

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH AS ACCOMPANIMENT

Reflections on Objectivity, Ethics, and Emotions

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I am a Salvadoran immigrant scholar in the United States. This means that I have lived and built a research career in the country whose settler-colonial government funded the civil war and benefited from the conditions that displaced my family from our birthplace. Consequently, and by design, I am always already positioned by others as being out of place. As a mestiza from a working-class background, I represent a notably small demographic in US academia, one whose ability to properly conduct research and to produce insightful work is often in question. For example, when I asked a professor for a letter of recommendation for a travel grant to conduct graduate research in El Salvador, he responded: “Make sure you are not just going to hang out with family.” And when as a research assistant I submitted multiple interview summaries to the Principal Investigator of a project, her response was genuine shock each time at my ability to conduct incisive interviews and to write clearly and perceptively. She did not expect someone who looked like me to excel at these skills, even though I was close to completing a PhD at the time. Such reminders of my marginalized positionality and of the associated assumptions others place on

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me have punctuated my journey and continue to contextualize my work: they taught me not to invest in presumed rules of research, including canonical approaches in the field of law and society.

It is not surprising that there are few others who share aspects of my social location as knowledge producers in academia. As sociologist Steven Osuna notes:

Through a racialized, gendered, and especially class-specific project, academic institutions have privatized and restricted knowledge production to elites and those from the upper classes. Any knowledge production by the lower orders of society has been interpreted as illegitimate, backward, or nonscientific, thereby allowing the knowledge produced through academic institutions by intellectuals to mask power relations through claims of objectivity and positivism.

(Osuna 2017, 27–8)

Indeed, many saw me as inherently less capable than others. In their eyes, my social location placed me outside of who may be trusted to uphold the revered values of objectivity, positivism, and even basic competence as a scholar. These professors communicated to me that they saw me as being out of place in a PhD program, but their actions were also instructive in other ways: I learned early on that my work as a socio-legal scholar should never aim to maintain an academic hegemony that in its development, excluded me and others like me.

Much of the underpinning of methodological training in sociology underscored similar marginalization. Patterns in funding, publication, awards, and assigned readings privileged quantitative approaches because they were perceived as systematic, replicable, and scientific (Luker 2008). On the other end of that spectrum of the notion of validity, scholars of color doing qualitative work – especially when invested in social justice – were deemed unable to capture “the truth” because we were too close to our research subjects, always already too “biased” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Never mind that “outsider” scholars have a history of egregiously biased and harmful misrepresentations of communities of color (Carbado and Roithmayr 2014).

Qualitative methodology curricula also established the expectation that good qualitative research required a start and end date, with the goal of entering and exiting “the field” in ways that minimized emotional entanglements. What happens when you live in “the field” and your goals expand beyond academic knowledge production? In this

chapter, I reflect on how, given my social location, I have navigated these expectations across the arc of the research process in multiple studies. It is a methodological appendix of sorts that scrutinizes two decades of qualitative work in the intersecting fields of international migration and law and society; and it calls for a reassessment of the potential value of our intellectual work.

ACCOMPANIMENT IN ACADEMIA

Now that I teach in a department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies, I rarely deal with the raced and classed forms of rejection common in sociology or law and society spaces. Visits to other departments and campuses, however, remind me of how social location can vastly inform one's approach to research. I enjoy giving talks to different audiences. I am energized by the intellectual engagement that opens possibilities for new directions in my analysis.

But sometimes these interactions are difficult. At a visit to an elite private US university, for example, a few white male graduate students training in qualitative social science research joined some faculty members and me for dinner. In the midst of savoring the delightful organic food, I noticed myself starting to feel physically ill in reaction to some of the students' commentary. One student stated that qualitative work is great because you can hear the gruesome stories about violence in migrants' lives, but you have the reprieve of theory to make sense of what they have gone through and distance yourself through it. Another agreed and added that writing was the best part of being a scholar because it removes him from the violence and permits him to organize and intellectualize it.

I felt ill because I know my own experience and that of many US scholars of color. We cannot fully distance ourselves from the structures that produce violence; intellectualizing is not the end goal. Instead, we are deeply committed to people's well-being just as much as, and often more than, to the advancement of a field. We are aiming to be in accompaniment.

As Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz explain (2019, 23) when they draw from the ideals and practices of the Salvadoran martyr Oscar A. Romero, accompaniment is "a disposition, a sensibility, and a pattern of behavior. It is a commitment based on a cultivated capacity for making connections with others, identifying with them, and helping them." For Romero,

accompaniment meant making the needs of the most powerless and most oppressed – the people most likely to be left out – into *everyone's* first priority. It entailed asking questions before acting, taking inventory of multiple forms of social exclusion, and learning how to be people who do not succumb to the dominant norms of an acquisitive, aggressive, and antagonistic world.

(Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2019, 25)

Scholars who are members of the majority racial group, who benefit from patriarchy and white supremacy, have the privilege of intellectualizing and distancing, and are more likely to be endorsed as appropriately objective and rigorous. Indeed, academia exists in and often reproduces the “acquisitive, aggressive, and antagonistic world.” Scholars who choose to counter the rules of objectivity and rethink notions of rigor (Hale 2008), are invested as co-creators of a process of transformation, often making the most oppressed their priority. This requires humility, carries immense responsibility, and can make writing feel paralyzing (Negrón-Gonzales 2014).

My practices of accompaniment stand in opposition to settler-colonial standards of objectivity (Morgensen 2012), but my work is rigorous in ways that matter beyond academic norms. This becomes evident to others through the emotional nature of the work. My practices of accompaniment give me access to people's lives in ways that can evoke deep emotions from study participants, readers, and audience members.

At my talks, people often ask me how I deal with the painful stories I document. Depending on who is asking, this question and ensuing conversations can signal different concerns. In my experience, white students are trying to make sense of how to follow the prescribed rules of “objectivity” while aiming to unearth deep insights about human experiences. Similar questions from working-class students of color, however, suggest a desire to understand how one maintains emotional well-being when the research so persistently reveals the kind of suffering that hits close to home. In each of these instances, though based on different priorities, audiences read me as being out of place in academia: one group for not being objective enough; the other for being too close to the institution's demands to do good work on behalf of the community. After two decades of research, I have come to understand that it is precisely my marginalized positionality as an out-of-place scholar that permits me to negotiate all such expectations to produce socio-legal work that is simultaneously humanizing and rigorous.

This chapter is about how the framework of accompaniment allows me to process the emotions of conducting law and society research. I find that by centering the emotional well-being of the most oppressed – study participants and readers from similar communities – research becomes a way to foster community because it allows people to engage in emotional ties with one another. I contend that a socio-legal researcher’s positionality also entails an *emotional* positioning and that emotions, rather than their denial through an expectation of “objectivity,” produce more honest and ethical research. Notably, my commitment to accompaniment blurs the presumed division between researcher and study participants.¹

RESEARCH TOOLS FOR ACCOMPANIMENT

The late poet-warrior, Audre Lorde, warned that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. As with any theoretical premise, Lorde’s caveat is useful only if the elements – whose paring away enables its elegance and urgency – are added back, so that the general truth of the abstraction has concrete meaning for day-to-day life. The issue is not whether the master uses, or endorses the use of, some tool or another. Rather, who controls the conditions and the ends to which any tools are wielded? . . . The house must be dismantled so that we can recycle the materials to institutions of our own design, usable by all to produce new and liberating work.

(Gilmore 1993, 70)

I have a PhD in sociology. There is no question that I was trained to use “the master’s tools.” Most of my research projects to date have drawn on in-depth interviews with immigrants in various legal statuses in the United States. Analyzing their words and using a comparative strategy to underscore common narratives by legal status, I aim to capture how US foreign and immigration policies centrally shape the everyday lives of migrants. It is my social location guided by goals of accompaniment that permit me to use “the master’s tools” to my own ends, in “new and liberating” directions.

I conduct research in a notably anti-immigrant political and discursive context in which immigration policies are often violently enforced

¹ I wish to credit Karina Alma and Floridalma Boj Lopez for encouraging me to make these points more explicitly and boldly.

