

## **The Personal is Political: Developing new subjectivities through participatory action research**

CAITLIN CAHILL  
*University of Utah, USA*

**ABSTRACT** *Participatory action research (PAR) is gaining critical attention from scholars across the social sciences, and in the field of geography more specifically, as it promises a viable alternative for researchers concerned with social justice. If most of the benefits of PAR are identified in terms of its potential as a vehicle for social change and action, PAR's role in personal change is less understood. This paper considers the development of new subjectivities in a PAR process from a post-structural perspective. My objective is to reframe and connect the social justice orientation of PAR to a feminist post-structural project which emphasizes the fluidity and multiplicity of subject positions as the basis for personal (and social) transformation. Analysis draws upon collaborative research conducted with six young women in New York City and their project Makes Me Mad: Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color. Discussion addresses the role of critical reflection, dialogue, emotion, and narrative in the participatory research process. Building upon critical educator/theorist Paolo Freire's contributions to PAR, I address issues of power, scale, and the politics of location in order to contribute to understandings of spatial praxis.*

**KEY WORDS:** Participatory action research; subjectivity; post-structuralism; young women of color; Paolo Freire

I've tried the past the six years of my life to figure out how to educate myself and find the means of using the tools/status attached to education. At certain points I've been asked to stop and reflect on the journey thus far. But this project has been the most thorough process of questioning that I've participated in thus far. Like stopping to ask—how am I viewed by the world? How do I view myself? How am I misunderstood? A whole other deep critique of a process of becoming ourselves. At times it was disturbing, depressing, and scary to consider the intricate webs of misinformation and neglect that have created some of the more negative aspects of urban living for young

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*Correspondence:* Caitlin Cahill, Assistant Professor, University of Utah, Community Studies, 225 South 1400 East, Room 228, Alfred Emery Building, Salt Lake City, UT 84112-0080, USA. E-mail: caitlin.cahill@csbs.utah.edu, caitcahill@gmail.com

women. But despite the overwhelming intimidations there were many moments when I was forced to deeply consider the strength that we were deeply imbued with and our bravery at facing challenges/obstacles, our past and some of what makes our roots. Piece it apart and making that connection and still being hopeful that we can improve it for ourselves and our daughters. (Fed Up Honeys Researcher, 2002)

When the women's movement declared 'the personal is political' in the 1960s and 1970s women were invited to reinterpret private experiences of exploitation and violence in a shared, social and political context. Women articulated a new gendered politics, redefining their own subjectivities, within the narrative frameworks of patriarchy and sexism (Apfelbaum, 2001). Along the same lines, participatory action research (PAR) practice starts with personal concerns as a basis for social theorizing. Through a process of investigating their own everyday lives and collective reflection, research participants identify their individual experiences as shared, as social, and then in turn as political (Fine *et al.*, 2001; hooks, 1995).

In this paper I consider the development of new subjectivities as part of a participatory research process from a post-structural perspective (Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Kesby, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), engaging the radical legacies of feminist politics, critical race theory, and long-standing traditions of community research (Anzaldúa, 1999; Bell, 2001; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Kelley, 1997; Lewin, 1946; Lewis, 2001). My objective is to reframe and connect the social justice orientation of PAR to a feminist post-structural project which emphasizes the fluidity and multiplicity of subject positions as the basis for personal (and social) transformation. At the same time, I want to show how a participatory praxis can inform post-structural theory and practice. My analysis draws upon a collaborative research project conducted with six young women growing up in the Lower East Side neighborhood of New York City and their project *Makes Me Mad: Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color*.<sup>1</sup> Building upon Brazilian critical educator/theorist Paulo Freire's (1997[1970], 1974, 1975) conceptualization of *conscientização* and his methodological and theoretical contributions to PAR, I engage issues of power, scale, and the politics of location in order to contribute to understandings of spatial praxis (Cornwall, 2004; Desbiens, 1999; Kesby, 2005, 2007).

### Participatory Research and Personal Change

Participatory action research is a collaborative approach in which those typically 'studied' are involved as decision-makers and co-researchers in some or all stages of the research (Pain, 2004; Torre & Fine, 2006). PAR is committed to democratizing the research process, places emphasis upon knowledge 'from below', takes lived experience as the starting point for investigation, values the knowledge produced through collaboration and in action, pushes scholarship to be accountable to the communities most affected by it, and may contribute towards social change movements (Breitbart, 2003; Cahill, 2004, 2007; Fine *et al.*, 2001; Hart, 1997; Kindon, 2005; Pain, 2004; Torre *et al.*, 2001). The goal in PAR is not only to describe reality but to change it (Pratt, 2000). It starts with 'the understanding that people—especially those who have experienced historic oppression—hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations' of research

(Torre & Fine, 2006, p. 458). Participatory action research is, therefore, especially germane to the project of understanding the identifications of young working-class women of color. In this sense, PAR could be understood as an alternative to what Foucault (1980) identified as the 'subjectifying social sciences', potentially challenging hegemonic relations of power and representation that are productive of particular types of subjects.

Recent critiques of participatory research, however, suggest a mismatch between the theory and practice of participation that warrant our attention (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Just as the rhetoric of participation has been appropriated in the neoliberal discursive emphasis on 'personal responsibility', 'participation' is also overused to describe a variety of research practices which could be understood as more or less participatory. Most problematic are those research approaches which in the name of participation mask realities of tokenism, reinforce social hierarchies, emphasize consensus, and reproduce the dominant hegemonic agenda (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hart, 1997; Henkel & Stirrat, 2001; Kothari, 2001; Pain & Francis, 2003). An ironic example is that the IMF and World Bank, two notorious bastions of multinational capitalism and global restructuring, are both using participatory research practices in 'developing' countries, raising the obvious question of how uneven power relations are addressed in this work (Francis, 2001). This points to a problematic tendency in participatory work whose analysis and practice foregrounds local experience while losing sight of the ways that broader structural processes interact at the local scale (Kesby, forthcoming; Mohan, 1999; Pain, 2004). This is an important critique which I argue can be addressed in a PAR process committed to addressing power asymmetries, structural inequities, and challenging hegemonic discourse.

Despite these important critiques, participatory research, and PAR in particular, represent viable, vital alternatives to the exclusionary domains of academic research. The PAR approach is especially appealing to social researchers working in an activist tradition (Fuller & Kitchin, 2004; Kindon, 2005; Pain, 2004; Pratt & Kirby, 2003; Ruddick, 2004; Torre & Fine, 2004; Torre *et al.*, 2001; Zusman, 2004). While most of the benefits of PAR are identified in terms of its potential as a vehicle for social change and action, its role in personal change is less understood (cf. Torre, 2005).

In post-structuralist terms, personal transformation can be understood as the cultivation of new forms of subjectivity or other possibilities of being in the world (Cameron & Gibson, 2005). As distinguished from the concept of identity, which is focused on the self, subjectivity is 'the conscious and unconscious thoughts and notions of an individual, one's sense of oneself and way of understanding one's relation to the world' (Weedon, 1987, pp. 32–33). My understanding is informed by feminist post-structuralist conceptualizations of subjectivity as unstable, multiple, contradictory, and in process; continuously being shaped in discourse and other material social practices as we interpret and act upon the world. Engaging subjectivity as a relational construct might also offer a lens through which to understand how, for example, global and local processes are mutually constituted in everyday life and through embodied spatial practice (Gibson-Graham, 2002; Nelson, 1999).

