

taking RISKS



FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND
RESEARCH IN THE AMERICAS

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FOREWORD BY MARGARET RANDALL

TAKING RISKS

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LATINA BATTERED IMMIGRANTS, CITIZENSHIP, AND INEQUALITIES

Reflections on Activist Research

ROBERTA VILLALÓN

Immigrant women are extremely vulnerable to interpersonal and structural violence. The intersection of their gender, sexuality, nationality, immigration status, race, ethnicity, and social class influences the way in which violence is inflicted and endured and affects the availability of resources for immigrant women to escape and overcome abusive relationships (Abraham 2000; Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Salcido and Adelman 2004). Feminists of color and advocates for battered immigrants' rights have been struggling for acknowledgment of the particular victimization of this group of intimate partner violence survivors. To some extent, their efforts have been fruitful: the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which is the main piece of legislation addressing gender violence for all survivors in the United States, includes regulations for special groups, such as battered immigrants. Rights include, the opportunity to access social services and legal protections conducive to breaking free from violent relationships, stabilizing their immigration status, and obtaining citizenship without the active sponsorship of the abusive spouse.¹ Moreover, law enforcement authorities and governmental and nongovernmental service providers have been trained on gender violence and immigration issues, and slowly, they have become more sensitive to cultural diversity, thus enhancing the way in which immigrant survivors are assisted.

Interestingly, however, as I developed activist research at a nonprofit legal organization in Texas, I found that battered immigrants encountered significant obstacles when they tried to end their abusive relationships and become U.S. citizens. Some of these obstacles were embedded in the formalities of the immigration provisions of VAWA. Other obstacles emerged informally at the nonprofit level. While both formal and informal obstacles affected all immigrant survivors of intimate partner violence, it was the most underprivileged immigrants who found the greatest hurdles along the way. In my fieldwork, I found that Latina immigrants who were women of color, native to Mexico, undocumented, in relationships with residents or other undocumented immigrants, LGBTQ, extremely poor, having complicated migration or criminal backgrounds, with few years of formal education, and/or unable to fit within the nonprofit organization's ideal client profile were significantly delayed or even prevented access to citizenship. These exclusionary dynamics not only countered the efforts of advocates for battered immigrants' rights, but also pointed to the pervasiveness of unequal "cultures of citizenship" (Rudrappa 2004, 11).

A feminist-of-color theoretical framework and the methodology of activist research² allowed me to reach these findings, findings which would have been kept opaque, if my research was done from above, and uncontested, if my research was done without involvement in the community. Activist research "can be thought of as an approach to doing research, one with a very specific aim—the creation of social change—and one that involves creating particular kinds of relationships among all of those involved in the research process" (Esterberg 2002, 136). Accordingly, as opposed to following a prescription on how to apply this methodology—which would produce "constraining" results (Hale 2008, 3)—activist researchers are led by fundamental principles with the goal "to produce an analysis that retains the integrity of political processes, specific events, diverse actors, and social context while revealing the broader processes at work that may not have been visible to the individual participants or even to the researcher at the time they were engaged in the struggle or when they conducted the research" (Naples 2003, 31).

Three main principles are (1) the "open and democratic" (Esterberg 2002, 136) relationship between researchers and participants; (2) the collaborative way in which knowledge is produced by researchers in

dialogue with the traditionally called “research subjects,” which indeed are the “knowledgeable, empowered participants” (Hale 2008, 4) with and about whom the research is being developed; and (3) the political implications and applications of developing the research project, which are usually related to provoking social change and bettering whatever oppressive circumstances are affecting the group of people involved in the study.

Inspired by this perspective, I developed an activist research project at a nonprofit organization in Texas that I call Organization for Refugees of America/Organización para Refugiados de América (ORA).³ At ORA, I was able to learn about the actual experiences of Latina survivors seeking relief through the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) as well as contribute to addressing their needs and those of the advocates working for them. In this chapter, I reflect on this particular methodological framework. I argue that while activist research is an invaluable tool in order to understand and challenge oppression, one must pay close attention to the manner in which the researcher develops her links to the community as well as to how the voices of all of those involved in the project are brought into the analysis. I look into the nuances of this kind of research projects and discuss the complexities of the liaisons between activist scholars and community. I discuss the differences between the ideal and real ways in which activist scholars and people in the community may develop relationships and consider how activist scholarship is expected to mobilize the researchers’ and the community members’ knowledge base, and thus, their interactions.

In order to analyze these aspects of activist research methodology I draw on a number of scholars. Specifically, Naples’ (2003) discussion about developing a reflexive praxis; Hale’s (2006; 2008) thoughts on the contradictions of politically engaged research and work on activist scholarship; Spivak’s (1988) ideas on the incorporation of subaltern populations’ voices into research; Mani’s (1998) development of Spivak’s work, particularly her point on acknowledging the relational manner in which these marginalized voices may be included; Menon and Bhasin’s (1998) mode of centering the stories of those who had been excluded from mainstream narratives; and Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2002) insights on standpoint, testimonies, and the worth of politicizing research to counter hegemonic structures of knowledge and power.

I build my discussion by including primary data that I collected on these issues since I began conducting activist research on violence against Latina immigrants. After providing background information on the nonprofit organization (ORA) where I did activist fieldwork, I share the story of Luisa, a Mexican immigrant survivor of intimate partner violence who sought protection at ORA. Her case condenses much of the complications of such process and allows the reader to more fully capture the contradictions of such reality. As I continue with the analysis, I include excerpts of field notes from participant observation, individual and group interviews, and workshops that I conducted with service providers for battered immigrants. All of these data illustrate the richness and difficulties of activist research and point to how this methodological tool can be better applied for developing scholarship and provoking social change.

Organization for Refugees of America and Activist Research

At the time of my research, the Organization for Refugees of America/Organización para Refugiados de América (ORA) was the only secular organization in central Texas that provided legal services to underserved immigrants.⁴ Texas, a border state, has one of the largest numbers of documented and undocumented immigrants in the United States.⁵ Texas also has a disproportionately high level of incidents of family violence.⁶ ORA devoted four of its five legal programs to immigrant survivors of different kinds of abuse (domestic, sexual, extortion, false imprisonment, human trafficking, and political, racial, ethnic, religious, gender or ideological persecution). An overwhelming majority of ORA’s clients were from Mexico and Central America, but ORA served immigrants from all over the world. ORA, with its ethnically diverse staff, presented itself as an inclusive organization, providing services to all immigrants, regardless of native language or ethnic, religious, or political background. In this way, ORA allowed me to explore the workings of culturally sensitive organizations, which feminist researchers both celebrated as safe havens for immigrants (Abraham 2000; Menjívar and Salcido 2002) and criticized as colonial and patriarchal (Menon and Bhasin 1998; Mindry 2001; Ong 2003; Rudrappa 2004).

Originally, ORA was a politically radical, volunteer-based, grassroots group focused on advocacy, legal, and social change. However, it gradually transformed into a politically moderate, employee-based,

nonprofit organization focused on providing legal services. This organizational history helped me think about the effects of the institutionalization processes that most nonprofits have gone through in the last thirty years (Fox Piven and Cloward 1977; Perlmutter 1994; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2007; Kivel 2007; Alvarez 1999). Since the 1980s, nonprofit organizations have become increasingly important in the provision of social services and implementation of community development programs as a result of policies intended to reduce the size of the state and its welfare capacities (Trudeau 2008). An essential piece of the “shadow state” (Wolch 1990), nonprofit organizations have grown in their function as institutions providing “the arena, the mechanisms, and the point of institutional access through which the offer of citizenship is extended and social integration can be accomplished” (Lake and Newman 2002, 110). In this context, nonprofit organizations devoted to immigration matters have been located at the crux of citizenship access, particularly when they serve poor immigrants who are in compromised situations due to precarious labor conditions and unstable immigration status—ORA being a case in point.

