

Contested knowledges: Negotiating the epistemic politics of engaged activist ethnography

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Abstract

This article offers a methodological reflection on what it means to practise politically engaged ethnography with contemporary alter-European activists. While politically engaged research has a long history in the social sciences, it continues to present methodological and epistemological challenges to ethnographers who want their work not only to be academically rigorous, but also politically relevant. In this article, I build on scholarship conducted in collaboration with activists and social movements and what has come to be known as ‘militant ethnography’ in particular. Reflecting on three years of fieldwork with alter-European activists conducted between the UK’s vote to leave the EU in 2016 and the European Parliament elections in 2019, this article suggests that engaged knowledge production, here, is as an ongoing process of *contestation*. The article introduces four conceptual pillars along which these epistemic politics may be negotiated, understanding the knowledges produced as *contextual*, *corporeal*, *contradictory* and *collective*.

Keywords

militant ethnography, activist research, engaged ethnography, methodology, epistemology, social movements, activism

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Introduction

In the summer of 2016, when the UK was preparing for a referendum that would come to mark the history of European integration, I spent my weekends on the streets of London, canvassing for a progressive ‘Remain’ case with fellow activists from the campaign group *Another Europe Is Possible*. I was about to embark on a four-years-long research project that was going to investigate the politics of alter-European activist networks, whose alternative ideas of Europe were largely overlooked at a time when the role of EU-Europe was a much-discussed topic in the mainstream media. Indeed, this movement rejected both the EU’s neoliberal policies as well as the idea that Europe was a binary choice, which you could be ‘for’ or ‘against’ to begin with. Instead, these actors believed, we needed to ask *what kind* of Europe we wanted to live in and how it needed to change to work for everyone, including and particularly for marginalised and oppressed groups in society, influenced, amongst others, by migrant, feminist, anti-racist, and workers’ struggles. My own involvement with alter-European activist networks had started before I conceived of this research project. It was born out of my personal experiences as a mobile EU citizen living in the UK. In search of finding ways of acting politically across the borders of nation-states, I had already been involved with *European Alternatives* – a transnational civil society organisation made up of more than 1000 individual members and member organisations from across and beyond EU-Europe.

As I campaigned for a progressive ‘Remain’ vote in the summer months of 2016, I contemplated a series of questions regarding my transition from activist to activist ethnographer: How was I going to negotiate my dual role as activist *and* researcher? How could I make sure that my research was both academically rigorous and critical but also useful to the movement itself? What would I be able to contribute, theoretically, and practically, to this movement of actors, who were so knowledgeable themselves? Of course, I was not the first to come across such challenges. In fact, politically engaged research may be as old as the social sciences themselves. Referencing engaged thinkers like Karl Marx and C. W. Mills, [Seidman \(2013\)](#) argues that sociology has always had a sense of social purpose built into the discipline and that many contemporary social theorists still want their research to be publicly relevant. At the same time, his book title *Contested Knowledge* also implies that the production of social theory is always a matter of contestation. Thus, while politically engaged research may have a long history, it continues to present methodological and epistemological challenges, not least for activism and social movement researchers (see, for instance, [Apoifis, 2016](#); [Deschner and Dorion, 2020](#); [Reedy and King, 2019](#); [Russell, 2015](#); [Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019](#)).

This article contributes to these wider debates regarding how to practise politically engaged research by offering a methodological reflection on how I negotiated the epistemic politics of engaged ethnography amongst contemporary alter-European activists. I build, here, in particular on scholarship conducted in collaboration with activists and social movements and what has come to be described as ‘militant ethnography’ ([Juris, 2007, 2008a, 2008b](#)). The article thus starts with a literature review that situates my engaged ethnographic project within a wider history of politically engaged and militant research, before introducing my own work as an activist ethnographer. Reflecting on

3 years of engaged ethnographic fieldwork conducted between the UK's vote to leave the European Union in the summer of 2016 and the European Parliament elections in 2019, this article demonstrates how politically engaged knowledge production is an ongoing process of *contestation*. Specifically, the article discusses four epistemic pillars, along which this process of contestation may be negotiated, understanding the knowledges produced here as *contextual*, *corporeal*, *contradictory*, and *collective*.

From public intellectuals to militant ethnography

The hope to make a positive difference in the world has arguably already “guided sociology and modern social theory for some 200 years” (Seidman, 2013: ix). In his seminal call for public sociology, Burawoy (2005), for instance, refers to the public relevance of 19th century thinkers like Karl Marx, W.E.B. Du Bois or Jane Addams. Other scholars go even further back in time, illustrating the long history of engaged scholarship with reference to Aristotle (Calhoun, 2008: xiii), or trace the origins of social theories to ancient Chinese, Egyptian or Greco-Roman civilisations (Seidman, 2013: 9). Since then, the tradition of political engagement was carried on by numerous intellectuals throughout the 20th century (Said, 1993). Bourdieu, whose work was “intensely concerned with the moral and political significance of sociology” (Wacquant, 1992: 49), comes to mind as an illustrative example. His ‘militant sociology’ (Pinto, 2001) was rooted in the observation that social science – in that it is intertwined in complex webs of power structures – “necessarily takes sides in political struggle” (Bourdieu cited in Wacquant, 1992: 51).