Conceptualizations of subjectivity appear to be at odds with participatory approaches that foreground the 'authentic' or essentialist identities of 'local' people, or whose goal is to emancipate 'oppressed' people (cf. Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Kesby, 2005). Instead post-structuralist perspectives suggest that subjects are

constituted through cultural discourse and practices. Some theorists even go so far as to understand the subject as ‘empty’ or abstract, and coming into being through the repetition of discourses that we associate with identity, such as gender, that look and even feel natural (cf. Bourdieu, 1977; Butler, 1999 [1990]; Nelson, 1999). My understanding of subjectivity, however, is not so extreme that it completely dissolves the subject. I embrace agency, following Stuart Hall’s conceptualization (1997, p. 292) of ‘diasporic identifications’, as a decision to occupy a particular position at a given moment, negotiating ‘the contingent, antagonistic, and conflicting sentiments of which human beings are made up. Identification means you are called in a certain way’ (Hall, 1997, p. 292). As Nelson (1999, p. 348, italics original) explains,

how individual and collective subjects negotiate multiple and contradictory discourses, is an inherently unstable and partial process. Moreover, although this negotiation, acceptance, or struggle may be conscious, it is never *transparent* because it is always inflected by the unconscious, by repressed desire and difference.

In short, subjectivity is always mediated and partial. My analysis privileges an emphasis upon agency, the taking control of, and taking up of, positions as opposed to mechanistic or unconscious performances of existing socially structured positions. To this end, in this paper I shall draw upon examples from the Makes Me Mad project that reveal the struggles of young women as they negotiate and collage together various subject positions, and in the process forge new ones.

Like Kesby (2005), I think that post-structuralism and participation can be understood as reciprocal and interactive, not antagonistic. Instead of focusing upon participation as ‘revealing subjugated knowledge and accessing silenced voices’, here I consider how ‘participatory technologies and social relations actually create new forms of knowledge and ways of knowing’ (Kesby, 2005, p. 2042). In other words, I engage the potential of a PAR process for producing new subjectivities, that in the words of Freire ‘affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality’ (Freire, 1997[1970], p. 65, italics original). A PAR approach is in keeping with post-structuralist thought, as it emphasizes ‘exactly how subjects “become” (that is, how they shift and create new identities for themselves despite the seemingly hegemonic power of dominant discourses and governmental practices)’ (Gibson, 2001, p. 641).

My analysis considers how young women are transforming themselves as they engage in a PAR process. What are young women learning about themselves? And how does a PAR process support and expand young women’s possible identifications? This is especially critical for young women who at this time in their lives are investigating and ‘trying on’ possible selves. While fashioning and refashioning their selves, testing themselves and all who surround them, young people take risks and explore different identities as they seek to establish their social roles (Cahill, 2000).

### **The Fed Up Honeys and the Makes Me Mad Project**

The Makes Me Mad project was developed in 2002 as part of a PAR project focusing on the everyday lives of young women in the city that I conducted for my

doctoral research. My study was broadly defined at the outset in order that it would be open to, and follow the lead of, the young women involved. The PAR project engaged six young women who lived in the Lower East Side neighborhood of New York City in a collective process of investigating their social concerns and trained them in social research methods. I recruited young women through doing presentations at schools and community centers in the neighborhood and leaving flyers advertising the project with guidance counselors, teachers, and youth workers. In order to participate, prospective researchers had to be between the ages of 16 and 22, live within the defined boundaries of the Lower East Side neighborhood, apply through writing a short essay, and meet with me to discuss their interest in their project. The young women were paid a stipend for their participation, which initially involved a four-week commitment where we met every day at the University and sites throughout the Lower East Side neighborhood for five hours a day. A diverse group of women broadly reflecting the neighborhood demographics were selected to be part of the research team; later they self-identified as the 'Fed Up Honeys':

We are Chinese, Puerto Rican, African-American, Dominican, and Black-Latina. As diverse as we are, personalities included, we seemed to click instantly and our conversations flowed. We fed off each others' ideas and we built on them as well. We spoke of personal experiences, shared our writings and discussed world issues we felt were impacting us. (<http://www.fed-up-honeys.org/aboutus>)

The young women researchers were involved with each step of the research project from framing the questions, designing the research, analyzing the data, to developing the research products (for more information about the research process and the PAR approach see Cahill, 2004, 2007; Cahill *et al.*, 2004). At the start of the project the young women conducted research on their everyday geographies using multiple methods, including mental maps, behavior mapping, a guided tour of their neighborhood, and daily focused discussions on particular areas of concern.

The project followed a Freirian model which started with the issues identified by the young women and their critical investigation of their social contexts (Freire, 1997[1970]). While many subjects were of concern to the young women, the Fed Up Honeys decided to focus their research on how the community's lack of resources (disinvestment) feeds into both stereotyping and young women's well-being and self-understanding (cf. Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004). Their project was 'inspired' by a report the young women read as part of their neighborhood research that was produced by a youth social service organization based in their neighborhood. The report featured a hypothetical profile of a young woman of color which was a composite of 'at risk' stereotypes of young working-class women of color: she shoplifted, had asthma, dropped out of school, her mother was on welfare, she contracted HIV, got pregnant, and eventually ended up on welfare. The research team developed their project, *Makes Me Mad: Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color*, as a way to 'speak back' following a long line of feminists and scholars of color who have used research as a means to critique the dominant perspective based on their own situated experiences of racism, sexism, and structural poverty (Bell, 2001; hooks, 1994; Jackson, 2004; Kelley, 1997; Ladner, 1973; Maguire, 1997). The project title expresses their anger towards deficit representations which pathologize young working-class women of color and

erase the complexities of their everyday lives. The research team initially decided to situate their project as a 'response' to the misguided authors of the report, academics, and others who misunderstand and misrepresent young women of color. Later in the project, however, the researchers decided that their primary audience would be other young women of color like them, as one researcher explains:

Presumably, the main audience for our research would be people outside of our community because it would be simple to assume that these are the people that are misunderstanding us and are the main consumers of stereotypes of young urban womyn of color. But over the course of our discussions we came to the very difficult realization that we too were consumers of these negative stereotypes, so we decided that our primary audience should be our peers. If we only communicated with outsiders that presumes that our peers (and ourselves) don't have the level of agency needed to make change to the predominant perceptions of us and we strongly disagree with that belief. (Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004, p. 3)

The researchers developed what Mary Louise Pratt identifies as a collaborative autoethnography, in which they represent 'themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms', as opposed to an ethnography where the dominant group 'represents to themselves their (usually subjugated) others' (Pratt, 1992, p. 7; see also Butz & Besio, 2004; Moss, 2001). The Makes Me Mad project reflects the desire of young women to self-define and to have control over their identifications. As part of the project the researchers developed new ways of presenting their research findings in order to engage multiple audiences. Their research products to date include a sticker campaign (Figure 1), a report (Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004), and two websites (<http://www.fed-up-honeys.org> and <http://www.fed-up-honeys.org/cn>). In addition, the Fed Up Honeys research team has conducted workshops in schools and community-based organizations, presented their research at academic conferences, written a book chapter



Figure 1. Stereotype sticker 1. © www.fed-up-honeys.org.

