CRITICAL RACE METHODOLOGICAL TENSIONS

Nepantla in Our Community-Based Praxis

Enrique Alemán, Jr., Dolores Delgado Bernal, and Sylvia Mendoza

And I now call it Nepantla, which is a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds. It is a limited space, a space where you are not this or that but where you are changing ... It is very awkward, uncomfortable and frustrating to be in that Nepantla because you are in the midst of transformation.

(Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 237)

Emphasizing the moral and ethical responsibilities of critical race scholarship, Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) bridge methodology and praxis by effectively arguing that committed intellectuals must move outside of academic walls to engage in critical race practice. They state that “We must learn to be ‘at home’ on the street corners and in the barrios, churches, mosques, kitchens, porches, and stoops of people and communities, so that our work more accurately reflects their concerns and interests” (p. 298). We, like many CRT scholars, take their point to heart and are literally, not just figuratively, “at home” in the barrios and community spaces they name. For example, seven years ago we formed a partnership with Jackson Elementary and introduced ourselves to students, parents, and school community members. Spurred by our desire to apply our scholarly expertise, tap into our professional networks, and exhibit “parental involvement” in our children’s school, we initiated a partnership between the University of Utah and Jackson Elementary when a call for proposals was released encouraging partnerships on the Westside of Salt Lake City, an area that has been historically underserved (Buendia & Ares, 2006; A. Solórzano, 2005).

However, even as we find comfort and a sense of belonging in the community in which we continue to work and live, we often experience the type of methodological discomfort, awkwardness, and frustration that Anzaldúa describes in the introductory quote. These tensions are not the result of the many beneficial and rewarding relationships we’ve forged with parents, students, educators, and community members. Rather, they result from being in spaces where theory and practice often clash and from
wrestling with ethical responsibilities as members of this community and as scholar-activists striving to develop trusting and reciprocal relationships.

Given our seven years of partnership development and community-engaged research, our goal is to contribute to this volume by offering a methodological discussion of some of the challenges we confront while doing critical race praxis. While CRT has always informed and shaped our program development, we continue to struggle with the methodological messiness of our research. Understanding the way schools work—or don’t work—for students of color, CRT has been especially useful in providing the tools and language to critique and push back against racist structures, policies, and discourses. However, we have also found that CRT’s tenets and its well-cited constructs do not always provide us with all the methodological tools to make sense of the tensions we experience in our praxis.

Indeed, our praxis is wrought with methodological tensions that result from the material realities of the parents and students with whom we partner, our limited capacity to reform educational systems and practices that continue to privilege and reify Whiteness, and the concerted state efforts to institute policies that increase surveillance and dehumanize immigrants. Although we are constantly negotiating the methodological uneasiness that results from these dilemmas, it is in illuminating our methodological frictions and contradictions and by expanding our use of other critical conceptual tools that we argue, our experience in community-engaged research may continue to push the boundaries of CRT, and critical race praxis scholarship in particular. Therefore, it is in our drawing upon Chicana feminist thought that we introduce the indigenous concept of nepantla—a space of tension and a space of possible transformation—as one way of articulating and theorizing the awkward, uncomfortable, and frustrating methodological tensions that are inevitable in critical race praxis.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, we will first contextualize our critical race praxis by introducing Adelante, our university–school–community partnership, and the background and context of the community in which it is situated. Next, we discuss how CRT is foundational to and grounds all of our partnership development. By introducing how nepantla as a conceptual tool informs our methodology simultaneously, we seek to theorize the “messiness” of critical race praxis. We then present an abbreviated counterstory that illustrates some of the tensions and ethical dilemmas we confront while living and working in this school community. Finally, we discuss the complications that arise with our insider–outsider positionalities when working to enhance confianza, or trust building, and the power dynamics that ensue. We seek to describe how our work with Adelante not only necessitates focusing on the messiness of engaging communities, families, and schools as critical race praxis, but also requires that we embrace the nepantla of our methodology as we continue to struggle for more just schools, policies, and practice.

