

By Whom and For Whom?
Intersections of Participatory Research and Community Art
Deborah Barndt
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Take the term "research" and add the qualifier "participatory." Take the term "art" and add the qualifier "community." In both cases, common sense notions of what is considered "research" and what is considered "art" are challenged, and the power dynamics inherent in any research and art undertaking are explicitly engaged.

Participatory Research

As a member of the first Participatory Research Group, the North American satellite of a new international network working out of the International Council for Adult Education (Toronto) in the late 1970s, I found refuge in this reframed idea of research. While doing doctoral research on Freirean literacy programs in Peru in the mid-1970s, I had grappled with the inherently political nature of my research, questioned my role as a *gringa* researcher in a "Third World" context, and ultimately took more direction from the community.

In the Participatory Research Network, I found other academic researchers challenging the "by whom" and "for whom" of conventional research. Participatory research consciously connected research, education, and action and made explicit the ideological stance it claimed was implicit in all research. It aimed to democratize research by involving communities in defining the issues to be researched as well as in the data gathering, analysis, and action to be taken. *By them and for them.*

Since those early years, participatory research has gained legitimacy in academic circles, while its terrain has become more contested. Divergent related practices include participatory research (PR), feminist participatory research, participatory action research (PAR), action research (AR), dialectical research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, and participatory rural appraisal. The deeper epistemological shifts underpinning these new configurations have been shaped by postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial notions of power. Dualist notions of power that shaped the early articulations of participatory research have been questioned by Foucault (1980), who claims that power is not negative but circulating and productive, and by Said (1978 / 1994), who both explicates and challenges the very construction of binary opposites, such as Europe / Orient and self / other. The dominant paradigm of western scientific knowledge as objective and measurable is being challenged on political as well as theoretical grounds. Similarly, participatory research is being challenged and transformed by critics who see it too firmly imbedded within a development paradigm (McKenzie, 2002) and by postcolonialists who propose "decolonizing methodologies," reclaiming and revalorizing Indigenous knowledges.

Community Arts

Similar political and intellectual forces have shaped the emergence of a community arts movement in Canada over the past few decades (Ford-Smith, 2001). The impetus has come from diverse corners: the increasing commodification of culture through corporate globalization provoking a desire to reclaim public space and to relocalize cultural production; the rich diversity of diasporic communities introducing new ways of framing and making art; the challenge of the arts establishment by artists of colour; more socially conscious artists working collaboratively with communities while democratizing art; the interests of funders supporting marginalized communities under the banner of community arts.

Adding the qualifier "community" to "art" poses similar questions as does the adding of "participatory" to "research." The dominant notion of each is revealed (and subsequently questioned) by the juxtaposition. Art, for example, is often characterized as an individual professional pursuit, increasingly shaped by the profit-driven marketplace of artistic production. "Community art," on the other hand, suggests a different context (community-based rather than corporate), content (representative of local interests and issues), production (collective rather than individual), and use (educational rather than commercial). Community art has been distinguished from so-called political art by its emphasis on the process of involving people in the making of the work as much as the finished product (Cohen-Cruz, 2002). Yet, in Canada, community arts is clearly a contested terrain, confronting similar tensions as does participatory research.

Engaging Contradictions: A Framework for Reconsidering Research and Art

The epistemological assumptions underlying my use of both participatory research and community arts are grounded in Gramsci's notions of "hegemony," a more fluid way of understanding power as a constant negotiation which moves between consent and resistance, and of "contradiction," the space within which we must constantly negotiate power. The chart below delineates some of the contradictions or tensions which participatory research and community arts, as forms of knowledge production, must engage.

1) CONTEXT: local / global, public / private tensions

- How do global and local forces converge in the context of the research / art? How does the global in the local, i.e. diasporic communities, challenge the practice, indeed the very definitions of research and participation, of art and community?
- In what ways do the current struggle to maintain a public sector in the face of increasing privatization impact the production of knowledge and art?