(Cahill *et al.*, 2004), and are currently developing a summer research program for young women with an explicit therapeutic emphasis.

In this paper, I reflect upon our collective participatory action research process, drawing upon the research team's published writings and transcripts from our taped discussions when relevant. Moving between the 'layers' of our collaborative research project, I shift perspectives here in my 'doubled' research role, inside and outside the PAR project, in order that I might, as Larch Juckes Maxey argues (2004), 'move beyond from within', and contribute the analysis of the Makes Me Mad project to the academic literature with the hopes of informing the theory and practice of critical activist research.

### A Post-structural Perspective on *Conscientização*

While Freire's work, along with other Latin American theorists (Fals Borda, 1979; Martín-Baró, 1994), is foundational to PAR practice, his Marxist inspired modernist manifestos may seem to have little to do with contemporary critical theory. What (if any) connections can be forged between the social justice emphasis of PAR and contemporary feminist post-structural and critical race theory (Butler, 1999; Hall, 1997; Nelson, 1999)? In this paper, I hope to demonstrate how Freire's explicit engagement with power, dialogue and praxis can illuminate our understanding of PAR's contribution to personal change within a post-structural framework. Using Freire's conceptualization of *conscientização* as a jumping off point for analysis, I discuss the PAR process as a site for consciously negotiating multiply-situated positionalities and the development of new subjectivities. As part of this practice, young women reflected critically upon their everyday lives as part of a collective process which emphasized dialogue, and in so doing they reworked and redefined their subjectivities as young working-class women of color.

*Conscientização* was defined by Paulo Freire as an awakening of the critical consciousness, as a 'coming to terms with the roots of your oppression as you come into your subjecthood' (Freire, 1997[1970], p. 31). Significantly, Freire's theories were based upon his engagement with poor, illiterate rural farm workers, at home in Brazil and in other South American countries in the 1950s and 1960s, contexts of extreme social and structural inequities and political unrest. *Conscientização* is central to Freire's critical philosophy of education, which he articulated as a radical, revolutionary action-oriented practice (he was jailed as a traitor and exiled for many years due to his efforts at educating the disenfranchised) (Freire, 1974, 1975). A starting point for 'education as a practice of freedom' (Freire, 1997[1970]) is the critical reflection upon one's everyday life. This is how we began our research process—with the investigation and analysis of the young women's everyday geographies. Using what Freire identified as a 'problem posing approach', the researchers were engaged in a process of critical questioning of issues that were important to them, and of each others' perspectives. As Freire states (1997[1970], p. 64, italics original): 'In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.' Similar to the feminist practice of 'consciousness raising' through this process, political understandings are developed through an analysis of personal experiences.

The first part of this participatory process involved the excavation of the researchers' situated positions tracing connections between identifications and the social/spatial contexts that produce these subject positions. As Freire writes (1997[1970], p. 90):

People as beings 'in a situation', find themselves rooted in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark.... Reflection upon situationality is reflection about the very conditions of existence: critical thinking by means of which people discover each other to be 'in a situation'.

The process of critically reflecting upon subjectivities revealed not only the complex ways in which young women identify themselves, but also how they are seen by the larger society. As Ginwright and James (2002, p. 36) point out, 'Often, inequality is linked to identity ... power and privilege are often granted based on identity (with the most going to white, heterosexual, middle-class men)'. To focus upon identifications served to surface broader social and political issues and the young women's situated positions. This was made very obvious when, as part of their research, the researchers read the report (discussed previously) produced by a local social service organization about young women in their community. The report forced the researchers to confront what Freire calls the 'the roots of their oppression', the process through which one perceives social, political, and economic contradictions, and takes action. Reading the report was a turning point for the collective, a moment of *conscientização*, of coming face to face with distorted representations and deciding in that moment to act upon this, to dedicate their project to 'speaking back' to distorted stereotypes. Along post-structural lines, *conscientização* might be understood as a negotiation and deconstruction of the cultural narratives that misrepresent young women of color, drawing connections between social identities and their social and political contexts. Identifying how and why others mobilize a discourse of stereotyping, the young women researchers considered at the same time how they themselves may also at times subscribe to these powerful cultural narratives. As Freire states, 'as long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically "accept" their exploitation' (Freire, 1997[1970], p. 46).

Freire identifies the outcome of *conscientização* as becoming 'more fully human', what some scholars identify as empowerment (cf. Kesby, 2005; Maguire, 2000; Nagar & Swarr, 2004; Raju, 2004). Kesby's post-structural theorization of empowerment places an explicit emphasis upon the dynamics of power within participatory research processes; he argues that 'empowered agency is the achieved effect of powerful discourses and practices such as participation or feminism' (Kesby, 2005, p. 2052). But while Kesby (2005) argues convincingly that empowerment is a 'polyvalent discourse' and builds upon a proud heritage of radical feminism, I am still not comfortable with the term. In addition to the loaded paternalistic connotations, empowerment suggests a passivity on the part of the participant—it is something that happens to him/her. It is difficult for me to disentangle empowerment from its history, where the term was especially overused with regard to communities of color, and young people of color in particular, who were often simultaneously identified as powerless and threatening. Even more problematic is when the discourse of empowerment is mobilized in connection with specifically determined goals or ideals, bringing to mind reform or assimilationist models that hold up ideals which reproduce social



hierarchies (Harris, 2004; Henkel & Stirrat, 2001; Kelley, 1997). From this perspective empowerment is understood as a behavior change. Empowerment = performing program goals defined by outsiders, such as in those development programs in 'developing' countries or programs for urban youth constructed as 'at risk'. But, who is empowering whom, and to what end? What does it mean to feel empowered? Is this the same as feeling powerful? (Cruikshank, 1994).

The underlying assumptions of the conceptualization of empowerment seem to contradict the original premises and promises of PAR, a process which is theoretically and empirically grounded in the power/knowledge of the participants. Even if young women feel less powerful in some spaces of their lives, they may have access to spaces where they feel very powerful and active. For example, our process involved not only interrogating questions of power and difference around the table, but also taking into account the multiple roles young women play in their everyday lives as they shift between various identifications, moving between, for example, student, caretaker, girlfriend, worker, best friend, lover, consumer. Along these lines, we considered the different spaces where young women felt in control in their everyday lives, with the understanding that they are all potentially powerful in different spaces/scales. What roles are more powerful? What are the conflicts between roles (between say being a student and young mother)? What spaces offer more possibilities for different performances of being a young working-class woman of color? A PAR process engaged in addressing issues of power implicitly adopts an understanding of power as ubiquitous and circulating in discourses, representations and spatial practices (Foucault, 1975).

Whether addressing one's relation to broader social structures of power and privilege or the differentials of power within the research process, interrogating the asymmetries of power is central to a participatory practice concerned with social change. To this end, PAR is, in effect, what Pratt (1992, p. 4; cf. Torre, 2005) conceptualized as a 'contact zone', a space of encounter where differently situated people 'meet, clash and grapple with each other' across their varying relationships to power. As Torre and Fine explain (2004, p. 19): 'A contact perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations with each other... in terms of copresence, interaction, [and] interlocking understandings and practices (Pratt, 1992, 5).' As a lens of analysis, a contact perspective offers a textured understanding of subjectivity. With this in mind, my discussion of the Fed Up Honeys process considers the young women's interpersonal and intrapersonal negotiation of power and positionality.