At the same time, gender violence-based legislation like the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) has underscored the importance of the role of nonprofits as intermediary organizations between immigrant survivors of intimate partner violence and governmental immigration authorities. Indeed, battered immigrants have been strongly encouraged to obtain the formal assistance of advocates, social workers, counselors, and legal representatives in order to seek relief through VAWA (Family Violence Prevention Fund 2005; WomensLaw 2009). While these services can be obtained through the private sector, poor battered immigrants must rely on community and nonprofit organizations offering services at low or no cost. These organizations are typically the one (and usually last) resort for survivors seeking escape from lives of abuse and dependency. Thus, the “gatekeeper” role of nonprofit workers—with the capacity to facilitate or impede battered immigrants’ access to citizenship—has become increasingly significant (Villalon 2010, 79).

While I developed activist research at ORA, I worked for two years as a part-time volunteer intern in its battered immigrant assistance program. The program provided legal services, free of charge, to low-income immigrants who were eligible to apply for citizenship under VAWA. As noted, through VAWA,⁷ battered immigrants are given the opportunity to access social services and legal protections conducive to breaking free from violent relationships, stabilizing their immigration status, and obtaining citizenship without the active sponsorship of the abusive spouse. In order to do so, an immigrant survivor must prove that (1) she was married to or in a common law union with a U.S. citizen or a legal permanent resident in good faith; (2) they resided together as wife and husband; (3) she was subject to domestic violence and/or extreme cruelty during the marriage in the United States; and (4) she is a person of “good moral character” (that is, does not have a criminal record). Once the VAWA self-petition is approved by immigration authorities, the battered immigrant is granted deferred action on deportation procedures and is allowed to apply for an employment authorization (renewable yearly) while she waits for her legal permanent residency application to be processed and granted. After three years of continuous and lawful presence as a legal permanent resident in the United States, VAWA self-petitioners may be able to apply for citizenship.⁸

If the battered immigrant was married to an undocumented immigrant, or separated but not divorced from previous spouses while engaged in the abusive relationship, she can apply for a U visa instead of a VAWA self-petition. This visa offers temporary status for up to four years (meaning deferred action on deportation procedures) and authorization to work in the United States for one year with the option to renew the permit twice. In order to obtain a U visa, the battered immigrant has to collaborate with the police on the scrutiny of her abuser’s deeds against her. The police have to certify to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) that the battered immigrant was victimized and that she has been helpful with law enforcement in the crime investigation. If the police issue such certification, USCIS may grant the U visa for the immigrant victim. Once the immigrant has been continuously and lawfully living in the United States as a U visa holder for more than three years, she may apply for legal permanent residency. A U visa holder may be granted the latter if her U visa status was not revoked, and she did not “unreasonably refuse to provide assistance to an official or law enforcement agency investigating or prosecuting the person(s) who committed the crime that made her eligible for U visa status” (WomensLaw 2012).

At ORA, I did prescreening phone and in-person interviews, collected immigration and abuse

histories and translated them from Spanish to English, prepared immigration forms and citizenship applications, and performed other tasks on an as-needed basis. My direct participation in these activities allowed me to collect data about a host of immigrant women's experiences: how they presented themselves; spoke and wrote about their experiences of migration and violence; expressed their demands and concerns about going through the citizenship application process; showed their feelings, fears, frustrations, and hopes; made sense of their situations; and reacted to the formal and informal requirements of the VAWA application process. Furthermore, my participation allowed me to observe the legal assistants, attorneys, and other ORA staff in their interactions with the immigrants (or "clients," as they were called by the organization's workers). For example, I noted the ways in which ORA staff expressed themselves; their oral and body language used with both clients and co-workers; their reactions to the histories of abuse, and their attitudes in their dealings with law enforcement officers and immigration authorities.

I also participated in meetings related to immigration and women's issues to which ORA staff members were invited on a regular basis (such as legal advocacy and violence against women conferences). In these meetings, I collected source data on how legal and social workers organized their activities and modified their services on the basis of changes in legislation and one another's working experiences. After my work day, I recorded my field observations in journal form, including not only immigrants' and staff members' stories, but also my own role, feelings, and thoughts (Esterberg 2002).

I complemented my participant observation by conducting personal interviews with attorneys, legal assistants, and other ORA staff. Through these interviews, I gathered primary data on how nonprofit workers comprehended and implemented immigration and citizenship norms and regulations. I asked them about their thoughts and feelings about their tasks and skills; their commitment to the state, immigration authorities, and funders; and their responsibilities to the local community and the immigrants. We talked about how they saw themselves in their interactions with all of these individuals and organizations. We discussed what they wanted to change about their jobs and/or about gender violence-based and immigration laws. While I did the interviews, I did not follow a rigid form, but instead adopted a more informal dialogue with the interviewees. This form not only allowed me to "emphasize the informant's world of meaning and utilize the informant's categories of understanding" rather than my own (Sjoberg and Nett 1997, 211), but also reinforced the open, democratic, dialogic, and reflective principles of activist research.

In following another fundamental aspect of activist research, I shared my findings in a collaborative fashion with ORA staff, other battered immigrant advocates, and the community of Latina immigrants and survivors of gender violence both during and after my field research. While I was developing the project, I frequently talked about my observations with ORA staff to check my accuracy as well as if my labor was conducive to addressing the needs of both the organization and the battered immigrants. After I completed a full-length write-up of my findings, I presented my analysis to ORA staff, first in writing, and later through a workshop as well as individual and group informal interviews.⁹ All of these instances added a reflective layer from the perspective of ORA staff, which tested the validity of my analysis and was critical to furthering the understanding of the processes at play at the organization.

I also conducted workshops at battered immigrants' advocate trainings and meetings where participants (nonprofit and governmental immigrants' advocates) reflected upon the formal and informal barriers that stand in the way of battered immigrants' quest for citizenship. Workshop participants proposed means to avoid or dismantle these barriers as well. These events provided me with an opportunity for contextualizing my work at ORA by obtaining other advocates' perspectives on how they have helped (or not) immigrants in their organizations, what they expected from immigrants as they were obtaining services, and how they tried to overcome organizational and legal limitations. Moreover, these opportunities furthered the links between academia and community (another main goal of activist research) so that the findings did not linger uncontested by those who were intimately involved in these matters beyond scholarly circles.

As I developed the research, I adopted a "reflective practice," as theorized by feminist ethnographer Nancy Naples, through which I was able to incorporate my standpoint and also remain "sensitive to the perspectives of others" and critically aware of the "power dynamics" at play in the community where the research was taking place (2003, 41). For instance, even though my background gave me the opportunity

to quickly gain access to and build trust with the immigrants and the nonprofit workers, my involvement at ORA posed some problems regarding my double role as researcher and worker. While I was performing ORA's job by respecting the organization's rules and interests, I also had a critical understanding of the activities and processes that were taking place during my working days. To cope with tensions resulting from my double role, I maintained a transparent attitude with the members of the agency and the clients and regularly wrote about my observations, thoughts, and feelings in a journal. I also paid close attention to how my personal characteristics shaped "ethnographic encounters" (Naples 2003, 41) "to reveal the inequalities and processes of domination that shape the 'field'" (Naples 2003, 38). I wondered how my occupation, nationality, immigration status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and age permeated my relationship with both battered immigrants and ORA staff.

