slowness required to collaborate with migrant organizations require a flexibility to the 6-day-a-week work schedule of workers, where meeting in the evenings and weekends were necessary and where the act of translation (from English to Filipino and from 'academic' speak to laypersons' terms) often elongated the time frame of a meeting from 2 hours to 4. These long conversations with various stakeholders were crucial in ensuring that different parties' needs were represented and that ethical research practices were instilled. Accommodating divergent priorities and schedules necessitated greater creativity in the research process. This means being open to the possibility of last-minute changes to research team meetings and interviews.

 Still, the pressure to produce peer-reviewed articles, conference presentations and grant applications before our application to tenure becomes one of the logics that organizes our time as tenure-track faculty. To navigate these realities, as pre-tenure scholar-activists, we have had to strategically 'code-switch' to make our research legible to academic audiences. We have had to figure out how to meet publication expectations for tenure. This meant publishing more pieces of methods and methodology (Francisco 2016, Francisco 2014) or on public policy (Tungohan, 2019), instead of conclusive analytical papers. Another tactic we used to ensure that our research remains legible to mainstream academics is to draw references and even to establish common linkages with more conventional literature on immigration when discussing PAR research in conference panels and in publications. We hold that academic writing on methods and implications for policy while

research is ongoing can be a strategy in which our painstaking projects could be accessible to peer reviewers and to our tenure requirements.

We maintain that this method of protraction that spans years is the type of scholarship necessary to examine the consequences of migration for migrants. This strengthens our academic theorizing as, longitudinally, we can assess the breadth of exploitation across one migrant's life and across many migrants' experiences. More importantly, the protracted way in which migrants stay involved, drop out, get reactivated and volunteer is an essential way to understand how to continue to politicize and conscientize migrants. As scholar-activists invested in movement-building, this type of knowledge is crucial in the project of justice and equity, and it can also contribute to academic careers through publication. At times, that process might not be linear and right on time but its purpose is worth upholding.

Conclusion: Reflection on Protracted Knowledge Production

Our insistence on the use of PAR is part of our feminist practice of widening what counts as 'legitimate' knowledge and methodologies. We offer this insight to future and current researchers as a strategic invitation to engage in protraction as a theory of change in the academy. In what indigenous and Black women scholars theorize as "sacred knowledge" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and "opacity on purpose" (Shange, 2019), migrant participants in our studies insist that the knowledge produced in projects conceptualized and conducted *with them* must hold their experiences and needs at its center. This echoes the Downtown Eastside's insistence that research should be based on relationship-building, where researchers are forthcoming about "who they are as people", their motivations for doing this work, and the "politics" informing their worldviews (5).

The democratization of knowledge through migrant workers' active ownership of the research process also leads to more accountable research practices *and* to stronger data. When those whose lives are directly affected by existing policies are the ones spearheading the research process, the results are inevitably more responsive to their lived realities and enables a move away from reductionist research findings that reproduce stereotypes on migrant 'helplessness.' This, in turn, ensures that research results are directly relevant to migrants' lives by assisting community partners in developing programs that will help in their advocacy work.

We insist that the gestation of political consciousness and sound scholarship about sousveillance (Browne, 2015) -the critical study of systems of power from "below"- has its own time. Therefore, a logic of inquiry that insists on participation will refuse to be clear or translatable to academic timelines. It must be relevant to the daily needs of political conscientization and organizing, rather than the ticking clock of the university. In fact, we believe that our strategic resistance to academia's imposed timelines is part of a growing academic feminist adherence to becoming 'slow' professors (Mountz, et al, 2015) which sees academia's speedy 'publish and perish' culture as being antithetical to ethical and sound research practices and also as disadvantaging female academics who are more likely than male academics to shoulder care work. Still, above, we offer some strategies to work within academic processes while conducting PAR with migrants. These tactics should be read as a challenge to the domineering pace of academia, rather than a concession, as we prioritize the protracted timeline of our research and participants, shielding them from the unnecessary and unforgiving rate of academic institutions.

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