**ADELANTE AND JACKSON: SETTING THE CONTEXT**

I like everything about Adelante! The immersion in college awareness as well as in the (Spanish and English) languages is the best thing that could happen at Jackson. I like that from such a young age we prepare and teach about college.

(Clara, Adelante parent)
CRITICAL RACE EPISTEMOLOGIES AND NEPANTLA

Even though racial fatalism continues to be an important part of Critical Race Studies—mainly because it “keeps things real”—Critical Race Studies, nonetheless, embraces key liberal traditions. Predictably this creates tension, but it is this uneasy coexistence between critical fatalism and liberal optimism that distinguishes Critical Race Studies from countervailing postmodernist movements that drift toward a nihilistic bent.

(Lazos Vargas, 2003, p. 4)

As stated previously, critical race theory undergirds our methodological perspective and provides a framework from which to understand Adelante’s initial development and subsequent evolution. Engaging with critical race literature, we first and foremost adhere to the notion that racism is historical and embedded structurally into society’s institutions, systems, and policies, such as in health care, housing, criminal justice, and education (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995). For schools in particular, macro-level, institutionalized racism and the inequity that it creates not only manifest themselves as systemic “gaps” in educational achievement, cyclical poverty, and dropout rates, but also result in micro-level, individual “gaps” in the K-16 educational pipeline that are part of the Black and Brown educational experience (Aleman, 2009a; Ladson-Billings, 1998; D. Solórzano, 1998). Derrick Bell contends that racial fatalism or racial realism is the notion that racism is a permanent aspect of our society, embedded in the everyday lives of all persons in the U.S., and corrosive to all of society’s institutions and structures (Bell, 1995). Thus we use the idea of racial realism to aid in our confrontation of these realities and the formulation of strategies that push back against the educational, economic, and sociopolitical conditions that marginalize families and students in our school community.

Although our work is informed by a racial realist view of the way schools work for our community, we are simultaneously guided by Bell’s (1995) words that the “fight itself has meaning and should give us hope for the future” (p. 308). It is in this continued struggle and hope—a critical hope that West (2005) distinguishes from “cheap optimism” or what Duncan-Andrade (2009) calls “hokey hope”—that unexpected benefits and gains in the face of permanent indestructible racism justify and sustain our endeavors. Hokey hope “ignores the laundry list of inequities that impact the lives of urban youth” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 182). It is based on a false narrative of meritocracy that suggests young students of color just work hard and pay attention in school then they will make it to college. While Adelante encourages young people to work hard to make it to college, it is not based on a hokey hope that ignores the very real material conditions of students at Jackson. Rather, Adelante is guided by racial realism and a critical hope that allows us collectively to move towards action without assurance that educational structures will indeed change.

To help us explore the methodological tensions and the contradictions of our critical race praxis that is grounded in both racial realism and critical hope we introduce the idea of nepantla, a Nahua word meaning the space between two worlds or the land in the middle. It is a “place where different perspectives come into conflict” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 548). Our methodological perspective understands nepantla as the rupture between elements of critical race theory and conceptions of critical hope or the unseen.
coexistence of critical fatalism and liberal optimism. It is that space where practice and theory meet and often grate against each other, requiring a researcher’s tolerance for ambiguity.

Burciaga’s (2007, 2010) exploration of graduate school as nepantla positions Chicana graduate students as nepantleras—women who negotiate a transitional in-between space and understand their role as individuals in the collective search for social transformation. “As such nepantla is also a bridge to possibility, a bridge to aspirations; a bridge one crosses voluntarily and involuntarily to draw from the rivers of lived and learned experiences” (2007, p. 147). Similarly, Elenes (2011) says nepantleras are constantly shifting, “from single goal reasoning to divergent thinking. This shift is characterized by a movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a holistic perspective ... This is a central aspect of ‘spiritual activism’ which connects the mind, body, soul, and spirit” (pp. 51–52).