In addition to the figure of the public intellectual, there is “a larger genealogy in social sciences, a wide set of epistemic, theoretical, and methodological traditions [...] which centrally address the politics of knowledge production” (Arribas Lozano, 2018a: 456). Critiques of anthropology's colonial entanglements from the 1970s onwards have given rise to different methodological approaches exploring how social research might be practised in more collaborative ways. Various scholars have since raised “critical questions about what the purpose of research is, who is it relevant and useful for, how it is conducted, what knowledges we take seriously – whose knowledge counts – and for whom we write and how” (2018a: 456). Indeed, scholarship that takes respective questions seriously has become more and more commonplace across the academy in recent years, including approaches such as ‘public sociology’ (Arribas Lozano, 2018b; Burawoy, 2005), calls for a politically engaged or ‘public anthropology’ (Bourgois, 2006; Davis, 2006), engaged activist scholarship in human geography (Halvorsen, 2015; Russell, 2015), and a commitment to social change in media and cultural studies (Ang, 2016; Freedman, 2017).

More than providing methodological tools, respective approaches have also challenged and raised epistemological questions about dominant understandings of academic authority, objectivity, and rigour. Oslender and Reiter, for instance, point to the ‘decolonial turn’ and the accompanying call for ‘epistemic decolonization’, which is based around “the concept of ‘coloniality’, the idea that colonial relations have extended past the colonial period itself and into every part of the modern global system,” thus the need “to be critical of existing master/universal narratives that still pervade society and

academia” (2015: x, see also [Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019](#)). Led by scholars from Latin America (for instance, [Mignolo, 2000](#)), as well as from Africa and the African diaspora (such as [Harrison, 1997](#)), respective scholarship has fundamentally challenged Western binaries and universalisms and put in its place “alternative ways of thinking from its dwellings in double consciousness, mestiza consciousness, border thinking, and subaltern epistemologies” ([Reiter and Oslender, 2015: x](#)).

In a similar move, feminists have put epistemological challenges to disembodied understandings of objectivity and proposed alternative ways of knowing and doing research (see [Blakely, 2007](#); [Haraway, 1988](#)). In her seminal argument on *situated knowledges*, Haraway, for instance, challenges “the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity” (1988: 589), that is, “unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (583). However, for Haraway, to situate oneself in solidarity with one’s research field does not mean to automatically regard subjugated positions – even if they might be prioritised – as innocent. Rather, what she is after here is a “practice of objectivity that privileges *contestation*, deconstruction, passionate construction [...] and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing” (1988, p. 585, emphasis added). That such approaches may not only work in theory, but also in methodological practice has since been proven by various feminist activist ethnographers, who brought together decolonial critique and feminist epistemic practice ([Craven and Davis, 2013](#); [Deschner and Dorion, 2020](#); [Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019](#); [Weatherall, 2020](#)).

Despite these methodological and epistemological advancements, scholars who act on the belief that “the purpose of knowledge production is political transformation” still often “have to struggle to pass the test [...] within academia” ([Deschner and Dorion, 2020: 207–208](#)). According to Hale, this is particularly true for “junior faculty members [who] are regularly warned against putting scholarship in the service of struggles for social justice” while “high-level professors shuttle back and forth between the university and government or private sector pursuits” (2008: 2). As Hale points out, such warnings are frequently issued “on the grounds that, however worthy, such a combination deprives the work of complexity, compromises its methodological rigour, and, for these reasons, cuts career advancement at risk” (2). Thus, while the question whether and how research practice may be politically engaged matters to all researchers, one group of scholars to whom it is particularly pertinent are those studying activism and social movements. Indeed, different activism and social movement scholars have called for “a shift from working *on* social movements to working and thinking together *with* social movement activists” ([Arribas Lozano, 2018a: 451](#), original emphasis), that is for research approaches that work “from within rather than outside grassroots movements for social change” ([Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 4](#)). Burdick already wrote in the 1990s that “[w]e cannot rest content with theorizing and representing social movements,” arguing for “a vision that allows ethnographic analyses of social movements to be useful to movement organizers themselves” (1995: 362). Similarly, in the aftermath of the alter-globalisation movements, Bevington and Dixon argued that US-based social movement scholarship in particular “has become detached from the concerns of actual social movements,” calling scholars to pay greater attention to how ‘movement-relevant’ scholarship may be produced (2005: 185).

