

# 2 Making a Case for Collaborative Research with Black and Indigenous Social Movements in Latin America

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We North American academics who conduct research in Latin America often overlook the long history of the production of critical thought by movements for social justice in indigenous and black communities. As we interrogate the political potential of research collaborations, we must think critically about the space of African diasporic and indigenous knowledges in Latin American studies. As Catherine Walsh (2007a:224) has argued, “The production of knowledge in Latin America has long been subject to colonial and imperial designs, to a geopolitics that universalizes European thought as scientific truths, while subalternizing and invisibilizing other epistemes.” The critical mass of black and indigenous researchers from Latin America is still small, leading academics to discount and negate the knowledges produced by black and indigenous scholars—oftentimes outside of academic institutions—as valuable contributions to critical thought and theory (Gwaltney 1981:48).

But at the same time, we need to shift our thinking away from the needs of the academy and to recognize that black and indigenous peoples are simultaneously knowledge producers and political actors. Their communities and

social movements are the seminar rooms from which knowledge emerges: a kind of theory-in-action that merges political militancy and cultural renewal. To translate black feminist scholar-activist Barbara Christian's work into the Latin American context, how else have black and indigenous peoples "managed to survive with such spiritedness" the institutional assaults on their culture, bodies, and humanity (James 1999:x)? Highlighting the political work of the organizations represented in the LASA-sponsored *Otros Saberes* project allows us to reflect on the fact that collaborations are not only far more common than we previously imagined, but also that they take forms that range far beyond the collection of data for academic-style analysis. These experiences in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Puerto Rico are less about initiating research collaborations than they are about recognizing and interrogating well-established national and transnational networks of research-based solidarity and social action.

Why bring together black and indigenous knowledge? The current political moment in Latin America is marked by the resurgence of identity-based movements that have become major interlocutors on the national scene, spurring a process of rethinking the nature of democratic participation. As a result, indigenous and black activists have become (sometimes uncomfortable) allies, frequently employing the same political and discursive models for action. This kind of solidarity, although inspired by common conceptions of full citizenship, is also the product of state regimes that place the rights of marginalized or minority groups under a common umbrella. A consequence of this is, for example, the fact that emergent black communities in Brazil and Colombia must appropriate organizing models from the more established indigenous movement (Ng'weno 2007). The political context, then, requires that black and indigenous researcher-activists engage in a mutual process of theory building, as well as practical action.

Why bring these knowledge producers together with academics (some of whom are, themselves, black or indigenous)? To answer this question, we must extricate ourselves from the North American academic settings in which we (the authors of this commentary) work and live, and imagine what it means to be an academic in Latin America. As Colombian anthropologist Myriam Jimeno (2000, 2005) suggests, doing social science research in Latin America is, simultaneously, an exercise of citizenship. Academic collaboration with black and indigenous organizations implicitly recognizes that both activists and academics are co-citizens who not only analyze social processes, but also use their observational powers to transform them. As a result, as Jimeno (2005:46) argues, "the sectors being studied are not understood as exotic, isolated, distant, or 'cold' worlds, but as co-participants in the construction of nation and of democracy in these countries." This proximity between

the researcher and the researched requires that all involved participate in “a meta-academic space of debate” and recognizes that intellectual work “has implications for the social life of people and the practical meaning of the exercise of citizenship” (2005:51). The insertion of academics into social life has resulted, historically, in a research agenda that privileges structures of domination and social transformation (2005:54; Ramos 1990) on the one hand, while on the other, it engages the academy in a collaborative dialogue with the subjects of academic research (Briones 2005; Vasco 2002).<sup>1</sup>

The decolonization of knowledge—understood as both a broadening of epistemological approaches and a reframing of what we as scholars know about black and indigenous social and political practices, histories, and cultural experiences—is an essential part of the political process of recognition of ethnic actors (Augusto 2007; Mohanty 2003). Political scientist Anthony Bogues (2007:209–210) makes the case for developing a “decolonizing episteme” through which we can reshape the knowledge-making process. First, epistemic decolonization would involve rethinking how closely the university works with the communities that surround it—more specifically, creating a space for the critical examination of racial, class, and gender assumptions that produce disconnections between universities’ needs and communities’ needs. Second, looking for and discerning decolonized knowledge requires unmasking “the power embedded in the production of knowledge” in the humanities and social sciences, areas in which “colonial regimes of power” continue to shape *where* we look for knowledge and the paradigmatic shifts that must take place as a result. Finally, it implies emphasizing interdisciplinarity in both research and curricula as well as reworking the disciplines in ways that recognize Afro-descendant and indigenous thought and practice.

How might our drive for collaborations between activist researchers and research activists speak to the broader goals and challenges of social movements and academic disciplines? Who defines theory, and how can the kinds of knowledges black and indigenous people produce leave the realm of “other” to be given historical legitimacy and mainstream status? Epistemic decolonization is based on the idea that black and indigenous actors must be able to participate in this reframing of knowledge and in deciding how disciplinary boundaries should open in order to center rather than marginalize them.

