

## INTRODUCTION

### *Research, Risk, and Activism: Feminists' Stories of Social Justice*

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If something compels you to try and change the world then you are an activist.

—Amina Mama (2013)

I realize I am a scholar activist not just because I believe in human agency and engaged scholarship but also because I believe in the future.

—Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2008, 265)

When Julie Shayne's daughter, Barrie, reaches the sixth grade, her teachers will assign her a "passion project." Barrie was in fourth grade the first time she got to watch her upperclassmates' presentations about their passions. She would come home after the presentations and tell Julie about all of the cool things the other kids were passionate about—from inventing stuff, to gymnastics, to solar power, to cupcakes (Barrie's favorite). As of this writing, Barrie still has two years until she gets to do her own passion project, but she already knows that she wants to talk about dance.<sup>1</sup> Props to her wonderful teachers Kim Copeland and M Wellman for inspiring their kids to think about their homework two years in advance! If only college professors could do the same. It occurred to Julie recently, as editor of *Taking Risks*, that this book is her own passion project; indeed, she has wanted to edit/write/collaborate on some version of it for at least twenty years.

This collection is about social justice, feminism, and activist scholarship. Some of the contributors first met via email in preparation for an *Imagining America* seminar in Seattle, Washington, in September 2010. Julie designed the seminar to foster discussion about the tensions inherent in researching justice, resistance, and feminism in the Americas. Potential participants were asked to think about issues such as tensions between the researcher and the “subjects”; the researcher and her academic discipline; the researcher’s insider and outsider positions; or competing interpretations of history. In response to her call for papers, Julie received a fascinating collection of essays. At the conference, seminar participants shared research agendas, with the dialogue additionally including discussions of some of the intellectual, political, and personal risks we take as activist scholars. This book is one product of that seminar.<sup>2</sup>

This introduction provides the conceptual background for understanding the case studies that follow. We begin with discussions of social justice/activist scholarship. Next, we look at the power of storytellers and their stories in documenting and archiving social justice movements and scholarship. We then consider how this collection of activist research and stories is an example of transnational feminist scholarship. Finally, we speak briefly to the risks of activist research.

### **Social Justice and Activist Scholarship**

The contributors to this volume envision our collection in dialogue with activist scholarship and transnational feminist methodologies, using stories as the bridge between the two. In what follows we do not intend to provide an exhaustive history of either body of literature, but we highlight the key concepts that resonate with and thus provide a useful context for this collection.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, this book is not a “how-to” manual for conducting feminist social justice or activist research but rather a collection by scholar activists who do such work.<sup>4</sup>

What is social justice or activist scholarship? To begin, it is important to note that such scholarship falls under a variety of labels: feminist methods;<sup>5</sup> indigenous methodologies;<sup>6</sup> participatory action research or action research;<sup>7</sup> public scholarship;<sup>8</sup> community-based research;<sup>9</sup> engaged or critically engaged research,<sup>10</sup> and emancipatory, antiracist, or antioppressive research,<sup>11</sup> to name some of the most commonly used terms.<sup>12</sup> And, as is common with all things academic, there is overlap across labels. In this introduction and the chapters that follow, we use the terms “activist scholarship” and “social justice scholarship” interchangeably. The term “social justice scholarship” resonates with this

collection's explicit grounding in a commitment to social justice. By this we mean justice in research, knowledge production, and pedagogy; most importantly, this includes a commitment to supporting the right of everyone to live a life absent of economic, political, social, and personal violence.<sup>13</sup> For the contributors to *Taking Risks*, the "social justice" in social justice scholarship refers to the factors that motivate us to research, along with the desired outcome to which we see ourselves contributing.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of the preferred label, the commonality in activist scholarship lies in the starting point that methodology, activism, theoretical insights, and reflection are inseparable. This mixture of sentiments is often described as "praxis," a term attributed to educator and theorist Paulo Freire (Nagar and Swarr 2010, 6). Barndt defines praxis as "a cultivated awareness of one's condition and shared experiences: both reflecting and acting upon the world to enact social change; the dynamic interaction of active contemplation and reflective practice" (2011, 149). Similarly and succinctly, Nagar and Swarr define praxis as "the cycle of action, reflection, and action through which human beings work to transform their worlds" (2010, 6).<sup>15</sup> This volume is rooted in a praxis-informed perspective.

Though we see praxis as inherent to activist scholarship, social justice research is about more than praxis. Social justice or activist scholarship, and all of its other names, has different yet overlapping meanings to its practitioners. Julia Sudbury and Margo Okazawa-Rey, editors of *Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminisms, and Social Change* (2009a), define activist scholarship as "the production of knowledge and pedagogical practices through active engagements with, and in the service of, progressive<sup>16</sup> social movements" ([b]3). We prefer their definition because it speaks to the broadness of scholarship: knowledge production (i.e., research) and pedagogy. Speaking more specifically to social justice research, we turn to Bickham Mendez and Potts and Brown. Bickham Mendez maintains that "[t]he aim of politically engaged research is to form an admittedly fragile and difficult coalition between 'grassroots,' 'local,' or 'experiential' knowledge and 'theoretical,' 'data-driven,' or 'scholarly' knowledge" (2008, 140). Similarly, Potts and Brown maintain that "[b]eing an anti-oppressive researcher means that there is political purpose and action to your research work. . . . Anti-oppressive research involves making explicit the political practices of creating knowledge. . . . It is about paying attention to, and shifting, how power relations work in and through the processes of doing research" (2005, 255).<sup>17</sup>