2) AGENCY: process / product, personal / political, individual / collective tensions

- Who are the actors in the process? What do they gain from the process as well as from the product?
- How do participants draw upon their personal histories as they deepen their understanding of the broader political history they are part of? How do they connect the two?

- How does this lead to taking political action that is both individual and collective?
- 3) PRAXIS: action / reflection, theory / practice, critical / creative tensions
- How does research inform the action or production undertaken?
 - In what ways do participants critically reflect on the knowledge / art they have produced?
 - Is their practice increasingly informed by thoughtful reflection?
 - How do they engage in critical analysis that mobilizes creative responses?
- 4) HOLISTIC KNOWING: body / mind, rational / intuitive, matter / spirit tensions
- How does the process engage all aspects of the self?
 - How are the diverse strengths of group or community members used? In what ways are the spirits (of persons and communities) nurtured through this process?
- 5) LEADERSHIP: insider / outsider, researcher / researched, facilitator / artist tensions
- How do the social locations of the participants influence their relationships?
 - In what ways is power circulating?
 - How do research facilitators or artist animators negotiate their own power while empowering others in knowledge and artistic production?

Two Cases: The Garbage Collection in Canada and Community Radio in Nicaragua

The questions posed above take on greater meaning when applied to specific projects, one framed as a "community arts" project, the other framed as a "participatory research" project. Yet, the community arts project engaged participants in participatory research and the participatory research project involved participants in community artistic production. While the starting points and the end points are different, both challenge similar relationships of power in their own contexts. Both remind us to ask of any artistic production or research process: By whom? And for whom?

The Garbage Collection The Garbage Collection

Context

In the summer of 2000, public debate was heating up in Toronto around the dilemma of what to do with increasing quantities of garbage being produced by a burgeoning global city and unchecked consumerism. Private waste disposal companies from the U.S. lobbied City Hall, where the City Works Committee had tabled a proposal to send Toronto's garbage north to an abandoned mine in Kirkland Lake, Ontario. This battle reflected how corporate globalization and free trade have opened up borders to competitive interests, threatening to privatize many public services.

The same year the Laidlaw Foundation launched its Take Part! Initiatives in Cultural Democracy program, funding three pilot projects with diverse communities and approaches (Pacific, 2000). The Garbage Collection, as one project came to be known, built on an alliance between the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE Local 416), representing the city's sanitation

workers, and the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA), who had been jointly investigating environmentally healthier options to the current garbage disposal system. Laidlaw hired four community artists to work with the sanitation workers and environmentalists to collectively produce murals on environmental themes on four municipal garbage trucks (Barndt & Lee, 2000).

Agency

A two-day popular education workshop was designed to build both interpersonal relations and alliances between the three groups represented, using participatory art practices. First, participants created *collages* of magazine images to introduce themselves individually. A *story-telling* activity, "Tracing the Trash," tapped particular relations each group had to the central theme: garbage. Artists considered the toxic materials they use and the waste they produce; sanitation workers revealed the risks they undertake getting the trash from our curbs to the sorting depot; environmentalists elaborated the impact of these various wastes of consumer society on the earth, the air, the water. This activity was, in fact, a participatory research process that honoured the social location, particular knowledge, and agency of each group represented.

Another activity used *sculpturing*, a popular theatre technique, to reenact past "critical environmental moments:" from a tire fire that forced the evacuation of a Toronto suburb to the *e coli* contamination of water that caused seven deaths in an Ontario rural community in the spring of 2000. Themes for the garbage truck murals emerged out of this creative and collective analysis, and were organized around the four elements — earth, air, fire, and water — one for each truck bearing an environmental message. One side of the truck was to represent "what is," the other to suggest "what could be."

While conventional research might have had the researcher(s) extract the themes, this process made their naming a collective responsibility. The images to represent the themes were also constructed through a collective process: the community artists stimulated participants to sketch images, brainstorm slogans, and synergistically build on each other's ideas. Teams were formed — each integrating a sanitation worker, an environmental activist, and a community artist — to finalize the design of each truck. The artists incorporated the elements created by the group into a coherent maquette for the murals.