Although from a post-structural perspective Freire worked within a reductive framework in his identification of only two diametrically opposed positions of oppressor and oppressed, his description of the process suggests a more fluid conceptualization of power that is relevant to a post-structural PAR process. He emphasizes what he calls a 'co-intentional praxis', a process *with*, not *for*. In this process Freire (1997[1970], p. 49) insists that participants must engage in the struggle, the process of *conscientização*, as 'subjects, not objects'. 'Subjecthood' within a post-structural framework might be understood as the conscious negotiation of particular cultural narratives and positions, defying dominant social constructions which pin stereotypical representations on the bodies of young women (Cahill, 2006). In this light, *conscientização* could then be understood as leading to the development of new subjectivities which may be potentially transformative and challenge hegemonic ways of being. Rather

than understanding *conscientização* as a singular turning point, a revelatory ‘big bang’ where everything becomes clear, my experience suggests that it is an iterative long-term shifting process of learning, making sense of one’s subjectivity, and reworking it through collective dialogue, ongoing reflection, and analysis.

While *conscientização* is articulated by Freire as a personal ‘coming to terms with’ one’s own situatedness, in a collective PAR process this ‘coming to terms with’ operates on both individual and group levels which should be understood as interrelated and mutually constitutive. For example, when one of the researchers, Erica, describes her multiple identifications, and the push and pull she feels among them in her personal description, she contributed to the overall analysis of the group which identified complexity as a key characteristic of young women of color. The following is an excerpt:

I am extremely emotional but want to hide my feelings. I have a hard time trusting some and put too much trust into others. This leads to hurt feelings and total vulnerability. I want to be vulnerable but it makes me feel weak. I want to feel weak but no one wants to care for me. I want to care for those I love and want them to care for me more. I never believe anyone can love me as much as I do them. I want to take care of people but don’t want them to need me. (‘The voice of a young urban womyn of color’, <http://www.fed-up-honeys.org>)

The collective decision to focus on stereotyping, in turn, informed the way, for example, another researcher, Alice, came to understand the ways in which gendered inequities in her community were produced and maintained, leading her to develop a research project focusing on stereotypes within the Chinese immigrant community (<http://www.fed-up-honeys.org/cn>).

Key to participatory action research is a collective process of critical reflection. Dialogue is the cornerstone of *conscientização*; according to Freire, ‘it is in speaking... that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is an existential necessity’ (Freire, 1997[1970], p. 69). Not only is the telling of one’s story crucial, but also the being heard. As we shall see, it is through this dialogic process of collectively working through and making sense of personal and shared experiences that there is a possibility of creating new subjectivities.

### *Conscientização* and Anger

‘I think our headline should be “Fucked over shitty”, ‘cause all we talk about is being fucked over.’ (Fed Up Honeys researcher, 2002)

A consideration of the emotional engagement in doing research, of what it *feels* like to do research and to be intimately involved, represents a feminist, post-positivist flipside to the distanced mantle of the scientific method (Bhavani, 1994; Cahill, 2004; Smith, 1999). Anger fueled our research process, as illustrated in the following excerpt where the researchers discuss the title for their website.

CC: Alright www.—what?

Ruby: www. whore I’m fucking mad. com.

Annis: That’s worse than ‘Makes Me Mad!’ but you know it gets the point across. It really does. I think we should let ourselves be angry.

That's how I feel.

*Ruby*: We are and we're trying to hide it.

*Annissa*: You know you have gotten more progressively angry over this month?

Freire speaks to the labor of *conscientização*, 'liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one' (Freire, 1997[1970], p. 31). It is this pain, this rage, that is so essential, hooks (1995) reminds us, in order to move beyond the pain towards self-recovery and clarity. In her discussion of black rage, she suggests that in order for black folks to claim subjectivity 'we need to claim our rage' (hooks, 1995, p. 16). Or, as Freire would put it, it is through the praxis of the struggle—through reflection and action upon the world—that we are able to transform it. In so doing we transform ourselves, as one of the researchers articulates eloquently:

By the end of our time together during the summer we came to the agreement that we wanted to provoke others into rethinking the standard negative stereotypes of young urban women of color that they encountered. But before we could even realize that that was what we wanted to do we had to (through angry eruptions, upset, and discussions) realize that we were living under the veil of those stereotypes ourselves. We had to touch upon some of those emotions that those oppressively heavy misconceptions had laid on us, and that was a difficult and sometimes painful process. (Cahill *et al.*, 2004, p. 238)

To face stereotypes as a collective is to come to terms with how these stereotypes have affected you individually and collectively, and the impact they have on your everyday lives. It is painful and this pain was often expressed as anger. The following discussion between the researchers gives a snapshot of the anger, interrupted by humor to take the edge off it (although the following words do not convey the emotions expressed through tone and body language).

*Annissa*: We're like some primitive crazy people—like we're just so fucking crazy. Not knowing how to wipe our tushes! Asses

*Janderie*: There's a lot of ass-wiping going on.

*Jasmine*: You'd be surprised how many people don't know how to do that, okay?

*Annissa*: So—that's so disturbing. That's the perfect way to put it. We're like little Africa. Maybe we should go to Africa. We're like insane. We're overemotional. Oversexed.

*Ruby*: Animals!!!

*Carmen*: We're like animals to them.

*Annissa*: We're like not even human. We're like half rabbit—

*Jasmine*: Half 'Bay Watch.' Half—

[Laughter]

*Carmen*: A rabbit. And no money. Like a hobo or something stupid.

The discussions of stereotyping were upsetting, emotional and painful, loaded with personal and historic legacies of racism, prejudice and denial. Implicit connections were made several times to slavery, what one researcher identified as 'the unspeakable', summoning up the related horrors, violence, and dehumanization. In this context the researchers exchanged experiences of feeling like second class citizens, feeling invisible in some places and hypervisible in others,

and the ongoing struggle to preserve one's self-esteem and humanity in the face of this. After reading the social service agency's report that inspired the Makes Me Mad project one researcher expressed this sentiment:

This last page, I'd rather not read it, but I'll tell you what I meant by it: the estimated costs for services are derived from the analysis and possibilities that a certain percentage of girls raised on the Lower East Side will manifest a particular problem or set of problems. Meaning that we are just statistics and projections! We're not human beings!... And I just put 'what the F does that mean?' Because I was really— and I wanted everybody to see. Look at that! (shows her notebook on top of which she has scrawled 'FUCK!' In big capital letters)

Central to the analysis of misrepresentations was their frustration and anger: Makes Me Mad! Anger was, therefore, not only a starting point for the project, it was also a line of vision that the researchers brought to their new understanding of the world and themselves. But in order for rage not to consume us, hooks (1995) argues that it must be engaged and used constructively; and it is this engagement that leads towards personal and social transformation.