In many ways, the scholar-activists involved with Adelante are nepantleras/os who constantly negotiate and shift between the overarching goals of the educational partnership and the everyday realities of parents, students, and institutional constraints. Indeed, our methodology allows us to weave together our intellectual, political, and spiritual work into a kind of spiritual activism (Delgado Bernal, 2008). We have reflected on our own educational experiences as multiple generation Chicanas and Chicanos, and each of us has personal and familial knowledge of inequity in public schools and has witnessed firsthand the damaging and “subtractive” (Valenzuela, 1999) nature of schooling for Chicanas/os or Latinas/os. Therefore, our methodology is rooted in our previous experiences of “being child translators, of experiencing racist nativism and racial name-calling, and struggles with normative gender roles in our families” (Prieto & Villenas, 2012). It is a methodology born from our own ways of knowing, learning, and teaching. It is a methodological approach of nepantla that includes a space of discomfort, dissonance, and possibilities.

**ALVARO: THE COST OF CENTERING EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE**

Adelante’s cultural enrichment component was conceptualized with the understanding that the cultural knowledge, pedagogies of the home, and family histories of students and families of color are often negated, silenced, and ignored in traditional school settings. The Adelante Oral History Project (AOHP) is one part of the cultural enrichment component and operates from the belief that Jackson students and families embody wisdom, knowledge, and traditions that can contribute to the core curriculum as well as enhance students’ education. Jackson students, teachers, and families collaborate to co-produce migration stories and community histories, and to re-tell the stories of their elders as part of the core curriculum. Students also share their work back with the school’s families via blogs, videos, or after-school presentations, and as a result students are able to learn from one another and teachers become acquainted with students and their families in new ways (Flores Carmona & Delgado Bernal, 2012). The methodological reflection below was primarily written by co-author Sylvia Mendoza and is not a composite story. Rather, it is a counterstory of the actual interactions she has had with Alvaro, a third grader who participates in the AOHP. We share it as a way of illuminating the nepantla of our critical race praxis.
As a co-coordinator for AOHP my research interests have been informed by our work with the students at Jackson Elementary and I have come to view the AOHP as a decolonizing pedagogy. The students’ final presentations of their projects have always impacted me profoundly and overwhelmed me emotionally. Watching the students share their research of self and present the narrative of their family members, cultures, and histories is validating not only because of the hours of collaborative work shared between students, teachers, and families to complete the projects, but also because, for me, the presentations represent a disruption—if only for a moment—of the colonial legacy of schooling that has intentionally omitted the life experiences of students of color (Calderón, 2010). At these final presentations, students are literally and metaphorically at the center of the curriculum and school. As their parents or other family members acknowledge and validate their stories, the students’ voices fill the room, talking back (hooks, 1999) to a history of schooling that has aimed to silence them, to drown out their experiences with a dominant narrative which does not represent their everyday lives.

However, despite our best intentions to provide a space that centers the voices and experiences of the students with whom we work, I was quickly reminded of the realities and limitations of the AOHP and of critical race praxis when recently facilitating a presentation for our third grade group. While most Jackson students and their families were in attendance, one student was noticeably absent. Alvaro, a student from Guatemala, was resistant from the start of the project. Even though he was in a bilingual dual immersion program, he had consistently expressed insecurities with his English abilities and struggled with his writing. Appearing to have internalized deficit notions of himself as a student, he would berate himself, commenting that his project would be the shortest and the worst. Rather than focus on the assignment, Alvaro would leave his desk, walking around the classroom, talking to other students, and avoiding his opportunity to write his oral history. When he did sit down to write, he would ask us to sit right next to him to help him write.

During one of these sessions when Alvaro asked for individual attention, he began to share his concerns with the project, school, and the challenges he faced in his daily life. For this particular project, students were asked to bring a photo from home or to draw a picture of a memory they had, and to then write a story about that particular image. Alvaro shared that he was unable to bring in any photos. “Can you draw a picture for me, then? Maybe a drawing of you with your family?” I asked. Alvaro decided that he would draw a picture of his brother and his brother’s girlfriend. As he took out a blank sheet of paper to begin drawing, he quickly changed his mind. “I can’t. My brother will get mad at me.” Alvaro was reluctant to share private information about his brother with strangers. When it seemed as though he did not fit into the purpose and goals of the assignment, Alvaro’s frustration mounted.

