

Book Review

Psychology of Women Quarterly
1
© The Author(s) 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
journals.sagepub.com/home/pwq



Crosby, A., & Lykes, M. B. (2019). *Beyond repair? Mayan women's protagonism in the aftermath of genocidal harm*. Rutgers University Press. 282 pp. \$110.00 (cloth). ISBN 9780813598970. \$34.95 (paperback). ISBN 9780813598963.

Reviewed by: Mary M. Brabeck , Steinhardt School, New York University, NY

DOI: 10.1177/0361684320935926

Beyond Repair? Mayan Women's Protagonism in the Aftermath of Genocidal Harm is a book for the serious mind and the open heart. Alison Crosby and M. Brinton Lykes accompanied 54 Q'eqchi', Kaqchikel, Chuj, Popti, and Mam women for 8 years (2009–2017) in a collaborative, feminist, postcolonial, participatory action research (PAR) project. The women sought justice, following the state-sponsored violence perpetrated against them and their communities, in the early 1980s, during the 36-year (1960–1996) genocidal war in Guatemala.

The authors begin with a victory: The February 26, 2016, Guatemalan High Risk Court “A” verdict against Esteelmer Reyes Girón and Heriberto Valdéz Asij for crimes against humanity—sexual slavery, sexual and domestic violence—perpetrated against the Maya Q'eqchi' women. In the ensuing chapters, the authors tell the stories of 54 women “protagonists,” 15 of whom were plaintiffs in the trial. The authors use the word “protagonism” to challenge dominant “damage-centered research,” and the gendered binaries of *victims* and *perpetrators*, which “remain disturbingly intact within feminist understandings of war and violence” (p. 11). Through analysis of the structural violence of poverty, genocidal racism, natural resource extraction, and land theft through colonization, Crosby and Lykes show that the 54 women are not “victims of war” but are dynamically agentic, vigorously resistant, and actively engaged in dialogic (not individualistic), embodied (not only rational) praxis.


This PAR study also included “intermediaries”—researchers, lawyers, psychologists, and transnational human rights activists—who accompanied the 54 women and language interpreters, many who were also victims of violence. Together, and within their distinct (in geography, language, dress, and customs) indigenous communities, this “community of women” formed dialogical relationships. They engaged in conversations, workshops that employed creative arts (drawings, storytelling, collage), and embodied practices (drama, massage), that helped the protagonists form new meanings of *Mayan women*, for whom “the individual

‘I’ is always bound to the social ‘we,’ the living to the dead, and the absence to the presence, which is all the more profound when the dead are disappeared” (p. 6). Collaboratively, they critiqued (“member checks”) the papers the two White university-based scholars wrote to document how the community of women sought truth and justice.

This is a complex and challenging book because the authors (and readers) are limited by the vocabulary and constructs of our Western, individualistic, patriarchal, and racist society. For example, a K'iché intermediary challenges the notion of feminism as identity: “The Mayan cosmovision is a life project, a political project. I don't call myself a feminist. I am a Mayan woman. I embrace feminism as a system of analysis but not as my identity” (p. 202). The authors refuse to simplify the multifaceted experiences of women within their Mayan cosmovision and their collective and individual histories and familial lives. And I (we?) read this book limited by our Western constraints on understanding the knowledge generated from this massive project of research, activism, resistance, recovery, and justice-seeking.

At the heart of the book is the question: “Is it possible to repair the psychological, embodied, material, individual, and collective harm left by the experience of racialized, gendered, genocidal violence through actions administered by the very state that was primarily responsible for perpetrating this social suffering?” (p. 202). This question is germane to the #BlackLivesMatter and the #MeToo movements. Those communities will develop different knowledge and insights, but like the accounts of the 54 protagonists, they will inform human rights and legal processes. Human rights scholars and activists will plumb this rich text for insights into the limitations of our legalistic understanding of human rights. Psychologists will find inspiration in the curative aspects of indigenous practices. Researchers will reevaluate how to conduct feminist, postcolonial PAR work. Feminists will rethink our work on identity and activism. And all of us will reach a fuller understanding of the human capacity for resistance and recovery from gross injustices and atrocities.

ORCID iD

Mary M. Brabeck  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6402-1367>

Author Biography

Mary M. Brabeck is a dean and professor emerita of applied psychology in the Steinhardt School at New York University.