

Participatory Action Research - Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers

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Episode 7 Host **Patricia Maguire** with Guests

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[00:00] **Patricia Maguire:** Hi. Welcome folks. You're listening to the Participatory Action Research Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers' podcast. This is episode seven with Michelle Fine, Cheryl Wilkins and María Elena Torre. I'm your host, Patricia Maguire. Our podcast amplifies the contributions of feminist trailblazers to participatory and action research. We discuss their work, their struggles, their successes, bringing feminist values and ways of being to participatory action research. And what we're trying to do in the long term really is revision participatory and action research so that it's more deeply informed by intersectional feminisms.

So today we have a powerful episode. [00:58] While each of our guests has an individual record of social justice, gender justice, racial justice work, we're going to dig into some of their collaborative and long-term work starting with their work in participatory action research "Behind and Beyond Prison Bars" with the ground-breaking work of the Prison Research Collective at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, which I think is fair to say is sort of a building block for many of your other collaborative projects. So that we can start to hear your voices, let me say Michelle Fine, welcome!

[01:34] **Michelle Fine:** Patricia, just a joy to be here with you. We've known each other for a hundred years and to be with Cheryl and María. Um, and as I said in my email to you, if one of us couldn't be here, it would feel a little like an amputation, so I'm glad we, we all made it.

[01:52] **Patricia Maguire:** Great. Cheryl, Welcome!

[01:55] **Cheryl Wilkins:** Thank you, Patricia, and wow I'm just meeting you! Anybody who Michelle and María say is a cool person and we should be in conversation with, I never

question and so I'm just happy to be here and, and definitely happy to be with my sisters Michelle and María as well.

[02:15] **Patricia Maguire:** María -

[02:16] **María Torre:** Thank you. It's wonderful to be here, to be here with you, Patricia, and of course to be here with the Cheryl and Michelle. What a gift this morning!

[02:25] **Patricia Maguire:** Let me just say some brief introductions to each of our guests, Michelle Fine is distinguished professor at the City University of New York. She's professor of critical psychology, women's studies, American studies, and Urban Education at the Graduate Center. [02:42]

Cheryl Wilkins is co-founder and co-director at Columbia University's Center for Justice. Cheryl is an adjunct faculty at Columbia University School of Social Work, and the Center for Justice brings issues of mass incarceration into Columbia University's Ivy League world.

[03:02] María Elena Torre is director and co-founder of the Public Science Project. She's also a faculty member in critical social psychology and urban education at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

[03:19] And for our listeners, you're going to be able to find more detailed information about each guest on our companion website www.parfemtrailblazers.net.

[03:28] Well, let's dig in and, and Cheryl, I'm going to start with you. I think that you and other women at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility were advocating back in the 1990s to bring college back after the 1994 Omnibus Crime bill ended Pell Grants for all incarcerated people. So perhaps you could tell us how your work in the bringing college back into Bedford Hills Correctional Institution got you connected up with Michelle and María and the prison research collective. How did you get connected up?

[04:08] **Cheryl Wilkins:** Well, early on as a group of us worked diligently to not just bring college back, but to have it sustainable, I can remember the earlier conversations from the very beginning is that we wanted to see the program up and running 10 years, that was our mark. And now we are in the twenties. You know, we also wanted to document, you know, this amazing process that was happening because even back then, there were groups of people from different walks of life that you would never think that would be working together on this project such as Department of Corrections and incarcerated women, and the community at large and academia. All of these different folks understood that it was a very unique process that we were going through, and the women inside the prison, you know, were actually leading this charge. And so, the way to document it was something

that my colleague and dear friend Kathy Boudin and Judy Clark came up with this participatory action research process.

[05:23] Of course, they knew Michelle fine, because Michelle knows everybody. And at the time she was helping Kathy and Judy get into a PhD program. You know, there was always that connection there. But what I want to say that's important in this conversation is that, you know, when you're dealing with a group of women who are inside prison, who all of these opportunities for folks from the outside want to come in and *do research on us and not with us made us leery*, made us afraid and made us feel like, hey, this is another person who is going to tell our story and make it or any way that they want to even, and we have no input. And so, participatory action research was our way to be involved of how we want this story to be told from the very beginning. And that was important for us.

[06:23] And that build that trust along the way. And that's how it began. And it was a process. Yeah, we've had to trust Michelle, María, and other folks from the CUNY Grad Center, but it didn't come easy, they'll tell you that. And the more time we spent together, the more trusting, uh, we became and, and now we are like family, you know, that was the start of it. One other thing I wanted to add is that at the end of the day, once the college was up and running, a part of what we needed to graduate in the core requirements was a research methods course, you know, and so this was our way, again, getting into participatory action research and starting with the course. And we also, they brought in workshops and so we started to get more into what PAR actually means and how we can play a critical role in telling that story.

[07:21] **Patricia Maguire:** Michelle or María, tell us about some of those challenges of developing trust. I mean, participatory action research is a very relational approach to knowledge creation. Tell us about some of the early challenges of in fact developing trust over time in the project.