Amongst activism and social movement scholarship that seeks to reinvent how research may be done *with*, rather than merely *on* social movements, one strand of scholarship that has been most inspiring to me in my own work is the work of scholars using *militant* approaches to knowledge production, namely *militant research* (Shukaitis et al., 2007) and *militant ethnography* (Juris, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). As militant ethnographers Apoifis (2016, 2017) and Valenzuela-Fuentes (2019) point out, militant ethnography overlaps with previous and related approaches in terms of their social or political commitment though they vary in terms of their focus or methodology. These include, for instance, participatory action research (Kindon et al., 2007), engaged feminist approaches (Blakely, 2007; Craven and Davis, 2013; Weatherall, 2020), and activist research (Hale, 2008; Reiter and Oslender, 2015; Routledge, 2013), as well as *militant anthropology* (Scheper-Hughes, 1995) and *militant sociology* (Pinto, 2001). At the same time, Valenzuela-Fuentes stresses that militant research “also differs from the work of solely committed scholars, who may produce sympathetic knowledge that is potentially useful to some movements or struggles but without necessarily getting immersed in the organizations” (2018: 722).

Indeed, the practice of militant ethnography arguably emerged out of a critique of traditional modes of social movement scholarship which approached activists “as ‘objects’ of study in a manner not dissimilar to an engineer studying a closed hydraulic system” (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 46; see also Arribas Lozano, 2018a: 451). Faced, in contrast, with self-reflexive and self-critical actors, Juris concluded that “classic objectivist paradigms fail to grasp the concrete logic of activist practice, leading to accounts and models that are not only inadequate, but are of little use to activists themselves” (2007: 164). Thus, for Juris, working “from within rather than outside grassroots movements,” militant ethnography may be understood as an “alternative research method” to “traditional academic approaches to the study of social movements” (2007: 164). In seeking to not only contribute academic knowledge but also to be *politically* relevant and committed to working *with* and *for* rather than *about* social movements, militant approaches suggest that academic rigour and public or political relevance need not necessarily be mutually exclusive (see Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 370).

As Juris and Khasnabish explain, more than verbally aligning themselves with a particular group, “activist researchers *enact* their political engagement by establishing relationships with a politically organised movement,” and commonly express a form of solidarity that is somehow ‘reciprocal’ (2013: 24–25, emphasis added). In practice, the notion of *being useful* in the process of politically engaged knowledge production might take varying shapes or engagement strategies (see Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014, for a detailed discussion). Besides the objective of creating insights and knowledges that are ‘useful’ (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 26) or ‘relevant’ (Arribas Lozano, 2018a: 455) to activists, concrete ways of engaging might include contributing to key actions like protests, meetings or events (Juris, 2008a); using one’s structural privileges to provide the material and immaterial necessities for struggle, for example, by providing access to university facilities (Halvorsen, 2015); or note-taking during meetings (Jeppesen et al., 2017).

Throughout the 2010s and the beginning 2020s, various scholars have applied militant research methodologies in different contexts. For instance, militant ethnography has since been employed by scholars working in a growing number of different contexts and movements, including anarchist or anti-authoritarian movements in Greece (Apoifis, 2016, 2017), autonomous movements in Chile and Mexico (Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019), the English-speaking Occupy movements (Donovan, 2019; Halvorsen, 2015), the climate justice movement in the UK (Russell, 2015), or urban movements in different geographies (Mukherjee, 2021; Reedy and King, 2019). As these more recent works demonstrate, militant research continues to pose practical challenges which vary from context to context. For instance, militant researchers raised questions such as which knowledges are actually useful to activists and what is worthy being researched in the first place (Donovan, 2019), how to navigate one's own position as academic *and* activist (Halvorsen, 2015; Reedy and King, 2019; Russell, 2015), or how to navigate the difficulties that come with operating in an institutional educational environment that is inherently driven by marketised and neoliberal logics, as highlighted by North American (Jeppesen et al., 2017) or UK-based researchers (Halvorsen, 2015; Russell, 2015; Pusey, 2018). Valenzuela-Fuentes (2019), who conducted her fieldwork in Latin America while being located at a British university additionally highlights issues arising with the colonial and imperial dynamics of knowledge production in Global North universities (see also Shukaitis et al., 2007).

What this brief review of militant ethnography literature begins to suggest then, is that knowledge production remains a matter of ongoing tension, contradictions and contestation. Thus, my aim in this article is precisely not to provide a blueprint or to resolve these once and for all. Moreover, my aim is *not* to present militant approaches and engaged activist ethnography as categorically superior. Rather, agreeing with Russell that we may consider militant ethnography as 'an orientation and a process' rather than "an 'off-the-shelf' set of techniques for measuring, recording and assessing the world according to academic standards" (2015: 224), I want to discuss an epistemic framework that helped me to navigate these contradictions in my own field in the hope that this may prove useful to other militant scholars.

