

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Insurgent CollaborationSanctuary as Research Practice

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2ff6c0b0>

Journal

Departures in Critical Qualitative Research, 9(1)

ISSN

2333-9489

Authors

Sánchez, Linda E

Coutin, Susan Bibler

Publication Date

2020-03-01

DOI

10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.1.106

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Insurgent Collaboration

Sanctuary as Research Practice

ABSTRACT Scholarship regarding those who are categorized as undocumented can put sanctuary principles into practice in research settings. To do so, scholars can conduct research in collaboration with immigrant communities, reject essentializing terminology, develop modes of sociality that challenge exclusion, and document the unofficial forms of sanctuary devised by members of immigrant communities. This research model is grounded in principles of accompaniment that were followed by 1980s activists who offered sanctuary to those fleeing wars in Central America. Examples of research initiatives and educational programs that follow such principles are presented. **KEYWORDS** Immigration; Sanctuary; Fugitivity; Nativism

In the face of virulent nativist sentiment, pervasive surveillance, and government pressure on localities to collaborate in immigration law enforcement,¹ we propose that scholars who write about immigration practice an insurgent model of collaboration that takes sanctuary principles into account. This model has four features: (1) It practices accompaniment by entering spaces of risk and working alongside those who are in these spaces in order to transform unjust social conditions;² such research is by, with, and for, not merely about, people who have been “illegalized.”³ (2) It rejects essentializing terminology in favor of words that reflect the identifications and preferences of those deemed “undocumented,” thus (3) embodying an ethics of fugitivity by challenging dominant categories and categorizations. (4) It documents and supports sanctuary outside of spaces traditionally seen as sanctuaries. We elaborate on each of these principles in turn.

ACCOMPANIMENT

During the 1980s, hundreds of US congregations declared themselves sanctuaries for Salvadorans and Guatemalans who fled US-backed regimes and who were at risk of deportation.⁴ For these congregations, giving sanctuary consisted

Departures in Critical Qualitative Research, Vol. 9, Number 1, pp. 106–110. ISSN 2333-9489, electronic ISSN 2333-9497. © 2020 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.1.106>.

of such practices as aiding Central Americans in crossing the US–Mexico border, providing housing and transportation, publicizing accounts of persecution, and opposing continued US military assistance to El Salvador and Guatemala.⁵ The 1980s sanctuary movement was transnational, as US participants were in close communication with religious groups and activists in El Salvador and Guatemala, and as US congregations regularly traveled to Central America in order to provide an international presence in communities at risk of persecution. Participants understood such actions as accompaniment, that is, as sharing the journey—and risks—of oppressed groups. Through sanctuary, they sought to transcend borders, build community, and achieve justice, perhaps, in the words of William Walters, “inventing ways to contest the expulsion of people from humanity.”⁶ Building on such work, in today’s context, congregations, cities, states, and some businesses have offered sanctuary to all at risk of deportation, not merely to Central Americans in particular, by refusing to participate in immigration policing, preventing information about individuals’ immigration status from being shared, and promoting inclusive policies.

ACCOMPANIMENT THROUGH TERMINOLOGY

Scholars practice insurgent collaboration by being ever vigilant of how we write and talk about individuals who have been “illegalized” by the state because we risk perpetuating hegemonic ideas of what the concept of “illegalization” means. Important figures in the immigrant community, such as poet Yosimar Reyes, have expressed that even the word “undocumented” can be problematic.⁷ According to him, being undocumented is a condition, like being poor. It is not an identity. One can grow up in poverty, just like one can grow up in “undocumentedness,” but one is not poverty, just like one is not undocumented. While the word “undocumented” has been embraced by communities without legal status as well as scholars, it is important to be aware that not all immigrants are comfortable with this as an identity. Scholars can accompany this effort by being mindful and supportive of these perspectives and the need for more inclusive terms.

One way to find new alternatives for talking about individuals who have been labeled as “undocumented” is by listening to their narratives. Using their concepts and narratives in scholarly work legitimizes these ideas and challenges dehumanizing state narratives, such as assigning “alien numbers” to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients. Collaboration with the immigrant community against dehumanizing ideology is an important sanctuary research practice.⁸ State apparatuses that strip people of their humanity often begin to do so through ideology, and therefore should also be contested

through ideology. Spreading and legitimizing alternative ideologies can aid scholars in becoming active collaborators in insurgent sanctuary research practices.

FUGITIVITY

Insurgent collaborations such as sanctuary resonate with the anthropology of fugitivity in key ways. Drawing on histories and theories of black resistance, “the concept of fugitivity highlights the tension between the acts or flights of escape and creative practices of refusal—nimble and strategic practices that undermine the category of the dominant.”⁹ Sanctuary aids those who are escaping violence and confinement, whether within detention centers or national borders, and also resists categorization imposed by states. At the same time, a goal of sanctuary is often to enable individuals to *stay* but on new terms; in essence, sanctuary can enact alternative forms of sociality. Incorporating sanctuary principles into research entails accompaniment, that is, joining in advocacy work; writing with (not just about) those who have been deemed “undocumented”; highlighting the diversity of immigrant communities; producing counternarratives; and sometimes remaining silent out of respect for interlocutors’ wishes.