[07:42] **Michelle Fine:** As Cheryl said, I was already working with Kathy in particular, and Judy, they wanted to get PhDs who were working with Teachers College to try to get a degree on the outside. But I was really there as kind of a friend/academic. Bedford Hills was a facility that the superintendent said it was a participatory, paramilitary organization. It was shockingly participatory and so much so that naive people like me could get lulled into thinking it was participatory and collective until there were these grotesque, sadistic acts of violence by administration, by correction officers, by policy that would, you know, shake María and me back into realizing, oh, this is a prison! The prison against women. This is a prison that's organized through control and surveillance and predictably unpredictable punishments in sadism. [

08:57] When college was canceled, Patricia, because of Bill Clinton's law, as you said, it's like this, this beehive of contradictory energies, beautiful women energies, probably more complicated on the inside than we got to see. Basically, a beautiful beehive among the women, older women, younger women. Most of the women we worked with had eight to 20 years to life, so they were there for a long time, and college had been a lifeblood in the institution for many years prior, and it just got shut down. It was like the oxygen got cut off. So college got closed but the ABE program (Adult Basic Ed), GED, English as a second language. Everything was affected.

So as Cheryl said, the women mobilized to bring college back in an amazing act of feminist, radical, socialist chutzpah. It was just like they were not taking no for an answer. And they mobilized university folk, community folk, church folk. [10:12] They got the superintendent's permission but was really their initiative. And I remember we had an early meeting on bringing college back and there was an amazing woman, Regina Peruggi and she stood up and said, I'll offer the degree. And I remember sitting there thinking, oh my God, she's going to go to her board of trustees and say I'm offer 200 free degrees to women who have been convicted of felonies.

[10:46] And after she said that the women, and she and Paula who worked with her mobilized to create a curriculum to figure out how to take advantage of the fact that in this prison of about 600, almost 200, 300 of the women had been in college. So it was how to kind of fill the gap and sustain the college-going work. [11:14] Very soon thereafter, the women said, we've got to document this because we can't take it for granted any longer. It had been a state entitlement for a long time, but we would have to demonstrate the positive impact. And I remember a corrections officer standing up at one of the meetings and saying, "you know, I hate this college program because I can't afford college for me or my kids, but at least at night now they're not biting each other. They're reading or they're writing or they're studying."

And I thought, this is a deep and complex problem and we're going to have to convince a lot of people to do an evaluation, much less a participatory one. So they came to me and asked me to do the documentation and I said clearly then and very clearly since let's do it together. [12:09] This makes no sense for myself - I had fabulous students - but what do we know about prison? You have knowledge, experience, analysis, and together maybe just maybe we can build a respectful, humble research collective where we share the different pieces of knowledge we've all got and engage research together.

[12:36] I'll name a few challenges and then I'll let María fill in. One challenge was I'm not sure the women in the beginning believed we're all really going to be researching together. It just sounded like a nice version of **extraction**. I'm not sure they trusted that we believed

that they were experts and frankly, I'm not sure they believed they were experts. I knew I wasn't an expert in prison life, but Cheryl, I don't know, but I'm not sure you believed you were a researcher in the beginning.

[13:09] **Cheryl Wilkins:** No, I was trying to get three credits, actually four credits. I needed to fill my core requirement.

[13:20] **Michelle Fine:** Yeah, so one chunk was building the trust, what María would call the *de nosotras*, the us-others, and building some of us were in green, some of us not, some of us getting strip searched after our meetings, some of us crying on trains. Over four years of meeting, we became more complex than women in green and women not. [13:46] Some of us got cancer, some of us were political, some of us had children, some of us lost relatives, some of us had depression, some of us spoke Spanish, that the sisterly, spiderwebs got comp-. And as the women started to come out, that continued. So as Cheryl said, we've continued doing work.

[14:09] At the same time, we knew that we had to manage the superintendent and the guards, so they weren't going to hate on us for going local or giving the women whatever weird frameworks operate in prisons. And so, I agreed that at, in the beginning, we were a meeting every other week. Whenever we met, I met with the superintendent and tried to explain what we were doing. And this was a project that was demonstrating a good thing in the prison. We weren't exposing the sadism, the health crisis, the racism, the lies, but still it was a soft process of helping to develop voice, agency, power, shifts in a very hierarchical place. And that was pretty threatening.

So the superintendent and I would meet every other week, I would explain, if you're mad at something, blame me, not the women. That didn't stop events like having women's cells searched, poetry books written torn, Cheryl and others punished in a variety of ways. Kathy getting solitary, Cheryl sent to the Canadian border for no reason other than to prove that you could or to hide some stuff that we all knew about having done the work that we did.

[15:39] So there were those ongoing ethical issues. We had to deal with the New York State Department of Corrections, and even though they wouldn't fund college, we had to get them to agree to run a statistical analysis on the history of college, to compare women with similar sentences who had been through college and those who hadn't in terms of reincarceration rates, recidivism rates.

And then maybe later in this conversation, there were power dynamics in the group. There was who was well-educated, there were trust issues, there were, who gets to do the analysis issues, there were competition issues within the group that we didn't quite know about. There were people telling the superintendent secrets, but you know that - just the

pathology of prisons that were in the group and around the group. But mostly this is a story of like amazingly good karma, like good things came to this work. Community members started to trust it. Churches wanted to get involved. We realized we needed a pre-college program, right, for, because most folks didn't have a high school degree or a GED. [16:59] People donated times. A guy named Bailey Jackson, a woman named Thea Jackson from community built the Heart and Soul, and the pre-college writers would come in and volunteer their time to be with the women to read papers. Artists, Glenn Close lived in the neighborhood, so she had a big event at Lincoln Center and people like Marissa Tome and Rosie Perez and Glen Close performed the stories of the women at Lincoln Center and the women, and I will close with this, the women knew that the proceeds from that fundraiser would have to go to the child of a woman in prison for their college, but also the child of a murder victim and the child of a correction officer, because they understood everything as entangled and ethical. That, that their lives were woven with the guards, that they weren't just the bad guys.