The decolonization of knowledge also requires the decolonization of methodologies, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and others (Augusto 2007; Sandoval 2000) have affirmed in their work. Smith argues that disciplinary methods of organizing, classifying, and theorizing black and indigenous ways of knowing, such as in anthropology, have worked to marginalize and exclude not just ideas but also bodies (1999:68). She writes that “these forms of discipline affected people physically, emotionally, linguistically, and culturally.

They were designed to destroy every last remnant of alternative ways of knowing and living, to obliterate collective identities and memories and to impose a new order” (1999:69). Reclaiming a space for indigenous and black intellectuals in the academy has to do with the pragmatic problem of rethinking the questions we ask about what we know and reorganizing the mechanisms of knowing which knowledges and whose voices have been previously silenced and suppressed.

The *Otros Saberes* projects demonstrate the methodological contributions of black and indigenous grassroots organizations whose goals are the simultaneous pursuit of truth, knowledge, and freedom. It is not a mere coincidence that their organizations focus on the formation of politically engaged black and indigenous intellectuals—a crucial conceptual, methodological, and analytical critique of the colonization of Western knowledge. They maintain the practice of decolonizing knowledge, universalizing “other” frames of thinking, while organizing street protests, cultural performances, and writing new policies. What does this recognition of “other knowledges” then mean for the urgent purposes of social action and the construction of racially inclusive societies? Epistemic decolonization is not simply an academic exercise: it involves activism on the part of scholars and theory building on the part of activists. Activist collaboration in the context of scholarly research is certainly not new in Latin America, where a politically attuned participatory action research methodology emerged in the 1970s, focused on research projects among peasants and indigenous people (Bonilla et al. 1972; Fals Borda 1991). In its earliest incarnation, participatory action research fused research with activism by fostering community participation in the selection of research topics and the collection of data, at the same time that academic researchers participated in the building of grassroots organization by recycling key concepts emerging out of the research.<sup>2</sup> Although participatory action research did sometimes culminate in scholarly production (Fals Borda 1979a, 1979b, 1981, 1984, 1986), in its early years it frequently confined itself to producing materials for the consumption of social movements (Chalarka G. 1985). The continuing influence of such approaches in Latin American studies has resulted in a model of collaborative research that is more political in its intent than is its North American counterpart, more apt to focus its efforts on political organizing than academic analysis.

The *Otros Saberes* projects reflect this Latin American intellectual tradition. Not all of the participants in the *Otros Saberes* Initiative are familiar with the methodology of participatory action research, nor are they all aware of academic debates concerning the role of the citizen-researcher. Nevertheless, the projects demonstrate a strong commitment to communities, one that goes far beyond the confines of the academy. The nature of this political commitment

is heterogeneous: in some cases, it is directed toward the transformation of the university, whereas in others, it is harnessed in support of grassroots organizations or the promotion of the demands of broader social movements. In all cases, it opens more questions than it answers.

## Collaboration or Participation?

For Edwin Taylor, an anthropologist with URACCAN, the Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense, collaboration is “when there are two or three parties, and on the basis of a proposal, they begin a process in which all the participants operate at the same level and the principal aim is to achieve the proposed goal...according to the different roles of those who are collaborating” (interview by Joanne Rappaport, July 2007, Bilwi, Nicaragua). The Nicaraguan project was different from those undertaken by other Otros Saberes teams because it was conceived in response to an administrative need expressed by the indigenous community of Tuara to obtain the documentation required to title their lands. The academic collaborators contributed technical expertise: how to prepare a map detailing the community boundaries, how to collect demographic data for the *diagnóstico*, both procedures required by the government. Taylor and his colleagues came to the collaborative team with the parameters of the research already established by the autonomous regional government because at a minimum they were required to collect all the data outlined in an official manual. Nevertheless, as Taylor relates, the academics recognized that their expertise could not subordinate the community: “At one point, we thought that the academic had a magic wand, that we knew what we needed to do. With time, we realized it wasn’t like that. Participatory research means that we all identify the problem to be solved.... Our role is to facilitate the process. The beneficiaries guided the research.... It was participatory because the beneficiaries accompanied us throughout the entire process.”