(Menjívar and Abrego 2012). As a member of one of the racial groups that is most explicitly targeted by such immigration policies in the United States, I am firmly aware of the intimate ways in which enforcement spreads fear and uncertainty in immigrant communities. Interviews allow me to learn directly from those who are targeted, whose voices and experiences are too often excluded or misrepresented in public discourse. From the conception of a project to the recruitment of participants, to the interactions during each interview, and through the dialectical process of analysis – all aspects and stages of my work are deeply informed by my social location, a commitment to humility, and goals of accompaniment.

I am both the thoroughly trained social science scholar who designs studies methodically to leverage the analytical power of comparative research, and I am the Salvadoran immigrant whose relatives and close friends suffer daily the complex consequences of the very systems that I analyze. My out-of-place status as a socio-legal scholar allows me to prioritize my own and my research participants' humanity above a questionable expectation for objectivity in the research process. To conduct thorough and humane law and society research (indeed, to even consider these equal priorities), I perform academic accompaniment in the tradition of Oscar A. Romero. For every project, therefore, I prioritize the most oppressed. This demands a layered process; every stage of research and analysis requires humility and different strategies to help me ethically manage emotions and information while capturing what is at stake for immigrant communities.

Conceptualizing a Project

Because of who I am, because I migrated as an undocumented child, because my family was forced to flee a war that was being funded and promoted by the US government to uphold a capitalist system that undermines the well-being of the majority of Salvadorans in El Salvador and abroad (Abrego and Villalpando 2021), I seek out research projects that help me understand how humans suffer, adapt, and live in the face of systemic, often legally condoned injustice. I remember how it felt as a child to interact with immigration authorities: we had to wake up before dawn, make our way through city streets and highways to get downtown and stand in line outside of the federal building before it opened, without any guarantee that we would be seen that day. If we were lucky, the line of people waiting was not yet too long and we were able to get a number to be seen.

Inside, we were sent through barren halls and into a waiting room that would soon be filled with other anxious people. We all sat quietly on uncomfortable chairs. My family walked in together when called into small offices. Sometimes we were treated kindly, or at least neutrally, and we were relieved. Often, we were treated poorly. Though it must have been difficult for my parents to remain quiet in the face of such disrespect, we did not question anything because our fates were in the hands of the people who asked my parents prodding questions. I vividly recall that even after we got legal permanent resident status, any time we crossed the border and returned to the United States, my parents were nervous at the point of inspection. The border authorities there also had the right to talk to us as they wished, to presume the worst of us.

This knowledge is embodied and powerfully lodged inside of me. In hindsight, it is not surprising that I seek out research projects that center the law as a powerful site of production of violence. I initially entered into the practice of empirical research, however, without a conscious awareness of how my lived experiences were shaping my academic interests. Instead, like most social scientists, I aimed to begin the research process guided by a carefully constructed research question. While I often revisit and revise my research question multiple times throughout the duration of a project, even after the conclusion of the analysis, I also believe that a solid research question best helps to guide research. I arrive at this research question through a dialectical process that takes into account the questions raised in the literatures on law and society and immigration, and places them in the context of what I witness to be pressing issues in the day-to-day lives of the people who are targeted by changing laws and dominant discursive contexts.

With a foot in academia and another in working-class immigrant communities, being out of place generates research questions that demand nuanced answers. It is not enough to generate theory for the sake of theory; it is necessary to also produce knowledge that reflects carefully and justly contextualized immigrant realities and informs immigrant rights movements. Conceptualizing a project as accompaniment, therefore, requires some understanding of the state of the academic field(s) of interest and a deep familiarity with the processes, practices, and emotions of the people and communities in question.

It has been a long process of learning and unlearning. In 2001, when I embarked on my first empirical project, I was taking graduate courses on immigration. The emphasis in much of that literature was on the

concept of assimilation – the idea that after a generation or more, the immigrant stock (immigrants, their children, and grandchildren) would look statistically just like the average middle-class white population (Gordon 1964; Park 1950). Implicitly, immigrant “success” was understood in that literature as approximation to whiteness. Measuring assimilation involved looking closely at national origin and racial groups’ average levels of educational attainment; at what percentage of each group were completing college; their average wages; and, most problematic in my mind, how many were intermarrying with whites (Osuji 2019). Implicit in this approach was the idea that “successful” immigrants were good enough to be accepted into white families. Most research questions derived solely from that literature were about measuring groups’ socio-economic attainment and whites’ acceptance of them.