[18:04] **Cheryl Wilkins:** You see these boxes in the back of my office? We are doing an archive of Kathy's (Boudin) work and her writings, and, uh, we're going to put it in Butler libraries. So, I think it was, uh, couple of days ago, the post-doc who's working on this showed me two things from this time period. One was a letter from Pete Seeger to Kathy and just talking about her writing, she had sent him some poetry and then he performed at, I think, the first Net of Souls in Westchester. [18:38] And the other letter was from, uh, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis. And, uh, they were talking about when the show was being recorded inside the prison for us to see the Net of Souls and, and they were there. And then of course, uh, Ruby Dee participated in that, in that reading of the stories of the women inside.

[19:01] **Patricia Maguire:** And María, let me just ask, so you were a graduate student involved in this. Had you done participatory action research?

[19:11] **María Torre:** So the trust that we've been talking about extended in many different layers all around. And I say that because I was a graduate student. I had just come in to the City University of New York, uh, what's now the critical psychology program. And I came in from a background in organizing. Um, but the places for an organizer at that time, and probably still today, were very limited. Several folks said to me, I should go to graduate school.

And one of my jobs, somebody passed along a book that had a chapter that Michelle Fine had written, *Making Homes*. It was an example of Michelle's work at that time, which came, you know, from a feminist critique of, uh, the production of knowledge, particularly in the social sciences, and was very rooted in this idea of no research about us without us. She

was engaging in what would later become more explicitly participatory methods but were really rooted in her own feminist and your, Patricia, feminist ideas and beliefs and critiques about, you know, who gets to be the expert and who knows, sort of the intimate details of our lives being essential to our understanding of what, what life is like. [20:23]

And, and so, I read that article and with my own arrogance thought, you know, if I were going to do research, this is the way I would do it. And lucky for me, Michelle was receptive to a phone call, you know, and I had no background in psychology. Anyway, so she had a leap, a little bit of leap of trust to, to extend to me a pathway into graduate school. [20:45] And then, um, in my very first year, she, she was on sabbatical and this project was just getting started. She had had early meetings, uh, Cheryl, Michelle, Kathy, many of the women that became our colleagues on the project were having these meetings around, you know, sustaining, building back, and then sustaining the college bound program. [21:03] And, um, I luckily came in as that was happening, and Michelle again trusted me to say, oh, why don't you direct this project? But she brought all of her, um, you know, her history and her passion and her ideas and I was doing a lot of, sort of, little of on the ground legwork in when she wasn't, um, around for that very, very beginning piece. [21:22]

But anyway, so the trust extended in many different directions and it really was my sort of organizing background that for me, led me to a place if I was going to do research, it needed to be, um, a form of research that took seriously the knowledge that everyday people have about their lives and experiences and how the, that understanding actually informs and in as a key analytic that we need to engage when we're trying to understand dynamics really, that folks are living. So that's how I came into the project.

[21:53] **Patricia Maguire:** It seems to me that the work that you all did in that project, then it just grew tentacles so many different ways. You have the Center for Justice, you've got the Public Science Project, you've got the Survivor's Justice Project. Talk a little bit about how those pieces, those, which all I think use some variety of participatory action research or critical action research or movement-based participatory research, how do those projects interconnect?

[22:25] **Cheryl Wilkins:** Well, I can talk about, uh, Center for Justice. I mean, all of our work is rooted in this participatory process. I mean, everything from Beyond the Bars Conferences where we certainly say, um, knowledge lives in grandmothers in those communities. And remember I'm in an academic institution where it may be thought of as, [22:49] we are the experts. And so again, we are sharing this information that's saying, yeah, if you go into my old neighborhood a grandmother will know what's wrong with that neighborhood and probably have solutions on how to make it better, you know, if given a chance. And so, you know, that's one thing. And in addition to, you know, just the way we

work with Beyond the Bars Conference, but you know, all of our work is in a participatory nature. [23:16] And so understanding that we do believe that everyone has strengths, strengths that may differ from yours, but nonetheless it is strengths. And so how do we put that together to make change is what my career has been about. And it started with this project in the Bedford Hills program.

[23:36] **María Torre:** When I think about participatory action research in this kind of context. Um, or critical participatory action research, which we often call it just to kind of emphasize attention to power and, and hierarchies of power that we're all embedded in them and that we need to really engage them in the process of participation. It's not just that we all sit together at the table, but you know, we really have to interrogate who we are in the work and then use that to forward the work.

[24:00] Much of the work that we did with the change, became the Changing Minds Study, was kind of a roadmap for a lot of the other work, as you say. And even at the sort of building block level in the sense that once we entered, Michelle and I entered the prison, we recognized that women living inside the prison, they had essential understandings of how things worked. [24:23] Right, but a lot of them, as Cheryl said, came together with a shared desire, with a shared outrage, with a shared belief that there should be no prisons, but if there are prisons, um, they should have places and spaces for folks to grow, right? And that college felt like an essential piece of the prison. So that was a shared belief.

[24:43] And I think that's true of all our projects. We come together because of, because of a common cause, a sense of urgency around an issue. And we come knowing that many of us have our own agendas within that, right? And we put all those agendas on the table so that we could try to chart a path forward together.