A host of common theorists and themes run through social justice and activist scholarship; Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, Orlando

Fals-Borda, and Michel Foucault have proven quite influential. Gramsci's (1971)<sup>18</sup> theories of power, hegemony, and "organic intellectuals" (discussed below) help social justice scholars articulate the power of knowledge as communicated through cultural institutions, combined with the lack of access nonelite sectors have to advancing knowledge claims. Freire (1983) and Fals-Borda (1979; 1991) articulate ideas of popular education and research where the learners and educators, researchers and researched should ultimately be one and the same. Similarly, accessing, communicating, and teaching knowledge are forms of power from which popular classes are excluded if they are not active participants in those processes (see Rodríguez, this volume). Fals-Borda advanced these ideas in his articulation of participatory action research (PAR)<sup>19</sup> and notion of *vivencia* (discussed below). Finally, Foucault's views of truth and power are central to social justice scholarship. Foucault theorizes that "'truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it" (in Rabinow 1984, 74) or what he called "truth regimes."<sup>20</sup> Further, he argued that the "requisite characteristics of truth are courage in the face of danger, a duty to speak, risk in speaking, speaking to power, and a social or moral status from which to speak the truth" (Sanford 2008, 4). In other words, "truth" is a politically imbued social construct with the power to shape social norms. However, because of the constructed and thus malleable nature of truth, it can and must be challenged, and scholar activists can play a role in that process.

Social justice scholars draw on the aforementioned to offer critiques of positivism<sup>21</sup> and claims of objectivity. Such discussions are typically closely connected to conversations about the social construction of knowledge and subsequent designation of scholars as experts and popular classes as subaltern. Activist scholars speak to these processes to identify and critique the power with which knowledge and *some* knowledge makers are imbued, while others are excluded. Such critiques thus demand alternatives to the traditional academic arrangement of "expert" versus "lay person/nonexpert." Though all of the chapters in this volume do not explicitly engage these critiques, knowledge production is implicit in the following chapters via our prioritization of personal interviews, testimonies, literature, and other alternative forms of data. That is, we do not question the need for rigorous research to produce data, especially by activist scholars in support of social justice causes. Rather activist scholars move beyond standard and unquestioned data to the sources that are still marginalized. In the case of this collection, we turn to stories.

Reflexive researching, writing, and teaching practices are also themes which span the literature. Additionally, it is virtually inevitable to read something that speaks to the vulnerability of junior scholars who conduct this sort of research—the result of institutional norms that deem social justice scholarship as subjective, applied, atheoretical, and thus unscholarly. Related to this, much of the literature is dedicated to establishing the scholarly rigor with which the research is conducted. It is also common to read about a researcher’s experiences of personal, professional, and pedagogical tensions and contradictions, including if/how we define ourselves as activists.<sup>22</sup> Not surprisingly, the literature discusses solidarity, alliances, and collaborations among scholars and grassroots activists. *Taking Risks* benefits from, builds on, and is illustrative of these earlier conversations. We now move on to the role of stories in advancing activist scholarship.

### **Story Listening, Archiving, and Telling**

As noted, recent writing demonstrates the rigor of well-researched social justice scholarship; indeed, in some cases activist researchers argue that social justice scholarship is more “accurate” than that obtained through positivist and so-called objective models. Most recently the editors of and contributors to *Engaged Observer: Anthropology, Advocacy, and Activism* (2008) and *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* (2008) have written persuasively about the intellectual legitimacy of social justice scholarship. In the introduction to *Engaged Observer* Victoria Sanford argues,

It is not uncommon within the academy for lived experience to be dismissed as unscientific or not relevant to real, objective scholarship. This is completely backward, because it is the academy that needs to be relevant to the reality of lived experience. Advocacy and activism do not diminish the validity of one’s scholarly research. On the contrary, activist scholarship reminds us that all research is inherently political—even, and perhaps especially, that scholarship presented under the guise of “objectivity,” which is really no more than a veiled defense of the status quo. (2008, 14)

This book adheres to the same argument: we access and thus share “lived experience” through the integration of stories. Similarly, social

justice scholars remind us that traditional positivist formulations of research devalue certain types of knowledge. For example, Gaventa and Cornwall maintain that “dominant knowledge obscures or under-privileges other forms of knowing, and the voices of other knowers” (2008, 178), where “dominant knowledge” refers to that which is produced through positivist research. In our collection we too challenge that norm and privilege “other forms of knowing” by focusing on stories.

Part of the work of this collection is to elevate the storyteller and her stories. Additionally, it is about committing stories to the archives.<sup>23</sup> All of the contributors have their own archives in mind and different ways of documenting those stories—video, theater, social science texts, fiction, the classroom—but our commonality lies in the fact that even when we do not have direct access to the storytellers, stories are central (for example, see Marín, this volume). Stories and their tellers emerged as a theme in this project as many of us confronted academic barriers when we opted to prioritize storytellers as the main source of information in our research projects. In *Taking Risks* the storytellers—the activists—are intellectuals. As story listeners, we acknowledge the authority of activists, though academia typically doubts the “truth-quality of . . . testimonials” (Sanford 2008, 11). Though collectively we privilege the stories of activists, we are not closed to competing interpretations of similar experiences. Indeed, all rigorous scholarship, whether based on oral histories or census data, must be attentive to contradictory analyses. Similarly, like most practitioners of social justice scholarship, we are cognizant of the fact that privileging stories does not eliminate the power imbalances with which research and writing processes are imbued. That is, story listening does not inherently undermine “the hierarchy of knowledge producers” (Nagar and Swarr 2010, 8) where even the best-intentioned scholar activists still hold the power over a storyteller by the virtue of our power to edit and communicate the stories without the storyteller’s presence to offer alternative analyses. (See Marko, this volume, for a discussion of how to subvert that power imbalance.)

