

**“Todos Somos Humanos, Danos Una Oportunidad”:
Amplifying Voices of Asylum Seekers through Activism Accompaniment**

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Abstract

This chapter will discuss the importance of bringing testimonios and voices of asylum-seeking families impacted by border policies front and center to tell their truth(s). Through a long-term, relational project of accompaniment and activism alongside migrant families impacted by violent immigration policies, we seek to reflect on the role of engaging in research deeply connected and committed to the well-being of migrant families. This work highlights the experiences of the activist research we have been undertaking at the Southern border since 2018 to build community with, advocate for, and gather testimonios from families impacted by immigration detention and those forced to endure the traumatic Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP), also known as *Remain in Mexico*, a policy that has stranded 70,000 families at the US/Mexico Border (Mukpo, 2020).

Pulling from feminist critiques of positivist research (Nagar, 2014) and Abrego's (2020) framework of research as accompaniment, we insert activist research as a continued form of accompaniment, *activist accompaniment*, embracing the relational importance of research as accompaniment. Goals of this chapter focus on both the critical importance of amplifying and centering testimonios of those impacted by migration and inhumane immigration policies while understanding activist accompaniment as a significant humane approach to migrant research.

Keywords: Migration Protection Protocols, Activist Research, Research as accompaniment, migration, testimonios

In this escalating climate of the criminalization and human rights violations of migrants, there is minimal research that centers the process of migration with and within the testimonios of those most impacted. This chapter discusses the importance of bringing testimonios and voices of asylum-seeking families impacted by border policies front and center to tell their truth(s). Through a long-term, relational project of accompaniment and activism alongside migrant families impacted by violent immigration policies, we seek to reflect on the role of engaging in research deeply connected and committed to the well-being of migrant families that begins at the border and follows them through their journey. This work will highlight the experiences of the activist research we have been undertaking at the Southern border since 2018 to build community with, advocate for, and gather testimonios from families impacted by immigration detention and those forced to endure the traumatic Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP), also known as *Remain in Mexico*, a policy that has stranded 70,000 families at the US/Mexico Border (Mukpo, 2020).

Pulling from feminist critiques of positivist research (Nagar, 2014) and Abrego's (2020) framework of research as accompaniment, we insert activist research as a continued form of accompaniment. We name our emotional, political, and investigative work we have been immersed in as *activist accompaniment*, grounding the relational importance of research as accompaniment. Goals of this chapter focus on the critical importance of amplifying and centering testimonios of those impacted by migration and inhumane immigration policies through activist research (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009) in the field of migration studies. We include feminist reflections on employing solidarity and responsibility in research and the field, considering the key question Richa Nagar (2014) asks,

Can notions of such solidarity and responsibility, trust and hope, vulnerability and reflexivity serve as a useful purpose in ethically navigating the forms of epistemic violence in which metropolitan academics are and will always remain, complicit? (Nagar, 2014, p. 3).

Utilizing Abrego's (2020) research as accompaniment, we reflect on our role as Latina scholars and activists in the struggle for migrant justice. As feminist scholarship offers critiques on co-constructed knowledge, we elevate migration reflections allowing for raw testimonios, free from

scripted analysis. We are driven to find a space that does not dilute or contaminate their raw stories of trauma and marginalization painfully inflicted by the Trump administration in particular.

As the field of migration studies grows, so does the demand for humane research that reflects the realities of refugees, migrants and asylum-seeking families and children. The urgent call to expand methodological frameworks that is co-positioned in the voice of the people and children must be examined. Our reflection centers around the ways in which our research inserts the work of art, videos, and testimonios into spaces, while limiting our own analysis. We also create space for the processing and sharing of emotions, both as activists and researchers and in community with the families we are working with. Our positionality provides a humanistic perspective that transforms traditional methodology into an artistic space of witness, advocacy and testimonio to highlight the inhumane conditions, trauma and emotional suffering of asylum seekers at our U.S. border under the MPP policy. Finally, our work connects to the greater platform of advocacy as a critical purpose for both the asylum seeker and us as researchers. As Latinas in the field, our own spirit of activism and resistance is reflected in how we collect, interact and stand in community with each of the families we have met with and continue to work with at the U.S. border and beyond.