[24:59] But we also recognize that we're really differently positioned. And we need to figure out how to even out some of that so that we can have at least enough of shared languages that we can build something. And so, in the case of the Bedford Project, you know, it started with that college class. We were very lucky that context made it very easy to do collective knowledge building in the beginning because there was a college program. [25:23] So we launched a class on research methods as part of the social science degree. The folks, um, who were living at Bedford, who, who collaborated with us on the research, came from that research class. I think it was seven women who participated in the class, joined the research collective.

But we organized that class with an umbrella question, right? [25:43] And that umbrella question really reflected our sense of urgency around the issue, wanting to know and be able to demonstrate what the impact of college was. And in that class, all, all of the

students, Cheryl included, um, formed their own sub-question, right, to reflect their own interests and agendas, um, that they, that they conducted research around. [26:04] Um, so we were really starting with tremendous amounts of work and, and data already that we could grow from, right? We believe that we all sort of have the capacity and we all have places to grow and we need to do that, that initial work, right? So that the participation is, runs deep throughout.

[26:23] **Cheryl Wilkins:** Can I say something to that, before we go to Michelle, and I don't even know while it's going on, 30 years soon, whether y'all know this, that some of the women that was in the research methods college class chose not to participate because of fear - is one thing. And fear of the officers, who will hold it against them for taking part of a research project, even though they knew nothing about it. Just the term research project, you know, would have you under scrutiny with, uh, the correcting officers. And also, some were going up, let's say for clemency, you know, or, or parole and they were afraid that this would be held against them, you know? And so anytime any sort of research is being done in a prison, it is not being looked upon as something that is just sharing knowledge. And, um, and so some of the women chose not to participate before for those reasons.

[27:23] **Patricia Maguire:** Well, and you bring up an important point, Cheryl, about people's right to be silent and to not engage. And for us somehow to understand there are lots of reasons that we need to dig into of why people maintain silence.

[27:40] **María Torre:** That's also interesting because I think it complicates too and reminds us that folks are making decisions, right? Sometimes I think, especially right now in university settings where folks are for good reasons, being really critical of how research has happened and what research relationships have looked like, but they kind of obsess about sort of a flattened notion of trust where all the power resides in the university folks and the folks in whatever setting or context are just like there to like roll over and be exploited.

[28:11] I mean, I'm so glad you raised that because it's both reminding us, right, that folks were, were choosing to participate or not participate some on skepticism of the project, some maybe on some questions around what's going on, but also because they had their own needs and desires and their own things happening in their own lives that they were weighing in the balance, right? And without that knowledge, we could kind of simplify, oversimplify that to just think that, oh, we were outsiders. They didn't trust us. They were, you know, where that is certainly a piece. But not the whole story. Not the whole -

[28:42] **Cheryl Wilkins:** No, not at all. Not at all.

[28:44] **Michelle Fine:** You know, Patricia, I love that this conversation is so cool and we've done this a thousand times and it's cool every time. But Patricia, I love that you're like connecting Beyond the Bars and Transcending Women and Survivors' Justice. And for, for you, but maybe for listeners, there are some like non-negotiable, loving principles that carry across, and I'm going to name some of those and then lots of like idiosyncratic...there's an opening, let's dive in! There's a nice guard, let's do something. The superintendent seems willing, like lots of spontaneous choreography as you well know, in participatory on-the-ground work, especially when the stakes are high, the politics are fierce, the issues are urgent.

[29:37] So, some things that cut across - one is that we always believe that those most impacted by injustice, that their experiences and analyses are at the center of the work: creating the questions, the codes, the analysis, the products - [29:55] but not alone as though it's just one position. They all agree with it. There were lots of differences among, but the first is that those most impacted.

[30:08] The second, which has only evolved recently, is that we spent a lot of time thinking about to whom is our work accountable? For whom are we doing this? And then who's our audience? And in this case, and most of our cases, those are not the same. Like, it was accountable to the women in Bedford, their families, their communities. But we also had to think about white upstate legislators and how to convince them. Right? And, and being deliberate about that is, is really powerful.

[30:45] The third, is we spend a lot of time thinking about people's experiences, but also politics and policies and structures and movements. It's not just what's it like for you to be like, we want to attach that to big dynamic. So it's kind of multi-scaler.

[31:08] The last thing I want to say is we spend a lot of time together thinking about what stories are we going to tell, and what stories are sacred, what stories stay home. [31:20] That is, how do we make dynamics and injustice and resistance visible and not make people vulnerable. And the last is that the university has an obligation to do this kind of work, to work with, beside, alongside.

[31:41] **Patricia Maguire:** I wanted to raise an issue, Michelle, that you just raised, because you're known for PAR projects that are extensive, elaborate, you have research camps, multiple co-researchers, interviews, surveying hundreds of participants at multiple sites. I mean, they're robust. They're complex. And you've said that collectively your work and your results are directed at policy makers. So, you intentionally include rigorous quantitative data where a lot of times I think people connect participatory action research to qualitative

data. But you've said you're really intentional about making sure there are rigorous quantitative components so that in fact you can impact policy. Talk about that as a strategy.

[32:32] **Michelle Fine:** Not all of our projects, but most include a quantitative and a qualitative, an archival, an historic, a contemporary. We look for what are the dominant patterns, but we're really interested in who are the funky outliers, you know, so that, so that we're pretty monogamous around documenting injustice, resistance and how things might be otherwise.

32:59] But we're pretty promiscuous around method, and strategy, and I do find it helpful when we're dealing with policy to be able to extrapolate beyond the site where one is doing work. So usually if María, Cheryl, and I are doing work together, we're in a site. But like Cheryl's work on transcending women brings together formerly incarcerated folk, women from across the country and looking for patterns across as well as what are the idiosyncrasies of somebody who's in Florida, or somebody who was a jailhouse lawyer, or somebody who lost their kids. What are the delicacies of somebody whose kids don't want to talk to her now?

