2018

Education In Our Barrios Project, #BarrioEdProj

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#BarrioEdProj is a youth-centered, digital, critical participatory action research (D+CPAR) (Mayorga, 2017) project about, and working with, Latino core communities (Morales, in press). In the pilot version of the project, the primary goal was to map the circuitry of urbanism and its material and raciocultural effects within the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City (El Barrio) and its schools. While gentrification has taken hold in popular discourse, it is but one aspect of what I have come to describe as racial neoliberal urbanism (RNU) (Mayorga, 2016) that emphasizes a market-logic and an exploitative use of cultural diversity to shape the city, its neighborhoods and institutions, including schools. It is at the intersection of RNU, El Barrio, and education reform that the Education in our Barrios project (#BarrioEdProj) came to be.

I work and think as an educator-scholar-activist (Suzuki & Mayorga, 2014) whose work is rooted in the scholarly, political and pedagogical commitments of PAR EntreMundos. PAR EntreMundos is situated in the wisdom of local communities, and combines critical inquiry and activism for the purposes of collective transformation (see Chapter 1 of this book). As such, PAR EntreMundos is committed to engaging communities in a process of what Gloria Anzaldúa described as conocimiento (Keating, 2000). Conocimiento

is a theory of consciousness in motion, where the inner life of the mind and spirit is connected to the outer worlds of action within the struggle for social change. While not always explicit, the connective work of conocimiento is pedagogical in nature. There is an "instructional dynamic" (Ball & Forzani, 2007) in this work that emphasizes processes of teaching and learning as collaborators "interpret one another and their environments over time" (p. 531) through a PAR process.

The pedagogical dimension of #BarrioEdProj is what is of particular interest in this chapter. In what follows, I provide background on El Barrio and its public schools, and the creation of #BarrioEdProj. Specifically, I map year one of the project pointing to the ways the project is a materialization of the principles of PAR EntreMundos. I will briefly discuss our research findings focusing on how RNU advances material, cultural and affective forms of dismemberment, where local people are dismembered, or disconnected, from power, knowledge, and place. I will also point to how conditions under RNU force individuals and institutions to create ways of navigating and transforming these conditions. I conclude by reflecting on the impact the project had on the youth co-researchers, and I consider how #BarrioEdProj might serve as a "guide for action". I argue that by involving youth and community members in research, storytelling, and social media engagements, #BarrioEdProj became a transformative way of expanding our critical consciousness and remembering ourselves to our histories, to each other, and to place, as a means of survivance (Vizenor, 2008).

Background: El Barrio and Its Public Schools

El Barrio has always been a community that is being reinvented. This was particularly evident with the mass migration of Puerto Ricans from their U.S. controlled island starting in the early 20th century and peaking in the 1950s (Sharman, 2006). El Barrio had become a Latino core community or "codified … homeland (both real and imagined) for Puerto Ricans, and by extension many other Latino immigrant groups, not only through demographic and sociological analysis, but also through a tropicalization process transmitted through literature, music, and visual art" (Morales, 2017, p. 334).

In the midst of demographic change, El Barrio would become a symbol of urban poverty (Cayo Sexton, 1965; Freidenberg, 1995) and a site of political struggle, as people dealt with varying cycles of organized abandonment

(Gilmore, 2008) and urban renewal. Renewal in the 1960s would come to El Barrio through an ambitious construction of multi-block (super blocks), high-rise, public housing that would make El Barrio the neighborhood with the highest concentration of public housing in the city.

The city faced its worst financial crisis in the mid-1970s, which would most adversely affect the already economically and racially marginalized populations of the city. By 1990, the economic and political power of El Barrio and the Puerto Rican population had been in decline though it's cultural and historical significance for Latinos continued (Rodríguez, 1994). Economically, "40% of the total population was below the poverty level and, of those, 62% were below 200% of the poverty level" (Freidenberg, 1995, p. 6) by 1990.