On the one hand, the immigrants tended to be comfortable with me because of my position as a volunteer and researcher, my sympathy as a woman survivor of intimate partner violence, my youth, our shared status as Latina immigrants in the United States (which took precedence over my light skin color or seeming whiteness), and my open attitude about sexual preferences. Class differences were mostly manifested in two aspects: immigration status and education. My documented immigration status as a researcher and my ability to speak and write Spanish and English fluently differentiated me from the immigrants seeking services at ORA, who appeared comfortable with this gap since I was working with them to complete their citizenship application process before USCIS. Rather, I was often the one who became upset because of the imbalances resulting from their underprivileged position as opposed to ORA staff's or mine.

On the other hand, ORA staff tended to be comfortable around me and grateful for my volunteer work. They perceived me as similar to them in terms of class background, gender, openness in regard to sexual preferences, and age and different from them in terms of my nationality and occupation. Some of them took me as a foreign focal reference with whom they could either clarify or discuss cultural differences; others maintained some distance as they recalled my double role as a volunteer and researcher and occasionally thought of me as threatening their authority at the workplace. By maintaining a critical awareness of my position as an "outsider within" (Hill Collins 1986, S14), I was then able to reap the most fruits from such a position's advantages and to work through its disadvantages.

Overall, the further I moved forward into the project, the more I realized the revealing potential of activist methodology as a research tool. As I mentioned before, I am convinced that if I had not developed activist scholarship, I would not have been able to uncover the processes that affected Latina survivors of intimate partner violence in such depth and complexity. In my book based on this research, I included large portions of my field notes and a significant number of excerpts of interviews, so the experiences of all the immigrants with whom I worked at ORA and their interactions with the organization's staff remained at the front and center of my analysis (Villalón 2010).

In a similar spirit, in what follows, I share, at length, the story of Luisa; a Mexican immigrant survivor of intimate partner violence who approached ORA. Her story, far from being an exception, was representative of many of the battered immigrants I met in the course of my research, including Claudia, Julia, Laura, Martha, Rosa, Manuela, Ana, Susana, Clara, Silvana, Rosario, Mónica, Samuel, Yolanda, Patricia, Ramona, and Leticia, who found a similarly unfortunate fate in their search of justice.¹⁰ By incorporating Luisa's story in full, I help the reader appreciate the complicated and intense texture of the processes that I was able to unveil through activist research.

The Case of Luisa

Luisa was a survivor of physical and psychological domestic violence perpetuated by her partner, Richard, a U.S. citizen, who was incarcerated after the last violent episode. Luisa approached ORA in search of legal help in regards to her immigration status because the police had informed her of her rights to apply for a U visa,¹¹ which would allow her to stay and work in the United States legally on the basis of the abuse she had endured. In our first meeting, the intake appointment, I followed the steps to gather as much information as possible in order to have the attorney review her case and decide whether Luisa could become a client of the organization or not.

The appointment was unusually long; it lasted almost three hours as opposed to a typical one-hour

meeting. The first set of questions regarding biographical information was daunting for Luisa. She had difficulty remembering exact dates about her marriage and the births of her children. She could not recall precise information on her entry to the United States or the addresses of the various places where she had resided. Regarding her marital status, Luisa shamefully told me that she had not married Richard because she was “Casada, bien casada” (“Married, really married”) back in Mexico. Then she explained to me that even though she was still married, she had lost touch with her husband since she migrated to the United States years ago. Luisa got involved with Richard as she had considered herself separated and lived with him for several years. Luisa had four children, all of whom had different fathers. Her children were still living in Mexico.

Regarding her history of migration, it took me more than an hour just to clarify when she had left Mexico and arrived in the United States. She told me that she had come in the early nineties and that she had never returned to Mexico, but as I went through the birth dates and places of her children, she told me that three of them were born in Mexico in the midnineties. While I thought she had gotten confused between the early nineties and the early 2000s, she insisted, “No Miss, 1990 … But, no, it was 1990 … 1990, I’m telling you!” It was after many explanations that she realized that we were currently in the 2000s and not the 1990s. Luisa laughed, embarrassed, when she realized it.

As we began to talk about her current and past addresses, she could not recall exact information and was certain about not possessing rental leases since her residences had been arranged informally, including her current one. After Richard was incarcerated, Luisa moved out and rented a room from a woman who did not even give her the key to the apartment: “I have to leave the apartment at the same time the other woman does, and then I have to wait outside until she comes back from work late at night.” As I heard about her current living situation, I gave her information about shelters for battered women. Luisa showed interest in them; “Can you help me? I don’t have a phone in the apartment.” I let her use the phone at ORA (the closest public phone she had was miles away). As soon as the person in the shelter picked up the phone and replied in English, Luisa handed me the receiver, “I don’t know what they are saying, Miss. Please …” As soon as I began talking about Luisa, the shelter apologized, “We don’t have any vacancy at the moment.”

Then, Luisa called another shelter where they spoke Spanish. After ten minutes or so of questions, they told her that they could not accept her because her children were not residing with her, and their shelter was “exclusively for mothers with children.” Finally, she called a third shelter, which was further away from the city where Luisa lived. Nobody spoke Spanish, so Luisa asked me to talk with them in English. They had space available, “She can stay with us from today onwards. What time will she arrive?” I offered to give Luisa a ride that same afternoon, but she reminded me, “I don’t know when I will be able to get in the apartment, late at night probably … I can’t go to the shelter without my things, and they are all in there, in the apartment.”

As we spoke, one of the ORA staff came to the office and told us that we had a message from one of the shelters saying that they could make an exception and take Luisa in (this was the shelter that only accepted mothers with children—after all, Luisa was a mother whose children were back in Mexico). Excited, Luisa said that she preferred this option because it was in town, and she could use public transportation to go to work. Then, I canceled the arrangements with the other shelter, thanked them, and apologized. We called the shelter for mothers and arranged for her to move in there the following morning. I would pick Luisa up by car the next day as she could not bring all of her belongings on the bus, on her own.

After these preparations, I explained to Luisa the next steps at ORA (her file would be reviewed by the attorney and then, in our next meeting, I was going to be able to let her know what her options were). Next, I helped her look at the bus map and schedule to see if she could take a bus from ORA to her place of residence. It was very hard for her to understand me, so I walked her almost all the way to the bus stop. She thanked me and continued to walk with a doubtful and fearful demeanor; “Bye, Luisa, see you tomorrow morning. Take care!” When I arrived back at ORA, Cathy, the lawyer, and Maggie and Jenna, the two legal assistants, expressed their surprise about the length of my meeting with Luisa: “Oh, Roberta … You are too nice.”

The following morning I went to pick Luisa up, but I did not find her. I was worried; I thought something could have happened to her, or maybe I had gotten a wrong address from her. I went to ORA,

and after an hour or so of trying, reached her friend by telephone—“I’m sure that Luisa is working … Yes, I’ll tell her about the shelter and the next appointment. No problem, Miss. Thank you.” I called the shelter and explained what had happened, “Don’t you worry. We will do our best to get in touch with her.”