Our Positionality, Quienes Somos

As scholars, researchers and educators, we also identify as activists in the struggle for justice for migrant and immigrant communities. As Latinas we experience a range of emotions as we hear and see the emotional trauma and injustice that children, families and elders are experiencing at the hands of our immigration system. Research with this community demands that we do more than collect data, keeping them distanced as the other, and we argue that our positionalities call us to bring our own understandings of migration and immigration within our family stories along with us in this journey. We must listen, understand, and use our work to build advocacy and relationships that extend into accompaniment.

Belinda identifies as Mexicana raised in Tejas. Growing up in the border state of Texas, I (Belinda) experienced and witnessed direct and institutional racism against Latinos and communities of color which inspired and influenced my work as both a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and faculty in academia. My work pushes me to bring humanity to the faces and corazones

of many who have been dehumanized and transformed into “others” as people attempt to vilify the immigrant community. Experiences in my own life growing up in a rural community that lacked space to share my own voice scarred me with derogatory names of “weback,” “illegal,” or “ese Mexicano” to identify Latinos. My memories of discrimination and ostracizing the “other” are reflected in the criminalization of asylum seekers and the repeated anti-immigrant policies that have poisoned the border. Witnessing and experiencing injustices both personally and through others growing up in Texas have pushed me to highlight the strengths and cultural wealth that stand strong as resistance and courage in the spirit of asylum-seeking families and individuals.

Born and raised in the Bay Area of Northern California, my (Amy) own witnessing of injustice against migrant communities varied. The Mission District of San Francisco, where my family hails from, was a haven for people from all parts of Latin America, as well as 2nd and 3rd generation Latinx families. My grandparents came from Nicaragua in the 1930’s, as some of the first Central Americans in the Mission of many generations that would follow. The home of my abuelita became a refuge for the many family members who would later arrive, aunts and uncles fleeing Somoza, cousins fleeing Civil War, and more recently nieces and nephews coming to reunite with family members. I began to notice the varied treatment the different generations experienced, and felt a strong calling to continue to engage in justice movements for my ancestral lands. Spending time at the border, building community with this most recent generation of Central American migrants evokes my family home, and the need for refuge and community upon arrival. It is in this memory that I continue to walk in solidarity with all people that are forced to flee their home and find refuge.

Our histories and desire to push for migrant justice is what brought us together, studying human rights in our doctoral program. Our work at the border began out of a grassroots effort to be in service on the front lines of supporting migrant families. As faculty in the School of Education at University of San Francisco (USF), rooted in service and social justice, our hunger to address the escalating injustices of the separation of children and families ignited our hope to be in solidarity with the families. At the same time that we began to open pipelines to the border for service and activism, a team of grassroots activist women from the Bay Area began to travel to the South Texas border to provide resources and support to the asylum families at the Catholic Charities Respite Center. Returning from the border after their first trip, our USF team was invited to travel on the

following trip together and later formed the Bay Area Border Relief. We both became active leaders in the group, focusing on mental health, adjustment, activism, and accompaniment of the asylum-seeking families for the past two years. As the time extended for asylum seekers in Matamoros, the Bay Area Border Relief team, including ourselves, committed to long term work to support the families at all levels.

Research as Activist Accompaniment

This chapter highlights the necessity of research to engage versus witness and the role counter-storytelling, art, and testimonio has in studies on migration. We are able to do this through an activist research agenda. We define testimonio as a form of storytelling that uncovers the way that systems of oppression conspire in the lives of Latinos and Latinas. This methodology is predicated on understanding the theoretical implications of lived experience. Testimonio is an exercise of agency; the very insistence of storytelling is an act of resistance against the silencing and subordination of the Latino/a experience (Yosso, 2005). We pull from both Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey (2009) and Cann and DeMeulenaere (2020) in stressing the importance and defining our understanding of activist research. Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey (2009) define activist scholarship as “a model of active engagement between the academy and social movements” (p. 3). We, as activist scholars, position ourselves in both the academy and movements for the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.