ALTERNATIVE SPACES OF SANCTUARY

Key to insurgent collaboration is documenting and supporting sanctuary outside of places traditionally seen as sanctuary. For example, Carlos A. Garrido de la Calleja and Jill Anderson’s edited volume, *¿Santuarios educativos en México?*, explores the possibility of establishing educational sanctuaries in Mexico.¹⁰ The contributors, who are Mexican and US scholars and activists, developed this volume in dialogue with Mexican youth who grew up in the United States and returned or were deported to Mexico, where they demanded access to education, and also with Central American youth traveling through (and often staying for periods of time) in Mexico on the way to the United States. Contributions detail the ways that Mexican universities can become sanctuaries for these returnees, whose financial challenges and US educational credentials are often barriers to completing educations in Mexico, and also for Central Americans who have educational needs but have not been enrolled in the Mexican education system. Significantly, contributors argue, these two groups also have knowledge and experience to offer each other, and scholars—who are also educators—can accompany them on their educational journey.

A second example of alternative spaces of sanctuary is the innovative Freedom University in Atlanta, GA, established for undocumented students. Georgia has

barred undocumented individuals from applying to public universities and has made it almost impossible to find funding for private ones. Freedom University offers college-level instruction and was modeled after the Freedom Schools of the 1960s, which were spaces established by community organizers after various local governments shut down public schools in an attempt to resist integration.¹¹ While perhaps the image of a church is most often associated with sanctuary, this university has become a sanctuary, especially when one considers that when it first opened, its location had to be kept secret because Ku Klux Klan members threatened to break up classes and turn in students to immigration officials. Edelina M. Burciaga argues that policies in Georgia not only create structural barriers to upward mobility for undocumented youth, but also reduce educational belonging. Her research demonstrates that lack of educational belonging stagnates undocumented youths' possibilities for a better future and causes emotional turmoil.¹² Alternative spaces like Freedom University become sanctuaries for gaining educational belonging.

By adopting these sanctuary principles in our research and teaching, we can build collaboration, counter nativism and racism, and foster inclusion in scholarship and practice. ■

LINDA E. SÁNCHEZ is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. Correspondence to: Linda E. Sánchez, Department of Anthropology, 3151 Social Sciences Plaza, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697, USA. Email: lindaes@uci.edu.

SUSAN BIBLER COUTIN is Professor in the Departments of Criminology, Law and Society and Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. Correspondence to: Susan Bibler Coutin, Department of Criminology, Law and Society, 2340 Social Ecology II, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697, USA. Email: scoutin@uci.edu.

We would like to thank Karma R. Chávez at the University of Texas at Austin for the kind invitation to contribute to this forum and for comments on an earlier draft. Linda Sánchez would like to thank the UC-MEXUS CONACYT Fellowship and the Eugene Cota-Robles Fellowship for supporting her doctoral research. She would also like to thank her research participants for sharing their stories and welcoming her into their lives. Huge thanks to her family and friends who have always supported her academic pursuits. She is very appreciative of the professors at UCI who guide her scholarly research, especially Leo Chavez, Susan Coutin, and Lee Cabatingan. Susan Coutin's research on the 1980s US sanctuary movement was funded by the American Association of University Women. She is grateful to all of her collaborators over the years, to Linda Sánchez for working together on this essay, and to their ethnography lab group members for critical reflections on research practices.

NOTES

1. Jennifer Chacón, "Overcriminalizing Immigration," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 102, no. 3 (2013): 613–52.

2. Staughton Lynd, *Accompanying: Pathways to Social Change* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012).

3. Carolina Bejarano, Lucia López Juárez, Mirian A. Mijangos García, and Daniel M. Goldstein, *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
4. Ignatius Bau, *This Ground Is Holy: Church Sanctuary and Central American Refugees* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).
5. Susan Bibler Coutin, *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the US Sanctuary Movement* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).
6. William Walters, "Deportation, Expulsion, and the International Police of Aliens," *Citizenship Studies* 6, no. 3 (2002): 287.
7. Megan Burks, "Poet on Helping Undocumented Students: Pass the Mic," *KPBS*, 15 October 2018, <https://www.kpbs.org/news/2018/oct/15/poet-helping-undocumented-students-pass-mic/>.
8. Heath Cabot, "The European Refugee Crisis and Humanitarian Citizenship in Greece," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 84, no. 5 (2018): 1–25; Didier Fassin, "The Predicament of Humanitarianism," *Qui Parle* 22, no. 1 (2012): 33–48; Miriam Ticktin, "Transnational Humanitarianism," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014): 273–89.
9. Tina M. Campt, *Quiet Soundings: The Grammar of Black Futurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 50. See also Maya J. Berry et al., "Toward a Fugitive Anthropology: Gender, Race, and Violence in the Field," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (2017): 537–65; Savannah Shange, "Black Girl Ordinary: Flesh, Carcerality, and the Refusal of Ethnography," *Transforming Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (2019): 3–21; Damien M. Sojoyner, "Another Life Is Possible: Black Fugitivity and Enclosed Places," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (2017): 514–36.
10. Carlos A. Garrido de la Calleja and Jill Anderson, eds., *¿Santuarios educativos en México? Proyectos y propuestas ante la criminalización de jóvenes dreamers, retornados y deportados* (Xalapa, Mexico: Universidad Veracruzana, 2018).
11. Jonathan Blitzer, "An Underground College for Undocumented Immigrants," *The New Yorker*, 22 May 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/22/an-underground-college-for-undocumented-immigrants>.
12. Edelina M. Burciaga, "The Latino Undocumented 1.5-Generation: Navigating Belonging in New and Old Destinations" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2016).