*Ruby:* I think with all the information that we get and all of the anger it makes me go outside of these doors and just look at everything totally different. And with this I am not, no longer naïve about what's going on around me. I'm much more aware. And I'm not, um, I'm not really like, I can't—I'm mad but I'm not going to get mad because you know what? Shit happens. That's the way I see it. Everything happens for a reason whether we know the reason or ever realize what the reason is. Everything happens for a reason. And I mean it just makes me more positive and it makes me want to strive harder for the shit that I do want to get it.

*Annisia:* I don't feel bad. Even if, I walk around angry all the time, like, I think I live in a perpetual state of anger. But I think it works for me in a lot of ways because—

*Ruby:* That's the way you strive for—

*Annisia:* Yeah. It's like a fire in your belly. It makes you push to get the things you want. It's the only reason I am able to go to a white classroom and do my work and write my papers.

Anger is motivating; 'a fire in your belly' that makes you 'strive harder' and get to where you want to go. It is a way of seeing that world that fuels your ambition. It is a stance with hands on hip (as depicted in the stereotypes stickers, Figure 1) in defiance. Coming to terms with their anger was very liberating for some, like opening up the flood gates, it all poured out as one researcher exclaimed: 'Before I was on this whole positive bullshit. Now I think I'm like fuck it. Fuck the world. Fuck everyone. Now I'm like—just face them head on. Fuck it. Shit happens. You got to face it.' It is an insistence to deal with, rather than deny structural inequities. Face it rather than run away, or pretend they don't exist. While certainly there were marked variations in expression and degree of frustration, anger was a collective embodied perspective, a shared standpoint, grounded in the material, social and political context of the Lower East Side.

### A Narrative Framework

The participatory action research process provided what Erika Apfelbaum (2001) describes as a social and shared context for the witnessing and reliving of each other's private experiences of violence and discrimination. 'Narration is tragically bound to the interlocutor's capacity for hearing what is said' (Apfelbaum, 2001, p. 29), critical to the sharing of traumatic experiences is being heard. In this instance listening is not a biological capacity, but rather an emotional relationship between people and requires trust. In this context consensus is not significant, what is important is a willingness to become 'part of the transmission' (Ibid.). Through sharing with others the pain of humiliation, isolation, and alienation that comes with racism, one is able to come to terms with one's pain, or at least release it, even though there is no pretense at resolution.

*Annissa:* I think that any kind of, the things I don't want to talk about, I force myself to talk about.

*Jasmine:* Because?

*Annissa:* Because there's a reason. There's a reason why I don't want to talk about it. I'm probably running from it. I'm probably afraid of it. And it's not bad to say I'm afraid. Like when I say I'm afraid, I'm no longer afraid, because I've dissipated some of it. I don't give it power. So much.

As Jasmine explains, 'It's always good to talk about anything. Whether it gets solved or not—it's always good to just get it off your chest.' Or put differently by another: 'I think we purged it. Like I think that was like purging, like whhhhhahha! Okay, now I can move on' (she makes a gesture of throwing up and sound effects). Discussing together the persuasive and dangerous characterizations they face in their everyday lives but do not often have the space to speak seriously about was cathartic or even 'therapeutic' as one researcher put it. Another identified the process as 'self-counseling'. The collective critical reflection process of PAR provided a space for expressing and releasing emotions and working through the pain and confusion of personal and shared experiences.

*Jasmine:* This is good because like—this is not something that happened over a year. This is like years of stuff that's just like festering inside of people and there's no place where you can just go and have people of different, coming from different areas, and talk about stuff. And—

*Janderie:* And not let it get hostile.

*Jasmine:* Yeah exactly. So this is perfect. This is something that people need. Especially if they come—if they're very frustrated. Because that frustration just leads to violence.

While similar to therapeutic processes which focus on the individual's relationship to the family, the PAR research project is a sort of therapeutic and critical educational process which 'jumps scales' (Smith, 1993) by drawing connections between embodied personal experiences and larger social processes. The emphasis in the PAR process is upon social analysis even though it starts with personal experience. This is not to say that it is not a psychological process, but that the line of inquiry is expanded to consider one's identity in relation to social, spatial and political processes. In short, the young women focus upon their subjectivities. Putting into words complicated feelings about experiences of

racism is not only a release, but a way of making sense of experiences and emotions that are often confusing and personalized, as Ruby explains:

I mean I was talking to my father about this and how mad I was when I got home Thursday (after reading the report). And was he was saying— 'I mean you just can't get too personal with it.' But you have to take this personally because if you don't take it personally it's just going to fly over your head and its going to keep on happening and I cannot accept it!

Racism and poverty are experienced as extremely personal and as part of one's everyday experiences of, for example, being displaced to an infested building, or being followed when shopping by a store employee. As Erika Apfelbaum (2001) states, 'telling is knowing one's story', and, by extension, oneself. Apfelbaum's writing explores the possibility of communicating with others across 'traumatic boundaries', which is relevant to the project focus on stereotyping, and the material and psychological impacts of structural racism and poverty. In the PAR project the telling and the knowing is a collective enterprise of developing a social analysis connecting discrimination, privilege, and race based on interpretations of personal experiences. 'The collectivity's historical accounts provide a legitimizing foundation for individuals to make sense of personal experience' (Apfelbaum, 2001, p. 21). Apfelbaum (2001) gives the example of how women's collective social movements in the 1970s denounced violence against women and made it a political and public issue which in turn made it possible for rape victims to come forward and share their stories within this narrative framework. Likewise, by focusing upon stereotyping in their project the researchers created a shared and collective space for validating stories of structural racism and poverty (made concrete in their virtual space of their website: <http://www.fed-up-honeys.org>). Such stories can be difficult to articulate without access to a narrative framework that can hold one's experience. In this space 'the problem' is redefined within the framework of structural racism (Aspen Institute, 2004)

The Makes Me Mad project represents a challenge to the dominant narrative perpetuated in educational institutions, the media, and the public sphere, which obscure the relationship between race and privilege, erase whiteness, and instead blame poor people for their own poverty. The prevailing paradigm proposes a double-edged story to explain success and failure. On the one hand there is the story of the American Dream which offers a color-blind discourse of meritocracy, suggesting if someone works hard enough they will succeed regardless of race (examples of 'success' include Colin Powell or Oprah Winfrey). Held up as attainable for everyone through personal effort, application and good choices, this fiction of success masks the unevenness of privilege. The myth of the American dream, of equality of opportunity, denies the endurance of racism, sexism, and class inequality and in so doing erases the struggles of most young women who navigate social structural constraints which include a shrinking labor market, the lack of affordable housing, and the poor quality of public education.