Popular participation operates at various levels in this project. The academic collaborators were affiliated with URACCAN, an institution of higher learning whose principal objective was to form cadres to forge autonomy in the coastal region. Here, ethnic diversity—indigenous Miskitus, Mayagnas, and Ramas; English-speaking Creoles; Garífunas—contrasts with the cultural homogeneity of the Nicaraguan Pacific coast, which is largely mestizo. In the past, the Atlantic coast was politically and culturally subordinated to Managua, the capital. So in a sense, as members of URACCAN, the academics shared the same objective as the Miskitus of Tuara. As *costeños* (people who live on the coast), they all felt the same urgency. At the same time, there is a direct relationship between academics and community leaders, a commitment

on the part of the former to share their technical expertise and the latter, their lived knowledge. Taylor is himself Miskitu, although from another community. Thus, the academic-community dialogue unfolded in the Miskitu language, with a full understanding of the centrality of the role of cosmovisión in the articulation of local needs and a common objective of restoring relationships of solidarity between Miskitu communities. These relations had been destroyed by war in the 1980s and, even earlier, by the introduction of commercial logging in the early twentieth century, which led communities to pursue their own economic interests against those of their neighbors. Yet another level of collaboration exists: the relationship between community leaders and members—particularly women—who had only scant knowledge of the contours of their territory and their history. The collaborative project facilitated an encounter between the community and its past.

Is this collaboration? Is collaboration defined by the level at which community activists enter into the research process? Does it require that social movements or communities participate in the initial articulation of the project, or is it sufficient that the university and the state prepared a project based on needs previously expressed by the community? Participatory action research, as it was conceived in the 1970s, involved communities in setting research priorities and in collecting data, but assumed the preeminence of the scientific methodology and interpretive frameworks used by academics—this is the distinction between a project that is merely participatory and the utopian dream of a collaborative research project. The Nicaraguan project appears to be more participatory than collaborative, in the sense that it subordinates community methodologies to those of the academy and of the state. But as we will explore further in our reflections on the other teams, collaborative researchers still have a long way to go before they transcend traditional hierarchies between Western methods and black and indigenous knowledge systems. Funding agencies and the state frequently end up dictating the parameters of the research, specifically, how communities participate throughout the various stages of the project and how their own knowledges are framed by Western systems of analysis. The very academic expectations that define the final product privilege Western forms of investigation and exposition.

## The Political Nature of Collaborative Research

Political commitment is central to the project of the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN). PCN researchers and their academic collaborators have engaged in a retrospective analysis of their organizing process through community workshops, interviews with activists, and international campaigns

to make their demands and the situation of Afro-Colombians more visible; these objectives are particularly pressing, given the fact that the territorial autonomy and the physical safety of black communities are under threat in the current situation of war. Workshops, a methodology that is central to the PCN project, are not only of academic interest, but are also arenas for political discussion and training, serving as spaces for self-discovery, as scenarios for “conceptual mobilization,” and as stages on which organizational decisions are made. This is clear in the minutes of the workshops, where the nature of the conflict is analyzed with an eye to understanding how Afro-Colombian territories that were won through legislative struggles are in danger of being lost to transnational corporations that occupy the lands of communities displaced by right-wing paramilitary violence. In this sense, workshops are spaces in which the objectives encompass not only strategies for documenting the political situation, but also strategies for confronting the conflict are developed.

Such a methodology breeds horizontal relations between activist and academic researchers; the latter can participate in the project only once they have demonstrated their acceptance of the PCN’s organizing principles. What this means is that while PCN activists are not required to acquiesce to academic conventions, procedures, and codes of ethics, the academic researchers must accept the organization’s political goals and subordinate themselves to the PCN agenda, in a move that Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe (2002) emphasizes is central to the collaborative enterprise. At the same time, academic allegiance to the PCN’s organizing principles implies that the conceptual framework of the project emerges out of the activist sector and not the academics.

Both PCN activists and their academic allies argue that other researchers have placed the organization in danger through the irresponsible publication of information. One of the workshops reflected on the differences between academic and activist research, underlining their distinct sources of theory, the differing ways that researchers are evaluated and legitimized, and their unique locations in universal or local knowledge spheres. In their article, the members of the PCN collaborative team emphasize the need to question the hegemonic model of the university and, instead, look for ways of simultaneously writing “toward the inside of the PCN” and “toward the outside.”

Although we agree that there are significant methodological differences between the individualistic research procedures of many academics and the collective methods and aims of the PCN collaborative team, we also question whether it is all that useful to draw such rigid distinctions between academic and activist research because, after all, the *Otros Saberes* Initiative—and the four decades of participatory research in Latin America that provide its

foundations—suggests that a common ground can, indeed, be constructed through dialogue and collaboration. Moreover, we recognize that in Latin America, new social movements and social scientists share, to some degree, a common discourse, language, and agenda. At the Montreal workshop that brought together the Otros Saberes teams at the Congress of the Latin American Studies Association in 2007, the Brazilian Wajãpi researchers argued that the ways in which issues were discussed were irrelevant to them: they felt that local knowledges articulating culturally distinct agendas and voiced in non-Western languages were not privileged in our discussions of collaborative methodologies. In many ways, the very discourse of the conference isolated both academic and activist researchers from the communities that are the sources of the knowledge being studied. Our homogenizing approach to collaboration refused to acknowledge the cultural specificities of collaborative work in different venues across Latin America. In other words, although the initiative opened an initial dialogue, we need to deepen our understanding of the persistent influence of the discourse and hierarchies of the university within social movements and, given such a critique, to rethink what collaboration should be.