The dynamic process of the workshop mirrored participatory research in that it started from the experiences of the participants, drew on their distinct "situated" knowledges, identified themes and proposed ways to represent them.

Praxis

The project unfolded through three key moments of praxis: the painting of the murals, the public launching of the painted trucks followed by the city's whitewashing of one mural, and a press conference protesting this official censorship.

The three-day process of painting the trucks alleviated fears of the so-called non-artists and dissolved most of the perceived boundaries between participants. Community artists guided the

painting, and executed the more delicate tasks. The 40 hours of painting by participants, their friends and family, represented the most active moments of praxis. With favourite music accompanying them, they were physically and mentally engaged, chatting and painting, eating and assessing our work, transforming their analysis and vision into visual form.

The most defining moment, however, came after the trucks had been publicly inaugurated, an event amply covered by both print and broadcast media. One truck depicted the proposed shipping of Toronto garbage to northern Ontario, and portrayed two businessmen holding dollars behind City Hall, representing the private interests lobbying for this option. With the garbage debate at its peak, all cameras focused on this topical mural. Two days later, the city councilor promoting the garbage deal ordered this mural whitewashed. This provocative act invited further media coverage and stimulated more public debate about both the garbage issue and community art itself.

Holistic Knowing

Could such a collective process of research and production have been generated without the multiple forms of art and media — visual constructions and theatre techniques used in the workshops, large paintings on the trucks, television representations of the garbage debate? Community arts and arts-informed participatory research are built upon a more holistic notion of knowing, one that engages body, mind, and spirit in collective creations. The participatory activities generated kinetic energy and the images tapped passions — both negative and positive — that might not have been so strongly expressed if the debate had remained at a verbal, or written, level.

Leadership

Throughout this process, different kinds of power were manifested: by municipal officials and media, by the funder and the community arts officer administering the projects, the cultural animator who developed the project and a popular educator (myself), the community artists and participants from diverse sectors. There was, however, a conscious effort to shift power to the participants who defined the issues, grounding them in their own stories, and representing them visually.

Community artists initially remained in the background, so that the mural design would be led by those who knew environmental issues. Artists took different approaches to their role as cultural animators; some maintained more control over the design than others. Insider / outsider tensions are often played out in participatory research and in community arts, as researchers and artists transform themselves into facilitators of research and artistic production.

In summary, *The Garbage Collection*, while framed as a community arts project, integrated practices of participatory research, and raised many questions about context, agency, praxis, holistic knowing, and leadership. The next case has a different starting point and raises different issues.

Community Radio in Nicaragua: "The Voice of the People Who Have No Voice"

Context

From the global city of Toronto, we move to a context that appears to be the opposite: the Pearl Lagoon Basin on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, a tropical area rich in fish, shrimp, and lumber. Historically marginalized by the jungle that separates the Pacific side of Nicaragua — colonized by the Spaniards — from the Atlantic side, the region was under British colonial control and continues to be exploited by a neo-liberal government which supports multinational businesses in extracting and exporting its natural resources. Since 1994, York University, with funding from the International Development Research Council (IDRC), has supported the Coastal Area Management Plan Project (CAMP-Lab), aimed at developing a community-based resource management plan.

The core methodology of CAMP-Lab has been participatory action research (PAR). While PAR has come under criticism for perpetuating western development relations, its application in the Pearl Lagoon Basin was clearly a counter-hegemonic act that challenged top-down development planning by involving poor coastal communities in crafting a community-based management plan. To promote this process, two popular communications tools have been created: a radio program entitled "Living in Progress with our Natural Resources" and a newsletter, AWAKE.