The Makes Me Mad project represents a 'counter story' (Harris *et al.*, 2001; Harris, 2004), a contradiction of the dominant discourse, and interrupts the production of what is understood as 'natural' (Bell, 2001; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Pulido, 2000). According to Harris *et al.* (2001), the counter-narrative represents subjugated knowledge, both because it does not resonate with the dominant paradigm and because it airs issues that are erased in the (white/mainstream) public consciousness. If the refusal to hear is an indication of fear, when someone's

'existential and epistemological safety is jeopardized' (Apfelbaum, 2001, p. 29), on a social level this fear can be explained in several ways. For example, the fear and refusal to engage the subject of race and racism in a meaningful way may reflect a discomfort with, or denial of, the enduring history of racism in the US, which brings up pain, anger, and guilt among other feelings. The discomfort with addressing issues of racial and class inequities is also indicative of the disjuncture with one of the principal American cultural narratives that if you work hard you will succeed, which many Americans are invested in. The stutters and silences around structural injustices at the intersection of race and class may also function as a mechanism for maintaining white privilege, which engages all of the above explanations (Aspen Institute, 2004; Fine *et al.*, 2004; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Pulido, 2000; Tate, 2003). The Makes Me Mad project suggests the possibilities of PAR as a collective space for 'breaking the silence' (Gates, 2004) of the (white) public sphere. Although different from the private spaces of the home that have been written about by scholars of color as important places for healing the scars inflicted by racism in public spaces and for the recuperation of self-esteem (hooks, 1990; Ward, 1996), the collective social and political analysis of PAR that starts with personal experiences may also be therapeutic.

### Contextualized Subjectivities

In the Makes Me Mad project, the young women focused their study upon the relationship between their community and their understanding of self. Their research questions speak to the layers of this relationship:

1. What is the relationship between the lack of resources (for ex. education) in a community and stereotypes of young urban womyn of color? What are the impacts of stereotyping on young womyn's well-being?
2. How do stereotypes effect and reinforce your self-image? your understanding of your peers? and your community?

Insisting upon a contextualized subjectivity which includes 'background' and 'the challenges young women face that leave them in compromised stereotypical situations', the researchers refuse a social construction which understands them as separate from their community. Instead, they propose what environmental psychologists identify as a transactional subjectivity, an acknowledgement of their interdependent relationship with their environmental context (Altman & Rogoff, 1987). In this regard, self-development is understood as inextricably connected to the development of their community. To begin with, the young women collectively deconstructed the stereotypes, identifying everything they leave out:

*Ruby:* The stereotypes—they leave out the true identity of the person. I think we are so much more complex and it's not too much. And there's a lot more about us than just a stereotype or a statement that tries to understand us in a simple way. And I just think they leave out a lot of everything! Almost everything.

*Janderie:*... they leave out the things that make us lead up to these stereotypes. Like our backgrounds and abuse in the family and how some of us don't have support. You know people pushing us. And sometimes, um, young people, or poor people, have to leave school to work to support their families and stuff like that.

*Annissa:* Cause their mommas have too many babies and there's no father around.

*Janderie:* Yeah exactly I think that's what they leave out. And deadbeat dads. They leave that out.

*Carmen:* It leaves out why. A girl drops out of school—why they get pregnant? And then—have to drop out of school?

*Janderie:* . . . that we are all lazy and on welfare. But that's leaving out the fact that there a lot of women out there who have to go out and work and support their families who are not lazy and who are not on welfare and are educated. It's like the opposite!

Tracing the production of the stereotypes was critical to the project of redefining their subjectivity:

*Janderie:* The lack of resources sometimes leads to the stereotype.

*Annissa:* Yes. Amen.

*Janderie:* When young women have nowhere to go and spend their time—

*Carmen:* That's what I wrote.

*Janderie:* They end up doing the wrong things like drugs and sex. Which is a stereotype of young urban women of color. And the lack of activities leads them to drop out or not challenge themselves enough.

At the same time that the researchers call attention to the structures underlying the outcomes, they acknowledge these stereotypes are, as anthropologist Leith Mullings (1994, p. 275) explains, 'grounded in enough reality to make them credible. They are not fully articulated, which makes them difficult to confront and contest; at the same time they arouse strong affect on many levels, some not always accessible to conscious reasoning'. This is what the researchers and I grappled with in the analysis, the contradictions between stereotypical behaviors all were familiar with and the production of stereotypes. For example, many of the young women had friends who were teenage mothers and statistically the Lower East Side has a high rate of teenage pregnancy compared to the national average (A. Cummings, personal communication; Guttmacher Institute, 2004; Office of Vital Statistics, 2000). What was confusing for the young women is that the stereotype can sometimes seem true. How do you challenge stereotypes which seem as though they are based in reality?

Another example is illustrated in the Makes Me Mad report by a diagram which attempts to map out the relationship between the lack of resources in their community and stereotypes using the example of poor public education, which leads to illiteracy, a lack of job opportunities, and low wages, reasserting the stereotype of ambitionless (Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004). As the researchers explain in their report, what is most problematic is that this stereotype is understood as 'inherent' or natural, by both outsiders and by young women. On a personal level what this means is that young women feel a sense of personal failure, as they try to negotiate failing educational institutions that undereducate them. It is a reproductive cycle, as Rios-Moore *et al.* (2004, p. 9) write: 'the relationship between failing institutions and the individual sets external and also internal standards for young women of color, one informing the other'. Reversing the gaze, the researchers shift 'the problem' from their own bodies to the larger social and political structure which distributes resources unevenly, as witnessed in their own



personal experiences and in their neighborhood (Cahill, 2006). They do not deny the fact that, yes, many young women are pregnant in their neighborhood and many are uneducated (and how these two stereotypes are mutually productive); but the young women choose to focus their analysis instead on the circumstances that are *productive* of this situation.

A contextualized subjectivity could also be understood in terms of the relationship between the young women and their community. This is not a straightforward relationship. For the young women who grew up negotiating the difficulties of living in a disinvested, and now gentrifying, neighborhood many contradictions abound. The tensions were articulated by the young women as a push and pull between 'moving on up and out', the escape narrative and an 'ethic of care' reflected in one's responsibility to the community (Cahill, forthcoming). The space in between these positions was loaded with associations and ambiguity. First there are the contradictions of what Carmen calls 'ghetto pride', which might convey a deep attachment to place, or a sense of having 'survived' the neighborhood, expressed in the use of language or posturing identified with being *of the hood* (Cahill, 2000). But then how does one reconcile the ghetto-centric identity while challenging stereotypes which are identified with the ghetto? Wanting to leave the neighborhood, on the other hand, sometimes labeled as 'selling out', might involve a critique of disinvestment, a sense of self-respect and healthy entitlement, even as at the same time this might mean disassociating with other more positive aspects of their community, and even an erasure of self. Negotiating this terrain illustrates the contradictory texture and complexity inherent in a contextualized subjectivity.

### **Different Eyes: The development of new subject positions**

I just see with different eyes. Open eyes. Like you, like I think what happened like when I was 15 years old, like people always used to say 'Ruby open your eyes! Open your eyes!' But you never open your eyes. But then like literally your eyes are open—but your eyes are not open! And I just think that just recently I've been opening my eyes. I saw a whole lot of different things and though it's negative I always try to get the positive thing out of it 'cause I don't want to walk around here with a type face. I don't want to do that. I don't want to do that for the rest of my life because it's going to stay on my face and it's just going to make me really ugly when I get older. Because it's going to be everywhere. And I just—I just try to see the positive light out of everything. (Ruby, Fed Up Honeys researcher, 2002)

Through the PAR process the researchers developed a social analysis weaving together tales of discrimination, of disinvestment and white privilege, and in so doing they redefined not only 'the problem', but also their selves. If to tell one's story is to know one's story, it is also to take control over one's representation. The Makes Me Mad project is a conscious and collective reconstruction of the young women's identities and the development of new subjectivities. For some the new subject positions may have involved a greater shift from previous identifications, the shifting of perspective depends of course on where you started. For example, while Ruby describes seeing with 'different eyes' and

'opening' her eyes (in the above quote) this does not imply a discovery of the truth, but rather a new perspective on her everyday experiences. In my analysis I do not measure the degree of difference or show the 'before' and 'after' self or identify the new subjectivities in simple terms, 'now I am this \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)', which gives an impression of a fixed or singular position. Instead I began with the premise that all involved are multiply-situated, complex, and contradictory individuals who are always changing, growing, developing and engaging with the social world around them. Rather than attempt to delineate the arc between new and old (an arc which is different for each of the researchers), my analysis focuses upon the young women's articulation of a shared situated subject position as revealed through their writings (Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004), the presentations of their research findings, and group discussions.