As El Barrio underwent economic and social change, the local schools also experienced significant change. During the first half of the 20th century, El Barrio schools were deemed some of the worst performing schools in the city (Fliegel & MacGuire, 1993; Nieto, 2000). Between the late 1950s and the 1970s, Black and Puerto Rican parents and activists criticized the school system for failing to educate their children, and began to demand more local control over the school system. In El Barrio and Central Harlem, this struggle would play out at Intermediate School 201 (I.S. 201), as parents and activists sought to have control over the school (Lee, 2014). While successful in galvanizing activism between Blacks and Puerto Ricans, the community control movement would be ended by the implementation of a decentralized, governance formation that dispersed bureaucracy and gave families limited but varied forms of choice between 1970 and 2002 (Lewis, 2013).

During decentralization, El Barrio would undergo an educational renaissance that had a profound impact on the schools. Through the leadership of savvy, political superintendent Anthony Alvarado, District 4 would launch a bilingual education program and a "progressive" small schools movement in the district (Fliegel & MacGuire, 1993; Meier, 1995; Pedraza, 1997). While these strategies would not transform the entire school district, it encouraged innovation by individual schools and school leaders to meet the needs of a broad range of learners. This "East Harlem miracle" (Fliegel & MacGuire, 1993) would move the whole district from the bottom rungs of school performance rankings (around 30th) to the middle rankings (around 14th) and ushered school choice as a way of improving urban school districts (Kirp, 1992; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Still, the heavy reliance on strong leadership, the weakness of the district as a whole, and the ongoing financial

struggles of the city, were among a number of factors that undermined the sustainability of the miracle (Lewis, 2013).

In 2002, newly elected Mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, New York Governor George Pataki, and other elected officials stood in the Patrick Henry School, located in El Barrio. They were convening to announce the signing of a new state law that would give the Mayor primary control of the public school system. The Mayor was optimistic that day and noted that in the near future he hoped to be able to show everyone "a system that is getting better and working and that will give the mayor and the city an awful lot more muscle in getting the changes that we think are necessary to continue the progress" (Steinhauer, 2002). Announcing this major change in school governance structure made clear that the direction of the city would be inextricably linked to the future of the schools. It also reflected the circulation of a brand of urbanism that would materially and discursively contribute to the remaking of the city and the school system over the eleven years of the Bloomberg administration.

The Roots of #BarrioEdProj

Unlike participatory action projects that begin with a group of individuals from a community who articulate a set of questions, #BarrioEdProj emerged from my own political commitments and vivencia as an Asian-Latino-educator-scholar-activist (Suzuki & Mayorga, 2014). Vivencia is a term Fals-Borda used to describe as the full experience of an event with all its possibilities that comes through direct participation (see Glassman & Erdem, 2014). As such, "vivencia cannot be observed; it can only be lived, felt, and experienced" (Glassman & Erdem, 2014, p. 212). During the Bloomberg era, I engaged personally and politically in the city as a teacher in the public schools, an education activist, and as a doctoral student. Over the course of that decade, my thinking with *and* through activism increasingly centered on understanding the brand of urbanism that operated within this era of racial capitalism (Mayorga & Picower, 2012; Melamed, 2011; Robinson, 1983).

I found that the global, material, effects of RNU were primarily damaging, and in some cases fatal, for already racialized and marginalized communities, including Latino communities. I am committed to working alongside these communities because I recognize myself as a Latino, I understand that our struggles are bound up in each other's, and participating in efforts for libera-

tion will contribute to all of us "getting free" (Taylor, 2016). Engaging in research by, for, and with Latino core communities and schools was thus needed to understand and disrupt the cultural and material consequences of contemporary urbanism. What, I asked, did urbanism look like during the Bloomberg era in Latino core communities, in the schools and the city overall? And, how did people navigate this brand of urbanism?