Sensing this, I asked Alvaro to draw a picture of anything he was interested in, and to write a story about it. He continued to be frustrated with the instructions and had a difficult time deciding on a topic. In the midst of this frustration, he shared: “I hate school. School is boring. And I hate living here.” Alvaro expressed that he missed home, where most of his family continued to live, and lamented on how things were much better in Guatemala. When I asked him to elaborate, he said, “At least in Guatemala we can walk outside in the streets.” In the U.S., and Utah in particular, Alvaro said he feared his family could at any moment be deported. Unsure of how to console
or validate his experience and feelings in such a vulnerable moment where he had enough trust to open up to an adult, I tried to continue the conversation. "What are some things you do like about school and living in the U.S.?" I asked. Thinking for a moment, he quickly shared that his favorite thing about the U.S. was Halloween—a holiday that allowed him not only to walk freely in the streets with his friends and family members but also to receive candy from friends and neighbors. At the end of our time together, Alvaro had drawn a picture (see Figure 24.2) and written a story:

I was born in Guatemala, I came when I was 6 years old. Then I came to Jackson Elementary. I was in 1st grade now I’m in 3rd grade, now it’s boring here and now I want to go to Guatemala because all my family is there. I do like the snow and Halloween. What I like about the USA is that you get to trick or treat at people’s houses.

For me as a doctoral student and an emerging critical race and community-engaged scholar, coordinating the AOHP and working with students like Alvaro exemplify the moments of methodological tension inherent in our critical race praxis. While the projects provide a space for students to research and share their experiences and histories, they also provide opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with students. Yet we are limited in how much we can do, what we can really change, and how, in the end, society’s institutions and their policies continue to destabilize and foster hostility in the lives of our students and their families. While I felt touched that

Figure 24.2 Alvaro’s picture story
Alvaro was comfortable enough to share such intimate and personal details about his emotions and his life, I also felt conflicted that through this project I was asking him to open up and reveal inner feelings and confidential information about himself and his family. When he shared his real life experiences, I was not in a position to assist or help directly with his situation. Further, while focusing on Alvaro’s life experience as a disruption within a colonial schooling project, it did little in the way of reforming immigration policy or of personally putting him at ease from his fears of deportation. It did not remove the fear that Alvaro feels daily when experiencing the mundane or, as he put it, just trying to “walk outside in the streets.” While I am exploring the possibilities of critical race praxis in education in my privileged position as a U.S. citizen and graduate student, Alvaro and his family confront real issues of citizenship, safety, and fear on a daily basis.

ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITY: UTILIZING NEPANTLA AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3)

Alvaro and his family are representative of the students and families with whom we interact. As for so many others, their lives have been impacted by an unforgiving economy, a harrowing migration experience, and an unequal and disadvantage public schooling system. This methodological reflection provides a glimpse into the *nepantla* of our critical race praxis. For us, the story of Alvaro epitomizes the layered and messy nature of our methodology, and the interactions between Alvaro and Sylvia reflect a number of complex interactions that occur while trying to sustain and build our partnership. While we experience many spaces of *nepantla*, in this section we highlight just two sites of dissonance we experience in doing critical race praxis. That is, our purpose here is to utilize the story of Alvaro to illustrate sites of tension between critical race theory and critical race praxis.

*Centering Experiential (and Dangerous) Knowledge*

Utilizing arguments for providing spaces and valuing the knowledges of marginalized people to challenge deficit notions and promote social transformation (D. Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), we often ask students and their parents to share their experiences as part of AOHP. Understanding students, parents, and communities of color as holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002), we allow our praxis to be shaped by community needs and aspirations. Our goal is to provide a counter to the manner by which marginalized communities, parents, and students are treated in the schooling process—a process that often fails to recognize and utilize the positive attributes and skills, as well as the rich and valuable histories, traditions, cultures, and languages, that are brought with them into the educational setting (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). However, while we listen and attempt to institutionalize the home and cultural knowledges brought to school by these students, the implementation of this goal is ripe with contradictions and limitations.
In asking students to reflect about and document their story as a culturally relevant exercise, we are simultaneously asking some of them to share student or parent realities that could jeopardize their very security or freedom. Although we attempt to mitigate this danger or fear by helping the school improve its relationships with undocumented parents and families, we are still left with contradictory understandings of our role(s) as scholar-activists: How should we as the researchers confront our emotions or feelings of powerlessness when we are unable to respond in meaningful ways with strategies that might actually alter the oppressive conditions that parents and students encounter?