Our work challenges assumptions around positivist research that tends to dominate the field of migration scholarship and pushes for research that humanizes communities most vulnerable (Paris & Winn, 2014). Nagar’s (2014) reflection on the work of co-authored scholarships offers us grounding questions to interrogate our work, while Abrego’s research as accompaniment clearly defines and frames how we approach our work. We do this by allowing ourselves to be in long term relationships with migrant families, walking with them along their journeys, and also advocating for changes to policy. We call this activist accompaniment, pulling from Abrego’s research as accompaniment and Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey (2009) and Cann and DeMeulenaere’s (2020) definitions of activist scholarship. As Cann and DeMeulenaere (2020) share, “Donald Trump’s election forced academics to confront the inadequacy of promoting social change through the traditional academic work of research, writing and teaching” (p. xxii). Inserting the

activism in accompaniment speaks to the tensions Abrego (2020) names around ethical ways to recruit study participants (p. 8). We do not see ourselves as apart or separate from the community, nor do we see the work as finite, having a set starting and end date, but rather relational and a journey, what Abrego (2020) calls research as accompaniment. Along with the emotional aspects of the research that Abrego refers to, we assert that the role of advocacy and activism must be present to engage.

Accompaniment comes from the work of the martyr Saint Oscar Romero, being defined as

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 acquisitive, aggressive, antagonist world. (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2019, p. 25)

Abrego's work pulls from this definition of accompaniment to describe the importance of research as accompaniment, in which she states that "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" (p. 3).

While we acknowledge the act of migration as a strength for individuals and families who harrow this long and difficult journey, embedded in the journey is trauma that is lived and real. There are not enough words to describe the journey, rather it is a lived experience that sits in the body, is felt in the soul and is etched in memory. For some they can smell the desert, hear the rustling of the trees, see the river passing with thirst, taste the water they drank for the first time. They tell us the stories of their fear with their heart racing as fast as it did the day they ran behind the coyote. Some have shared stories of near death as they close their eyes, trying to erase what sits at the front of their mind.

As these experiences are felt, the body has memorized the journey and the sensory connectors are not disrupted by the reality of time. For those who have escaped violence, fleeing for their lives and looking for a sanctuary to protect their family, narrating their stories in dialogues for

research is not always a forum that is welcome. Opening doors for the journey to be told by them in ways that capture not just narrative but also emotion is critical. Abrego (2020) shares that in research as accompaniment “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” (p. 11). There is the role of being able to process the emotions as well as put those emotions into a project that will continue to advocate for a more humane and just situation. When one tells their story in any form, there is sacredness. It is almost as if a ritual should be done before and after to witness and recognize the experience. Abrego shares her personal processes, however, we assert that our advocacy begins with the various rituals we utilize when arriving at the camps, and the way we participate in rituals that are already present with the families we are working with. We do not see ourselves as separate or apart from.

In the forced separation of family, the loss of home, the loss of country, and the trauma, one is holding a pain and reality that can only be understood in the context of the journey itself. To tell this story is to acknowledge a world of emotions, to re-experience physical memories of stress, pain, exhaustion, fatigue, and other stored emotions that contribute to sensory connections that are stimulated by memory. Such memories last a lifetime and are connected to each step a migrant family or individual takes in the United States.

Methodologies selected for migration research must be rooted in forms that give the individual or family a space to physically shed their thoughts, holding space for both sensory memory and testimonio. Another layer of the work is to include agency in the process, a key to holding the space for both reflection and action by the participant. For them to be heard, it is also important for them to know there is action. Finally, the relationship cannot end when testimonios are collected. The researcher is now a part of that memory, of that relationship and constant engagement and nurturing of that relationship is required. The shared experiences that participants trusted us with as researchers demand that we continue to connect with them throughout their ongoing journey as they fight for asylum at the camp. The basic needs for survival they have and the imperative messaging for help requires that we be present and understand their trust as sacred. Our work as researchers calls for our own ethics to support ongoing resources and advocacy in situations where great suffering is happening. Our call to humanize them through research is also our call to action and presence in ongoing dialogue and community with them to seek justice.

As the paragraphs above demonstrate, testimonio within migration research is a powerful tool to understand the experiences of those who migrate (Eastmond, 2007). The use of testimonio, as a method, allows for the researcher to understand “experiences as expressed in lived and told stories by the individuals” (Creswell, 2013, p. 70). The process of sharing, hearing, and witnessing is a sacred event that must honor the relationship from which these stories come. Many researchers using narratives within migration research claim to use narratives as a way to “give voice” to migrant communities. As Montero-Sieburth (2020) highlights, this can create a “power differential which separates” researchers from participants (p. 211). It also begs the question; after then what? The research as a constant relationship, continuing to come back to advocacy and activism that center the well-being of the community, is where our project moves beyond giving voice to explore the power of the testimonios when taken out of the research project and brought into the realm of activism, or activist accompaniment as we refer to this.