The Design of the Project

#BarrioEdProj, was designed to be a form of Digital, Critical Participatory Action Research, of D+CPAR (Mayorga, 2014). In this project, digital technologies and ubiquitous social media tools were leveraged to support and animate a form of public social science. CPAR is

> rooted in notions of democracy and social justice and drawing on critical theory (feminist, critical race, queer, disability, neo-Marxist, indigenous, and poststructural) and is an epistemology that engages research design, methods, analyses, and products through a lens of democratic participation. (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012, p. 171)

CPAR places the processes of problem posing, research, analysis, and data sharing, in the interlocking hands of adults and youth, of the focus community, and partnering scholars and activists. CPAR is thus not solely method, but a reimagining of the research process. It is a recasting of the "researched" as participants in the design of research, the production of knowledge, and the sharing of knowledge with the broader publics. From this premise, the collaborative was created.

Digital social science is an emerging area, but it draws from various traditions and is used in #BarrioEdProj as a means to amplify the analytical and political dimensions of this form of public science. The Economic and Social Research Council, a British organization, defined DSS as social research aimed at:

> developing innovative and more powerful, networked and interoperable research tools and services that make it easier for social scientists to discover, access and analyse data, and to collaborate so that they may tackle increasingly complex research challenges. (as quoted in Spiro, 2014)

Data gathering and data sharing were the aspects of DSS that were of most importance to #BarrioEdProj. Early on in the implementation of the project,

the overall research design moved from an online community engagement to digital historical ethnography. Digital historical ethnography is, like traditional ethnography, about gathering, sharing, and analyzing stories (Murthy, 2008; Underberg & Zorn, 2013). In this project, the focus was on gathering archival materials and video recorded interviews. Hunter (2013) asserts that "[t]he goal of historical ethnography, as with any other ethnography, is to gather and convey an internally valid description of a site and the peoples therein" (p. 231). As a process, historical ethnography relies on the construction of temporally, and spatially, situated narratives that are triangulated through archival materials. This approach enabled a contextual understanding of change in El Barrio and its schools, as well as the actions of individuals to these changing social conditions. Digital tools, in this case, do not supplant traditional historical ethnographic methods, instead it pushes how data would be organized and used to teach and engage the public.

#BarrioEdProj would seek to collect, analyze, and share barrio stories through digital video cameras and online video tools (Vimeo/YouTube). We launched http://barrioedproj.org (Wordpress site via OpenCUNY.org) to serve as an information clearinghouse and interactive space to create an evolving archive and to invite discussion. The bulk of the data came from digital video recorded, semi-structured interviews, with a multi-generational group of stakeholders connected to El Barrio education. We asked participants about their relationship to El Barrio and its schools, their perspectives on cultural and economic change, and, finally, their views on the future of the neighborhood and the schools.

Building With El Barrio

New York's Latino population has grown and changed over the last century, with over 2 million Latino New Yorkers (27.3 percent of the city's population) forming Latino core communities in different parts of the city by 2010 (Haslip-Viera, 2017). #BarrioEdProj could have been initiated in a number of these core communities, but having connections to educational institutions and fellow activists in El Barrio, and the neighborhood's long history as a cradle of Latino New York, El Barrio became the first project site. Moreover, with funds awarded to me by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York's (CUNY) Digital Initiatives grants program, I was able to offer a small stipend for two youth researchers. Using social media platforms, I posted

an advertisement calling for El Barrio youth who wanted to develop research and social media skills and, most importantly, have a stronger voice in their community. Within a week, several young people had contacted me, as did colleagues who worked with high school and college aged youth. One colleague, Blanca E. Vega, who was then director of the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) at Marymount Manhattan College in New York, would connect me to Mariely and Honory. After conducting interviews where we spoke about the project and why they were interested in doing this work, Mariely Mena, then age 19, and Honory Peña, then age 23, were hired as project co-researchers to form #BarrioEdProj research collaborative.

Mariely is a Chicana from New York who went to public schools throughout her K–12 career, including The Young Women's Leadership High School (TYWLS) in East Harlem. Honory is a Dominican-American who, as a child, split her time between schools in New York and the Dominican Republic. She went to a high school in the city. Both Honory and Mariely were students at Marymount Manhattan College in New York, where they were very active in the college's Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP).