In Ecuador, black activists such as teacher Iván Pabón expressed how the geographic as well as social distance between the university and black and indigenous communities is measurable. How many blacks study and teach at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (UASB), the academic institution that hosted the LASA-sponsored Otros Saberes project in Ecuador? A lack of affiliation with an Ecuadorian university may have factored into the difficulty Pabón faced when he was initially denied the visa to participate in the 2007 LASA conference in Canada; in the end, conference organizers had to intervene. More recently, the Fondo Afro-Andino has dissolved as an organization within the UASB, the activists who implemented the LASA-sponsored and other black movement initiatives have been removed, and its archives have been moved to the university library. Though we know very little about the exact reasoning that drove these changes in social and spatial positioning of black activists and activist scholars within this context, the changes in the Fondo Afro-Andino illustrate that the project of including “other knowledges” within Latin American universities oftentimes involves the exclusion of the very scholars and communities that produce those knowledges. The subjects featured in the Fondo Afro-Andino’s documents, for example, are furthered distanced from the intellectual life of the university. Collaboration should include a complete restructuring of the university to rid it of the spatial and social alienation black and indigenous scholars and social movement actors may experience in these institutions.



## Collaboration as Solidarity: Unraveling the Different Levels

The researchers represented in *Otros Saberes* would consider themselves to be activists and scholars, an identity that marks political solidarity as the principal aim of their research efforts. Their intellectual pursuits complement their political actions. The members of the teams consider themselves to be engaged in a broad struggle for social justice that requires a deeper commitment beyond the institutional demands of academia. Thus, the focus here is on three kinds of collaborative research, which we will elaborate upon with reference to three of the teams: (1) activist research that takes place within the framework of academic institutions, but that involves sustained and intense interaction with social movements (Ecuador); (2) community-based researchers articulating culturally specific epistemologies that only initially require the presence of academic interlocutors to be successful (Brazil); and (3) collaboration between academics and activists who become researchers (by formal training in the university or in social movement classrooms), both of whom are ultimately accountable to the political organizations and communities (Mexico).

How these researchers differ, or whether they differ at all, warrants exploration here, considering the complexities of their identities, geographic locations, and institutional limitations. The absence of black and indigenous university faculty and students in Latin America would lead us to expect that these researchers do not share similar racial, ethnic, class, and national backgrounds with black and indigenous activists. However, in at least three cases (Ecuador, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico), some of the academic researchers shared these identities with their activist counterparts—which suggests that institutional positioning may be even more significant than the commonalities they share. How they balance these contradictory commitments provides invaluable insights into the complexity of collaborative research, particularly into how subjectivity impacts upon collaborative dialogue.

### Black Activists Transforming Academe

Training of grassroots researchers is essential to effective collaboration between social movements and academic investigators. The former coordinator of the Fondo Documental Afro-Andino of the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuadorian academic Edizon León, maintains that the central problem of social science research in black communities is the lack of black academics or activists able to carry out studies of Afro-Ecuadorian culture. On the one hand, many activists do not perceive existing academic models of research as particularly useful for transforming the social conditions of their

communities. On the other, pervasive racial inequalities in access to higher education discourage black students from pursuing advanced degrees and developing their own research projects and methodologies in collaboration with black communities.

When asked by Keisha-Khan Perry about his definition of collaborative research in relationship to black Ecuadorians, León responded in an electronic communication in the following manner:

*I believe that in addition to achieving a definition that breaks with eurocentric “scientific tradition” that conceives of knowledge-producing as an individual activity, we must think about the production of knowledge as a collective enterprise in which we each make a contribution, which come together to build and produce knowledge. Collaborative research means working with the community on an equal basis, which therefore means delegitimizing oneself as an academic so as to not establish hierarchies of knowledge. (Edizon León, personal communication, 2007)*

Disrupting hierarchies of knowledge production and dissemination is at the center of collaborations between researchers and activists and between activists and universities such as the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar. For León, who accompanied the founding of the Fondo Documental Afro-Andino and the growth of Afro-Andean studies, collaborative research has meant establishing permanent relationships with black communities throughout the country, in the Andean region of South America, and elsewhere in the African diaspora. As a result, blacks have transformed how the university system views their place in the nation, Afro–Latin American culture as a focus of scientific inquiry, and the inclusion of black students and faculty in the university.