MPP and the US/ Mexico Border

In 2018, Belinda was invited to partner with a grassroots activist group of the Bay Area Border Relief (BABR) to head to the Rio Grande Valley to respond to the horrific images of the Trump administration’s family separation policies. The team originally partnered with Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in McAllen, Texas, run by Sister Norma Pimintel. Sister Norma runs a respite center where migrants and asylum seekers can go once released from U.S. Border Patrol detention facilities. The team spent between ten days to two weeks on each visit, supporting families and talking to children about their experiences under Border Patrol detention. These trips took place every few months throughout 2018 and 2019, and included the first part of 2020. During a trip in June of 2019, we noticed that more and more families were camping on the other side of the Brownsville Bridge in Matamoros, Mexico. “Metering,” a policy that existed prior to the Trump Administration, limits the number of asylum seekers that are allowed to cross into the United States (Cheng, 2019). Asylum seekers must put their name on a list with Mexican officials and wait until their number is called. In June of 2019, we met families who shared that a week had gone by with no number being called at all. This resulted in more and more families taking up permanent residence along the border to wait for their turn to claim asylum.

Earlier in January of 2019, the Trump administration furthered its attack on the asylum process, and began sending asylum seekers who claimed asylum on the U.S. side of the river back to Mexico to wait for their court hearings. This policy, Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the Remain in Mexico policy, has been detrimental to families. In February of 2020, BABR, along with researchers from the University of San Francisco, spent a week working with families in Matamoros, Mexico. All of the families had been impacted by MPP. Some of the families had been there a year or more (as there were families already there due to the metering policies).

In each of the visits to the border, service to the communities was front and center. Through time spent with families, the sharing of their experiences often came naturally. Many requested that people in the United States understand what was happening along the border. One activity that was originally intended as a letter exchange between children turned into an entire social media campaign, at the request of a number of the families living in the camp. This deep engagement led to the collection of testimonios.

The level of engagement, advocacy and service, combined with testimonios of the community, has created a rich experience of scholarship that positions the voices of the asylum seekers to advocate for systemic change. Utilizing testimonios and activist accompaniment with asylum seekers calls for a closer examination and expansion of relevant research that speaks to the emotional and physical decline of asylum seekers at our borders. Their voices and experiences become a critical layer of activism to push for immigration reform. Our work at the border expanded testimonio, by also incorporating art and a constant engagement with families and individuals through WhatsApp chats, voice memo and videos. Through this expansion of testimonio, we have captured their spirit of struggle and strength to share their voices, highlighting their agency to work alongside us, research-activists to make change. This work is critical for future migration studies as our work brings to light a humane approach to addressing the immigration crisis' impact on the most vulnerable.

Testimonios from Matamoros

We engaged with countless asylum seekers, listening and witnessing their shared testimonios on a number of different trips from 2018 until the present. The foundation of our work held the necessary

space to actively listen to each individual we sat with. The process for us to meet with an asylum seeker was organic in nature. Each location was very different but, in many ways, similar.

Our first months of work began at the border in the United States. Stationed at the Catholic Charities Respite Center, our first priority of work was to provide support for their immediate basic needs. We gave out blankets, helped with supplies, resources and served warm meals, all the time seeing the pain and stress on their faces as we did our best to bring care and hope as we emotionally struggled to witness the cruelty they were living through at our borders.

Our research did not make sense outside the reality that the most important work was to care for their immediate physical and emotional well-being. Our Bay Area Border Relief and University of San Francisco team worked tirelessly to be engaged at all levels. Their tears drove us to spend long nights making sure children had a warm bed to sleep in and to find food that at times became scarce alongside a growing need. We pushed through our own anger, frustration, and helplessness as the spirit of despair saturated the air we all breathed. Determined to find hope, we found immediate ways to support the asylum seekers. We held babies in our arms to let exhausted mothers eat a warm meal, we began art stations for the children, some drawing rainbows, others cages. We helped to make phone calls, advocated for medical support, and ultimately sat and listened to the stories that shared migration journeys of goodbyes, near death encounters at the Rio and the joy of standing on U.S. soil. We wrote letters to Senators, tweeted urgent messages to political leaders and tried to get the word out at home to fight for humane policies. What we saw and felt forced us to change the way we understood research. Our work of accompaniment and activism first and foremost was the most important part of embracing the humanity in all of those people we met.