Before the next appointment, Luisa called me to let me know that she was not going to be able to make it because “a work opportunity that she could not miss had come up.” We rescheduled our meeting, and when I asked her if she had gotten in touch with the shelter, she told me that she had. But, “I have to call them again to see how I will bring my things over—I can’t bring my bag, the table, my bookcase, and the other things on the bus, as I told you.” As much as I understood how important her belongings were for Luisa, I thought that she was not convinced that moving to the shelter was the right thing for her; perhaps she feared the loss of proximity to the one friend who had provided her with emotional, informational, and material support; perhaps she felt that living in a shelter was depriving her of her autonomy (as opposed to what shelter advocates aim for, that is, to provide a safe haven for survivors and help them regain their sense of self and independence) (Schechter 1982; Rudrappa 2004). Not possessing the keys to the apartment where she was living was not as disturbing for her as I had originally thought.

In our rescheduled appointment, I was excited to tell Luisa that ORA had approved her case—she qualified to apply for a U visa. I explained the steps to follow, particularly the requirement of collaborating with the police in the investigation of the crime committed against her, as well as the benefits of applying for this visa—deferred action on deportation procedures and employment authorization. Then I asked, “So, Luisa, do you want to go ahead with this?” Luisa, confused and fearful, replied, “Well, I don’t know, miss. What do you think? Should I?”

Luisa’s doubts probably emerged from listening to how lengthy and intricate the U visa application process was going to be. Moreover, she probably felt threatened by the fact that she was being asked to keep an open connection with the police. Immigrants, particularly those unauthorized, commonly feared the police because they had been known to profile them and collaborate with immigration authorities. At the same time, survivors of domestic violence tended to have mixed feelings about criminalizing abusers, especially if they had to contribute with the police investigation against them. After I explained the U visa application procedure in detail one more time, Luisa seemed to overcome her (fairly characteristic and reasonable) fears: she agreed to go through the process.

The supervisor of Luisa’s case, Courtney, was ORA’s expert on U visas. She told me to “go easy on the case, because until we get the certification from the police, we should not waste resources on it.” I tried to make progress on other matters related to the case as much as possible in order to have everything ready for when the certification arrived. Luisa missed many appointments (because of temporary work opportunities and even threats from the abuser’s relatives), so the pace was very slow in comparison to other cases on which I worked. Whenever we met, Luisa raised questions about her immigration application status: it was difficult for her to understand that despite all the paperwork done, there was no news about her case. She also expressed her fear of her abuser and his family’s threats, particularly about being deported: “I’m so scared, Miss; what can I do? I thought all of these would help, but you tell me there’s nothing yet.” Luisa’s confusion and concerns were legitimate, especially at a time when raids of undocumented workers were increasing and debates about restricting immigration laws flooded the media. While my explanations were not necessarily pleasing, at least she knew who to call and what not to say or do if she were apprehended by immigration officers.

I followed up on Luisa’s case with Courtney at least once a month because I could not believe how long the police were taking to give her certification, especially because Richard was indeed incarcerated with charges of domestic violence against Luisa. Courtney was not surprised at the length of the wait: “I wait an average of four months to receive responses from the police.” After seven and a half months from the intake appointment, I received an email from Courtney: “The police denied Luisa’s certification. They claim she did not cooperate in the investigation. They called Luisa, but she did not return their phone call.” When I asked Courtney if there was anything Luisa could do about it she explained to me that she could call the police and explain that she never got their message because she had moved several times. Luisa followed our instructions, and in her conversation with the police, she reiterated that she was willing to collaborate in the investigation of her abuser’s crime against her.

After several weeks, I tried to get in touch with Courtney to check on Luisa’s case, but I did not hear back from her. Three months later (that is, eleven months after the intake appointment with Luisa), I

finally received an update from Courtney: the police had refused once again to certify Luisa, and consequently, ORA was not able to proceed with her U visa petition. Courtney disagreed with the police's double denial of Luisa's certification; clearly frustrated, she told me that it was "plain bullshit." I asked her if we could further complain. Hastily she replied, "I cannot take care of her case at the moment. I'm busy with other U visa applicants." As I left her office, Courtney said, "*Pobrecita*" (poor thing) and clarified that she would get in touch with her to let her know about her options to complete a victim's compensation petition. Upon receiving the news from Courtney, Luisa never came back to ORA.

Learning from Luisa's Case: Formal and Informal Barriers to Citizenship

Unfortunately, Luisa's case is typical of the fate of many battered immigrants who approached the nonprofit organization. Her case is also representative as it illustrates the revealing potential of activist methodology as a research tool as well as its promise to advance struggles to dismantle the particularly oppressive circumstances and needs of minority battered women. By developing activist scholarship from a feminist of color perspective in my years of research at ORA, I found that independently from their histories of abuse and legal entitlements under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), immigrant survivors confronted additional formal and informal barriers when they tried to break free from violence and dependency and become U.S. citizens.

Formally, battered immigrants are bound by the immigration provisions of VAWA, which by mirroring the broader family-based immigration law system, prioritize heterosexual, economically self-sufficient, married U.S. citizens as arbiters of citizenship for immigrant spouses. Therefore, even if battered immigrants can self-petition for citizenship through VAWA without the sponsorship of their abusive spouses, their ability to do so depends on (a) their marital status and sexual identity, (b) their abuser's nationality and immigration status, and their own country of origin, and (c) their socioeconomic capacities.

First, the marital status and sexual identity of abused immigrants determine the options available for them. VAWA provides full protection for married, heterosexual immigrants by allowing them to self-petition for citizenship as survivors of abusive intimate partners. However, VAWA partially protects battered immigrants who are not married or in a common law union with their abusive partners or who are separated but not divorced from a previous spouse while being involved with the perpetrators. This group of immigrant survivors may be able to obtain immigration relief through a U visa (like Luisa), which in comparison to VAWA self-petition for citizenship, is a less certain and more difficult process to traverse given the fact that immigrants must collaborate with the police in the investigation of the crime. Battered LGBTQ immigrants are the least protected of all: because their intimate relationships are not considered legal at the federal level, they cannot self-petition for citizenship through VAWA. They can only apply for a U visa as survivors of violent crimes like rape, sexual assault, abusive sexual contact, and sexual exploitation (but not domestic violence) committed against them in the United States. Besides the complications and disadvantages of U visas relative to the benefits of citizenship self-petitions, battered LGBTQ immigrants face the sociocultural barriers rooted in sexism and homophobia (Luibhéid 2002; Calvo 2004; National Resource Center on Domestic Violence 2007).

Second, the national origin and immigration status of the abuser determine the options available for battered spouses, no matter the intensity of the abuse. If abusers are U.S. citizens by birthright or naturalization, their victims can obtain legal permanent residency as soon as their VAWA applications are approved and apply for citizenship three years later. If abusers are legal permanent residents, their victims can also obtain legal permanent residency and apply for citizenship three years later. However, the waiting period to obtain residency varies depending on the nationality of the battered immigrant, ranging from less than a year to more than eight, according to the length of the backlog that the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has in processing petitions from the applicant's country of origin. The longer a petitioner has to wait for her residency, the longer the path toward citizenship.

The noncitizen status of the abusers damages their victims not only in terms of the length of the process, but also in terms of its certainty. On the one hand, if the abusive resident is deported (that is, loses his status as legal permanent resident) due to an incident of domestic violence, the survivor has two years to file a VAWA self-petition, or her chances to gain legal status perish. On the other hand, if the abusive

resident is deported due to other reasons before the VAWA application of the battered immigrant is approved by USCIS, all chances to gain legal status for the applicant end instantaneously. If abusers are neither United States citizens nor legal permanent residents (that is, if they are unauthorized immigrants), victims cannot self-petition for citizenship but rather apply for a U visa. As I explained before, U visas provide the longest and least certain path to stabilize the immigration status of survivors.