Though some scholars acknowledge stories as a necessary entry point to intellectual inquiry, much of the theorizing revolves around turning to narratives to *explain* social or historical processes—for example, social movements and their organizational strategies.<sup>24</sup> Within that framework, also called “the narrative turn,” stories and narratives (generally defined in this literature as one in the same) are used as “a method or means of studying social life” (Davis 2002b, 22). For example, Eric Selbin eloquently and insightfully asks how revolutionaries’ stories are used to inspire future revolutionaries. He helps us understand the interplay of history and culture vis-à-vis storytelling in inspiring revolutions (2010). Much of this literature thus focuses our

attention on the story as disembodied from the storytellers. In this collection, we see stories as a way to document social movements, rather than as something to be extrapolated by scholars to “explain” those movements. Latin American *testimonios* advance a similar approach, and *Taking Risks*’ contributors collectively benefit from this pioneering activist scholarship (see, for example, Grabe, this volume).<sup>25</sup> Put another way, we see the storytellers as the experts or, in the Gramscian sense, as intellectuals.

Gramsci reminds us of the power of knowledge, particularly as communicated through schools, churches, and other institutions of culture, which serve as messengers of hegemony. That is, knowledge is “created” by and in the service of the elite, at the expense of the working class. According to Gramsci, “all men [sic] are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men [sic] have in society the function of intellectuals. When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function on the professional category of the intellectuals” (1971, 9). Here, intellectuals are designated as such by the ruling class and thus serve as the architects and enforcers of hegemony.<sup>26</sup> Gramsci maintains, and we concur, that the “organic intellectuals” of the working class are not imbued with the social status that permits their intellectual skills to be considered as skills, let alone an indication of their analytical prowess.<sup>27</sup> In this book the activists and storytellers are indeed intellectuals, but their social status, particularly in contrast to “expert academics,” does not codify them as such.<sup>28</sup> George Lipsitz offers a similar sentiment:

Throughout our lives most of us have encountered serious people in all walks of life who lack the dignity of being taken seriously. Their acts of reflection, contemplation, and creation generally take place without any recognition or reward, in spaces quite unlike the Butler Library [at Columbia University]. They work with the tools available to them in the arenas to which they have access. Their names will never appear in newspapers, much less be chiseled into friezes on classic revival buildings. Yet they leave their mark on the world in other ways. They often mine unexpected and nontraditional archives. They generate fundamentally new imaginaries, fashioning ways of knowing and ways of being that are important to our understanding of the world in which we live as the great works of famous philosophers. (2008, 89)

This volume is, in part, about listening to and documenting the stories of such “serious people.”

Colombian sociologist-activist Orlando Fals-Borda (1925–2008),<sup>29</sup> one of the founders of Participatory Action Research, articulates what he calls *vivencia*. He explains that “[t]hrough the actual experience of something, we [the researchers] intuitively apprehend its essence; we feel, enjoy and understand it as reality, and we thereby place our own being in a wider, more fulfilling context” (1991, 4).<sup>30</sup> Fals-Borda advanced this approach to research, which urged scholars to participate in the political actions they study. Fals-Borda believed this was necessary to most effectively understand the issue at hand while also supporting the activist movement being studied. In *Taking Risks* we depart slightly from that construct. That is, researchers must do more than “feel, enjoy and understand ‘it.’” Rather, we prioritize the activists, the Gramscian organic intellectuals, the storytellers that we meet in the course of our research, and activism as those who embody that *vivencia*. As activist scholars we turn to the storytellers for interpretations of social justice activism rather than our own experiences alongside them. Similarly, Potts and Brown advance a need to value Fals-Borda’s concept of *vivencia*, which we reframe as stories:

From an anti-oppressive perspective, knowledge does not exist in and of itself, isolated from people [read: stories]. Rather, it is produced through the interactions of people, and as all people are socially located (in their race, gender, ability, class identities, and so on) with biases, privileges, and differing power relations, so too is the creation of knowledge socially located, and socially constructed. Recognizing that knowledge is socially constructed means understanding that knowledge doesn’t exist ‘out there’ but is embedded in people and the power relations between us. (2005, 261)

Implicit here is the need to value activists as intellectuals and their stories as a legitimate, if not primary, component of constructed knowledges.

As we know, one goal of social justice scholarship is to foster alliances with activists. From our perspective, to build lasting solidarity, scholars need to truly hear stories—what Potts and Brown call “political listening.” That is, to listen “not for what we expect to hear or for what fits with what we already think, but for assumptions made both by ourselves as listeners and by speakers while attending to the dance of power” (2005, 272). Anthropologist Angel-Ajani Asale shares a similar sentiment: “Can we be engaged scholars or activist intellectuals if we do not know how to listen or if we seek or even demand knowledge that confirms what we already think we know? . . . [A]n anthropologist’s job



is supposedly based on the act of listening. Listening does not imply that the listener is an expert or an authority. I believe that there are valuable lessons to be learned if we open our ears to experiences that might not fit what we think we know" (2008, 87). "Political listening" can thus foster alliances, challenge subject/researcher power imbalances, and destabilize the rigidity and elite biases of positivist research.