Methodology: Engaged activist ethnography with alter-European activists

In this article, I discuss methodological reflections from my own engaged ethnographic work with reference to other scholars' accounts of practising engaged research with activists and social movements. As Apoifis notes with reference to Juris and Khasbanish (2013): "In many ways, militant ethnography conforms to the more traditional aspects of ethnography" (2016: 50), in that it can "rely on tried and tested techniques of qualitative researchers" (Apoifis, 2017: 6), for instance, when it comes to the application of different ethnographic methods or questions of reflexivity (see also Deschner and Dorion, 2020). As such, my own way of working ethnographically is inspired by classic anthropological (Clifford and Marcus, 2010; Marcus, 1995) and sociological texts (such as Wacquant, 1992) on socially or politically engaged qualitative research. However, given my

particular focus on the challenges of navigating the *political* engagement in *activist* ethnography, I will mostly draw, in this article, on ethnographers and scholars who have worked closely with activists, social movements, or community organising groups.

The ethnographic reflections used in this article derive from an ESRC-funded research project that worked in close collaboration with activists from transnational civil society organisations whose aim is to create European alternatives from below. In this project, inspired by practical experiences and concrete suggestions of aforementioned militant ethnographers, my mode of participant observation was actively engaged in the activism at stake, meaning, for instance, regularly supporting the organisation of events, joining protests, or contributing to the development of publications and campaigns. Through respective engagements, my aim was not only to contribute to academic scholarship, but also to co-create, share and exchange knowledges beyond the academy, and to advance the development of a progressive transnational politics from below in times when nationalist far-right forces were gaining strength across the European continent. That is, my aim was to produce knowledges that are at once academically rigorous and publicly useful.

In the following, I will discuss the contested process of knowledge production in militant ethnography along four dimensions, understanding respective knowledges as *contextual*, *corporeal*, *contradictory*, and *collective*. These dimensions are neither necessarily new or specific to engaged activist ethnography per se, nor are they separable into neat categories, but intersect and overlap. Nevertheless, as I found myself continuously challenged by various tensions and contradictions, these dimensions stood out to me in that they reflected frequently reoccurring issues in my own field. Noticing that these were issues that were similarly raised by other militant ethnographers, I found it helpful to think of these four pillars as something to ‘hold on’ and return to amidst and in order to negotiate the many uncertainties and complexities of doing politically engaged research. What I will suggest throughout and across all four dimensions is that is that politically engaged knowledge production is necessarily marked by a continuous process of contestation which militant ethnographers may embrace rather than try to resolve or ignore.

Contextual knowledges

When my research project with transnational activists in Europe began in late 2016, a year of political mayhem was coming to an end. The UK’s decision to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president were but two illustrative examples of a crisis within Western democracies that cut much deeper. On the European continent, this crisis surfaced increasingly through the rise of various nationalist forces, including far-right parties like the German *Alternative für Deutschland*, the *Front Nationale* in France, the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, and Matteo Salvini’s *Lega Nord* in Italy, which gained considerable strength in founding EU member states. Meanwhile, ‘Fortress Europe’ had left many of those seeking refuge from war, poverty or prosecution to die in the Mediterranean Sea. This rise of xenophobic nationalism alongside other perpetual crises like ongoing austerity or the regressive backlash against women’s and minorities’ rights in different European countries marked both the context

within which my ethnographic research project was unfolding as well as some of the key issues that the movement I work with was struggling against.

While my own research is situated primarily within a European geography, the situation hardly looks less bleak globally. For Bourgois, we live in a “global state of emergency” (2006: ix), where “globalization has become synonymous with military intervention, market-driven poverty, and ecological destruction” (x). Similarly, Juris and Khasnabish describe the contemporary situation as

“a historical moment defined by an ever-more rapacious form of global capitalism and empire, a temporally and spatially unlimited “war on terror,” and a geopolitical order defined by white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialism, ecological crisis, and vast social and economic inequality.” (2013: 369)

Besides considering the political context within which activism takes place, it is crucial to acknowledge the institutional context in which knowledge gets produced. Feminist activist researchers like Jeppesen et al. argued that the process of neo-liberalisation “favours a capitalist market logic over strictly academic commitments” (2017: 1057). Similarly, Freedman (2017), for instance, discussed how processes of neo-liberalisation play out in a UK context, pointing out that research agendas designed to maximise profit contribute to the very situations that produce inequality.

What, then, does it mean to produce academic knowledge that works towards social change in the outlined societal and institutional context? Hale suggests that as “all knowledge claims are produced in a political context; notions of objectivity that ignore or deny these facilitating conditions take on a de facto political positioning of their own” (2008: 2). Juris and Khasnabish argue that “the positivist logic of objectivity has long served as a mask to hide a false universality... in ways that support the interests of those with greater socioeconomic, political, and cultural power” (2013: 373). Here, militant and engaged activist ethnographers problematise how researchers are deeply entangled within institutional and broader societal power structures. This perspective contests the assumption that researchers can enter a field from an entirely neutral position to start with, arguing that the contemporary context is already skewed and biased in favour of the status quo.