Lest we be unclear, there has been much success in listening to and incorporating familial and communal knowledge into the school curriculum via the AOHP. Family history has been shared in public spaces. Students have bilingually honed their home knowledge and traditions. Teachers have had university students aiding in literacy and writing in their classrooms. The Brown bodies of undergraduate and graduate students have benefited from connections to this community and influenced the culture of the school. However, Alvaro (and possibly other students) has also experienced discomfort in sharing his experiential knowledge. While Sylvia listened and worked with him by modifying the assignment, there was a clear sense that focusing on his life and revealing personal family information were not empowering for him. In fact, sharing his experiential knowledge that was shaped by acts of racism, colonialism, and anti-immigrant sentiments was painful. For those who are the most susceptible, there is an added fear of being exposed and experiencing retaliation (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Whether it be a kindergartner who shares how he and his mother were apprehended by immigration agents (Delgado Bernal et al., 2008) or a parent who feels a teacher behaves in a racist manner or feels that the school is not a welcoming space (Aleman, 2009b), there is often a personal sense of vulnerability and possible exposure when these experiences are centered. So, while AOHP attempts to institute a value of experiential knowledge throughout the partnership and within the classroom space, Alvaro highlights the threats that he and others face on a daily basis. His example challenges us to complicate and problematize our development of CRT praxis in schools. And, although it also requires us to acknowledge the methodological tensions and embrace the nepantla that we as researchers are thrust into, his example does not absolve us from the ethical and moral responsibility of ensuring his anonymity and the protection of his rights and the rights of those who are most vulnerable to society’s racist policies and practices.

The work of all of those involved with Adelante, and critical race praxis more generally, must seek to cultivate meaningful, caring, and ethical relationships with the students and their parents or family members. However, cultivating these relationships requires being aware of the local context and the realities of our partners. At times, our students’ projects must be modified if there is a sense that their safety may be compromised because of the assignment. Many times additional and one-on-one communication is needed to better explain the purpose of the projects and to ensure that student and family situations will not be overtly shared. To practice reciprocity and develop confianza, the oral history project staff also share intimate details of their own histories and experiences, regularly creating templates based on their own lives to share with the students before asking the students to share their personal histories. These examples contribute to the development of confianza between Adelante and the Jackson community and contribute to the creation of a space where students and family members feel they can share personal details about their selves and their lives.
While these are small ways that we attempt to mediate contradictions that emerge, Sylvia’s reflection demonstrates a larger point—listening and truly hearing marginalized experiences does not necessarily mean one can do something to alter those experiences. Sylvia felt real frustration in knowing that the overall structure and colonial legacy of schooling, combined with the very real socioeconomic factors affecting the community, severely limited her capacity to significantly and substantially alter Alvaro’s life situation. As she pointed out, listening and focusing on his life experiences “did little in the way of reforming immigration policy or of personally putting him at ease from his fears of deportation.” The geopolitical effects of migration, immigration, and a global economic crisis have impacted Alvaro’s family as they have so many other Latino families in the United States. The families have to contend with a surveillance that limits their freedom of movement, participation, and engagement with societal institutions such as schools (López & López, 2010). Moreover, the families sometimes view the Adelante team as having more power to limit this surveillance and address school concerns than we actually have. So, while our research and the partnership attempt to impact school culture, the curriculum, and the awareness of higher education with a backdrop of racial realism and a colonial legacy, we are reminded daily of how little institutional and systemic impact we can have on the material realities of many of the families with whom we work. Sylvia’s reflection demonstrates our neapantle—that space where practice and theory scrape up against one another and where we wrestle with our understandings of the research and practice that we seek to conduct. As a result of this uncertainty, we are forced to be neapantleras/os who constantly negotiate and shift between the overarching goals of our educational partnership and the everyday realities of parents, students, and institutional constraints.