Why do these stories and our attempts to document and share them matter to social justice scholars? Two key realities remind us of the importance of documenting and archiving stories: historical memory/national record and pedagogy. Shayne explains in her chapter in this collection that her book about Chilean exiles along with their feminist magazines have recently been added to the accessible holdings at the Documentation Center at the Museo de la Memoria y Los Derechos Humanos (Museum of Memory and Human Rights) in Santiago, Chile. Within a couple of weeks of learning this, one of Shayne's undergraduate students (Jessica Monteiro Manfredi, author of this volume's section introductions) sent her a link to a story about a pro-Pinochet film that was being both celebrated and protested in Chile.<sup>31</sup> The film was screened at an event sponsored by an organization of retired military officers and the September 11 Corporation. (The organization is named for the date of Pinochet's coup d'état; September 11, 1973.) The film has thus become part of the national Chilean archive "documenting" that nation's bloody past.<sup>32</sup> Needless to say, members of the Chilean and international community have challenged the "facts" and analysis upon which the film is built, as evidenced by the mass protests against the screening. In short, if films are circulated that tell an incomplete, misleading, and unsubstantiated story of the Pinochet dictatorship, human rights museums, memorials, and other archives which document the national tragedy must persist as well. Much of the story of the dictatorship can only be told by those who suffered and survived it, rather than those who orchestrated and violently perpetrated it. The reality is, even the most revolutionary soul is mortal and needs to be heard. If younger Chileans do not learn of their bloody past, at the risk of sounding cliché, history is well positioned to repeat itself.

In a similar vein, Tamera Marko discusses a video archive project in Medellín, Colombia, that documents women's contributions to rebuilding their city. These archives challenge the Medellín government's tourism narrative, which credits itself with the area's reconstruction. These video archives thus tell a more complete story, which represents the activism, agency, and dignity of the leading protagonists in the restoration project. Erica Williams explains how sex workers in Bahia, Brazil, articulate their needs and demands, often in direct contrast to what she (and others) call the "abolitionist" wing of the sex

work movement. This wing is often blind to the wishes of the women they claim to “protect.” In short, listening to and documenting the stories is a pressing issue if we are to guarantee a more complete and dignified collective and national record.

Teaching provides another urgent reminder of the need to collect, document, and validate stories. As Margaret Randall reminds us in her foreword, the U.S. educational system fails to teach our children about cultural and political histories, particularly those that expose the U.S.-supported human rights violations in the Americas and elsewhere in the global South.<sup>33</sup> As a result, our college students often come to the classroom with racist stereotypes of Latino/as and virtually no knowledge of our interlocking histories.<sup>34</sup> The task of catching up our students on the histories that U.S. K–12 schools have failed to teach them requires preserving the stories of those who experienced and shaped these histories. (See Lettvin, this volume, for a student’s perspective on this challenge.) How can we expect our students to be engaged global citizens if they lack a critical understanding of a major part of their history? How can our students question and challenge contemporary U.S. policies if they have never learned of the human rights violations that have resulted from such policies? Paulo Freire reminds us that “[n]arratives of liberation are always tied to people’s stories, and what stories we choose to tell, and the way in which we decide to tell them, form the provisional basis of what a critical pedagogy of the future might mean” (1993, xii). As social justice researchers, the onus falls upon us to locate, document, archive, and teach the “narratives of liberation” to which our university status affords us access.<sup>35</sup> We turn now to how the stories in this volume exemplify transnational feminist scholarship.

### **Activist Research and Stories as Transnational Feminist Scholarship**

As stories of many different border crossings, framed by multi- and interdisciplinary research modes, the chapters in this collection make a contribution to the evolving field of transnational feminist studies. Regardless of whether authors identify their work explicitly with feminist approaches, we understand each story as a powerful illustration of the methodological priorities that transnational feminist theorists have brought into sharper focus for all researchers committed to social justice.

In their introduction to *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994), a volume that cultivated numerous discussions of transnational feminist

methods, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan challenge texts that, though nominally feminist, demonstrate a “willing participation in modernity . . . that wittingly or unwittingly lead to the oppression and exploitation of many women” (2). Though hailed as a universal civilizational “goal” toward which we are all assumed to be working, the concept of modernity has been theorized from the privileged yet fictional position of the “European unitary subject” (7)—a subject generally conceived as white, male, heterosexual, educated, and able-bodied, who has citizenship in a developed, “Western” nation-state. The contributors to *Taking Risks* displace this subject, to foreground the lived experiences and critical practices of Others that modernist discourse has typically consigned to alterity: here, women across the Americas. We assert that these women’s contributions as writers, artists, volunteers, researchers, activists, scholars, mothers, and laborers provide a fruitful starting point for understanding contemporary transnational political, economic, and cultural processes.