During Perry’s visit to Ecuador in June 2007, local women promoted a “Re encuentro de saberes Esmeraldas y Chota—Proyecto: Saberes propios, religiosidad y luchas de existencia afroecuatoriana” with the general administrative support of the Fondo Documental. An encounter between residents of the Chota Valley, located in the mountains, and coastal Esmeraldas, both research venues for the Otros Saberes project, involved an exchange of local knowledge in order to bridge the distance between disparate black communities and to forge the social, cultural, and political understanding necessary to mobilize on a national scale. Over a three-day period, they told stories, performed rituals, and narrated a common history of oppression and resistance. Elderly Chota women focused on their experiences on sugarcane plantations, and residents of Esmeraldas shared historical memories of *marronage*<sup>3</sup> and the construction of collective land rights; on a more intimate level, people shared recipes and exchanged foodstuffs, music, and riddles. Chota and Esmeraldas residents left the encounter with a sense of togetherness,

and as Perry heard Esmeraldeña doña Carmen tell her neighbors after returning home, “Going to another black region made me realize how much more we can do as a people.”

In an insightful reflection on the role of translation in ethnography, Talal Asad suggests that ethnographers have a very specific purpose in mind when they describe other cultures for academic readers. For Asad, ethnography is “addressed to a very specific audience, which is waiting to read *about* another mode of life and to manipulate the text it reads according to established rules, not to learn to live a new mode of life” (1986:159). In a sense, this is precisely what the research team from Quito did by creating a sensitive and detailed ethnographic portrayal of Afro-Ecuadorian lifeways, particularly those relating to childbirth and death. The achievement of this ethnographic sensibility was obviously enhanced by collaborative dialogue.

However, the very tools that we, as academics, have at our disposal, may be at odds with the objectives of community members, such as doña Carmen. The women of Chota and Esmeraldas hoped to learn the traditions of their counterparts in order to incorporate them into their own lifeways and forge political solidarity; their aim was not to read *about* another culture, but rather to learn to experience it. The problem is that the production of ethnography—which is the tool we have to share with our counterparts—may be geared to a very limited audience that does not necessarily include these communities. Such materials are highly useful for transforming images of black and indigenous communities for a national audience and impacting the research agenda of universities, but the very nature of these expositions distances their contents from the communities themselves. The struggle, then, for all collaborative researchers is to devise means of “letting go” of their material, so that local communities can appropriate it to their own ends and by their own means. This ultimately may involve promotion of a community memory of the collaborative research methodologies—through pedagogical intervention—rather than of the empirical results of the investigation. Although pedagogy was, indeed, central to the Ecuadorian project, we turn now to its implementation in Brazil to explore in further detail the contradictions and ambivalences of collaboration.

## Training Indigenous Researchers and Teachers

The Brazilian research team evolved out of an innovative collaboration between the Conselho das Aldeias Wajãpi (Apina) and Iepé, the Instituto de Pesquisa e Formação em Educação Indígena, composed of researchers from the Universidade de São Paulo. This partnership has involved an ongoing program of training indigenous teachers, health workers, and researchers,

emphasizing the learning of Portuguese, mathematics, anthropology, linguistics, and research methodologies. Wajãpi researchers collected materials on a broad range of topics: practices of ritual seclusion; origin narratives; expressive forms, such as music, festivals, and storytelling; and traditional architecture and practices of food preparation. The main objective of the research projects echo the goals of the Fondo in Ecuador, “research in order not to lose”: (1) to document the wisdom of the elders; (2) to record indigenous memory; (3) to promote Wajãpi vernacular literacy; (4) to strengthen traditional knowledge before it becomes extinct; and (5) to produce information for non-indigenous peoples that will counter ignorance and diminish racial prejudice. Learning academic techniques, Wajãpi researchers collected oral histories (using tape recorders to document hours of interviews), engaged in participant observation (practicing making traditional beverages and re-enacting festivals), and acquired the tools of cartography (mapping indigenous territories).

In an interview with Perry in Amapá, Brazil in 2007, Wajãpi activists assert that the indigenous researcher is unique in his or her methods and forms of presentation of results: “While you are working, you produce different forms of doing research, adapting to local conditions; they [the interviewees] are the ones who set the rules.” Some researchers may have to rethink where they carry out their work, when travel to certain communities becomes difficult, or perhaps, they must restructure interview schedules because of sudden changes in hunting patterns. Wajãpi team members questioned the rigid timelines that academics usually face when embarking on research in indigenous communities, which does not allow them to explore culture in depth. Wajãpi researchers believe that their permanent location as participants in the everyday life of their communities allows them both the time and flexibility to acquire the type of knowledge, far beyond what non-indigenous researchers are able to accomplish. Thus, what they have achieved during the course of the LASA sponsorship barely scratches the surface: what looks to us outsiders as a profound ethnographic account is not sufficient for them, but rather is simply a step in a long-term project aimed at collecting and disseminating information on Wajãpi history, language, and culture.