At the same time as I was reading that literature, I was spending time with high school youth at a community-based organization. What began as a class requirement to conduct an ethnography ended up becoming an important space in which to practice research as accompaniment. Immigrant students taking a video-making class taught me about the challenges they faced in their poorly resourced schools and, in some cases, as they came to learn that they were undocumented. Toward the end of that academic year – my first year in graduate school – another youth organization started meeting in the same space as the video-making class and some of the youth in the first class joined the group. Mostly undocumented, they were organizing to try to influence public policies in the state of California. I attended all the meetings, gave rides to some of the participants, and joined them as a chaperone on a bus trip to the state capitol over 350 miles away. Through my research, I developed short bios of some of the students that activists then presented during legislative visits to lobby for the passage of Assembly Bill 540, a policy that would make it possible for undocumented students to afford college in California. Having gotten to know a group of students who would benefit from the passage of the bill, I became invested in their political fight, at the same time that I needed to conduct research for my master’s thesis.

The immigration literature suggested that “success” for these migrants would be to attend college, but it did not account for the fact that state and federal policies *impeded* college attendance for undocumented youth. Still new to the practice of empirical research

and academic writing, I devised a research question that safely (within the master's house) centered the notions that were prominent in assimilation literature. I tried to answer the research question: how do undocumented children of immigrants experience assimilation? I designed a study that used interviews to compare the migration, schooling, and neighborhood experiences, as well as the future plans of children of immigrants in three legal categories: US citizen, legal permanent resident, and undocumented. The comparative strategy allowed me to, on the one hand, underscore their many shared experiences as working class and poor Latino immigrants up until high school graduation, and on the other, reveal their starkly divergent future plans and college prospects due to legal status (Abrego 2006). My status as a researcher steeped in immigrant communities allowed me to recognize the missing factor of legal status, and later to develop a focus on the legal, social, and political construction of "illegality" that effectively hinders what migration scholars were counting as "success."

Recruiting Study Participants

Being an out-of-place scholar and an immigrant from a working-class background committed to accompaniment also informs how I approach the people who participate in my research. Unlike traditional researchers who are taught that their research projects (and career) take precedence over the desires of "human subjects" (for a similar observation, see González-López 2010), in the tradition of Romero, I understand my work as needing to center the well-being of participants. I grew up in a poor neighborhood where outsiders sometimes came to conduct research without explaining to us what they were doing. Too young to understand who was behind such projects, I do remember feeling uncomfortable with their assumptions about my community. In hindsight, I wonder if those researchers and outsiders thought they were improving our neighborhoods, maybe even empowering us. If they did, they were mistaken. Their lack of humility and unwillingness to include us in the process prevented any sense of ownership or empowerment for us.

These experiences contextualize how I understand my responsibilities as a researcher. I do not feel comfortable entering a project presuming that the benefits to my career and to the vague notion of a socio-legal scholarship field are sufficient to override the discomfort or potential harm that my research could bring to the individual people

who participate.² I am aware of the intricate ways that laws shape people's intimate and complex lives, and I do not want to open up difficult conversations without offering something in return.

Early in graduate school, before I had children or work responsibilities, I was able to spend ample time getting to know people and assisting in their various efforts prior to requesting interviews. In my first empirical project, for example, I spent countless hours not only attending meetings and providing rides, but I also helped edit students' college application essays and wrote letters to politicians to share findings from my work along with a request for policy changes to benefit the youth I was writing about. I did much of the same for my second research project. Still involved in the immigrant rights movement, I began to see changes in how students presented themselves and how they understood their place in US society after a change in law granted them greater access to higher education. I was conscientious in my decision not to request interviews with them until after I had helped a few of them navigate higher education, serving as an unofficial mentor and making myself available whenever they sought me out.