Aware of the emotions that the asylum seekers shared with us, we reflected with them our own thoughts and processes to fight against the system through our work, research and scholarship. Agreeing with them that in telling the story and truth, change happens. We anchored our activism in research as a necessary role in sharing their stories, their testimonies of lived experience that demanded we look closer from all angles. How do we consider mental health and the psychological impact that forced migration and cruel immigration policies have on children? How do we fight for mothers and fathers forcibly separated from their children by migration policies that ignore family? This work can only be done through the building of trust, through relationships, and through activist

scholarship. We recognized this in our own emotions that did not let us simply check a box, or fill in a question, rather they demanded we acted with compassion, care, as witnesses, and as activist scholars and caregivers. This is where we began to truly transform our own notion of migration research.

Art, Activism and Accompaniment as Methodology (Advocacy, Resistance and Truth)

When we thought the situation could not get worse, we saw asylum seekers forced out of the United States into Matamoros, Mexico by the Trump Administration. As they moved, we moved with them, witnessing an unsanitary and inhumane tent camp. Even the mere thought of trying to undertake research in one of the most inhumane conditions for asylum seekers seemed cold and complicated. Seeing families in tents, the rain, heat and elements taking a toll on their physical and emotional health is shattering. For us on the ground, repeated feelings of helplessness overcame us as we watched children playing in one of the most contaminated rivers in the area. We saw families hungry, huddled together trying to figure out just one more day ahead. Tears, laughter, and expressions of hope greeted us, as well as confusion and fear. Volunteers came in and out of the camp with supplies to share, many who had worked on their own to figure out lifelines for the asylum families, all while Trump promised that “Mexico would pay for them to wait.” As researchers we had to first understand our own emotions; what we were feeling when we were witnessing the trauma of so many, forced to live in these conditions by our United States government. The shock of seeing families just like ours, forced to live in tents for months – and now over a year – creates a flood of emotions. Seeing the beautiful faces of little ones light up when we say hi and extend our care to their family as we sit with them reminds us of the fragility and vulnerability of young children, suffering the consequence of policies that do not protect our asylum seekers at the border. Witnessing the strength of fathers, mothers and elders as they speak with courage and conviction of their truth, the harsh reality of trauma they have endured in their countries and the deaths of many loved ones that are frozen in the reality of their psyche and quest for protection at our borders. All of these images are just a few of the realities of what we grappled with considering how to push for justice centered research that listened to the truth of the people, that let them speak and allowed us to create a safe space for them to share.

This is where the difficulties of accompaniment arose. Oftentimes, the processing of our emotions happened in small moments of sharing, looking for each other throughout the day – to check-in, if we were lucky. Most of the time, the processing took place in the energy of the activism itself. On our last visit to the border before Covid-19 shut down all possibilities, the 9th court of appeals ruled MPP unconstitutional (Dickerson, 2020). News was running through the camp, and after a long day, we immediately shifted into: we need to walk with people to the bridge, we need to speak to agents to demand that they open up the crossing. Our processing in this exact moment was alongside a number of folks we had spent the day with, them asking us what this ruling meant, us texting communities in the U.S. to see what we could do, and all of us extremely emotional. This is what it means to walk with communities in their struggles, using our contacts with the academy, with news outlets, with a larger audience in the United States to share. It means working through our emotions with each other as researchers and with the communities we walk with. We do not put our emotions on those we work with, we are extremely mindful of this. However, we also cannot distance ourselves from the emotions that they are feeling, that we are feeling as well. It is an important part of the confianza and relationships to be able to share human emotions.

The Blank Canvas

Gathering from work in the field of counseling using the arts (Hernandez Arriaga, 2017), we are familiar with the use of art as a cultural form of healing and rooted in storytelling and advocacy. Framed with this notion of creating a safe space and a blank page for the children and families to share anything they wanted with us, we positioned our work to use art in different forms to have them express, advocate and scream through canvas, cards, banners or letters. As researchers, we observed that what might seem to be simple art transformed the asylum seekers' experiences into an in-depth process of graphically expressing urgent messages of need, illustrating emotions of isolation, fear, and inhumanity, while at the same time pushing for urgent messages for change. We began with the simple question: "What message would you like to share with the United States?" From here their confined emotions were released without censorship. The blank canvas allowed their voice to be spoken through messages, drawings, scribbles, poems, letters and exclamations of messages such as "Todos Somos Humano" [we are all human]. In our research and movement to support asylum seekers, it became clearly evident to us that the art form ignited a raw advocacy at

the border to move their voices beyond the growing wall. Their art became a vessel to tell their story outside of the camp, with a continued hope for change (Hernandez Arriaga & Dominguez, 2020).