In June 2007 when Perry asked members of Pairakae *aldeia*, where some of the researchers live, why this project was important to them, they responded, “We are the ones who asked for this project.” A provocative discussion ensued about the difference between indigenous and non-indigenous research on Wajãpi culture. Previous experiences with various types of researchers who “do not return anything to the community” led one of the leaders to argue that researchers necessarily had to be indigenous. However, one of the Iepé organizers questioned this position and recounted that some academics maintain strong links with the Wajãpi and are long-time advocates

of indigenous rights. More importantly, this organizer continued, white researchers have disseminated knowledge that contributes to dispelling racist ideas about the Wajãpi and about indigenous peoples in general. However, the indigenous researchers continued to insist there is a difference between anthropologists and them, while recognizing ongoing collaborative and advocacy work: “We are not going to expel our partners, but we want our autonomy so as to not always depend on them.” One teacher and researcher stated in an interview with Perry in Amapá in June of 2007: “Research emerges as a result of the cultural demands of the community, defined by community members.” The entire community is involved in deciding which research questions and methodologies are important and determines collectively how they will systematize the data for dissemination throughout Wajãpi territories.

This staunch position on the part of Wajãpi researchers reveals how collaboration between indigenous investigators and their communities leads to a restructuring of research questions and methods of scientific inquiry in indigenous communities. It also leads us to reconsider the future of collaboration if, as the Wajãpi insist, such research can only be conducted on their own terms. Is the role of the academic collaborator to train black or indigenous researchers who will subsequently transform these methodologies and replace the academics entirely? Should an ethics of collaboration include knowing when to let go? The disengagement of academics in the process of collaboration is about retaining the faith in indigenous and black communities’ ability to make their own decisions about how to use the knowledge they have collected and organized. The real aim in the decolonization of knowledge project may be less about replacing the academics and more about expanding black and indigenous people’s wealth of knowledge, their perception of the complexity of their everyday lives, and the language they use to control the cultural reproduction of that knowledge. The Wajãpi researchers’ use of community gatherings to demonstrate the cultural practices they document, such as the making of specific drinks or different ways of hunting, means that the act of communicating became an aspect of incorporating new knowledges with what Ngũgĩ (1986:14) calls the “the language of his experience of life.” As the Wajãpi researchers expressed in our conversations, this may be a recognition of the unique role of black and indigenous communities in the articulation and reproduction of knowledge acquired during the collaborative research process.

## **Self-Critique: Documenting Indigenous Women’s Agency**

Like the PCN, the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB) of Mexico employs a workshop methodology as a space for collective reflection.

A June 2007 meeting in Mexico City provided space in which researchers from Oaxaca, Baja California, and Los Angeles could discuss the challenges that the organization faces in representing gender and generational equity. The activists posed questions about existing barriers to effective leadership among young people, women, and new members; the areas of decision making in which women predominate; how to identify and construct effective models of organization; and how to forge alliances with other indigenous and immigration-focused organizations in Mexico and the United States. The workshop concluded that although indigenous women occupy the grassroots of FIOB and are the central organizing force in their communities, they do not occupy leadership positions in the organization. This is not surprising. What was surprising was to hear indigenous women voice a collective gender critique, openly denouncing the patriarchal practices of male leaders and proposing gender reform. For FIOB activists and research collaborators located in the United States and Mexico, self-critique provided vital information on how to strengthen the grassroots.

FIOB has an extensive history of working with academics, especially with individuals who have long personal activist histories. The realization that gender inequity was a serious problem in the organization grew out of previous conversations between activists and academics. FIOB's *Otros Saberes* project stemmed from the productive dialogue between a Native American feminist historian-activist at UCLA, Maylei Blackwell, and a Los Angeles-based FIOB activist, Odilia Romero. The two wanted to know what the grassroots, primarily comprised of women, thought about FIOB. Thus, from the proposal stage, the project was conceived through a dialogue, which later developed into a political partnership, founded in their shared experiences as indigenous women. However, this kind of relationship between academic researcher and activist is not without its challenges. The Mexico City meeting was characterized by a self-critique that emerged out of the research process of interviewing grassroots women activists. Blackwell systematically presented the workshop with quotations from the team interviews, making clear and decisive recommendations for ensuring the future of the organization. This generated disagreements on the part of the male activists, who, in a heated debate, accused the bearer of the bad news—Blackwell—of misinterpreting the internal gender dynamics of FIOB. The women activists suggest that a reframing of their definition of leadership was needed so that it included women's mass participation at the grassroots. It was only after activists like Romero defended the feminist academics, claiming their own responsibility as co-researchers for the findings that had been presented, that the organization was able to begin work on proposing concrete projects for correcting gender inequities.