A critical turning point in the project, following the researchers' reading of the social agency report (previously discussed), was the collective identification of the group as 'young urban women of color'. Whereas at the beginning what was most remarkable to all involved were their differences, in the face of the stereotypical profiles in the report the group rallied and pronounced their common ground, a shared standpoint based on an identification of intersections of race, gender and place. The researchers wrote their report 'To convey the difficulty and challenge of being a contradiction... of being many things at once' (Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004):

It's clear that these stereotypes are very limited in their scope and unable to fully encompass the complexities of individual lives ... These misinformed portrayals leave out all of the subtle and unique differences between individual young womyn. Without considering the challenges that we face in our everyday lives, these portrayals further the already stagnated process of improving the living conditions that many young urban womyn of color face.

Speaking with regard to a Black feminist standpoint, Collins (2000, p. 36) suggests: 'When individual expressions of consciousness are articulated, argued through, contested, and aggregated in ways that reflect the heterogeneity of Black womanhood, a collective group consciousness dedicated to resisting oppression becomes possible.' Identifying themselves as 'young urban womyn of color' engaged an identity that is founded upon a historic legacy but grounded in their own contemporary experiences. Redefining what it meant to be a young working-class woman of color was powerful for the researchers, who, in so doing, were taking control of their representation and self-definition in this new subject position.

Central to the collective construction of the situated subject position of what it means to be a young urban woman of color is a bifurcated perspective of being the 'other'. What Du Bois (1989) calls 'double consciousness' and which (the late, great) Gloria Anzaldúa (1999, p. 99) takes even further in her conceptualization of 'mestiza consciousness', a hybrid, 'racial, ideological, cultural and biological crosspollination, an "alien" consciousness ... a consciousness of the Borderlands', to account for the ways in which we are multiply situated. Anzaldúa (1999, p. 100) explains:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of

the flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war... the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of references causes *un choque*, a cultural collision.

The push and pull is confusing, as one researcher expresses it:

I just don't understand how I could feel all of that stuff there and then feel the exact opposite. It's like crossing over to invading the others. Like private. I feel all of this at the same time. . . . We're always switching, right? Or at the same time we're feeling happy and sad. We're complex people, right?

Acknowledging the power of stereotypes 'as expectations of who we should be or who we will be', as an 'axis around which everything revolves' in their analysis of their own writings, the researchers identified examples of how they use, relate to and resist stereotypes; how they 'define themselves against and/or through stereotypes' (cf. Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004), as excerpted from their report:

'I am a bearer of life, lover, fighter, mad, mad, mad, self-involved, a member of an African American family, a slave's great great granddaughter, troubled, angry, thoughtful, Black, stereotypical, a statistic.' By combining words that are contradictory and connected she simultaneously sheds and uses the stereotypes to describe the way she views herself and the way she thinks she is viewed from outside. By doing so she acknowledges the connection of perceptions with the way she constructs a self-image. (Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004)

As opposed to stereotypes which attempt to fix a singular identity, the researchers refuse easy categorization highlighting their contradictory, shifting subject positions. In one moment a researcher exclaims: 'We need to learn how to wipe our own asses without white people or anyone doing it for us!' and the next she calls attention to the connections between white privilege and structural racism. The PAR process provided a space for processing some of the tensions between our multiply-situated identifications.

A collective subjectivity was not only about a shared social identification, but also about the process of working together, of collaborating in producing their understanding of their situated position. It was about doing something together, as one researcher wrote: 'Our research resulted in a shared bond between 7 young womyn with 7 very different personalities.' The support and the relationships developed through the PAR process were what the researchers articulated as the most important about the project. The researchers supported each other by policing the borders of their collectively produced subjectivity as young women of color, catching stereotypes which would slip out in conversation: 'Hold on. Wait a moment. What did you say?! Lazy? Please tell me how you can be lazy and work so many hours a week? Uh—huh. I'm not hearing that.' Nurturing self-respect and affirmation was part of the larger project of producing an oppositional subjectivity which defied stereotypical understandings and which reaffirmed their complexity.

'Do you.' While this catchphrase emphasizing the individual may appear contradictory to a collective subjectivity, the affirmation of one's individuality and an emphasis upon staying true to one's own needs was key to the shared analysis. 'Do you' or 'I'm going to do me' is about taking care of

yourself (instead of everybody else in your life) and not losing yourself in the face of a hostile social context. The collective subjectivities are founded upon an attention to individuality, to each other's desires to accomplish their dreams despite the overwhelming structural barriers and stereotypical profiles which limit access to opportunities. To this end, the research process also became a space for the exchange of resources, advice—such as guidance with regard to dorm living or helping each other with financial aid forms, or working through how to negotiate differences with parents. Support also took the form of sharing interpretations of situations and coping mechanisms on how to deal with racist assaults in the classroom or problems in communicating needs. The exchange of information was also, therefore, part of producing and maintaining the new collective subjectivity.

### **Conclusion: Spatial Praxis**

But is it enough to articulate a new narrative which reframes and redefines experience? Do new subjectivities need to be sustained through practice and action? Do we accept the PAR process as a potential site for personal change, as Kesby (2005, p. 2056) eloquently articulates?

So perhaps participatory arenas can provide concrete spaces for resistance and tangible 'paradoxical spaces' (i.e. spaces 'beyond' dominant powers but in the here and now, not some distant utopian future/zone [see Desbiens, 1999]). Perhaps they can provide 'heterotopic' locations of reflection from within which to contest, invert, and reveal as illusory the spaces and relations of everyday life. Perhaps they can constitute arenas in which the performance of empowered agency becomes possible.

If so the question then becomes, how do these narratives 'live' and 'survive' outside of the PAR process when we leave the supportive spaces of collective research? Is the PAR process just some sort of free space for releasing steam or a therapy session for processing social inequities (Weis & Fine, 2000)? There is a worry that participatory research, even in its more ideal forms, is just some sort of set aside space for developing critical thinking and consciousness, for engaging in critical reflection upon the social structures that constrain us, even while other spaces of our lives are increasingly regulated. These are important questions asked by interdisciplinary researchers, critical educators, and activists concerned with social change.