Third, the socioeconomic status of battered immigrants shapes the chances they have to access VAWA's benefits. On the one hand, the costs associated with the application process are high because of USCIS fees, the charges for supporting documentation, and legal representation. While this burden has been partially lifted by the assistance of pro-bono lawyers and nonprofit legal organizations like ORA, the costs that are not waived delay or impede the application process for the immigrants most in need. On the other hand, VAWA applications require immigrants to possess and provide documents, bills, payment receipts, and health reports and to trust official authorities, such as policemen, and government bureaucrats. These requirements weed out the neediest immigrants, who either lack the ability to collect personal documents and receipts to prove identity and common residency with the abusive spouse, may not ever have possessed such papers, or may not have been able to systematically file them or access them because of their controlling abusers. Simultaneously, police reports (or the collaboration with the criminal investigation in the case of U visas) and the inclusion of psychological evaluations are a threatening obstacle for the applicants, who not only fear the police but also find counseling too much of a foreign and demanding practice. As a result, the poorest immigrants continue to find the process unaffordable, complicated, and thus, unattainable.¹²

All together, the formal barriers that stand in the way of battered immigrants' access to citizenship replicate long-standing gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, and class hierarchies of the United States. So, as much as the immigration provisions in VAWA have made a positive impact on many survivors, inherited biases from the broader family-based immigration system limit the reach of the benefits. The state utilizes immigration laws to sustain its sovereignty (by regulating which individuals are welcome to join a given population), build nationhood (by setting citizenship ideals), and control productivity (by stimulating or preventing foreign laborers to legally join its working force) along gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, and class lines. In the United States, immigration laws have historically prioritized men over women, married over unmarried, heterosexual over LGBTQ, white over person of color, European over non-European immigrants, Christian over other religious identities, citizen over foreigner, and richer over poor (Haney López 1996; Glenn 2002; Hing 2004; Ngai 2004). Confined by these laws, the spirit of VAWA—to protect all survivors of intimate partner violence regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, or immigration status—is truncated by such overarching exclusionary ideals and institutions.

Besides these formal barriers inscribed into the law, additional ones informally emerge at the level of the nonprofit organization. As I developed activist research at ORA, I found that advocates created tacit parameters that guided their dealings with battered immigrants seeking services. They expected battered immigrants to present themselves and behave in particular ways in their frequent interactions with them and in their potential interactions with official authorities. As I paid close attention to ORA staff's practices, thoughts, feelings, and case management decisions, I found that immigrants who were compliant, tidy, constant, resolute, autonomous, responsible, deferent, considerate, discreet, redeemable, considerably recovered from the battering, and good parents (when applicable) were prioritized by nonprofit staff, regardless of their traumatic past and eligibility under VAWA. Immigrants who fit the "ideal client" profile not only were supposed to be easier to handle throughout the application process, but also were supposed to have simple, solid cases that immigration authorities would most likely approve. This attitude corresponded with organizational frameworks focused less on human rights advocacy and more on service provision with an emphasis on obtaining funding through satisfying funders' requirements, which usually awarded high volumes of approved VAWA applications.

These informal barriers, coupled with the formal ones, affected all immigrant survivors of intimate partner violence. However, my research showed that it was the least privileged immigrants who encountered the most hurdles along the way, regardless of their histories of abuse. Latina immigrants of color who were native to Mexico, undocumented, in violent relationships with residents or other undocumented immigrants, and/or LGBTQ found greater disadvantages. Furthermore, battered immigrants were significantly delayed or even prevented access to citizenship if they were extremely poor, had few, if

any, years of formal education, had complicated migration or criminal backgrounds, and/or were unable to fit within the nonprofit organization's "ideal client" profile.

Reflections on Activist Research

The use of activist methodology allowed me to uncover the workings of the formal and informal obstacles that stand along the way of battered immigrants' access to justice. The potential of activist research as a revealing methodological tool, however, was furthered by its collaborative and applied character: I was also able to think about and elaborate suggestions on how to dismantle such exclusionary institutions and practices together with advocates and Latina survivors. The fact that these suggestions were created in collaboration with those who were part of the community with whom I was developing my research had two major, interrelated, consequences. First, the traditionally hierarchical, oppressive, or colonial dynamics of scholarship (derived from the scholar/expert versus research subject/object dichotomy) were significantly reduced. Second, the chances for the collaboratively created scholarship to be critically adopted by those who needed it the most (in this case, Latina battered immigrants and their advocates) significantly increased (Naples 2003; Esterberg 2002; Hale 2008).

At the same time, the practice of the collaborative and applied qualities of activist research was quite challenging: How would members of the organization and community react to findings that were controversial, critical, or negative? Would they open up and continue to allow for activist research to be developed in their setting, or would they shut down and cease to participate in the project? How would the working relationship between us change? How could the project and its findings survive beyond the potential emergence of tensions? In order to discuss how activist scholars might navigate these challenges, next I focus on my experience at ORA, particularly, on the various instances when I shared my analytical observations with ORA staff and how their responses, in turn, fed the research.

To begin with, ORA staff members were aware of my research purposes and my intention of actively collaborating with the organization's needs in order to better serve battered immigrants. All the while I was involved as an intern for the immigrant survivors of intimate partner violence program at ORA, I would informally bring up comments and observations with the goals of testing the resonance of my views and thinking about how to take action together with ORA staff. I found these informal exchanges to be very fruitful for the development of the research because they not only reaffirmed the usefulness of my active participation for the organization and the battered immigrants' community, but also served as indicators of what issues I should continue or begin to focus on research- and workwise.

A little more than halfway into my field research, I presented my preliminary findings to ORA staff with the double aim of sharing what I had been able to compile so far as well as obtaining their feedback on my observations: Did my preliminary findings make any sense to them? Would they share their thoughts on these observations? Were they interested in working on some of the issues that I (and they) had identified as problematic, yet solvable? Could they clarify some of the doubts I had? Researchwise, this was also a rich instance; particularly because it revealed working contradictions of the nonprofit organization as well as important limitations of activist research. First, ORA staff appreciated my labor and the analysis, and they also seemed to agree with my views. They expressed their willingness to let me continue with my research while I was "doing such great work as a volunteer at the organization."¹³ In addition, they were open to the suggestions of trying to improve access to counseling for battered immigrants and exploring ways to provide childcare services or more child-friendly practices in the organization. But they were clear to point out that if anybody, I should be the one person taking care of it, since they were already overwhelmed with their caseloads.

After a couple of weeks of gathering information and developing some ideas on how to take care of both issues, I shared the information with ORA staff. It was then that I realized that I had misinterpreted their message. Their asking me to take care of it was more probably meant to be taken as a deterrent rather than as an encouragement: my proposals to facilitate counseling access and organize childcare services ended up finding an institutional void. In other words, the proposals were shunned, and I was then given a clear message not to "waste time pursuing such ideas."¹⁴

Despite frustrations, I took this "incident" as part of the data to be collected, data that would help me understand both the dynamics of the nonprofit organization and the nuances of activist researchers'

proposals. On the one hand, I took note on how overburdened staff felt as well as the ways in which they drew specific boundaries on their tasks (like focusing on processing legal paperwork alone while outsourcing the labor, and responsibility, of psychological and family assistance for battered immigrants). On the other hand, I reflected on how ORA staff framed my double role at ORA as volunteer and researcher: while they were interested in my labor as an intern for the program for battered immigrants, they preferred to keep me at bay; some staff perceived too much involvement on my part as a threat to their jobs as well as an invasion of an outsider telling them what to do differently. Consequently, I thought about how to limit my volunteer work (since it was not my intention to take anybody's job away) and also how to better share my observations and ideas in a way that they would find productive as opposed to insidious.