Although we recognize that the knowledge produced through collaborative research is useful for advancing the political projects of organizations like FIOB, it is perhaps overly romantic to envision collaboration as a process of bridge building between activists and academics. Sometimes, collaborative research creates conflicts internal to these organizations, not only between academics and activists, but also among activists themselves; frequently such discord follows the familiar fault lines of gender, generation, and geography. Nevertheless, joint interpretation—which, more than the collection of data, characterizes collaborative research—does not necessarily lead to disruptive antagonisms, but sometimes, as is the case in FIOB, to productive tensions that are brokered by the academics. In other words, in this instance Blackwell's presence deflected potentially divisive tensions away from the female activists, allowing for a more fruitful discussion. We cannot focus exclusively on the methodological contributions of academic collaborators in these endeavors. The public performance of collaboration, as well as the social dynamics that accompany collective dialogue, are equally significant. The hierarchies inherent to these organizations shape how activists will process this kind of research. In this sense, collaboration involves the negotiation and resignification of internal fault lines, which are not only the subject of investigation but also the very substance of collaborative dialogue.

## The Geopolitics of Collaboration

The Afro–Puerto Rican history project, which brought together academics from the Universidad de Puerto Rico–Mayagüez with community researchers from the city of Aguadilla, was intimately collaborative in the sense that the local researchers controlled the entire process. At the same time, the project met rigorous research standards, collecting data in the form of personal narratives. Community researchers felt quite strongly that they lacked the methodological tools to document the persistence of racism on the island. As a result, they received extensive methodological instruction from oral historians, so that, as in the Brazilian case, training and education were among the academic collaborators' major roles.

But although the Wajāpi researchers ultimately hoped to distance themselves from social scientists, the Puerto Rican oral historians did not feel estranged from their academic counterparts. Jocelyn Gélīga, one of the academic collaborators, emphasized that her role was not to be an ethnographer, but instead to serve as a facilitator for the work of the community team. The Aguadilla researchers enthusiastically agreed with her; they emphasized that Gélīga and her co-academic, José Irizarry, were not distanced from the community because they, too, were Afro–Puerto Rican (Gélīga's father was

one of the narrators chosen to tell his life story). Tania Delgado, a community researcher from Aguadilla, suggested that if the academics had not been black themselves, the project might have ultimately been more academic than political. Both the academics and the community researchers had lived through similar experiences, in Puerto Rican society in general and in their families, which had pressured them to accentuate their white features and hide their black ones. In this sense, the research project was equally urgent for Géliga and Irizarry as it was for the Aguadilla community.

Ultimately, the success of the Puerto Rican project can be measured in their collective output: a series of gripping narratives organized around common themes, conceptualized and collected primarily by the community researchers. In this project, collaboration meant a passing of the baton from the academics to the local oral historians, an empowering of the latter so that they became researchers in the fullest sense of the word. However, as the Aguadillanos deepened their command of oral history methods and their appreciation of how blackness and racism were experienced in their community, their relationship with their academic counterparts was not frayed or disrupted, but transformed. Irizarry and Géliga became interlocutors with the community, all of them engaged in communal interpretation to a common political purpose.

Why was this project so successful in dismantling traditional hierarchies between the work of academics and of local activists? Once the Aguadillanos were trained in oral history methodology, they effectively became co-researchers whose interaction with the academics was transformed into a partnership. Clearly, the fact that both groups were Afro–Puerto Rican is significant, but the local researchers' level of education and standard of living also enabled their double-consciousness. Unlike the members of the other community research teams, the Aguadillanos live what is essentially a middle-class existence—even as some of them recognize the insidious influence of US colonialism that permits them these advantages. In other words, the Puerto Rican team's experience leads us to consider whether the very possibility of collaborative research depends upon the geopolitical context and the educational attainments of activists.

## Conclusion

It may be simplistic to assume that collaboration will take on the same character across Latin America. Research methodologies may be more effective in one context than in another, and the purpose of collaborative work—whether it involves collection of data or communal reflection—will vary, depending upon the needs of the political organizations. The presence of a strong base



of organic intellectuals may promote a closer working relationship between activists and academics, as well as foster a protagonistic attitude among community researchers, who may be better equipped to find their own voice as scholars, limiting the extent to which they are framed as ethnographic subjects by academics.

Our accompaniment as *investigadoras solidarias* (researchers in solidarity) of the Otros Saberes collaborative teams has led us to a number of conclusions, some that we correctly identified and others that diverge from our original expectations. It was clear to us from the outset, both from our personal experiences as collaborative researchers and from the successful Otros Saberes proposals, that collaborative research is by necessity political in character. When indigenous and Afro-descendant organizations engage in this type of work, they do so with a clear political purpose in mind, a set of objectives that inexorably transforms the participation of academics in the project. Political engagement—which can also be understood as a form of solidarity on the part of academics—must necessarily feed into the needs and exigencies of the organization, and thus does not necessarily lead to answering the kinds of questions laid out in the academic literature that generally guide scholarly investigation. But, as we discovered, what constitutes political engagement ranges far beyond acceptance of a political program and agreement on the part of academics to subordinate their own objectives in the face of collective intentions.