In my own fieldwork I found that attention to context is crucial particularly in the case of engaged activist ethnography for at least two reasons: (1) it can give way to new knowledges about alternatives in the making, and (2) it can challenge engaged researchers to not only produce publicly accessible knowledges, but to move beyond “a unidirectional flow of knowledge from the academic expert to extra-academic audiences” (Arribas Lozano, 2018b: 102) and engage in the practice of co-publishing.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was often struck and highly impressed not only by how extremely well-informed my research participants were about ongoing political issues, but also how their contextual knowledges translated into the development of political alternatives from below. For instance, a few weeks after Matteo Salvini and his Lega Nord took power and subsequently installed xenophobic policies against different migrant groups, including a closed port policy for migrant boats arriving via the Mediterranean

Sea, I joined an activist workshop in Florence, in which two strands of participants worked towards concrete strategies or campaigns fighting for freedom of movement and against hate speech. Another example of promising alternatives to the nationalist status quo that emerged from my field is the role that progressive cities and radical municipalities may play *en route* towards a radically different Europe. As I have argued elsewhere (Scharenberg, 2021a), one of the key findings of my research is how transnational activists, rather than aiming to change Europe starting from Brussels institutions or national governments, work towards *transmunicipal* connections which have the potential to bypass regressive nationalist policies.

However, while alternative proposals and ideas to the status quo were emerging everywhere in my field, it was striking how little these were discussed by national mainstream media, which marked another struggle of the activists I worked with (Scharenberg, 2021a). Thus, similar to other militant and activist ethnographers (for instance Casas-Cortés et al., 2013), I made myself useful by contributing to making the ideas and emerging alternatives more public, including through the movement's active tradition of self-publishing. As Deschner and Dorion remind us, activists and social movements often engage in practices of self-publishing their ideas and knowledges, such as in the shape of "feminist libraries, protest archives, and activist publications as independently produced magazines, newspapers and books" (2020: 206). In my own case, while in the field, I spent my writing efforts not on publishing academic articles, but focussed instead on conducting interviews or writing blogposts and articles about events I attended (such as the aforementioned workshop in Florence amongst others) to be published in the movement's own or affiliated alternative media channels, wrote book reviews about books and edited collections that emerged from within the movement, or contributed to movement self-published volumes. As such, producing contextually driven and publicly relevant knowledges *with* rather than *about* the movement became part of the knowledge production process rather than a mere afterthought.

Corporeal knowledges

By the time we made it to Trafalgar Square, I was exhausted. Physically, because I had taken part in the entire day of action to defend EU citizens' rights in the context of Brexit: helping fellow activists set up a stand with material, talking to others during the mass-lobby at Westminster Parliament, and, finally, collectively chanting at the day's closing rally under Nelson's Column. Emotionally, because I am one of the more than three million EU citizens living in Britain myself, whose future is fatefully dependent on how the negotiations will turn out. Trying to influence their outcome, the group which organised this day usually focusses their efforts on lobbying and PR. This, in fact, was their first rally, as one of the activists told me. "We could have just done a lobby, it would have been fine. Politically we didn't really need to do that." But a rally, he claimed, is a kind of reward, an opportunity to get together and "enjoy the collective atmosphere" in times when "there is so much uncertainty and people are feeling really anxious." Familiar with respective emotions due to my own entanglements in the political situation and related forms of activism, what resonated with me about his comment was that the rally's primary

purpose was less about putting pressure on political decisions. It was to have a *soothing* effect on all those left alone with the unbearable feeling of uncertainty - a means of *collective enduring* (Field notes, September 2017, London).

The previous anecdote is one of many possible examples that illustrate my physical and emotional entanglements in my ethnographic field – the *corporeal dimension* of the knowledges produced. Amongst ethnographic researchers, it is widely accepted that the researcher’s body functions as a key instrument for data gathering (Deschner and Dorion, 2020; Juris, 2008b; Scheper-Hughes, 1995), which inevitably bears certain risks and limitations. This makes reflexivity essential and asks researchers to interrogate how what they bring to the field – including their personality, ontological viewpoints, physical features, sexual orientation, demographics, gender, class and ethnic background – may influence how one selects, perceives, depicts and interprets data (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014; Juris and Khasnabish, 2013; Seidman, 2013; Wacquant, 1992).