Accordingly, when I completed a full-length final write-up of my findings, I tried to organize a meeting with ORA staff where I would once again test my views and obtain their feedback. Because of coordination difficulties, I was only able to share my analysis in writing. This means of communication generated very little reaction on their part. I sought to overcome this second "incident" since I did not want my final writing to neither include their views and reactions nor have at least the potential of being of any use to the organization. One year later, I was finally able to organize a workshop at the organization where I presented a report on my analysis and gathered ORA staff's thoughts. Because at the time of this workshop only three of the people who used to work while I was doing research at ORA were still there,¹⁵ I also organized group and individual informal interviews with them. All of these exchanges were particularly fruitful for the final development of the research given that I was able to strengthen the analysis in a collaborative fashion, while adding a reflective layer from ORA staff's perspective, both of which were absolutely critical to contextualizing and furthering the understanding of the processes at play at this kind of nonprofit organization.

In the last workshop and interviews, I made sure to frame my analysis of ORA within the broader context of the immigration system and nonprofit organizations, while emphasizing the important role that ORA and its staff played in providing services to underserved immigrants as well as their key position as gatekeepers of citizenship. Key to these exchanges was my invitation for them to express their thoughts on my analysis as well as to brainstorm ideas on how to tackle those formal and/or informal barriers that they identified as being problematic.

Overall, ORA staff members were attentive and found my analysis accurate and sensible. They carefully listened and thoughtfully shared their comments and questions. First, they agreed with my depiction of their role as gatekeepers (or brokers) of citizenship between the state and the immigrants, a role that emphasized their enormous power and responsibility in being the ones who could either open or close immigrants' access to stabilizing their immigration status and becoming autonomous individuals in the United States. Then, as I explained the problematic formal barriers of VAWA's immigration provisions, they expressed their discontent, but, because these barriers were inscribed in the law as inherited from the broader immigration system, many advocates took the position that while unfortunate, these hierarchies were unavoidable. They also claimed that despite its biases, VAWA at least provided some battered immigrant women the opportunity to break free from abuse and become citizens; in other words, they believed that the disadvantages were counterbalanced by the advantages of VAWA's immigration provisions.

The section on informal barriers was the one that triggered most of the reaction on the part of ORA staff. Among their laughter and jokes, they spoke up and collectively confirmed that they "dreaded working with clients who cried a lot; clients who brought and could not control their kids in appointments; clients who called too much (many times per week, more than once a day), and clients who were too demanding (the ones with higher economic status)."¹⁶ If the clients behaved this way, the staff members explained that they "didn't rush to make appointments with them."¹⁷ The staff's consensus on this matter seemed to work as a relief on their concerns about the consequences of leaving these clients unattended—even if before they may have informally had shared their frustrations about what I identified as "problem clients," this seemed to be the first occasion when they saw it as a group or institutional issue. They also seemed to be able, for the first time, to share their preoccupations about the effects that this differential treatment would bring to the clients. ORA staff also expressed their disorientation on how they could dismantle the organization's informal barriers. Lucy, for instance, said, "I realize that these client

preferences ended up reinforcing the barriers you are talking about (particularly social class). But, I'm not sure what we can do about it.”¹⁸

In response to this, I shared my suggestion of setting time apart to discuss these matters at the organizational level, a suggestion that was received with enthusiasm. I also pointed to the importance to think about what was happening at ORA in the broader context of nonprofits: staff’s role as gatekeepers, the formal and informal barriers were not unique to ORA, but common to many other nonprofit organizations providing services to battered immigrants. They were curious to read about what was going on in other institutions, so I offered references to articles, reports, and books written about and by other organizations that had identified similar patterns and were working on dealing with them. Additionally, I suggested that fostering network communication through trainings or conferences with similar groups could help as well. I signaled the relevance of keeping both a reflective and a political attitude with regard to their work given their power as gatekeepers of citizenship. The contextualization of my analysis of ORA’s workings among other nonprofits calmed some of the anxiety resulting from hearing such a critical report.

However, the initial enthusiastic reception of the report/workshop was tamed in my individual and group interviews with staff members who used to work at ORA while I was doing field research. Cathy told me that my analysis “made sense but it was very difficult to address when working—abstractly was OK, but practically was impossible.”¹⁹ Similarly, Jenna believed that my analysis made sense, even if “it was hard to hear.”²⁰ However, she did not think that change was necessary; “We do a very good thing.”²¹ Jenna and Cathy resisted my proposal to address the informal disparities at ORA. Cathy explained, “I don’t think this would work. It wouldn’t be welcomed. People would be like … ‘What the fuck?!?’ if I asked them to spend time talking about dropped cases while they have been working plenty on other cases that had been selected and approved.”²²

Courtney, who used to be ORA’s U visa expert, reflected on the organization’s role as a gatekeeper and its resistance to change. She argued that funding conditions and the growth of the demand of services has changed the nonprofit’s attitude:

If ORA didn’t get any more clients, the story would be different. I remember that at the very beginning of the U visa program at ORA, I had very few clients. I had to do a lot of outreach to get enough clients. But later on, I had so many, that prioritizing or dropping clients didn’t matter. There was a Nigerian woman, one of the first cases I had … I had so much time [on] my hands that I did everything I could until I got the certification from the police. Later on, the case of this woman would have been dropped once her certification was denied in the first place—I would have thought, I tried hard enough and there are so many other clients waiting.²³

It was in the latter context that Courtney had dealt with Luisa’s case. As we talked about her, I shared my frustration about how she had let Luisa’s case sit in the file cabinet for several months and later decided not to insist on getting the police certification of Luisa’s collaboration with the investigation. Courtney empathized, and added that “the fact that we were still helping many others made it hard to recognize these informal practices as problematic. There were also issues of self-preservation. For example, not getting too involved or sad with the clients’ stories allowed me to distance myself from the immigrants and focus on doing business.”²⁴ Finally, Courtney articulated her thoughts about the importance of contextualizing ORA’s experiences,

It is hard but necessary to hear criticism in order to be able to change. It helps to know that other nonprofits are going through similar things—it would be great to be more collaborative between nonprofits (here is difficult because nonprofits are competing for the same funding sources, but it would be nice to see more collaboration). I believe that thinking about how the organization is doing is very important. Retreats can help—at a retreat staff could focus on what is happening and develop ways to deal with whatever is thought of as wrong. Another way to provide better services is to get thorough, constructive feedback from the clients (as opposed to the feedback that ORA collects right now, which is useless because the survey that clients complete provides set answers), as well as keeping and evaluating records of the flow of immigrants through the

organization (even if these may require resources, I think it would be worthy).... Also, I see that even if it's hard, and one may be tired from working so much, it is very important to keep politics alive.²⁵

Courtney's reference to politics was indeed a poignant one since ORA had moved away from being a politically active grassroots group to becoming a quasipolitical nonprofit organization. Cathy and Jenna acknowledged that the formal barriers inherited in VAWA were problematic; however, they expressed that it was not their responsibility to deal with that. While they would not resist other advocates' efforts to make immigration policies more inclusive, they were not interested in joining the struggle. They added that if ORA staff were requested to engage in political activism, this work would have to be calculated as part of their labor rather than left unpaid.²⁶ If ORA paid for these efforts, and there was enough time to still take care of the same number of cases, then ORA staff interested in politics could become actively involved. So far, the slight political activism that ORA staff had engaged in (like signing online petitions or joining community rallies) had gone unpaid, while their regular case work was put on hold. ORA staff felt that this trade-off was unfair both to their clients and to themselves.