To date, I continue to accompany the immigrant rights movement. With added responsibilities, however, I have only managed to stay in touch through social media with many of the people who participated in my first two projects. Time constraints no longer allow me to be present to the same degree or in the same ways as when I was a graduate student. My approach now includes applying for sufficient funds to provide monetary compensation to people who are willing to share their stories with me. For one project, for example, I was able to secure enough funding to pay each study participant US\$50 per interview (Abrego 2018b). While traditional researchers sometimes question the ethics of providing monetary incentives (Fisher and Anushko 2008), I understand people's time, stories, and energy to be valuable and because most of the people I interview are also exploited workers, I know that this sum will minimally help offset financial need. I view these payments as the least I can do to thank them for sharing their stories and knowledge. I get to learn directly from them – the experts of their own experiences.

² There are important, broader discussions about ethics in social science research that are beyond the scope of this chapter, but merit close attention, as well (Fisher and Anushko 2008).

Conducting Interviews

Once people have agreed to participate in an interview with me, the next part of the process is to approach our interaction mindfully and with humility (González-López 2011). This practice is something I learned while conducting interviews and not through my formal academic training. In 2001, during my first study, I had a striking moment that underscored the different sets of rules and expectations in research. I had just completed my first year in graduate school and after spending several months volunteering as a teaching assistant in a video-making class, I asked the students if I could interview them for my master's thesis.

The youth in the class knew me well by then and happily agreed to participate. During the interviews, all the students expressed an understanding of their family's migration as central to their lives; shared that they had witnessed violence in their communities; and noted a severe lack of resources in their schools. Expecting that there would be many clear distinctions in their experiences by legal status, I was starting to worry that the differences were not evident in their narratives. Finally, during one interview, when sharing his hopes for the future, an undocumented student began to cry. Internally, my first response was a sense of relief and even excitement because his emotions would help confirm my hypothesis.

My mind raced thinking about how I could leverage this interview and his tears to strengthen my findings. This would allow me to make a clear connection in my thesis between the youth's experiences and the legal categories that I was arguing mattered centrally in the process of immigrant integration. The student went on to talk about how disoriented he felt to have recently learned of his undocumented status as a sixteen-year-old. He had difficulty focusing in school and wondered how life would be in the future. Would he be able to achieve any of the goals he had envisioned for himself? My next emotion was shame. Excitement was not an acceptable feeling in the face of a scared teenager's tears. How could I prioritize my thesis over this young man's well-being? Why did I, even for a second, think that my academic goals superseded the emotional well-being of the people living through the challenges I was studying?

To this day, I am ashamed of my one-time excitement in the face of another person's pain. I vowed to never allow academia's rules and expectations to devalue study participants' and my own humanity. To that end, I work hard to create a comfortable conversational

atmosphere in every interview. An interview is, after all, just a specific kind of human interaction, and in any conversation human beings develop a relationship, even a very brief one, that determines how we feel and how we respond to one another. Here too, Romero's centering of the needs of the oppressed, is a guiding framework for research.

Providing accompaniment as a scholar requires humility and a presence of mind to understand even in indirect language the law's consequences in people's lives, even when they do not actually name the law as the culprit of their problems. For example, even though few children of migrants I interviewed in El Salvador were familiar with the term for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), they described the sadness that invaded them when they knew that their parents had work permits (and presumably a stable legal status) but had not returned. They expected parents to demonstrate their love by visiting them, but these expectations were based on incorrect understandings of the law. Having lived experiences in communities with many undocumented and temporarily protected immigrants, I understood the role of the law in their families' separation.

Many of these conversations and realizations are painful for study participants to revisit. Therefore, I also always remind inconsolable interviewees that we can stop the conversation whenever they want. We can take a break or end the interview if talking is too difficult. I sometimes cry with them. Despite expectations of "objectivity" and replicability (that would require me to ask questions in the exact same way of every single study participant), I do not hold back. If I feel like reaching out and lightly touching their arm to console them, I do so. Sometimes, I can sense that my crying will only make the situation more difficult, either because they are trying to be strong or because it will make them more emotional, so instead I offer comforting words or gestures. Here, it is important not to make the situation about me. The interviewee should not be expected to do the emotional labor of consoling the researcher.