A key challenge of producing transnational feminist scholarship involves transgressing the binary divisions that structure modernist thought: male/female, white/nonwhite, heterosexual/homosexual, but also center/margin, global/local, and First World/Third World. Such skewed privileging is always antithetical to social justice, and the contributors to this collection blur these binary divisions. It is difficult, for example, to locate the position of Cuban-American researcher Marisela Fleites-Lear at either margin or center, “First” or “Third” World. Her personal investment in her research in both the United States and Cuba does not clearly align with either the privileges of the “global” or the marginalization of the “local,” but is fraught with risk no matter what “side” people cast her on. Erica Williams’s chapter on the sex trade in Bahia, Brazil, complicates scholarship that has cast sex work as a “last resort” for desperate women, revealing instead the “complex desires” and sometimes empowering life changes borne of this labor for workers she met. Williams further reveals Bahia as a dynamic site of “globalized” culture, rather than an unchanging “local” of fixed and repressive gender relations.

Transnational feminist methodologies involve another complicating binary transgression that is central to the stories in this collection: moving beyond the activist/academic divide (Alexander and Mohanty 2010; Grewal and Kaplan 1994). As Angela Davis reminds us, the “feminist critical impulse . . . involves a dual commitment . . . to use knowledge in a transformative way, and to use knowledge to remake the world so that it is better for its inhabitants” (2008, 20); that is, as feminist scholars we also must be advocates for justice.<sup>36</sup> But this remains a challenging subversion that can have significant and negative

consequences for those who practice it. North American academia can be a “perilous” place to produce activist scholarship (Alexander and Mohanty 2010) and doing so remains a radical act—although, as contributor Roberta Villalón reminded us as we wrote this introduction, while blending activist and academic practices may yet be radical in the United States, it is common across Latin America.

As Julia Sudbury and Margo Okazawa-Rey point out so eloquently in *Activist Scholarship* (2009), the incursion of neoliberal hegemony into North American academia has shadowed its halls with a “culture of fear” (6), making it politic for some academicians to invalidate activist scholarship (for example, by denying tenure to candidates whose work is activist in nature), or claim that it compromises nation-state security. After criticizing the “war against terror” in 2001 at a conference in Canada, Sudbury returned to the United States to “electronic hate mail and death threats” (2). It is thus from personal experience that she poses the question, “Can scholars whose commitments are grounded in movements for social justice produce rigorous scholarly work that is true to their political commitments?” (2). In *Taking Risks*, we assert that it is possible. Indeed, it seems that Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey’s most pressing question is rather, “What are the costs of not attempting it?” The answer is a heightened state of injustice, or at best maintenance of the status quo.

One of the strengths of this volume is that it is often difficult to distinguish scholar from activist in contributors’ stories. Roberta Villalón, for example, is both researcher and volunteer at an organization that provides legal services for battered immigrant women in Texas. Villalón’s own standing as an immigrant and her commitment to transnational feminist politics were important motives in her work, and her writing demonstrates constant, deliberate reflection on her position as an activist academic researcher. In Julie Shayne’s chapter, the Chilean exiles of the *Aquelarre* collective in Vancouver struggle to classify the discourse of the feminist magazine they published, never really satisfied that it was activist or scholarly, and ultimately some accepting that it must have been both.

Transgressing the academic/activist binary changes the terms of who does the investigating and who or what is the object of that research. There is a great deal at stake in challenging this positivist tradition of maintaining a “strict separation between the knower and that which is conceptualized as knowable” (Brooks and Hess-Biber 2007, 12). Here, the insights of feminist standpoint theorists remain relevant to the stories in this collection (see Hesse-Biber and Nagy 2007; Naples 2003). As these pioneering feminist scholars have shown, “the situated locations of our bodies serve not as contaminants to building knowledge

but instead as potential ‘cognitive resources’ that direct our attention to ‘features . . . that we would otherwise overlook’” (Brooks and Hess-Biber, quoting Helen Longino, 2007, 14). Sandra Harding’s notion of strong objectivity, which suggests taking the experiences of marginalized groups as a starting point for building knowledge (ibid, 10) and rejects the knower/known Cartesian separation, is a key methodological element for several of the contributors. Tamera Marko’s chapter on video archiving the stories of *desplazadas* in Medellín, Colombia, and Shelly Grabe’s work capturing the voices of *compañeras* in Nicaragua are compelling—and often poignant—illustrations of this methodology. There are also moments in this collection when the “knowers” are indistinguishable from research “subjects,” and storytellers turn the analytical lens upon their personal experiences (especially Williams, Villalón, and Fleites-Lear), thus shifting the terrain of what is knowable by fusing researcher and research subject.

Indeed, we begin to see that what is “known” and who does that “knowing” are mutually constitutive. How could Erica Williams have understood the positive experiences of Bahian sex workers without examining her own gendered and raced positioning within Brazil? What personal and theoretical insights would she have lost without that (sometimes painful) self-reflexivity? Joyce McCarl Nielsen reminds us that “all researchers carry their particular worldviews, histories, and biographies with them into their research projects” (Brooks and Hess-Biber 2007, 13)—as we see in these stories, they also carry their passports. Each contributor shows how personal considerations of race, gender, and/or citizenship led to specific research experiences, even as her conceptual frames and self-knowledge were shaped by her inquiries and findings. This process of self-reflexivity similarly affects our contributors’ students, colleagues, collaborators, and family members in several stories (see especially Rodríguez, Fleites-Lear, Marko, and Grabe).