Striving for Reciprocity and Confianza while Acknowledging Insider– Outsider Privileges

We have taken special care to not replicate the manner by which universities and educational researchers have conducted their research historically—exploiting marginalized communities as research sites and students and people of color as research “subjects,” taking from them without giving anything back (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). As scholars of color, we are well aware of this colonial history and struggle with the ways that we may be complicit and fail to “give back” in meaningful ways. We approach our research “in solidarity with urban communities” and an understanding that “their pain is our pain” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 190), but we are also keenly aware that, as university professors and graduate students, we enter our community with power and privilege. Although we are insiders who live in this neighborhood and have children who attend this school, we are also positioned as outsiders with privileges afforded by location of birth and socioeconomic status denied to many in the community we are a part of. We hold contradictory identities as the colonizer and colonized and embody what Villenas (1996) describes as “having a foot in both worlds; in the dominant privileged institutions and in the marginalized communities” (p. 231). Many scholars of color have noted the methodological tensions that can emerge when doing research in our “own” communities (Baca Zinn, 1979; Russel y Rodriguez, 1998; Téllez, 2005). Power and the dynamics of its use are inescapable and central to the transformative work being conducted in schools. So while we as critical race scholars wrestle with the unequal distribution of privileges—of which we are holders—we also attempt to build trusting, reciprocal, and non-hierarchical relationships.
with our partners. This methodological process does not subdue the tensions we feel as scholar-activists. Rather it places special emphasis on our development of trust and our ethical responsibility in supporting parents to negotiate their harsh realities.

Alvaro’s story points to the very real tensions we experience when trying to build trusting and reciprocal relationships. Sylvia speaks to her discomfort with the idea that her academic endeavors are sometimes at odds with what is most relevant to the students and families. For example, the confianza Sylvia developed with Alvaro allowed her to travel to his world, if even momentarily (Lugones, 1987). Their relationship of confianza developed over time and was based on reciprocity in that both Sylvia and Alvaro contributed to it and benefited from it. Sylvia was attaining teaching and research expertise in a community that she was invested in and one that she wanted to give back to. At the same time, Alvaro received mentoring and support with his writing skills and was nurtured with individual, culturally competent instruction. However, this relationship of confianza also contributed to Sylvia’s discomfort as a CRT scholar-activist. Not able to alter the structural barriers that he was up against, she felt inadequate and unable to reciprocate in a meaningful way precisely because she had developed trust with Alvaro and occupied a more privileged status or position than he.

So, although fostering confianza and reciprocity is foundational to Adelante’s work in that partnership activities strive to benefit all partners, structural and geopolitical barriers often do not allow us to overcome the contradictions that are present when there is no symmetry in the reciprocity. In other words, reciprocity is often conceived as being 50–50 or looking the same for all partners. However, in our experience, reciprocity cannot be symmetrical given the nature of our privilege and the state of racism in a racial realist view of society. Oftentimes, “doing” critical race praxis benefits the activist-scholar in qualitatively and quantitatively different ways than it benefits the student or community of color. One can argue that the outcome is hardly fair or equitable. In fact, the community outcome of partnership work or community-engaged scholarship is but a brief disruption, a moment in a legacy of oppressive structures imbedded in school and society. In the case of Alvaro, immigration reform was not achieved via the oral history project or other aspects of the partnership. Alvaro and his family continue to live in fear of deportation. For Alvaro, Utah and the larger U.S. sociopolitical context continue to represent an unsafe and unwelcoming place to live. While the Adelante Partnership aims to confront ethical, caring, and reciprocal relationships, we continue to be confronted with methodological tensions created by our privileged positions as faculty and graduate students. We see ourselves advance in the academy without knowing the final outcomes of the students and families with whom we work. This methodological tension we will continue to wrestle with, and the questions that arise will prompt us to further develop strategies for reciprocity in our research.