There are two seemingly contradictory responses to this line of inquiry. First, as Kesby argues, participatory processes must not be understood as isolated in time and space, but rather as 'openings' within existing social relations and spaces, instead of 'unproblematic 'heterotopias' of reflection' (Foucault, 1980). It is therefore necessary to understand participation and the production of new subjectivities in relation to the broader social, cultural, and political context. On the other hand, if we understand new subjectivities to be embedded and constitutive of the material and social space of the PAR process, an extension of this logic suggests that it may not be possible to sustain these subjectivities in other spaces. In this regard, Kesby (2005) raises concern with regard to the 'fragility' of 'new knowledge repertoires ... outside of carefully managed arenas'. But this conception of space seems too fixed to me. While participatory spaces may feel

like bubbles of possibility, I hesitate to define them in opposition to everyday spaces; and I question also whether they do 'suspend' everyday socio-spatial relations (Kesby, 2007). Perhaps, in keeping with a post-structural framework, the boundaries between the inside and the outside of PAR projects are not so clear. If we conceptualize participatory spaces as a contact zone (Pratt, 1999), the emphasis then is upon exchange and interaction. Within this framework, a participatory space explicitly engages a 'relational' analysis that cuts across geographical settings, drawing connections between micro- and macro-scales of the environment. While PAR necessarily emphasizes personal experiences and thus the local scale of analysis, as critics are quick to point out (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), a relational analysis of collaborative knowledge production starts to trace what Cindi Katz (2001, p. 1231) identifies as 'a topography for feminist political engagement', a 'grounded but translocal politics' that highlights the contours of situated experiences. If the personal is political, it is also, as the Fed Up Honeys reveal in their collective analysis, an opening for examining the way structures of power inform the everyday lives of young women. In other words, the development of new subjectivities need to be understood as partial, constituted within the PAR process, but also as a positioning that is developed 'across', along the lines Katz theorizes. As Kesby (2007) points out, just as 'hegemonic relations "push in on" participatory arenas, participatory relations can also "push out on" those constituting everyday spaces' (Jones & Speech, 2001). Perhaps then our spatial analyses need to theorize the porous interfaces of participatory spaces.

A fluid conceptualization of personal and social transformation as a 'struggle for interpretative power' (Pratt, 1999) involves new understandings and ways of being in the world which are both situated within specific geographical settings and at the same time represent a perspective on one's relation to others and the world. The PAR project functioned as a place where the young women could reflect, experiment, and grapple with different perspectives and in so doing work through contradictions of their everyday lives. Even though it is sometimes painful, new subjectivities can cross borders without a passport (Anzaldúa, 1999). Performances of new subjectivities can take different forms from something as simple as taking women's studies classes in college or introducing a new conversation at the dinner table, to something as dramatic and involved as dropping out of a failing school to go to an alternative student-centered school (as one researcher did). Another researcher who could not understand her experiences in the Chinese immigrant community in the same way after participating in the project developed a website with resources for young women in similar circumstances (<http://www.fed-up-honeys.org/cn>).

Participatory action research is thus less about 'liberation', as Gibson-Graham (2002, p. 36, italics original) explains, 'but about creating new discourses that *subject* in different ways, thus enabling subjects to assume power in new forms'. This, she argues, is the basis for a transformative politics that, like feminism, starts with personal experience as an entry point for understanding socio-spatial relations, for cultivating new ways of being, engaging new languages, discourse, and representations (Ibid., p. 53). But, significantly, the Makes Me Mad project highlights the relationship *between* discourse, agency, material practices, and space. The development of new subject positions is thus not just about negotiating discourse, but also about the struggle within and against the material conditions of structural racism and poverty.

According to Freire (1997[1970], p. 47), the development of subjectivities is not ‘an armchair revolution’. The ‘discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must also involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be praxis’ Freire’s (1970, p.36) conceptualization of praxis, as ‘the reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it’, places emphasis upon agency. The ‘action’ part of PAR suggests engagement, reaching out and across spaces to new audiences. In this regard the young women identified in their report (Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004) concrete recommendations for change in their neighborhood, ‘community building needs from a young womyn’s perspective’, in the areas of health, employment, housing, finance, and education. For the Makes Me Mad project the researchers also developed several products—two websites, the stickers, and the report—designed to live ‘outside’ of the participatory project and project their new subjectivity into the public sphere. As the researchers explain in their report:

We are looking to plant a seed in the minds of society. We wanted our stickers to upset you to the point of inspiration. We want our beautiful, young, urban, womyn of color to realize what it is we have against us and we hope it will give you all the motivation to go against the grain, to prove everyone wrong. If you are checking our the website or are reading our newsletter right this very second, then our job is half done. From this point on it is completely up to you to decide whether or not you are willing to accept these stereotypes or reject them. (Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004)

Or both, as a young woman living in the Bronx suggested as she put the stickers ‘lazy on welfare’, ‘promiscuous’, ‘likely to become teen mom’, ‘uneducated’, ‘in abusive relationships’, all over her body, one by one, saying ‘I am this’ (Guishard, personal communication), at the same time taking control of these violent representations and owning them and taking their power away.

### Acknowledgements

Profound gratitude to the Fed Up Honeys whose passionate engagement and intellectual generosity continue to inspire. I feel most privileged to have had the opportunity to work with Cindi Katz, Michelle Fine and Roger Hart whose support and critical feedback inspired, challenged and buoyed me throughout the research process.

Thanks to Linda Peake for her editorial guidance. I am most appreciative of the reviewers’ critical and supportive commentary. Sincere thanks to Mike Kesby especially for his close reading and very generous feedback.

This research was supported by a fellowship from the American Association of University Women. A travel grant from the American Association of Geographers and the National Science Foundation allowed me to attend the Participatory Social and Cultural Geographies session of the 2004 RGS-IBG annual conference, organized by Sara Kinson and Rachel Pain, which inspired this paper.

### Note

1. The research team explains their intentional spelling of ‘womyn’ as follows: ‘The reason we spell womyn with a ‘y’ is because the ‘correct’ spelling of woman and women have the words man and men in them’ (<http://www.fed-up-honeys.org>).

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#### ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

### **La personal es política: Desarrollando nuevas subjetividades a través de la investigación-acción participativa.**

**RESUMEN** La investigación-acción-participativa (IAP) está recibiendo atención de parte de eruditos en varias disciplinas de las ciencias sociales, y más específicamente en geografía porque prometa una alternativa viable para investigadores que tienen interés en la justicia social. Si la mayoría de las ventajas de la IAP se entienden en términos de su potencial como un método para la acción y el cambio social, menos entendido es el rol de la IAP en el cambio personal. Este papel considera el desarrollo de nuevas subjetividades en el proceso de IAP desde una perspectiva pos-estructural. El objetivo es reenmarcar y conectar la orientación de justicia social en la IAP hacia un proyecto feminista pos-estructural que enfatiza la fluidez y multiplicidad de posiciones de sujetos como la base para la transformación personal (y social). La análisis utiliza una investigación colaborativa realizado con seis jóvenes de la ciudad de Nueva York y su proyecto *Makes Me Mad: Stereotypes of young urban womyn of color*. Las discusiones se tratan del rol de la reflexión crítica, el dialogo, la emoción, y la narrativa en el proceso de investigación participativa. Complementando las contribuciones del educador/teorista Paolo Freire a la IAP, atiendo los asuntos de poder, escala, y la política de la ubicación para contribuir a los entendimientos de la praxis espacial.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** La investigación-acción-participativa (IAP); subjetividad; pos-estructuralismo; jóvenes de color; Paolo Freire

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