I have worried about harming study participants in the process of trying to tell a more holistic analytical story about their lives while offering them little in the way of concrete and immediate rewards for their time, stories, and vulnerability. Most often, however, people have told me after the interview that it felt good to share and release some of the pain they carry. They are grateful for the opportunity to be heard with compassion. This alleviates my fear that interviews may be too emotionally extractive, and, after multiple studies, I recognize that the

rewards may not ever be directly tied to those who initially shared their words with me, but that there can be a more collective sense of healing and justice for those who later read the words and feel identified, even empowered, by the stories.

Given the intimacy of interviews, however, this is not always the most appropriate method to conduct socio-legal research on the consequences of US foreign and migration policies. Since 2014 when Central American unaccompanied youth were arriving to the United States and being detained inhumanely in large numbers, my mind and heart have been with these asylum seekers. As a Salvadoran immigrant, I find it deeply distressing to see the images of the squalid and lethal conditions so many people, including transgender folks, women, and children, have been confined to over the last several years.

Amid ongoing disputed and contemptible changes in immigration policies, these migrants' current conditions are cataclysmic. My socio-legal researcher skills and the interview space that I am able to create, no matter how mindful and humane, will not lessen their dire immediate needs. Unable to volunteer at the border for prolonged periods, I feel that it is exploitative to request interviews with asylum-seekers who fled dangerously impossible conditions at home, and who have been desperately waiting for months at the northern Mexican border for a chance to plead their case for asylum in the United States. Realistically, even the offer of a financial incentive feels incomplete, as they continue to be dehumanized and unprotected. Asking them to retell their story of migration while they are in the midst of such devastation feels extractive and abusive – particularly for researchers who descend into the area merely in search of stories to boost their own careers, no matter how “objective” their research design.

In these cases, my interest in uncovering how the legal system produces suffering and inequalities has led me to pursue other methods. While I feel ethically compelled not to request interviews from migrants and asylum-seekers in detention or at the border, I also feel morally compelled to keep shining a light on the ongoing injustice. For this purpose, I have turned to analyzing documents – from the Congressional Research Service, the White House archives, and multiple presidential administrations – to connect the dots between US imperialism, as evident in foreign policies, and the unlivable conditions in Central America that expel migrants and asylum-seekers (Abrego 2017b; Abrego 2018a; Abrego and Hernández 2021; Abrego and Villalpando 2021). In the future, when I turn to other projects,

I hope to return to conducting interviews. As a socio-legal scholar, I find that the greatest insights, both intellectual and practical, come from the very people who live and resist the consequences of the law in their daily lives.

Writing and Analysis

When I do conduct interview-based research, my responsibility as a scholar with the goal of accompaniment requires that I continue to work ethically with the information I collect. After each interview, I often take several days to let people's words and experiences sit with me. This was initially not an intentional part of my process; rather, I came to learn that it was something I needed. In this process, I take the time to imagine their experiences and think often about their strength as human beings who persist through systemic obstacles to try to attain a more stable and happy life. I think about the depth of suffering that some people carry and the lack of empathy of mainstream US society. I write notes about interviewees' gestures, the moments when they took long pauses, when they cried. I write about the emotions I felt during our conversation. And I save all these details to potentially use at the writing and analysis stage of the project. Even when they do not make it into the final draft of a manuscript, those details help me humanize study participants and their stories, and they humanize me while adding depth to my analysis.

When the interviews are done, I have either transcribed the recordings myself or have paid to have them transcribed. At the stage of reading the transcripts to begin the coding process, I once again feel and manage my emotions in order to complete the project. On many occasions, I have cried. Reading the transcripts, even after being present during the interview, often reveals more details that I might have missed the first time around. The crying, in these instances, affirms my humanity and underscores the full humanity of those who I have interviewed, in a process that is not only driven by a sense of academic purpose. I try to be patient with myself as I work through my emotions to eventually get to a point of distance, enough to begin to find and name the patterns, to locate the points of most value for both socio-legal scholarship on immigration and for the immigrant rights movement.