Around policy I guess maybe I have an old-fashioned commitment to, if there are large scale databases, let's extract those also. [34:00] So on the college thing, it was easy enough really to get the state to run an analysis of what percent of women who had been in college in prison compared to those who hadn't recidivate in three years. Women who have been in college in controlling for crime and incoming education have an 8% recidivism 7.7% recidivism. [34:27] And those who don't have an almost 30%. Like even a conservative Republican, should think this is a good idea. Even though those data drawn very different epistemic assumptions, I think we find the jazz of different methods and different kinds of evidence.

[34:49] **María Torre:** Absolutely everything Michelle's just shared and, you know, a research collective will often make strategic decisions around how to engage different kinds of audiences and what conversations they want, or we want our research findings to be able to, to participate in. And so, it was a real strength of the project that we were thinking about multiple audiences. Sometimes audiences that came to us, or rather, that we decided we wanted to speak to as the project was growing. Right? So, I don't think in the beginning we were intent on interviewing guards, but it became important as the research grew, that that was going to be a critique of why college, right?

[35:29] When we spoke with legislators, Michelle and I, at one point, when most of our colleagues at that point were still incarcerated, it was Michelle and I who was initially meeting with, with policymakers, and we were like meeting with a group of state legislators

at one point, and we were ready and armed and feeling really strong with our quantitative data. And they turned to us and they said, you know, we know the numbers. You know, convince us, tell us a story about why these matters.

[35:54] **Cheryl Wilkins:** And I think that what the quantitative data did in a nutshell was really challenge what we are doing as a society. How dare you call it correctional settings, if you are not trying to do that, if you are only trying to punish. Because this data shows that this is definitely reducing, um, the rates of recidivism and women are not coming back to prison. And so it's the data in, um, conjunction with the stories that help make this policy change.

[36:29] **Patricia Maguire:** I want to take a little bit of a different tact here away from this specific project and the other projects that grew out of it. And, there was an article that Michelle and María wrote in about 2019 and the very first line was, "What if psychology took feminist scholarship seriously?" And so, I want to shift the conversation a little bit to, what is it that the three of you believe makes your work feminist, if you will?

[37:02] **Michelle Fine:** I think there's the old-fashioned version of feminist where the personal is political and the political is personal. And by that, I mean we are interested in experience and politics and our work is multi-scale. I think there's the commitment to intersectionality that we are not just all white, straight, middle class, women, whatever, that, that it matters. And it matters in huge ways inside this category that some of us are still willing to call women and fems or... Um, but that within that race and gender, and documentation status, and sexuality, and incarceration history, and experiences with violence. Like those are not demographic things that we talk about all the time. And, and whether you're raising a baby and how many people you're taking care of, like that all matters. That people are in context, context of responsibility, of abuse, of laughter, of joy, of love, of dependency, of despair, of possibility, that feels deeply feminist.

[38:22] A third enactment of feminism is that the research is attached to politics, campaigns, struggles. It comes out of it, it feeds back to it, even while we're doing theory and activism and performance and Beyond the Bars, and, um, we're also feeding back to work on, on the ground.

Fourth is that one question leads to the next. So, after we did Changing Minds, the children of the women wanted to do a project. So, we had what we always do, like a big dinner, and the kids range from a seven-year-old running around to, I think Maxine, Iris Bowen's daughter, was at that point in her thirties. And we said, what questions do you want to investigate? What do you want to know? And they decided to make a film basically from a

child's point of view, and it's called Echos of Incarceration. I think you can find it online. And now there are many films. [39:28]

So there's something about the gorgeous reproduction of stories, and inquiries, and birthing of new projects that feels very feminist. And reflection, and reflexivity, and situated knowledge, and ethics...those all feel very feminist.

I think there are, on the Survivor's Justice Project, which is a group of formerly incarcerated women who have survived incarceration and domestic violence, there were hard conversations because the first person to get out of prison based on this law was a black man. [40:14] And I remember the lawyer said to like a Zoomie group like us, oh my God, the first person got out of prison and on the DVSJA Domestic Violence Survivors Act, and his name is Malumbo. And all of our faces were like, huh, his name is, and we all had feelings about it. Like we didn't fight for this law for white women and black men to get it. [40:44] Like when is our turn? And we had a really beautiful, hard, not beautiful at all, difficult conversation about race and gender and is this law easier for white women? So that too feels feminist. Having hard internal conversation about spaces where we're fiercely attached and where we come from radically different spots.

[41:10] **Cheryl Wilkins:** Uh, thinking about, uh, the Survivors Justice Act. And I think that, you know, when I look at things through a feminist lens does not necessarily mean that it's just only going to impact issues surrounding women. I think that looking through it through a feminist lens means that, you know, we are going to be very critical. We are going to be, uh, in a space where we are not going to separate one or the other. Although we might have feelings, and we may organize from around the kitchen table. I do feel that as an African American black woman, I had to go through a process of what it means to be a feminist, a black feminist woman, because there was a separation at one time with, uh, women who were white versus black. And the things that happened is that we don't understand each other's journey. And so, if we don't understand each other's journey, then how can we support one another? And so, even just learning about each other's cultures and looking at things that we have more in common than not, you know, is helping us come together, you know, as a feminist movement, and not separating us by culture, by race, by our past.