Political engagement involves expanding the political to include a broad range of cultural objectives whose consequences may be, not immediate, but deferred, as is the case in the ethnographic project from Brazil and the work of historical recovery in Ecuador and Puerto Rico. Political engagement must also be understood as moving beyond the research questions and the materials that are ultimately collected and made available to organizations: it also means learning to accept non-academic counterparts as equal in the research endeavor. In some cases, as in the Nicaraguan effort, it may involve adopting participatory as opposed to collaborative methods, when the broader context obliges that particular methodologies be applied to the objectives espoused by the activists. Thus, in order to produce a document appropriate to the land-titling process—the ultimate goal of the Miskitu activists—the nature of the research process necessitated following a strict methodology that left little room for more subtle indigenous concerns. Even when collaboration includes training activists in research techniques—such as occurred in Puerto Rico, Brazil, and Ecuador—this does not mean that they are not equal team members, because on the conceptual level the two sides of the Otros Saberes equation clearly have different methods, research questions, and personal experiences that contribute to the dialogue. Recognizing

this is deeply political because it impacts not only the team itself but also the academic activities in general of university-based scholars like ourselves, who will find it difficult to return to standard academic research models. For this reason, it is no accident that so many of the teams argued for a transformation of academia.

Nevertheless, in the course of our collaboration with the initiative, we were struck by the realization that organizational rhetoric that identified a vast gulf between academic and activist research did not, in fact, play out in practice. The academics involved in *Otros Saberes* were politically committed and open to dialogue with their activist counterparts; they were scholars who for the most part were dissatisfied with “academics as usual,” which is, precisely, why they entered into the kind of arrangement supported by the initiative. Most of the key players on the activist side had received extensive training, whether through the collaborative process itself or in universities, and, essentially, spoke the same language as did the politically engaged academics. While the *purpose* of the research might have differed across activist and academic venues, the *contents* were not really in dispute; the results could have been generated by sensitive academic researchers willing to listen carefully to the communities with whom they worked (although, perhaps, they might never have obtained the access nor the ability to discern detail, of native researchers). In contrast, what divided activists from academics was a question of *power*: Who, ultimately, would control the research process and its results? This power struggle runs through many of the team reports and is particularly apparent in the Colombian desire to contrast academic and activist research and their efforts at marginalizing external scholars, in the Mexican attempt at limiting the academic purposes to which the research could be applied, and, above all, in the Brazilian assertion that in the end, indigenous researchers should replace external ones. Quite obviously, recognition of these tensions was key to the political nature of all of these collaborations.

But to our minds, there *are* certain potential key differences between activist and academic research that were not expressed clearly in the project reports, in our post-LASA workshop, or in the observations we made during site visits. Colombian anthropologist Luis Guillermo Vasco (2002), whose historical work with the Guambiano History Committee stands as a model for collaborative research, argues that the differences between academic and indigenous approaches must be sought in the arena of concept formation, in the work of interpretation, and ultimately, in theorizing (see also Rappaport 2008). This process cannot occur in the short space of a year or eighteen months, which is all that the *Otros Saberes* teams had at their disposal, leaving us at a loss as to how to engage this issue in the context of the Initiative. This process of theorization will take place over the long term as the teams

strive to make sense of the research process, discuss it in internal venues, and make it comprehensible to unschooled members of their organizations or communities. Only then will this research take on a distinctly activist character.

The experiences and histories of collaboration in Latin America leave us more encouraged about the political potential and urgency of merging the commitments of the social sciences and social movements. More importantly, as social movements look toward universities as forums to advance their political thought and to provide concrete acts of solidarity, we must push ourselves to address the paucity of published theoretical and intellectual work by black and indigenous scholars and activists, as well as the timidity of their voice in most parts of the continent. *Otros Saberes* positions black and indigenous thought at the center rather than on the margins of contemporary theories of racism and racialization, political mobilization, and broader issues of rights, community, coalitions, and social transformation. But at the same time, it raises more questions than answers about the dangers and limitations of collaborative research, suggesting that *Otros Saberes* is one of many first steps toward attaining this goal.

## Notes

1. In this sense, in contrast with collaborative research in the United States—which for the most part oscillates between a paternalistic action anthropology (Foley 1999) and methodologies geared for the most part to academic publication (Lassiter 2005)—the task of the Latin American researcher is more complex: it implies exercising a voice and a praxis not only in the academy or in local spheres of communication, but also nationally. In other words, social research in Latin America is as much intellectual work as it is activism. It is thus not surprising that many politicians and national leaders in these countries emerge out of the social sciences.

2. Nevertheless, this model has since been appropriated and depoliticized by multilateral institutions and nongovernmental organizations (Chambers 1997; Cooke and Kothari 2001).

3. *Marronage* is the process by which enslaved Africans in the Americas escaped servitude and established free and sovereign societies. Though not always the case, most maroon communities (also known as *cimarrones*, *quilombos*, and *palenques*) were often located in geographic territories distant from colonial cities and plantations and unknown to slave owners.