Transnational feminist theorists have also brought a critical social justice lens to bear on analyses of the nation-state (for example, Caldwell et al. 2009; Grewal 2005; Kaplan, Alarcón, and Moallem 1999; Alexander and Mohanty 1997), and contributors to this collection highlight women’s engagements with the nation-state across the Americas. In these pages, it becomes clear that the power and purview of nation-states are neither totalizing nor uncontestable. Richa Nagar and her colleagues (2002) have demonstrated the importance of looking beyond the nation-state in transnational feminist research, at bodies, individuals, households, communities, intra- or supranational regions, and global networks. When we focus our research lens on these scales and the relationships among them, we see that women’s experiences at

any one location are influenced by and shape actions at others. In this collection, Robin Garcia's chapter on community media, for example, shows that national politics in Venezuela faces constant pressure from community groups, whose demands are organized and broadcast on the radio. Without Garcia's focus on the community, we would lose this crucial insight into contemporary nation-state formation in Venezuela. Other contributors focus our attention on bodies (Williams), individuals (Villalón and Grabe), cities (Marko and Marín), or texts (Lettvin, Rodríguez, Fleites-Lear, and Shayne).

While the nation-state has often been a repressive force in women's lives across the Americas, related work on human rights discourses has shown that the state is not always antagonist and can also be an ally for some women. Nancy Naples (2002) has argued that activists working at the grassroots (local) level can profitably deploy human rights discourse to achieve progressive legal goals for marginalized women. As Dana Collins and her colleagues point out in "New Directions in Feminism and Human Rights" (2011), for example, Southern Mexican women activists "reshape human rights discourses in accordance with their own visions [and] lived experiences" (9). Their focus on specific women acting in a localized context, with or against a legal mechanism, emphasizes that women—of various races, nationalities, immigrant status, and sexual orientations—are also subjects and shapers of law. This methodological choice displaces the "European unitary subject" as the privileged figure that has been, philosophically and literally, the "human" of human rights. Working in this vein, Roberta Villalón (this volume) shows how Latina immigrant women in Texas who are survivors of intimate partner violence can benefit from even limited state protection and a special pathway to U.S. citizenship. Stories by Rodríguez and Shayne illustrate the transformations that occur in women's lives when they cross nation-state borders within the Americas and face the challenges and opportunities that come from immersion in a new national context.

As Richa Nagar and Amanda Swarr remind us in their introduction to *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (2010), transnational feminism is not a "search for resolutions or closures" but an "inherently unstable praxis whose survival and evolution hinge on a continuous commitment to produce self-reflexive and dialogical critiques of its own practices" (9). The stories in this collection put forth transnational feminist scholarship as a mirror of the sometimes fragmented but also powerful and pragmatic attempts by women across the Americas to resist the hegemony of modernity. The contributors capture specific experiences of women struggling to enact social justice at this historical moment. These stories build up the historical archive to reflect the

contributions of women and our intersecting identities—a project that is no less relevant now than it was when feminist scholars undertook to bring women’s experiences into academic purview in the 1970s.

Unfortunately, though four decades have passed since the inception of feminist studies in North American academia, there are still academic and professional risks associated with advancing activist and transnational feminist scholarship. We turn now to a brief discussion of those risks.

### Taking Risks

The chapters that follow document the challenges we confront as we make visible the stories of risk takers: activists and everyday citizens who inspire us to continue work that is not always personally or professionally advantageous, but that feels impossible to stop. We see our work as “passion driven scholarship.”<sup>37</sup> This is not the first collection to make explicit our emotional connections to research. As Margo Okazawa-Rey has eloquently explained, “I am convinced, more than ever, of the need for a radically different relational practice alongside our analyses and political actions, a practice that emanates from our souls and energizes us” (2009, 221). David Domke proclaims: “Hope is a word that is almost entirely absent from the academic lexicon. Why? Because to talk of hope suggests that we might care, that we might be genuinely invested in the material that we research and teach about” (2008, 46). Perhaps most succinctly, using Gramsci’s words, we practice an “optimism of the will” (cited in Leonard 1993, 156). The contributors to this volume are energized, hopeful, and optimistic about our research agendas, but we know we take risks in advancing them. At the time this project began only one of the contributors was tenured (Marisela Fleites-Lear) while the rest of us were a combination of students (graduate and undergraduate), postdocs, assistant professors, or off the tenure track entirely. As noted above, the literature on social justice scholarship is replete with examples of the challenges junior scholars and graduate students face when pursuing this sort of research and publishing agenda.<sup>38</sup> (Indeed, some of the contributors confronted barriers and “cautions” in the course of writing their chapters for this volume.)

We have all benefited from the work of senior scholars who are attentive to these barriers and opened doors for us. As Julia Sudbury and Margo Okazawa-Rey explain in the introduction to *Activist Scholarship*, “[b]y gathering together a group of academics, most of them in senior, tenured positions, who have dedicated their lifework to this

endeavor, we wish to make activist scholarship possible as a viable mode of intellectual inquiry and pedagogical praxis (2009b, 3). Charles R. Hale, another senior scholar, notes in his introduction to *Engaging Contradictions* that graduate students and junior faculty are “regularly warned against putting scholarship in the service of struggles for social justice” (2008b, 2). Hale says elsewhere: “Welcome, come in, and please leave your politics at the door” (2008b, 1). The contributors to *Taking Risks* have decided not to leave our politics outside. All of this said, we wish not to inflate the risks that we take as academics. Our risks for the most part are professional. Some of us have risked physical danger in the course of our research, writing, and activism (Marko and Rodríguez) or permanent separation from family (Fleites-Lear), but for the most part our risk taking ultimately concerns career advancement, or a lack thereof. Certainly this is a real concern, but as scholars who are or are allies to activists who experience daily, unavoidable risks of a different sort, we hope not to convey a self-importance that our university positions, vulnerable or not, afford us.