While reflexivity on these aspects is essential for all ethnographers, it is particularly crucial in engaged activist research in that the researcher’s political engagement in the field further complicates the ethnographer’s position. For instance, Routledge reminds us that politically engaged researchers needs to always remain aware of the “problematic power relations that exist between (research) collaborators” and “activist-ethnographers” (2013: 258). In his case, this meant acknowledging his own “cultural capital of higher education” as well as the fact that he possessed “the time and resources to travel [...] unlike the majority of poor peasants who comprised the membership of the social movements who participated in the network” (258). Similarly, Deschner and Dorion argue that, “activist ethnographers need to reflect on the colonial and heterosexist history and [...] use ethnography in non-exploitative ways” (2020: 206).

In my own fieldwork, I had to constantly remain acutely aware of how my own situatedness as a white EU national inevitably positioned me in the field in complex ways – including legally (in that my status in the UK was at stake during Brexit negotiations), emotionally (in that I faced the same insecurities as many other EU nationals during that period) and politically (in that I was still in a privileged position compared to, for instance, racialised EU citizens or non-EU migrants in the UK) – and how this may affect what I see and not see, what I choose to write down and what not. Reflecting on such and other aspects of the role that the researcher’s body played in my specific context, such as in the previous anecdote, I noticed two important aspects of what it means to produce knowledge *through the researcher’s body*: it can influence how we come to *understand* the field of political activism, and how we *write* about it.

Firstly, as Juris and Khasnabish (2013) argue, more conventional strands of social movement scholarship commonly map activist practice along institutional dynamics. This means that politics is primarily understood in relation to state institutions, party politics and representative democracy, “thereby reducing these phenomena to existing political, epistemological, and ontological frameworks” (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 6). Juris and Khasnabish hold that such a bias towards the status quo and its underlying assumptions might in fact risk a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of more radical politics, which may operate according to a different logic altogether (see also Melucci, 1996). By contrast, the corporeal entanglements of ethnographic research may facilitate an

understanding of how such alternative logics come about, as Juris' work with alter-globalisation activists illustrates. In his case, corporeal engagement included attending hundreds of protests and meetings, part-taking in online discussion, as well as, quite literally, "putting one's *body* on the line during direct actions" (Juris, 2008a: 20, emphasis added, see also 2007: 165).

One key aspect here is to pay attention to the role of emotions, feelings and affects – dimensions that, as feminist researchers (such as Blakely, 2007; Gilmore and Kenny, 2015) have criticised, are too often neglected in our research practices for fear of loss of objectivity. However, as Blakely argued, emotional engagement can in fact "help to foster intellectual clarity and a deeper understanding of the issue(s) being studied" (2007: 59). Indeed, in activist research in particular, attention to "sensations of tension, anxiety, fear, terror, collective solidarity, expectation, celebration, and joy," Juris argues, can provide an "embodied understanding" of the cultural logics of the activism at stake (2007: 166, see also 2008b and Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019: 727). Juris holds that:

"it was only by becoming deeply involved in the direct action planning process, which at times meant positioning myself at the center of extremely intense and sometimes personal debates, that I could fully appreciate the complexity and logic of direct action planning and the accompanying fear, passion, and exhilaration." (2007: 168)

For these affective dimensions of the political to fully become visible, Juris concludes, it "requires an engaged and embodied democratic praxis" (2008b: 61).

Other militant ethnographers' work has confirmed the point that physical and emotional participation – whether during direct actions or more everyday political actions like squatting, providing care work or dumpster diving – can give way to valuable "insights on emotions and concepts" (Apoifis, 2016: 54), "not least," as Routledge reminds us, "because transformative encounters based on solidarity often emerge from our deep emotional responses to the world" (2013: 260). Thus, Valenzuela-Fuentes points to how militant ethnography may be brought together with feminist approaches, which similarly operate "as an embodied praxis" (2018: 6). In my own work, I tried to remain aware of how my emotions were shaping what I noticed in the field and what not, but also to what my own and others' emotions were telling me about my field. For instance, as illustrated in the aforementioned anecdote, it was my emotional and corporeal entanglements (here: exhausted) that shed light on the protest's purpose (here: enduring), which might have been less obvious from an institutionally focussed perspective which may be interested rather in questions of strategy and efficacy.

Secondly, attaining to the corporeal dimension of research can challenge ethnographers to reflect not only on *what* we write about, but also *how* we write. Taussig's (2013) account of Occupy Wall Street in New York is a good example that shows how scholarly investigations that pay attention to emotional and affective dimension can not only help illuminate certain aspects of a movement's specific cultural and political logic but also capture affective atmospheres in writing. Here, Taussig quite literally *occupies* the text with images, signs, quotes, media headlines, and sounds, illustrating the event's historical intensity:

“...several older women sit sedate in lounge chairs knitting woollies for OWS [Occupy Wall Street] and the coming winter. They have all the time in the world [...] that compressed stasis which is the revolutionary moment. Clickety-clack go the knitting needles as history is rewoven. They have cardboard signs by their sides, voicing their outrage. Clickety-clack.” (2013: 31)

Highlighting seemingly banal actions at Zuccoti Park – the knitting, the dancing, the shouting, the cleaning, the drumming – Taussig’s text re-constructs the visceral and, indeed, “magical” (2013: 30) sense of political significance that these moments held at the time. Here, paying attention to “the subjective mood, feeling, and tone” of political events can add “descriptive flesh to what might otherwise read as dry, distant, and disengaged analytic accounts” (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 3), thus creating research output with a greater accessibility and the potential to engage wider audiences.