Resistance

Using art with asylum seekers allows them to stand up against the vile policies by which they feel chained. One father did a very powerful drawing of the Journey of the Asylum Seeker. In this piece he documented each border that he had to cross, beginning in his country, explained why he fled and then what he encountered at each border leading up to the United States. His diagram represents the journey many asylum-seekers weather with a determined spirit to keep their family strong.

(PLACE ILLUSTRATION 1.1 HERE)

Another father asked for his drawing to be shared with as many as possible. His drawing represented the Rio Grande with border patrols flying around, the United States flag waving on the other side. On his canvas, he tells the message that we are all equal and “somos humanos” [we are human].

(PLACE ILLUSTRATION 1.2 HERE)

These pieces of artwork are the ways that the families are able to resist the constant messages of dehumanization. Sharing the messages, the art and the drawings within communities in the United States, was speaking out. The camp in Matamoros was right next to the border crossing. A number of times Mexican officials attempted to move the camp, given its visibility (Leaños, 2019).

Governments from both countries attempted to hide the reality of the clear violations on the right to claim asylum. Sharing this reality was a key part of the activism. The families in Matamoros wanted – needed – people to see their situation for what it was.

Truth

Drawings of alligators in the river, children crying, families alone on the Mexican side of the river share the reality and truth of what they are living, countering the justification of U.S. officials who

implemented the Migration Protection Protocol. Asylum seekers who are living the experiences of MPP must share the realities of what is happening and at the same time, research must reflect and push their reality forward to document all areas of their experience. Children have shared readily as they too want their stories to be told. The use of art creates a safe forum for them to draw and represent what they are holding. In the moments of drawing, they are allowed to be children, while also beginning to process experiences. The art did not include the names or specific details that could name them but allowed for a story to be told.¹ Elders, parents, children want their stories to be told. Research then becomes witness, advocacy and truth through their art as they begin to process, create, speak and be heard. The process of art also gives them a moment of relief to experience sensory processing to paint, use color, see and move their life experiences to a space that demands to be heard and seen beyond borders. The fact that a large part of our team are mental health practitioners added to the role we could play in hearing testimonios. While much of the art was anonymous, there were families that wanted to document their stories and wanted their names out there. This placed their process of asylum at great risk, especially under the Trump Administration, as immigrant activists have been targeted (Pinto, 2020). We were always clear in sharing the possible retaliation for their work. However, many began to create their own Twitter and Instagram accounts to continue to post videos and images of their experiences. It then became our responsibility to share these videos by reposting as much as possible.

Querida America: The Activist Research Agenda

On our most recent trip, in February of 2020, the research team brought letters from school aged children in the Bay Area to distribute to the people living in the camp. The team also came with art supplies to encourage the children in the camp to write letters and draw pictures to bring back to the children from the Bay Area. This originally began as an exchange between children. However, one of the residents of the camp who was helping us with all the organization, asked if he could also write a letter. This led to a three-day activity in which adults would come to send a message. At first the prompt was open, however, over time, more and more of the messages were directed to the U.S. government, and many to the Trump Administration directly. People wanted to share their pain, their hopes, their dreams, and their experiences. One child shared, “mi sueno es ser residenta de los

¹ See the work of Hernandez Arriaga and Dominguez (2020) for more details and images of some of the art that was done.

estados unidos y ser la mejor patinadora” (my dream is to be a resident of the United States and be the best skater) (BABR, n.d.). Another man shared, “nosotros no salimos de nuestro país porque queremos, salimos por tanta corrupción solo te pido queremos salir de esta situación tan crítica que estamos viviendo” (we didn’t leave from our country because we wanted to, we left because of all the corruption. I only ask you to take us out of this situation, so critical, that we are living) (BABR, n.d.). They also wanted the messages to be shared. We collected over 300 letters, which were then scanned, translated and coded for themes by us and two other graduate students. The letters were then used to start the Querida America campaign, a social media campaign in which each day a letter was highlighted with a message or an image around MPP (BABR, n.d.). This again began in collaboration over WhatsApp between the BABR team and families in the camp. They wanted their messages shared with politicians. Some in our team were even able to access a fundraising meeting with a Senator and share the letters.