Popular communications, developed within social movements in Latin America over the past 30 years, democratizes art and communications tools that are integral to popular education and grassroots organizing for social change (Nuñez, 1998). While it shares the concerns of community arts for socially critical content and participatory processes of production, popular communications have usually emerged from social movements, while community arts often originates with artists and may exist quite separately from such movements.

Agency

The community radio program was jump-started during a five-day popular communications workshop I co-facilitated with a York graduate student, who developed it with local youth over the next six months. The program draws environmental themes from the community, addressing issues ranging from the mapping of a Green Trail to protecting diverse species and keeping mestizos from encroaching on natural resources to a critical assessment of a proposed shrimp farming business.

The process of putting together the radio programs is participatory research, affirming peoples' knowledge:

Sometimes people feel that they don't know anything. But we have proven with this radio program that community people know a lot. They have the capacity to identify the problems and they have the solutions or they know where to go to get the solutions. (Tinkam, 2002)

The radio production experience has also developed the self-confidence of the young people who

are now able to research, interview, and implement a program on their own. Whereas two years ago, they could not have imagined themselves taking such an active role, and were even afraid to speak up, they now talk with animation about the issues as well as the participatory process.

Praxis

The radio program also promoted action on the issues discussed, and reflected critically on actions or lack of them. One recurring theme has been the depletion of the fish supply, which many attribute to the use of many large gill nets by mestizo populations moving in from the Pacific region. When it was first discussed on the radio, some community people went to the mayor's office to propose a closed season period to replenish the fish supply. When nothing happened after several months, they revisited the issue on the radio, to rekindle popular pressure to get the municipal government to act.

Holistic Knowing

Coastal peoples represent oral cultures, and radio is the most accessible and culturally appropriate medium. The program coordinator calls the radio program:

the voice of the people who have no voice. At first people would sit in their communities and talk about the problems they face but there was no way that everybody could hear what they feel. But when someone from the community gets on the radio, and talks in their own language (Creole), people can understand exactly what the person is saying. (Tinkam, 2002)

The radio show incorporates various oral elements of the culture — stories, jokes, riddles, songs, and music. The use of these multiple forms of popular culture on the Caribbean coast helps the radio program reach people in a more integral way than a written medium might offer. Research material gathered for the radio program is often transcribed and printed in the newsletter, AWAKE, offering another catalyst for discussion through stories, poems, drawings, and questions for use in schools.

Leadership

The CAMP-Lab staff are community leaders who nurture new leadership in the youth running the radio program. Such an intergenerational dynamic is critical, combining the freshness of youth with the counsel of their elders on political matters.

Tensions exist between the Creole and mestizo populations, and between those who come from the outside and those who remain in the community. There are potential conflicts as well between those trained in conventional radio practices, which create celebrities out of local broadcasters, and those who are new to radio, but committed to a more participatory use of it. Another leadership issue centres on our role as outsiders offering technical assistance to the CAMP-Lab project. While a Canadian facilitator trained the youth to take on the radio show as their own, international funding runs out in mid-2003. Can this dependency be broken in a context in which there are scarce resources for such creative initiatives?

Intersections of Participatory Research and Community Arts

These two cases — the Canadian one explicitly defined as a community arts project that implicitly incorporated processes of participatory research and the Nicaraguan one explicitly elaborated as participatory action research integrating culturally appropriate popular communications forms (radio) — had similar goals of identifying relevant themes or content that could be problematized, of deepening a collective analysis leading to more informed action, of empowering the individuals involved and of linking them through alliances with others. In each case, art and media tapped individual and group creativity, and engaged body, mind, and spirit in a process that both inspired and mobilized. While not unproblematic, these multi-media tools have the potential to engage people more deeply and to facilitate their taking ownership of the process. They adapt cultural practices deeply imbedded in the community, and draw upon local knowledge of the ecosystem so essential to its survival.

The framework offered here allowed a cursory analysis of the two projects in distinct contexts. These can serve as guidelines for the critical development of and reflection on similar ventures, which blur the lines between research and education, art and activism.

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