Partnerships

As a pilot version with limited funds and still underdeveloped relationships, we kept decision making power amongst the three of us until we as a group felt we could engage more people in steering the project. To cultivate our fledgling relationships we continued to do outreach in the neighborhood and online to build partnerships and our presence in the community. The outreach was geared toward raising awareness about the project, identifying potential interviewees, and building relationships where we would offer to promote events and make note of issues that were of concern to these individuals and organizations. In building these partnerships, we sought to create an interactive dynamic where our partners could provide us feedback on the work, connect us to other stakeholders, and collaborate with us in crafting more questions.

Our partners varied in who they represented, and how they partnered with us. The local Community Board (*CB11*) was supportive and provided space to conduct interviews. East Harlem Preservation, a volunteer advocacy group dedicated to promoting and preserving the vibrant history of East Harlem, under the direction of Marina Ortiz, endorsed the project, participated in interviews, and shared relevant information and events with #BarrioEdProj

on an ongoing basis. La Casa Azul Bookstore, an independent bookstore and community space in El Barrio, under the leadership of Aurora Anaya-Cerda, supported our work by providing space for events and inviting us to partake in education-centered events. And Marie Winfield, an El Barrio parent and advocate for, among other things, parks equity, educational justice, dual language instruction, and local tech incubators for youth, was one of our early interviewees and now remains in close contact with the project.

A Curriculum of Conocimiento

Wright (2015) notes that PAR projects are "adult-supported learning contexts that promote young people's involvement in project decision-making, planning and design", and that "entail[s] providing a curriculum and skill-building instruction to student researchers" (p. 25). As the collaborative was taking shape, I had begun to design the curricular framework to get us started, and as an educator-scholar-activist my approach to curricular design drew heavily from the traditions of critical pedagogy. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) remind us that critical pedagogy is:

> an approach to education that is rooted in the existential experiences of marginalized peoples; that is centered in a critique of structural, economic, and racial oppression; that is focused on dialogue instead of a one-way transmission of knowledge; and that is structured to empower individuals and collectives as agents of social change. (p. 1)

Critical pedagogy is a twining of critical reflection and action, or praxis, for the purposes of inciting participant's conscientization, or critical consciousness. Along the same lines, Gloria Anzaldúa spoke of the notion of conocimiento as a "state of awakeness" that "connects the inner life of the mind and the spirit to the outer world of action" (Keating, 2000, p. 178). In this case, the curricular goal was to engage in a process of awaking all participants to the operation of social injustice and to El Barrio and its schools, specifically, as a means to transform our collective future.

Critical pedagogy is actualized through the curriculum. Curriculum is defined here as the "series of things" a group of people must do and experience in order to unfold the development of some dimension of individual and collective capacities (see Flinders & Thornton, 2012). As a place-based project, the content of the project was El Barrio, its history, institutions, and people. My initial design of the curriculum prioritized reading materials about the

neighborhood, like Arlene Dávila's *Barrio Dreams* (2004), and literary works like Ernest Quiñonez' *Bodega Dreams* (2000). Having taught in the public schools doing teacher education work for over a decade at the time, it was rare to see students exposed to this literature prior to college. As such it was critical to teach about El Barrio and to weave in key sociological themes that the literature has focused on.

While literature was our starting point, it was important to me that we connect that to people and places that make El Barrio what it is, and to develop the research and media skills needed to evolve our project. As such, I engaged the group in developing plans for outreach and engagement. Together we identified local community events to attend and built relationships with local institutions like the archives at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies. In addition, we identified the research, video and social media production skills we felt we needed and organized trainings for the group. This included trainings on conducting interviews and observations, video production, and using social media tools to engage the public.

Team Meetings

Another key aspect of the curriculum was the building of a sense of community. The collaborative would meet between one and four times a month to discuss readings, do trainings on research methods or social media practices, and reflect on our work in the field. More, meetings were an opportunity for reflection and community building. Routines were established where we opened with personal "check-ins", which gave us an opportunity to share and discuss things happening in our personal lives. Reflections on readings and our field experiences also included examinations of the affective dimensions of our fieldwork. By making the social emotional development of each of the collective members a part of the curriculum, we established a familial dynamic within the group that honored personal knowledge, feelings and perspectives, as an equally legitimate aspect of the curriculum.