I draw on personal experience to understand the insidious, yet invisible, aspects of law's consequences. Without my embodied knowledge, I may not have sufficient perspective to analyze the words of

study participants in the proper context. For example, when people tell me that they are responsible for being undocumented, I emphasize that the settler-colonial legal system simply does not provide the option of legal migration for large numbers of vulnerable people (Speed 2019). When undocumented and poor youth describe themselves as “lazy” and blame themselves for being unable to go to college, I note the timeline of immigration and education policies that contextualize their development and block their college attendance (Abrego 2006). When members of a mixed-status family express feeling hurt at the unequal treatment they receive from their parents, I look beyond individual parenting decisions to consider how the law provides unequal resources for children based on their different legal statuses (Abrego 2016). And when women seemingly make decisions that put their lives in danger, I highlight the legal and economic precarities that limit their options (Abrego 2017a). The parts of me that are marked for marginalization as a scholar simultaneously empower me to eschew any false premise of the law’s objectivity and to view multiple angles of a law, its creation, and its implementation, while also understanding how it shapes people’s public and more intimate behaviors.

Academic expectations of objectivity unfold in particularly acute ways in law and society research. The study of laws, of a system of rules and regulations, implicitly expects that researchers be particularly “objective” in their study of the legal system. The first time I submitted my work for review to a law and society journal, for example, reviewers requested that I sound more “authoritative” in my writing:

The work is compelling and the analysis is strong. A significant detractor, however, is the choice of voice and the continual use of I-me-my. . . . it robs the author of her/his legitimacy as a scholar making a profound academic and social argument . . . the author is advised to take her/his spot in academe with conviction. Pronoun and subject choice in this case moves the manuscript in a more informal, less legitimate sphere, unintentionally turning away potential readers and policy makers. . . I found it exceedingly difficult to take the manuscript (and thus the author) seriously due to this choice.

In response to this reviewer’s request, I removed about half of these instances, often making sentences sound a bit awkward to my ears. Instead of saying, for example, that “I supplemented the interview data with participant-observation,” the published article states, “The interview

data is heavily supplemented with participant-observation” (Abrego 2008, 717). The missing words signified that an actual human being conducted the research. It is, therefore, rather telling that an expectation of objectivity makes analysis, at times, more imprecise and always disembodied. In that particular study, none of my conclusions changed, but the reviewer and editor preferred that I not acknowledge my own participation in the work.

Presentations

I am now a full professor and have had the opportunity to present my work hundreds of times. Given my experiences and my commitment to research as accompaniment, presentations have been, at times, particularly difficult, but also incredibly rewarding. It is in the physical exchange of information, in the conversations that happen directly following a presentation that I am able to witness how different audiences receive my work.

Have you ever cried during a research presentation? This was not a possibility we discussed in methods courses in graduate school. Following an expectation of objectivity meant that we would not become emotionally engaged with the people we interviewed, with their experiences or words. Thus, I was not prepared when I first practiced my job talk in my own living room and cried. I practiced it repeatedly until I no longer felt like crying because I worried that I would never be employed if I cried during a job interview. The practicing helped me become distant enough from the suffering I detailed that I could make my analytic points in a standard presentation style in front of audiences.

But then, it happened again. The first time I presented to an audience of Salvadoran youth, at a college conference organized by the college student organization, USEU (Unión Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios), I read an excerpt from an interview to them in the original Spanish. The mother I had interviewed in California had not seen her daughter in twelve years. With much anguish, she recalled in detail the day she had parted from her daughter to migrate to the United States to provide financially for her family:

My heart was boiling with sadness. I would watch my daughter play and say, “God, please give me the strength to leave.” . . . One night I put my daughter to bed and she turned to face the wall. And she always used to hug me, but she did not that day. I think she could sense my

departure . . . and I lay awake crying. And my little girl wakes up and she tells me, “Mami, I want milk (*crying*). I want milk, mami (*crying*).” Those words gave me the strength to [leave]. And I told her, “There is no milk, baby, but I promise I will get you some.” And she tells me, “I love you, mami.” And I tell her, “I love you too.” And she fell asleep until morning . . . That morning, the bus was coming. That was the bus that always sounded the horn loudly at the entrance to the town, and it started . . . I changed my daughter, I put on her pink sandals and I sat her on the table and I told my mother, “Hold her, mom . . . I leave her in your hands. Love her as if she were your own daughter.”