In retrospect, the reactions of all ORA staff were indicative of the worth of going through the challenging phase of sharing findings with them, who were indeed fundamental collaborators of my activist research project. Given their responses, I was able not only to check the accuracy of my analysis, but also to modify, improve, and expand my analysis based on their responses, and more importantly, elaborate courses of action collectively. All the frustrations were counterbalanced by the richness of ORA staff's feedback, which was useful in identifying the interpersonal and institutional dynamics that may or may not allow for change to happen. As I reflected; wrote my book, articles, and book chapters; and prepared new workshops for and with immigrants and their advocates, I took all of the ORA staff's feedback into account and built on it critically. Specifically, as I observed that ORA staff members seemed to be reluctant to push for legal change to modify the formal barriers inherited from the larger immigration system or to engage in actions to dismantle the informal barriers emerging from their own inequitable practices, I wondered how my research could still contribute to furthering battered immigrants' access to justice.

I realized that one of the main ways to overcome interpersonal, organizational, and political barriers in activist research projects was by broadening the front of action. My activist research project did begin at ORA but did not end there or when I did the report/workshop or interviews with the staff. Activist research was a process that had to continue beyond the location and the time of the original fieldwork. Thus, besides sharing my work while emphasizing both the particular obstacles that battered immigrants cope with and the invaluable activist research methodologies within academic circles at professional meetings,²⁷ university talks, and college courses,²⁸ I made my research easily accessible on the Internet²⁹ and proactively offered to join meetings and do workshops to discuss these topics in the community.³⁰ Moreover, I got involved with battered immigrants' rights networks and women's rights organizations which had a membership inclusive of activists and advocates, such as Arte Sana, ALAS, Mujeres del Movimiento, and Women's Worlds, where I have regularly participated in online discussions and in-person meetings and learned from other participants.

Other concrete examples of how I expanded my activist research project beyond ORA are the workshops I conducted at Arte Sana's 2008 and 2010 National Conferences devoted to "help bridge the gaps in victim services by promoting the development of culturally competent programs and the active participation of the Latino community in anti-sexual violence work," with little to no "private or governmental financial support" (Arte Sana 2008, 22). In my workshops, I emphasized that the processes that I discovered while working as a volunteer at ORA are common to other nonprofit organizations subjected to similar legal and funding constraints and that the objective of thinking about these issues was to develop more inclusive policies and practices for battered immigrants. Workshop participants (nonprofit and governmental immigrants' advocates) were asked to form groups, reflect about the formal and informal barriers that stood in the way of battered immigrants' search for citizenship, and propose means that they had used or could use to avoid or dismantle them.

Most participants mentioned the constraints attached to grants and seemed to be doubtful about overcoming these, mostly because of a tremendous need for resources. A few argued for developing

alternative sources of funding in order to be able to serve a broader spectrum of the immigrant population in tandem with the nonprofits' inclusive missions. Common propositions were collaborating with other nonprofits, educating the community, increasing the number of bilingual speaking advocates, and developing culturally sensitive services. While the strategy of pushing for policy changes was put in the context of founders' constraints, participants recognized its importance and noted the fear that immigrants felt in regards to deportation due to increasing anti-immigrant sentiments in the country. Finally, regarding informal practices at the nonprofit level, most advocates pointed to their struggles between allocation of scarce resources and faithfulness to their organizations' missions. They also emphasized the need to connect and cooperate with other organizations and valued the possibility of thinking of and developing strategies to handle these issues at in-house and network meetings, trainings, and conferences.

The diversity of the group of advocates that attended the workshop was exemplified by their main concerns: while victim services specialists from the police department felt constrained by bureaucratic red-tape that significantly slowed down the process to assist battered immigrants, recently hired advocates were surprised to find out that VAWA's immigration provisions reflected gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, and class discriminatory institutions typical of the broader immigration system. The range of responses, however, stressed the need to take a proactive, comparative, and collaborative approach on how to resist formal and informal barriers that stand in the way of battered immigrants' access to justice. As Laura Zárate, Arte Sana's founding executive director, stated in the conference's opening remarks: "We are very diverse.... We are a big family.... We are all experts.... We are all survivors,"³¹ and in order to survive organizationally and struggle for the well-being of "newly arrived or third generation" immigrants, "we need to create ways to work together, include each other, refer each other, and support each other's efforts" (Arte Sana 2008, 1).

Concluding Remarks

Despite its challenges, there was not a moment when I doubted the richness and potential of activist research. Hence, to end I share a set of ideas that I believe researchers should keep in mind before, while, and after taking on this sort of methodological framework. First, in order to develop activist research, scholars ought to believe in the ideological reasons beneath this methodology, evaluate its particular relevance to the subject matter at hand, and be prepared to become politically committed to the work. In other words, if scholars are incredulous of the politics of activist research, they can instead make use of other qualitative tools that are not inherently politicized, like participant observation or interviews. Second, scholars should be truthful in their relationships with the members of the community and/or organization with whom they are developing the activist research project. An open attitude, transparency, and humility will allow scholars to gain and maintain access to the community, as well as to build a constructive, long-lasting, and ethical working relationship.

Third, activist researchers ought to be faithful in how to incorporate the views, opinions, and voices of the community members to the analysis: having talked with "them," or worked with "them" is not enough and does not automatically provoke a change in the understanding of otherness or the oppressive structures of power (Mani 1998; Menon and Bhasin 1998). This is particularly important given that one of the purposes of activist research is to counter hegemonic practices in research and beyond, a purpose that would be voided if researchers reinterpret, omit, or ignore community members' perspectives. Accordingly, activist researchers should be conscious of the possibility of disagreeing with the community, as well as finding resistance or indifference to ideas that they believed had emerged from their working relationship with the community. If such tensions occur, it is the responsibility of activist scholars to critically take care of frustrations and disputes while incorporating them as data to be later analyzed as part of the greater project. Therefore, researchers should not take conflict as a deterrent or a failure, but as an intrinsic part of activist methodologies. Scholars ought to be persistent, reflective, and critical, so their analyses will bear fruit despite the challenges that may emerge during the research project.

Fourth, and last, researchers should keep in mind that activist projects are relational processes of knowledge creation and that as such, they ought to be conceived as collective, complex, and long-term endeavors that are expected to become larger than their own protagonists and locations. This knowledge is destined to change the standpoint of researcher and community members, and consequently of their

relationship. If such changes mean that their links come to an end, activist scholars should remember that good activist research projects continue to develop and have an impact beyond their original sites and members since in the end, the most important is to advance the political and practical issues at hand.

The careful and critical use of activist research is particularly useful when addressing controversial, complex, mobilized, politicized, and of course, unjust social issues. The worth of engaging in activist research in the Americas is indeed increasing, because of not only the dire circumstances in which most Latin American countries presently are but also the highly discriminatory and exploitative situations in which most Latin American immigrants find themselves in the world. Moreover, the transnational and activist participation of scholars becomes especially significant given the unequal distribution of resources (which of course affects the academic arena). If the ultimate aim of sociological studies is to contribute to processes of social change that will ameliorate living conditions for all in the Americas and beyond, the significance of the methodological framework of activist research is only on the rise.³²

Notes

I would like to thank New York University Press for allowing me to use some excerpts from my book *Violence Against Latina Immigrants: Citizenship, Inequality, and Community* in this chapter (2010).