Findings: Dismemberment and Survivance

Over the course of a year of being in the neighborhood and the archives, and conducting interviews, doing social media work, and team meeting discussions, we began to organize our findings. In documenting the way RNU had

worked its way through El Barrio, two major findings that emerged were the affective effects of RNU, and the varied strategies of survivance the people of El Barrio enacted to navigate RNU.

It was clear that the gentrification of the community was central to residents' views, as was the often-punitive characteristics of a Mayor-controlled education system. One similarity between El Barrio and school are the damaging affective and material effects of RNU. Fullilove (2005) poignantly notes that

> …all people—live in an emotional ecosystem that attaches us to the environment, not just as our individual selves, but as beings caught in a single, universal net of consciousness anchored in small niches we call neighborhoods or hamlets or villages. (Chapter 1 Section 2, para 16)

For many of our participants and the co-researchers, the remaking of El Barrio and its school came as a root shock (Fullilove, 2005) that produced feelings of dismemberment or loss. As one of our interviewees noted, "the history, the historicalness of East Harlem is diminishing for the simple reason of the push that's coming into our community on the development level" (Nazario, 2013). We felt that the feeling of losing one's neighborhood was reflective of what we also had been reading from the literature about the community and urban change--namely feelings of disconnection from place and political voice.

At the same time that we had documented this brand of urbanism, we paid close attention to survivance. Native scholar Vizenor (2008) says that survivance "is greater than the right of a survivable name. Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry" (Chapter 1, Section 8, para 9). In this project we learned about how people in El Barrio navigated dominance. Our interviews and observations of public events, for example, demonstrated that some individuals and local institutions focus on complicity, while others engage in local politics with the hopes of disrupting dominance. The data we gathered connected to our reading of secondary literature and archival materials where the lives of community advocates, like activist Antonia Pantoja, were powerful examples of activism. Through our interviews and coming to know the history of the community, we came to appreciate the actions people have taken in response to living with, for and against social conditions.

We continue to be in the process of writing up our findings, but we have been committed to using the findings as a tool for teaching. For example, we

have shared our findings, and lead workshops on some of our methods, at research and educator activist conferences. Most importantly, we organized a community event at La Casa Azul Bookstore to share some of our work with the local community to receive feedback from participants to help us craft more formal reports and online blog posts.

Assessing the Impact of #BarrioEdProj

#BarrioEdProj has not made a profound impact on the redistribution of resources or changes in urban policy on a systemic level in El Barrio, yet. Still, I argue that as a pedagogical tool, #BarrioEdProj has had a transformative impact on those who have crossed paths with the project.

Our two youth co-researchers Mariely and Honory, I contend, felt the most profound effects of the project. My intention was to give them opportunities to become engaged community scholars who were aware, or consiente, of the social, structural issues and be able to use research to inform and incite social transformation. Their responses and ideas over the course of the first year of the project suggest that the project had a positive impact on their emerging critical consciousness and research skill development. But what I want to pay particular attention to is the impact the work had on their own conocimiento, or critical consciousness.

Having been members of the East Harlem community for most, if not all, of their lives, Honory and Mariely were being exposed to East Harlem-focused social science and archival information for the first time. This elicited feelings of surprise, dissatisfaction and some anger. The fact that this material was not part of school curriculum for many people, including themselves, lead them to express feelings of missing out and asserting that Latinos were somehow seen as less. On top of all these feelings, there was also a growing anger as they began to think more about the devastating impact gentrification and education reform were having on their lives, and the lives of others in the neighborhood. In short, they had become critically conscious of the varied ways that education and urbanism had dismembered them from their histories and their community.