### Organization of the Book

The social locations of the contributors to this volume are varied and fluid. That is, we are a collection of scholars/activists/artists situated in the North (most of the time), writing about the South.<sup>39</sup> Some of us are motivated by our connections to our homelands (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Cuba) or adopted homelands (Colombia, Canada) and others by a deep sense of solidarity with the struggles to which we have gained access. The following chapters are meant to capture some of that fluidity.

The contributors in *Taking Risks* listen to stories in the forms that activists/intellectuals represent them: texts, performance, memorials, and activism. We open the book with a monument recognizing a 1955 massacre of Argentine civilians at the Plaza de Mayo. Artist Nora Patrich’s brief description of the massacre and her memorial remind us of the importance to archive stories and teach history in the venues to which we have access. In part 1 we look at stories as represented through textual articulation. Chilean writer-activist Carmen Rodríguez begins the collection by speaking to the power of fiction as a form of activism. She explains how writing, particularly against revisionist histories, is an act of resistance.<sup>40</sup> Next, graduate student Mahala Lettvin looks at activist writing from the reader’s perspective.<sup>41</sup> She uses the case of the Argentinian dirty war as documented through fictional texts and memorials to articulate reading as activism. Julie Shayne



then looks at a feminist magazine produced by Latina exiles (including Carmen Rodríguez) in Vancouver, British Columbia. These feminists created the magazine to articulate and communicate the political and artistic accomplishments of Latinas in and outside of their homeland; the pages are thus replete with stories. In part 1's final chapter, Marisela Fleites-Lear talks about stories of literacy and literature through her analysis of underground libraries in Cuba and award-winning Cuban "desk drawer novels."

In part 2 we learn of performed stories. Tamera Marko opens this section with a discussion of a transnational, collaborative documentary project based in Medellín, Colombia, where women tell their stories of the reconstruction of their city. Next, Robin Garcia takes us to Venezuela to learn about community radio and television projects and the stories Venezuelan media activists are telling about their experiences with the Bolivarian Revolution. Christina Marín closes the section with a discussion of traumatic stories of femicide along the Juárez/U.S. border as articulated through three plays she has directed.

The third part addresses stories of grassroots activism. Erica Williams opens the section with a discussion of the conflicts in Bahia, Brazil, between sex workers and their advocates and abolitionist approaches to sex work. In a related discussion, Roberta Villalón's work in Texas conveys the challenges for Latina immigrant survivors of intimate partner violence and the restrictions often placed upon advocates working to further their rights. Finally, Shelly Grabe closes the section and examines the activist efforts of the women's autonomous movement in Nicaragua vis-à-vis the testimonies of two feminist leaders in the movement.

Julie Shayne and Kristy Leissle conclude these chapters with a brief discussion of interdisciplinary spaces, cultural capital, and social justice scholarship. *Taking Risks* closes with an afterword by Julie Shayne, where she speaks to the family-career divide and its risks, based on her own life-changing experience in the academy, an experience which ultimately provided her the space to pursue this passion project.<sup>42</sup>

### Notes

We would like to thank Kari Lerum, Karen Rosenberg, Roberta Villalón, and Erica Williams for their extremely helpful feedback on an early version of this introduction. Additionally, Kristy would like to acknowledge Michelle McGowan in helping her think through the transnational feminism part of this chapter.

1. It is now a year since the first draft of this introduction was written. Barrie has since decided she wants to do her project on the basics of acting.
2. Interestingly, this is not the only book about social justice/activist scholarship to begin in a similar conference-type setting. See, for example, Nagar and Swarr (2010, 13–15); Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey (2009b, 8–9).
3. For the most part, we focus on scholarship produced in the past two decades.
4. We point the reader to the following texts for history, overview, examples, and/or suggestions for how to conduct feminist social justice scholarship: *Research as Resistance*, Brown and Strega, eds. (2005); *Just Methods*, Jaggar, ed. (2008); *Engaging Contradictions*, Hale, ed. (2008a); *Voices of Change*, Park et al., eds. (1993); *Nurtured by Knowledge*, Smith et al., eds. (1997); *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, Reason and Bradbury, eds. (2008); *Handbook of Feminist Research*, Hesse-Biber, ed. (2007); *Introduction to Action Research*, Greenwood and Levin, eds. (1998[a]); *Racing Research Researching Race*, Twine and Warren, eds. (2000). For good discussions of action research's roots in Latin America and the global South, see, Lykes and Mallona (2008); Nabudere (2008).
5. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007); Jaggar (2008); Nagar et al. (2002); Naples (2003); Sandoval (2000).
6. Brown and Strega, et al. (2005), Wilson (2008).
7. Fals-Borda (1979); Fals-Borda and Rahman, et al. (1991); Park et al. (1993); Smith et al. (1997); Barndt et al. (2011); Greenwood and Levin, et al. (1998a); Lykes and Mallona (2008).
8. Dempsey, et al. (2011); Downs, et al. (2006); Mitchell K., et al. (2008).
9. The Sociological Initiatives Foundation <http://www.sifoundation.org/2007/03/what-is-community-based-research>.
10. Hale, et al. (2008a); Sanford and Angel-Ajani, et al. (2008); *Imagining America*. <http://imaginingamerica.org/about/our-mission>.
11. Brown and Strega, et al. (2005); Twine and Warren, et al. (2000).
12. Greenwood and Levin use the term “Pragmatic Action Research” which we have not seen elsewhere in the literature (1998b, 11). Similarly, Dana-Ain Davis uses the term “pracademics,” which she defines as “the bridging of theory and practice, in an effort to illustrate the meaning of being politically engaged” (2008, 229).
13. Peter Park and others describe their version of social justice scholarship, participatory research, similarly: “The explicit aim of participatory research is to bring about a more just society in which