[42:34] You know, just for, I mean, this is recent stuff just in times of covid. I had so many, uh, women and led by white women movements, you know, asking me to come into their space, you know, just to give them some insight on how they could better support us as we go through this time that none of us, uh, knew anything about. [43:01] And, um, you know, I had this conversation with my dear friend Kathy. And she suggested that I asked them to come into our space, you know, because we did have coalitions and things. If you really want to learn more about what we are doing as a culture and what we are doing as a race,

then, then come into our space. [43:24] And I didn't have the time, you know, to leave what was going on in my community, to educate those that wanted to learn. And so again, we are coming together and I'm happy about it. Um, and again, I just feel like looking at it through a feminist lens does not always mean that I'm looking at it to solve issues surrounding women only.

[43:47] **María Torre:** I think the only thing maybe that I didn't hear is that we take the body really seriously, you know, that we take emotions and feelings, and love very seriously. And that we use them all as sources or ways of knowing, ways of seeing, ways of knowing, ways of understanding. It's very much about the person, but it's also how it's produced in the person and what it's reflecting back to us that's at the heart of it. It's, it's, it's using all of these parts of our lives to better understand the larger and, and the web that we're all sort of caught in, and the parts that we want to celebrate and the parts we want to carve out so that we can bring each other a little more freedom and a little more justice.

[44:34] It's the theorists, it's the poets, it's the writers. It's all those women early on who were, um, asking really important questions, starting with their own lives and each other's lives. It's the solidarity. Some of that early work gets ignored, but, but it was really there, there was really no movement that was, was done, um, in the women's movement that was done exclusively by white women or exclusively by black women, or, you know, if you really look, um, history will show you that there have been maybe not enough, but there have been really powerful circuits of solidarity, um, that's really pushed the women's movement forward, the civil rights movement forward, the black liberation struggle, the Puerto Rican liberation struggle, and those lessons have are equally as important to, to us, to me. But I also think to us as is, you know, sort of traditional, social, psychological, you know, work in, in methodology.

[45:32] **Michelle Fine:** Particularly around prisons, Patricia, these dynamics matter. There is a slice of white feminism that has gotten attached to prosecutors' offices and victims' rights, and, um, maybe got co-opted, maybe went there on their own. Doesn't much matter. There was something in my life, in my body that trusted police in prisons a lot more 30 years ago than I do now. But that's because I've learned with, um, women of color who had no such, for good reason, had no such trust. So, the kind of naivete that I think relatively privileged white feminist can trust government and trust police and trust universities. And come on, we can do this. Come on, we can like, cajole the president into...that there's a cautious skepticism in coming together, but also in not fronting the seductive and then the critique, but positioning those together in criminal justice, prison abolition, how to think about domestic violence and incarceration, which Angela Davis does such a good job of like bringing those together. [46:55] Women of color have just

been, it's been much more front of mind and, um, direct about than I think white women. And we've gotten, myself included, a little seduced into believing in institutions. I do think prison work becomes like a petri dish for why fierce and loving intersectionality is really crucial. And even in that fight that I was talking about on Zoom, at one point, Cheryl said, "Wait a minute, we were all locked up together, what are we doing?" And, and, and so you returned Cheryl to a level of solidarity without whitewashing the differences among us. But you let us re-member and re-embody that we were engaged with struggling systems, not just these identities that keep us in funky boxes and opposition.

[47:54] **Cheryl Wilkins:** The one thing that really brought us along was this gentleman's story. I mean, we were no more victimized than he was. You know what I'm saying? And so, he just happened to be a man. And so that kind of brought us together like, hey, you know, this doesn't just happen to women, it happens to black men as young boys as well.

[48:17] **Patricia Maguire:** You have this incredible body of work, let's just say participatory action research, that piece of it. And if I were a listener, and knowing your work overtime, I would be so intimidated, I would think, where in the world do I begin as a new action researcher, activist-researcher, participatory action researcher. What would you say to beginners?

[48:44] **Cheryl Wilkins:** I would start with, read Michelle and María's book.

[48:49] **Patricia Maguire:** There we go.

[48:50] **Cheryl Wilkins:** And I would like to think a part of this is, um, they're working, doing exactly what you just asked. You know, where do I start? How do I get community engaged? What are some of the necessary steps? Because this is actually, uh, what they lay out in our Women Transcending Collective Leadership. They come in like three or four times a year and they go through this process with folks and there are many questions and, and so - You know, even women are doing a campaign, you know, participatory action research we explain can enhance that campaign. And here's how.

[49:27] **Patricia Maguire:** Michelle or María, what would you say to newcomers, emerging scholars, people who want to get into this work, but are intimidated?

[49:35] **María Torre:** I think there's probably many different answers to that. I guess sometimes what I, I feel like is, to start where you are, to start with what you're passionate about, to start what, what feels urgent to you, where you have relationships. I mean if you have relationships around those issues. If you don't, be with the people who are doing the work that you want to bring research to. If you feel like that's not happening or if it's, you know, again, if it's an issue that you feel strongly about and, and you start working with a group of people who are also feeling strongly about that, what are they doing? What do they

want to know? What do they, what would be useful? You have to come together around an issue that feels important to you, I think.

[50:19] **Patricia Maguire:** Michelle?

[50:21] **Michelle Fine:** It's interesting to me, who thinks this is intimidating? I, I get it that the big projects are intimidating. It's not that big a leap to say, whose question is this? How would it change if the people who are most directly impacted were sitting around the table and helping us shape this question and the methods and the material? Like, why are we scared of that? I think it's worth interrogating, what's the fear?