Beyond the field of activist scholarship, many academics have already begun to grapple with the question how it may be possible to *write differently* (Ahonen et al., 2020), in order “to facilitate an emotional, bodily, or in other ways sensory connection between the text and the reader” (Meier and Wegener, 2017:193). Key concepts and approaches that challenge conventional modes of academic writing which have emerged in recent research and which may be useful to militant ethnographers are the idea of ‘writing with resonance’ (Meier and Wegener, 2017), the understanding of ‘academic writing as love’ (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018) or as ‘skin’ (Brewis and Williams, 2019). Indeed, some scholars have asked how writing itself may become a form of resistance, for instance by writing collectively in order to give space to a multiplicity of voices and perspectives (Ahonen et al., 2020).

In my own work, I share Apoifis’ ambition to write in such a way that the “colour and vivacity” (2016: 62) of my field is conveyed by my ethnographic vignettes. For instance, in a book chapter on the diversity of the movement at stake, my writing pays particular attention to the affective dimension, notably the (literal and metaphorical) *colour*-clashes between two strands of protesters (Scharenberg, 2021b). Here, the writing itself aims to convey both the intensity of that moment, while simultaneously enacting one of the key findings of my fieldwork, namely the ideological and thematic internal contestations and contradictions that existed within my field. Apoifis raises another important point about why it matters how we write, namely to “keep the work accessible to those without experience with academic jargon” (2017:13) – an ambition which I pursued in my own writing. Thus, while I am not suggesting that corporeal perspectives should always be prioritised or that institutional dynamics are less important, I would argue that attention to the corporeal dimension of engaged ethnographic research can raise crucial questions about what we write about, how we write and “for which audience” (Juris, 2007: 172).

Contradictory knowledges

Throughout 3 years of engaged ethnographic fieldwork with transnational activists, I have grown used to awkward introductions. When introducing myself to a group of activists, I usually take a bit longer than everyone else, having to explain my different positions as

both activist *and* ethnographer. When fellow activists introduce me, they sometimes half-jokingly add that I would be a kind of ‘spy’ or explain that I am also there to ‘research them’. Usually, people respond to these awkward introductions with either interest or indifference. On one occasion, however, I was met with a real sense of suspicion. The situation occurred in the context of dozens of activists from across and beyond Europe gathering for a few days of workshops in rural Eastern Germany. The activist I was introduced to had recently come back from the Mediterranean, where they worked with migrants who had undertaken dangerous and often lethal journeys across the sea. When I mentioned my split position as an activist scholar, the friendly expression on their face dropped. They explained their frustration with academics: sometimes they found themselves surrounded by more researchers than fellow activists; but rather than helping in hectic and stressful situations, the researchers were standing around taking notes. They told me they hoped I was not that kind of academic.

The understandable sense of suspicion I faced in this situation is known to many activist scholars (for instance [Apoifis, 2016, 2017](#); [Reedy and King, 2019](#); [Russell, 2015](#); [Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019](#)). Like in my ethnographic anecdote, suspicion might arise from activists’ previous experiences with researchers whose commitment was brief, and who have had little to “give back” ([Calhoun, 2008](#): xx), or when researchers enter an activist community primarily with the aim to contribute expert advice rather than taking part ([Juris, 2007](#)). I share other militant ethnographers’ difficulties navigating participants’ suspicion and open hostility in some cases, as well as the feeling of having to ‘pass a test’ ([Deschner and Dorion, 2020](#)) and that “establishing trust was a constant battle often requiring exhausting efforts” ([Apoifis, 2016](#): p. 53). This tension is pointedly illustrated in Scheper–Hughes’ *Propositions for a Militant Anthropology* (1995), in which she describes her ethnographic engagement during fieldwork in a Brazilian shanty town in 1982. The anthropologist had previously worked there as a community organiser, actively supporting the community’s struggle for clean water, basic medical services, and other local infrastructures. When she returned to the field as an ethnographer a couple of decades later, some of the local women were struck by her newfound political disengagement. After re-articulating her role as primarily defined by observing, documenting and understanding, Scheper–Hughes recalls that her research participants were not impressed. In their view, she observed, they had been very willing to collaborate with her, while she seemed to refuse to work with them. Hence, they called on her to join the struggle rather than “just sitting idly by taking field notes. ‘What is this anthropology to us, anyway?’” (1995: 411), they asked.