Doing the archival work and conducting interviews also served as a counter to dismemberment, as they engaged in work that afforded them opportunities to re-member themselves to these narratives. They were pleased to learn about the rich history of the neighborhood. As they began to read through

the archives about the work of organizations like ASPIRA or United Bronx Parents, and individuals like Antonia Pantoja and Evelina Antoinette, their pride was observable.

While Honory and Mariely's analyses were honest and often propelled by feelings of anger and despair, by re-membering they were engaged in the empowering and joyful compelling. She notes,

> My whole perspective of my own community has changed a lot, especially because I feel like when I was younger I didn't really pay too much attention. Or at least, me, mentally, I wasn't worried about anyone else, but myself and what I had to do. Now with the project, it's more like every day no matter what when I walk out of my house and I'm around East Harlem, I'm always consciously thinking about what's going on. (Mena, 2014)

Mariely's comments are suggestive of an important distinction between remembering and a politics of re-membering. In engaging in our research process, teaching and action were processes that were "active rather than re-active, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary" (Eng & Kazanjian, 2002, p. 2). Re-membering is thus a political act, rather than an apolitical recollection.

Re-membering is also a path to action. In the midst of our research, one of the questions we often asked ourselves was fundamentally one about taking action: The community is in trouble, so how can we help people realize what's going on? We drew from all aspects of our projects as we wrestled with this question, including the archives. When reflecting on examining the archives from ASPIRA and our interviews, for example, Honory asked, "A lot of the interviewees have been talking about parent involvement, how can we spread what ASPIRA is doing into the community?" (Peña, Meeting Notes, 2013). In this question, Honory was engaging in her own process of re-membering herself to the history, and strategies, of struggle that ASPIRA represents. At the same time that she was connecting the past to contemporary struggles, she was looking to the past for guidance. The question that Honory posed here became an essential question that continues to animate the work of the project in the present.

During an interview toward the end of the first year of the project, Honory would also extend her thoughts on taking action based on our research into schools. Here she was speaking about how students were underserved by

the education system, and how the work of the project might contribute to working against these conditions:

> It's a battle because they're just used to that. I feel like maybe doing some of that kind of connection in the neighborhood, or even if it's not the school principal, someone whose involved, even if it's a parent. If they're involved, what do they see?… and getting their point of view. Not even just the interviewing in the neighborhood, but coming into these schools or into these programs or even just community spaces, it's like, *what's the scoop? What's happening?* [Italics added] (Peña, 2014)

Honory had come to recognize that there are people very much involved in the struggle to create more just educational conditions, but the emphasis on the individual within RNU meant a solidification of already present divisions. Part of her solution to interrupting that individualization was to further expand the reach of our D+CPAR into the schools by sharing information for the purposes of inspiring conocimiento.

#BarrioEdProj as a Guide to Action

More, by learning from, with, and through the project, #BarrioEdProj can also be understood as a "guide to action" (Le Blanc, 1996) for others to use against adaptive racial neoliberal urbanism. Perhaps the most important lesson is that we can all participate in a PAR EntreMundos to actualize social change. The notion of EntreMundos refers to "in-between spaces of our own creation since we cannot fit neatly into categories made for us" (See Chapter 1). Latino core communities and we, as Latino educator-scholar-activists, live and struggle in the in-between, formed by multiple histories and futurities from the south and the north.

To do research, teaching and political action from this in-between space is challenging and necessary work. It is a means of educating each other and ourselves in order to move toward liberation. Further, by rooting our work with and through a barrio, PAR projects become a tool of empowerment. I return to our co-researcher Honory's description of research within our structure:

> I definitely see research differently now and I do hope to one day do some research of my own. I've noticed that is more than just reading what's already out there but is also about going straight to the sources themselves and make connections/research that way. All my life I've been told what is that I need to get done and what tasks I

> need to finish and that's what I thought this experience was going to be like, but it has actually taught me that I can bring my own ideas and i[t']s ok to brainstorm and talk about what I like to see be done and how my thoughts can be integrated into the project. (Peña, 2014)

It is our hope then that #BarrioEdProj serves as a valuable and accessible guide to action to use in establishing their own work in their own contexts, and working toward social change.

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