[50:49] So, we do work with Vera Institute for Justice, which is a very progressive legal research organization, but as is true of a lot of progressive organizations, used to be very white and then they hire people of color. People of color come to our summer institute. They're like, these aren't abstract questions. That's my cousin that I just saw at Rikers. We need to involve folks in the community in our research. You know, you don't just plop into Louisiana and get three teenagers who have been in juvenile justice to sit on the research team. You really got to build these.

[51:33] Um, but even projects that are already almost done, maybe create like a, a little card of your findings and sit around with folks who have paid the price for this injustice and ask them what's missing? what's wrong? Here's the bad draft. Marie and I are always saying, here's the bad draft of the findings. What, what we get wrong? And like with Vera, it's been very interesting. Like some of their projects now have an epilogue. I don't know, I think, I think it's hard for academics. It's not hard for people in communities to say, oh, this is a good idea. Like, you're interested in what I think they don't trust it, but they get it.

[52:17]

Academics, you know, Orlando Fals Borda has that essay on, um, the Academy does not have a monopoly on expertise. I think that's the most offensive part of PAR for academics that we are saying academics don't have a monopoly on expertise. We have something to offer. And yet that is kind of the dominant view that if you have people from and with the community's most impacted, it'll be biased, or advocacy. And I'm using air quotes because that just reflects what the late Charles Mills would call our epistemologies of ignorance or privilege. That we shape questions from a god's eye view, from privilege or from ignorance, but they're often the wrong questions. And it's not hard to just say, what if once a month we had a group of those most impacted, whatever that is, kids pushed out to school, undocumented folks, formerly incarcerated, um, women who have been forced up c-sections, whatever the issue is, and just said, are these the right questions? What questions would you want to ask?

[53:32] And I don't know why we have a kind of the academy as like a firewall against that knowledge unless we feel that our own hold our knowledge is a little fragile. So, there's an arrogance to being able to say, I don't know, I know some things, but you know, some things we could build something together. And white people have to be careful not to march into other people's communities and decide, here's a question, I'm sure this is important for you. But it's worth thinking, what's the intimidation? I don't believe it's the size or the bold. I think it's like, what if we really heard what people are experiencing?

[54:13] **Patricia Maguire:** A final question. On this podcast, I've focused a lot on the trailblazer piece of things. For example, how long your work has been, how you started out with PAR and the particular prison collective, and then, you know, brought it forward into all these other spaces that you're in. [54:34] Let's go a little bit to, uh, you know, to use John Lewis's term, the troublemaker piece of the podcast. And how would you say specifically you've been troublemakers in the world of research?

[54:48] **Cheryl Wilkins:** Well, I could start, I don't know whether you understand the magnitude of doing research while in prison, but not just doing the, you know, they go home, I say. But for us who were inside, you know, being bold enough, being brave enough, um, being vulnerable enough, you know, to take on this project and being trusted enough. Because, you know, Michelle and María, would tell us all the time, even though they, all of the interviews that we've done inside, they would have never been able to get that kind of information from the women inside who we were interviewing because probably because of the trust factor to begin with. And so there's one thing.

[55:33] I'm in Columbia University where scientific research lives. You know, so every day, even in our, my own organization, we use titles because of Columbia, not because of how we work together, you know, and we are about a collective sort of leadership group, and we all have strengths. [55:56] And so my whole life is around, you know, bringing this way of thinking into the world in which I live and whether it is at Columbia University and whether it is inside the prisons, we are actually doing a project that's looking at, you know, our process in building out this organization. Uh, we are doing an oral history project and we are also doing a, a short documentary.

[56:25] And, the reason why it's not done yet, for you to...is because we needed to show what the women are doing now. And so how important that process was for us and how it contributed us in a way that we are now making positive change in the world. Um, everything from not just universities to executive directors, to working in the city, to working in Mount Sinai, which she's doing overtime right now, cause, cause of the nurses' strike. But it's, so, it shows that, uh, this process in itself, allowed us to grow and allowed us to understand how we can make, um, positive change in as well as my whole life actually, my

purpose in life. And, whether it is in academia or the movement, I'm still the person who learned critical PAR inside Bedford Hills and utilizing it throughout my life.

[57:33] **Patricia Maguire:** Michelle or María?

[57:35] **Michelle Fine:** So, there are concrete places where we've stirred things up. Who has expertise? Who gets paid to be a researcher? How do we think about ethics? You know, we fought with and then educated our IRBs. How do we set up budgets to be able to pay people who are in prison or their kids? Um, more arrogantly or more annoyingly, we have more recently moved toward arguing, "How dare other people do research on communities without communities." It used to be, can we just do this thing and you'll let us do it? Um, Cheryl just said, whether I'm at Columbia or the movement, Cheryl and Kathy have insisted that Columbia has porous membranes, and the movement is in Columbia, and Columbia is in the community. [58:35] And even though at funny moments everybody wants a 'distinguish', I think we're all about know these borders are open and we're lucky they are. And we have an obligation to be working with and to dare to challenge what [58:55] Martín-Baró would call dominant lies with surprising solidarities and think about our obligations to communities and movements that have been under siege. I think that's where the, the trouble gets created.