(Abrego 2017c: 58)

Although I had already been able to present the same material in English, reading and presenting her words in Spanish to a Salvadoran audience filled me with sorrow and I cried. Horrified, I looked around the room only to find that most people in the audience were also crying. It became an opportunity to acknowledge the pain of these all-too-common family separations in the Salvadoran migrant experience.

That was the last time I cried during a presentation. Instead, I practice and focus on the goal of sharing the material and my analysis with each audience. When I look around the room, however, there are often a few people shedding tears during my reading of interview excerpts. They remind me of the power of study participants’ stories and affirm my commitment to them.

I have also been fortunate to hear directly from audience members about how they relate to my work. On one occasion in 2014 at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I gave a talk about how US intervention had played a key role in forcing Salvadorans to flee El Salvador, often leading to family separation. A student I had never met walked up to the front of the room as I was gathering my belongings. The tall, husky young man stood in front of me, wanting to say something, so I looked to engage him. Unlike others who have specific questions about the research, he just asked, “Can I give you a hug?” Surprised, but sensing his sincerity, I said, yes. He gave me a warm, tight hug. Afterward, he told me that his father had been deported to El Salvador when he was only a child. He had grown up with anger, dealing with the turmoil of feeling neglected. Hearing me present my research on how immigration policies play out in other people’s lives, he finally understood that his father could not return. It was only in the analytical space of my work that it finally made sense to him that his

father's absence did not represent a lack of love, but rather that it was produced by the law and its violent implementation.

As a scholar in search of accompaniment, I bring these experiences into my work. I think of study participants as potential audience members in my presentations and I write with them in mind as much as I write to move and build upon the scholarship on law and society.

CONCLUSION

Credibility in the academic community is based on where people have trained, what degrees they have attained, and how prestigious their publications are, especially in socio-legal work. As an out-of-place scholar, I have been forced to consider these matters. Publications are, after all, the currency of academia. I would not have been employed or tenured without the proper academic qualifications – those things that university committees and administrators can quantify. But what I find most fulfilling in my work is the ability to shape the narrative, highlight the nuances, and underscore the full humanity – my own and that of the study participants who are members of my communities and potential readers of the work. In twenty years, I have learned that even when the exact people I interviewed do not read the final products (often because IRB does not permit me to keep the contact information of interviewees), it may be the case that their children, grandchildren, or other relatives in college classes; or people in very similar life circumstances as them will read their words and feel seen and empowered (see, for example, Sasser 2014). Academic research is both more rigorous and meaningful when our work can reach and faithfully capture the expectations of these multiple audiences (Hale 2008).

Academia presupposes a separation between intellectual and embodied pursuits and prioritizes what feminist scholars and scholars of color critique as a false expectation of objectivity (Collins 1989). An uncritical emphasis on objectivity requires that researchers ignore the messiness of life to categorize people and experiences into dependent and independent variables. Good social science research, in this formulation, is “objective” because it will consistently lead to the same findings, regardless of scholars’ social location or emotions. As a scholar with a marginalized positionality, I know this to be false and I welcome the grainy truths that arise in my embodied research and people-centered analysis. I navigate my social location and emotions in detail

and at length at every stage of research to serve the purpose of accompanying the very targets of violent laws.

I am constructed as an out-of-place scholar in US academia because I am a Salvadoran immigrant from a working-class background, a subject of US neocolonialism. Using the tools of academia, I make the research process rewarding and more meaningful through accompaniment, by producing work that is more humble, rigorous, and verifiable, not only to the academic community, but – equally importantly – to my own immigrant community, as well. We do this work, we invest time and resources, and we wrestle with the words on the page to weave together stories that will make evident for readers the ways that their own lives, too, are framed within legal structures. When they can see that, and when they can apply that lens to resist in their own lives, out-of-place socio-legal scholars have countered the violent settler-colonial legal system insidiously represented as fair, neutral, and objective; and we have effectively used academic tools in the struggle for justice and liberation.

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