- no groups or classes of people suffer from the deprivation of life's essentials, such as food, clothing, shelter, and health, and in which all enjoy basic human freedoms and dignity" (1993, 2).
14. This is not to suggest that all of the contributors share an identical vision of social justice. Indeed, as editor of the collection, Shayne never explicitly asked the authors how they define the concept. Charles Hale, editor of *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* (2008a) offers a similarly general observation in his introduction: "By shared political sensibilities, I do not mean homogeneity, but rather a shared commitment to basic principles of social justice that is attentive to inequalities of race, gender, class and sexuality and aligned with struggles to confront and eliminate them" ([b]7).
  15. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, both of these definitions come from books, like this one, which are also part of SUNY's Praxis: Theory in Action series, ed. Nancy Naples.
  16. Roberta Villalón, contributor to this volume, notes that the term "progressive" does not always travel well internationally. Rather, it is more of a U.S.-bound term.
  17. There are countless other definitions of social justice scholarship. Some others we appreciate include: "[A]ction research is neither a theory nor a particular set of methods. It is a way of orchestrating combined research and social change activities to pursue collectively desired outcomes" (Greenwood 2008, 330). Another useful one is: "The distinctive contribution of activist scholarship, rather, is to enact an alternative way of doing research that attempts to contribute to the social good and to modestly advance the frontiers of knowledge, while training a bright light of critical scrutiny on the inequities of university-based knowledge production and attempting to ameliorate these inequities through the research process itself" (Hale 2008b, 23).
  18. Gramsci figures heavily into analyses and explanations of activist scholarship, particularly participatory action research (PAR). Similarly, Gramsci's ideas are typically paired with Paulo Freire. For example, see Barndt 2011; Hall 1993; Gaventa, 1993; Gaventa and Cornwall 2008.
  19. Despite PAR's initial liberatory ideology and potential, it has since been criticized for being coopted by a host of oppressive institutions, including the World Bank. For example, see Potts and Brown (2005, 256, 281); Barndt (2011, 16, 141–42, note 79); Heaney (1993, 41–46); Gaventa and Cornwall (2008); Nagar and Swarr (2010, 8).
  20. See also Weir 2008.

21. "Positivism is the belief that knowledge should be guided by facts, rather than by imagination, pure logic, or any other nonfactual source" (Applebaum and Chambliss 1997, 12).
22. A few of the many examples include Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey, et al., especially chapters 10 and 11 (2009a); Barndt (2011, 19). For discussions of the personal conflicts regarding scholars using the term "activist," see Chatterjee (2009, 134); Mitchell (2008). For reworkings of the term "activism" in the academic context, see Collins (2012, 16); Lykes and Mallona (2008, 117).
23. For a related discussion regarding the motivations behind writing and archives, see Morgan, 2006.
24. See, for example, Davis et al. (2002a); Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008); Polletta (2006); Polletta et al. (2011); Selbin (2010); Smith and Schaffer (2004); Stone-Mediatore (2003).
25. See also Latina Feminist Group (2001) *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
26. See also Leonard 1993, 166.
27. For an interesting take on the "organic intellectual," see Morales 2001.
28. Bud Hall, in his introduction to *Voices of Change*, also speaks to the Gramscian notion of "organic intellectuals" as related to participatory research (1993, xviii); Glenn Omatsu offers a similar analysis in his discussion of community activists as his "mentors," whom he ultimately draws on when designing his courses (2009, 167–85).
29. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/26/colombia.sociology> (Accessed July 20, 2012).
30. The Viva Project (2011) also works from this point of departure, drawing on Susan Smith in *Nurtured by Knowledge* (1997).
31. See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G\\_vp8FPuF7g&feature=g-u-u](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_vp8FPuF7g&feature=g-u-u) and Bonnefoy (2012).
32. A disturbingly ironic component of the story is that the film was debuted in Santiago's *Teatro Caupolicán*. In 1983 this theater housed a massive demonstration of women and feminists against Pinochet. Estimates put the attendees at ten thousand women, and the event is credited by many as the first public act of women against Pinochet (Shayne 2004, 100–02).
33. We want to be clear that we believe there are a host of reasons why U.S.-educated K–12 students do not learn these histories, many of them entirely out of the control of the teachers, including teaching to standardized tests and, worse yet, having such topics literally deemed illegal as recently happened in Arizona (Lacey 2011).
34. See also Chatterjee 2009, 138; Warren 2008, 215.