One of the key ways these letters demonstrate research activism is that they amplify voices versus “give voice,” as that the letters began as an idea of someone living in the camp. Those living in the camp saw this as an opportunity to highlight their struggle by sharing their messages with a larger audience. The role that we played as researchers was to amplify and spread the messages and work with the migrant community in Matamoros to advocate for the ending of MPP. As researchers, we had to remain flexible and open to moving in directions that the community pushed us in.

Video

Another form of artistic expression for research is the use of video by the asylum participants to gather and document their stories during the MPP crisis. For some this is a method of protection to be able to capture what they are living through. Capturing their own video to narrate experiences they are living has been a way of documenting the truth. Having access to video gives them agency to share their stories with others through social media or other forms. Video opens access to stories told from their eyes, their voices. We were able to partner with Dr. Oscar Guerra of the Bay Area Border Relief, who shared a go pro² and additional cameras to leave with the asylum seekers at the camp, many who have now been there for over a year. Some asylum seekers have worked to initiate their own twitter pages, to post messages and document the inhumane experiences that they have

² A small versatile camera that can capture action shots and has technology available to upload and edit short videos.

endured, utilizing the go pro and other recording devices. Videos were taken and shared on Twitter to document the situations in the moment. For example, when the Mexican officials attempted to move the camp, the videos were extremely useful in garnering attention. The same is true for the various storms and documenting what was happening during the pandemic. Especially at the beginning, when many were confused. Many have shared that they feel forgotten, that no one is listening, that the conditions are deteriorating with minimal legal support for their asylum cases. We have committed to advocating for the community by sharing the videos, stories and photos that asylum seekers have posted online; they are generated with pseudonyms to protect them while still sharing real time crises at the border. We would repost, add to our own social media handles and share with media outlets in the United States.

Confianza y Amistad: Continued engagement

As shared throughout this chapter, the idea of listening to testimonios immediately places us in a relationship with those we are working with. It calls us to partner in their struggle for refuge. This meant that we had to continue to engage and nurture our relationships when we left the camp, and this was done through WhatsApp. WhatsApp allowed us to continue to build our relationships beyond advocacy at the border and also through the COVID crisis. The use of the app allowed for breaking down walls of communication because it was an inexpensive way to communicate across borders. We were able to maintain news and daily reports through text messages, voice messages and photos. Some of the messages are just greetings and blessings, others are pleas for help. For example, this summer there were a number of days of heavy rain, inundating the camp, and WhatsApp messages would come in regularly with updates on the situation. The messages hold us accountable to the community. Upon hearing reports of harsh weather conditions or other varying needs, we would collaborate with the team here to fundraise for resources, and reach out to our contacts working at the border to share the needs that we were hearing.

While border walls and inhumane policies like MPP have attempted to silence and hide asylum seekers, the WhatsApp communication tool has helped us remain connected to their daily lives at the border. Their art and sharing of stories as sacred calls for us to not look away. Their testimonios asked for us to do more, to move their words beyond the canvas and into the world. As researchers, the importance of ongoing conversations with asylum seekers as participants in our

research understands *confianza* [trust] as an ethical part of our work with the mothers, fathers, elders and families we have met. For us, the most important aspect is that they trust we are still here, listening, advocating and walking in solidarity with them.

Conclusion

As the four examples above highlight, the objectives of this project were not solely the production of knowledge from the border. It was taking our students out of the classroom and putting into practice what it means to walk in solidarity with the migrant community. It was building relationships, learning and understanding the needs of the community and then engaging in research that will support those needs. It is activist accompaniment, a partnership in which, as researchers, we were able to pivot quickly to respond to the desires of those we were working with. The impact of this work is continuing with more letter writing campaigns, sharing narratives on news stories, recognizing that they have a community behind them to amplify their cries for humane immigration policies that protect them. While we are excited to publish our experiences, that is not the aim of this research. We share these stories, as yet another avenue to highlight the cruelty of the U.S. government's attack on asylum seekers and migrant communities. This is an activist piece that is recognizing asylum seekers and their agency to advocate for themselves as asylum seekers. We want to build pipelines of communication to be shared and we are utilizing resources to amplify space for their stories to be told in systems that have tried to shut them down and shut them out. We must remember their messages of “Todos Somos Humanos, Darnos Un Oportunidad” [We are all human, give us one opportunity].

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