CONCLUSION

During ntebalta, individual and collective self-conceptions and worldviews are shattered. Apparently fixed [methodological] categories ... begin eroding. Boundaries become more permeable, and begin to break down. This loosening of previously restrictive labels and beliefs, while intensely painful, can create shifts in consciousness and opportunities for change.

(Keating, 2005, p. 9)
Committed to social change, community engagement, and activism, we are situated in complex, nuanced dilemmas in heeding Ladson-Billings and Donnor's (2005) call for a moral and ethical responsibility of conducting critical race scholarship "at home on the street corners and in the barrios" (p. 298). Even as we feel "at home" with our communities, engaged with parents and students, applying the skills and privileges garnered in our time in the academy, we often experience methodological discomfort in our critical race praxis. As stated earlier, it is not a discomfort or unease we have with the community members or the community spaces in which we live and work. Rather, our discomfort emerges from the nepantla we find ourselves in—the methodological space where theory and practice clash, requiring us to embrace ambiguity, compromise, and discomfort all at the same time. Nepantla is, in part, that uneasy feeling of being involved in transformational work.

While space (and the story of Alvaro) did not allow us to engage all of the many methodological tensions we have encountered in our critical race praxis, we want to argue that CRT and nepantla work in tandem to help us make sense of these tensions and the compromise that is always present in this type of praxis. For example, as CRT scholars, we know that an understanding of racial realism and the inequities it creates influences all aspects of how we negotiate critical race praxis within or alongside educational institutions. Our challenge is naming and pointing to racist practices and policies that are present in a university or school setting, while also attempting to build a sustainable partnership with individuals who work in these institutions. In other words, in order to continue our work from within these institutions we often find ourselves having to diplomatically negotiate the ways in which we call out racism. Different than the discomfort we explained in regard to Alvaro and the many students and families like him, we have also found uneasiness and dissonance in that space between calling out racial realism and maintaining critical hope. However, we remain optimistic in our implementation of the Adelante Partnership, and part of being "realistic" is the idea that activism comes in very different forms and transformation happens at many different levels.

Attempting to critically reflect on our roles as members of a community of color seeking to maintain our positions as academic researchers in a predominantly White research-intensive institution, we utilize nepantla as a space for emancipation and empowerment, rather than oppression or schizophrenia. In wrestling with the complexities of embodying Brownness and privilege, and struggling with the normalcy of frustration and tension that pervades in the "in-betweenness" that Anzaldúa alludes to, we draw upon our understanding of nepantla as a supplementary construct with the potential to complement a critical race methodology. With this, we challenge the false binaries (good/bad or activist/sellout) that we too fall victim to and attempt to place our praxis in the in-between spaces that constantly test and challenge us and provide moments of frustration along with success. By embracing these points of rupture and discomfort, we see the real potential of using critical race praxis in tandem with nepantla.

NOTES

1 Both Alemán and Delgado Bernal and their partners reside in the local community and have children who attend Jackson Elementary.
2 University Neighborhood Partners (UNP) (http://www.partners.utah.edu/), the University of Utah's unit responsible for promoting and facilitating community-engaged research and partnerships, sponsored the call
for proposals and provided $5,000 start-up funds for two years. Since this initial grant, UNP has served as integral partner and provided numerous opportunities for us to continue our work.

2 We use the Spanish word Adecuado, which translates to “forward,” “forward moving,” or “looking forward,” as a reinforcement of the goals and purpose of the partnership.

3 Utah and western U.S. states in general have been undergoing a significant shift in demographics over the last several years. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the western region of the U.S. is made up of 13 states, of which Utah is one. See http://2010.census.gov/news/pdf/apartment2010_map3.pdf for a visual representation of the percentage increase in population for each state. Utah’s population has increased by 23.8 percent since 2010. The Census Bureau also projects that 90 percent of all population growth will occur in the south and west regions of the U.S.

REFERENCES