[59:11] And I guess the last thing is challenging from whose point of view or questions asked, you know, like, why do so many of those children have disabilities is not the question, like, why are so many of them involved with the criminal justice? Like, so shifting it up and challenging not, yeah, like the research advocacy thing, it's a whole other conversation. This is not advocacy. I'm pretty hard-line conservative on this. This is research. This is critically engaged research that has a kind of strong objectivity, to borrow from Sandra Harding, and theoretical or provocative generalizability, which is language we've created in a kind of context validity.

[01:00:01] **María Torre:** There's a responsibility also and a reminder of power when we stir trouble. And I think we, we try to be as best we can, mindful of that. And then of course things get messy and explode, and then we try to clean up the pieces. But in the realm of the university and the ways that we make trouble both, you know, theoretically, but also practically on the ground. You know, universities like to think that they're open, but of course they are not, you know, we are in a public one really likes to think it's open, but of course has guards and has, you know, all kinds of layers of protection and security and who's allowed in and who's allowed out.

[01:00:38] And again, that ranges from the theoretical to the very concrete. And when you cross those boundaries repeatedly, you have to be mindful of who's paying the price. Um,

and I think, you know, as best we can, we try to leverage each other's power and, you know, strategically, um, push those boundaries or explode those boundaries. [01:01:00] But, um, without make, without increasing vulnerability. And in across our projects, you can see that on all sides where, you know, sometimes it's the folks we easily ascribe with power. But then there have been times when we've been pushing boundaries in communities around what's legal and not, not legal to do. And we've done some of our more exciting research presentations, um, you know, with artists who've allowed us to project our findings. In that case, it was, um our colleagues who lived in the neighborhood, who were the ones who had capital to help protect us so that nobody got arrested when we violated these rules around who can project light and noise and sound and that kind of thing. You know, we try to operate as a collective that's mindful of power and try to leverage each other's power.

[01:01:48] Sometimes it's those of us who haven't suffered at the hands of some of the injustices that we are studying so acutely, right. Maybe we've even been benefited from them, you know, that has engendered, because of that privilege, sometimes it engenders a belief that something is possible, when most of our collective knows, well it's not, but then we kind of move forward with that cautiously and go places we never thought imaginable.

[01:02:14] Um, so it's both sort of leveraging our power, leveraging our privilege at times lev- you know, listening to our collective, the knowledge that comes from our collective vulnerabilities and our specific vulnerabilities that are not always shared right? But using all of that. That's one piece of our troublemaking that we even sometimes run into with movements of today, that, that we're very much rooted in the knowledges that are produced because of our identities and our, where we're situated, but we really see them as productive sites and productive parts of us, um, rather than just a space for constant reflection.

[01:02:50] **Patricia Maguire:** All right, let's wrap this up. Is there anything that you came to today and you said, boy, I really want to make sure I say this about participatory action research feminism, a message you wanted to get out there that either I didn't ask about or give you a chance to say.

[01:03:08] **María Torre:** I want to publicly thank you, Patricia. Many moons ago when I was that graduate student, you hosted a group of women feminist scholars who were engaging in participatory action research just as it was kind of having a rebirth maybe, um, or coming together in a more explicit way in the States, in the Northeast. And you gathered a group of us together, and I remember being a younger scholar in that space and feeling both lucky, but also awash in all of the possibilities that this group of women were kind of imagining together around. But it was a, a space that wasn't shy around the conflicts. Um, and it was really serious about the future. And, um, it was a bridge for me to launch myself onto this

journey. [01:03:55] I remember bringing the work of Cheryl and others, um, from our collective who at that time weren't able to expand outside of the prison. And so, yeah, so I just wanted to say out loud that, that this is part of the work that we're doing, that we're creating the work, we're inviting others in, we're taking them seriously, we're building further afield with them and allowing them to grow into the people that they need to be. And I hope that I can continue that work and that all of us, um, can learn from each other in the way that we have. So thank you.

[01:04:25] **Patricia Maguire:** Thank you. That was, Mary Brydon-Miller and Alice McIntyre and myself, uh, put together this small working conference called Bridging the Gap, where we were trying to bring together feminist scholars and participatory action research activist scholars, um, and trying to sort of bridge the gap between those two things, because at the time, it didn't seem that feminist scholarship was very participatory and often not action-oriented. Thank you. Cheryl or Michelle, final words here.

[01:05:02] **Cheryl Wilkins:** Just bringing to the forefront that there is no particular place where knowledge lives or does not live, understanding that, um, uh, strengths and knowledge lives all over, and, and recognizing that and accepting that.

[01:05:21] **Michelle Fine:** That, that there's something so joyously giving about this work that when I said before, it's good karma, it's, it's more than that. It's like a collective embroidery that you know - that there's a lineage, not punctuated by arguments, and then I said Patricia was wrong, and then she was too white. And I was too, like, that's not our history at all. It's like, how do we grow this in a way that's reflective and honoring and dares to jump off the next cliff together? And I feel like we've done that. And so really thank you, Patricia, when you invited us, I was so moved. And it's a new year and new beginnings and I, it feels so good to start it with you.

[01:06:16] **Patricia Maguire:** Thank you so much to our guests today, Michelle Fine, Cheryl Wilkins, María Elena Torre, and I want to give a huge thank you to our listeners. You can help expand our listenership by giving the link to this episode to your colleagues, your networks. Give us a boost on your social media. A transcript of today's podcast, citations, additional information about our guests, will be posted on our companion website, www.parfemtrailblazers.net. So if you missed earlier podcasts, you can find them there. All right. That's it for episode seven of Participatory Action Research: Feminist Trailblazers and Good Troublemakers, and as John Lewis urged, now go make some good trouble of your own.

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