1. Regularly, an immigrant who marries a U.S. citizen or a legal permanent resident is allowed to apply for legal permanent residency on the basis of her/his union. The citizen or resident is the one person who has to sponsor—that is, file the application and provide economic support for—the immigrant spouse in front of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). When the citizens or residents are abusive partners, they tend to take advantage of their power to sponsor or not sponsor the immigrant spouse's USCIS application as a means of control.
2. Activist research is also referred to as action research, participatory action research, feminist action research, collaborative research, grounded theory, and the like (Hale 2008; Esterberg 2002). Because there is no one unique definition of activist scholarship, all of these kinds of activist research have significant similarities and also certain differences that should be neither overlooked nor minimized. For example, while feminist action researchers always pay attention to gender inequalities, collaborative researchers may develop their projects with no attention to gender matters.
3. All the names used here are pseudonyms. I also changed dates and locations for security and confidentiality purposes. All immigrants, ORA staff, and members of other organizations working on battered immigrants' issues provided me with their informed consent to participate in this research project and be referred to in publications of my authorship. My transparency in sharing the goals of my research project was grounded not only in the traditional ethical guidelines of the American Sociological Association and Institutional Review Boards, but also on the ideological principles fundamental to activist scholarship, including openness, democracy, and equality (on ethics and activist research, see for example Esterberg 2002, 148–49).
4. In order to be eligible for free services, immigrants had to have earnings below 125 percent of the officially defined poverty line (that is, annual earnings lower than 17,500 dollars for a household of two in 2008, according to the official guidelines of USCIS. Accessed at <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.5af9bb95919f35e66f614176543f6d1a/?vgnextoid=6a096c854523d010VgnVCM10000048f3d6a1RCRD&vgnextchannel=4f719c7755cb9010VgnVCM10000045f3d6a1RCRD>, March 2009).
5. According to data released by the Office of Immigration Statistics of the United States Department of Homeland Security. See, for example, the reports of 2007 at <http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics>.
6. Calculation based on data available at the Bureau of Justice Statistics of the United States Department of Justice (<http://www.ojp.gov/bjs/intimate/ipv.htm#contents>), the Texas Council of Family Violence ([http://www.tcfv.org/pdf/dvam07/Year%202006%20Family%20Violence%20Statistics\(HHSC\).pdf](http://www.tcfv.org/pdf/dvam07/Year%202006%20Family%20Violence%20Statistics(HHSC).pdf)), and the United States Census Bureau (http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/Thematic-MapFramesetServlet?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-tm_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_M00092&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-MapEvent=displayBy&-dBy=040#?306,337).
7. VAWA was first enacted in 1994 and must be reauthorized every five years. The reauthorization process opens the opportunity to revise the act's regulations and budgets, which has had positive and

negative effects. On the one hand, activists for women's and immigrants' rights have been able to push for improvements in the regulations and increments of funding. On the other hand, opposite groups have tried to reduce the extent of assistance offered for survivors of gender violence. A case in point is the last reauthorization round (2011–2012—as of this writing, currently underway) which found strong groups pushing to roll back benefits for LGBTQ, immigrant, and indigenous survivors (see Villalón, forthcoming).

8. There are several conditions and requirements that legal permanent residents have to meet in order to successfully apply for citizenship. Besides paying all application fees, residents have to show that they have been living continuously in the United States, have been economically self-sufficient and autonomous, and have not committed any crimes, among other things. For more information on this, visit <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.eb1d4c2a3e5b9ac89243c6a7543f6d1a/?vgnextoid=d84d6811264a3210VgnVCM100000b92ca60aRCRD&vgnextchannel=d84d6811264a3210VgnVCM100000b92ca60aRCRD>.
9. For these individual and group interviews, the nonprofit workers who were members of ORA while I was doing my fieldwork were given notes on my analysis in writing. In the interviews, I went through the main findings and clarified any questions they had. We talked freely about their reactions while I took notes.
10. You may read about all of these immigrants in my book, Villalón (2010).
11. As noted earlier, one of the achievements of the battered women's movement was to educate police and other key civilians (like health practitioners and teachers) of the rights that victims of gender violence have under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Police officers, and particularly, victim services units' staff, are trained to become aware of the rights that gender violence survivors have and the organizations where they can be assisted.
12. For a full explanation of these formal barriers, see Villalón (2010, chapter 3).
13. Group interview with Cathy, Jenna, Magie, Courtney, and Marina, Central Texas, mid-2000s (exact date not revealed for confidentiality purposes).
14. For more details see Villalón 2010, 112–17.
15. Staff rotation at nonprofits is very high indeed and very common (advocates refer to this phenomenon as “the revolving door of nonprofits”). See Villalón 2010, 132–34.
16. Field notes from report/workshop to all ORA staff, central Texas, July 11, 2008.
17. Field notes from report/workshop to all ORA staff, central Texas, July 11, 2008.
18. Field notes from report/workshop to all ORA staff, central Texas, July 11, 2008.
19. Personal interview with Cathy, central Texas, July 1, 2008.
20. Group interview with Cathy, Jenna, and Maggie, central Texas, July 11, 2008.
21. Group interview with Cathy, Jenna, and Maggie, central Texas, July 11, 2008.
22. Group interview with Cathy, Jenna, and Maggie, central Texas, July 11, 2008.
23. Personal interview with Courtney, central Texas, July 24, 2008.
24. Personal interview with Courtney, central Texas, July 24, 2008.
25. Personal interview with Courtney, central Texas, July 24, 2008.
26. This position reflects the change of grassroots social change organizations to nonprofit social service organizations. As Hawk explains when she is recalling her years of activism in the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1960s and 1970s and in Women of All Red Nations (WARN) in the late 1970s, “When we first started organizing, we were rookies. We did not know how to organize but learned as we went along. Today, when young people ask me about my days in AIM and what they could do now, their first question is: ‘Where will we get the money?’ Often they are surprised by my response. But back then, we did not focus on fundraising. (Nor did we see activism as something we would get paid to do.) We organized first, and then figured out how to make it happen” (Hawk 2007, 102).
27. Examples of these are presentations at conferences organized by the American Sociological Association, the International Sociological Association, the Latin American Studies Association, Sociologists for Women in Society, and the Association of Black Sociologists.
28. As an assistant professor at St. John's University, I created and taught courses like Family Violence, Immigration and Inequality, and Human Trafficking, all of which are directly related to the topic of

my activist research. I also included these issues when I taught Sociology of Gender, Gender in a Global Context, Sociology of the Family, and Research Methodologies.

29. You may visit my webpage (<https://sites.google.com/site/robertavillalonphd/>) and join me on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Violence-Against-Latina-Immigrants/135417359821439>)
30. An example of this is my participation at the Free Adult Literacy Program organized by the Committee of Latin American and Caribbean Studies at St. John's University (http://www.stjohns.edu/academics/centers/clacs/adult_literacy_program.stj).
31. Zárate, August 18, 2008, opening remarks of the Arte Sana National Conference “*Nuestras Voces/Our Voices: Collaboration and Transformation en la Comunidad.*”
32. Villalón 2011.

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