To most ethnographers, inhabiting at least two *contradictory* positions will be a common experience. As both *academic* practitioner, that is, as the *scientist* with a tape recorder, and as someone who might become a *friend*, meaning, “a human being like everyone else”, ethnographers have to negotiate what Morin calls an “internal duality” (2002: 158; see also [Reedy and King, 2019](#); [Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019](#)). In engaged activist ethnography, this internal split is complicated further. As both my ethnographic vignette and Scheper–Hughes’ anecdote illustrate, the activist ethnographer’s position is not only split in two but might be understood as a kind of internal *triangulation*. As *human beings*, ethnographers have a sense of responsibility towards their participants with whom

they often have friendly relationships (Morin, 2002). As *scientific beings*, activist ethnographers have to deliver accounts that are not only politically useful, but also “rigorous and robust in academic terms” (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 370; see also Halvorsen, 2015; Juris, 2008a; Russell, 2015). Finally, as *political beings*, activist ethnographers are expected to actively engage politically, rather than idly standing by (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). As Apoifis puts it: “Political participation in the field is a core component of militant ethnography” (2016: 52). Acknowledging these different perspectives, militant and engaged activist scholars argue that the position of engaged scholars is unavoidably “schizophrenic” (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 24), necessarily contradictory (Halvorsen, 2015) and a process of “continuous testing” and negotiation of one’s different positions (Deschner and Dorion, 2020: 219).

Importantly, as several activist ethnographers have pointed out, the embodiment of different positions does not mean that internal critiques are censored or remain hidden in activist ethnographies (Deschner and Dorion, 2020: 218), nor that activist ethnography necessarily produces “overly celebratory accounts of social movements” (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013: 374). Rather than throwing the notion of objectivity overboard altogether, engaged activist researchers argue that the point, as the title of Hale’s edited collection suggests, is *Engaging Contradictions* (2008) instead of ignoring that they exist. Thus, rather than by attempting to remaining politically neutral, objectivity and academic rigour may be achieved here through different modes of ‘testing’ the knowledges produced (see Deschner and Dorion, 2020), that is by interrogating one’s emerging findings from the different positions one holds (personal, academic, political) as well as in conversations with others (friends, academics, activists). Juris and Khasnabish, for instance, propose a mode of reflexivity that moves “back and forth between deeper modes” of physical and emotional engagement, and “more distant moments of interpretation and critical analysis” (2013: 374; see also Apoifis, 2016: 62). In other words, what is required here, is “a decentred, diasporic position”, a way of “engaging with the world, not just personally but also intellectually and politically,” as Ang (2016: 33–34) once described the work of Stuart Hall.

In my own work, I have not only continuously asked myself whether a certain finding holds ‘true’ from the three different positions I hold inside of myself (and if not, what this, in turn, told me about the finding), but also discussed emerging hypotheses in continuous conversation with activists and academics, such as at assemblies, conferences and in informal conversations, including with other engaged researchers. Moreover, importantly, like other feminist (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015) and activist ethnographers (Halvorsen, 2015; Juris, 2007, 2008a), I also experimented with different modes of collective reflection together with my research participants. This included offering back my analysis to activists “for further reflection and debate” (Juris, 2007: 173), for instance, through a blog where I shared thoughts from my analysis as it developed and which encouraged further debate, as well as through ongoing conversations.

Finally, as Apoifis implies in his ethnographic work with Greek anarchists and anti-authoritarians, the contradictions that come with taking an active political stance in the field, are worthwhile pursuing because the particular position of the militant ethnographer has the power to produce knowledges that do not become as visible in less politically

engaged accounts. Comparing the findings of his own work to those in an edited collection on similar actors, which, however, “is not based on ethnographic fieldwork that actively engages with the actors in question,” Apoifis suggests that respective accounts may risk “disempower[ing] activists by inadequately representing their politics,” while militant ethnography can produce knowledges that pay attention to “the political nuances and subtleties of their collaborators which may help avoid similar shortcomings” (2016: 55; see also [Juris and Khasbanish, 2013](#)). Similarly, [Burdick \(1995\)](#) pointed to the need for more engaged approaches to better understand the heterogeneity within specific movements. In Apoifis’ case, the researcher found that it was only because he was “explicitly politically active within some of these networks” that he “learnt of the importance of using both the categories ‘anarchist’ and ‘anti-authoritarian’ when referring to the anti-state radical left milieu in Athens” (2017: 12).

In my own fieldwork, I experienced a similar mismatch while talking to other academics at conferences of how studies using more distant methodologies produced quite different accounts of the movements I was involved with, notably labelling them as *pro* rather than *alter-European*. As I argue elsewhere ([Scharenberg, 2021b](#)), the participants in the movement I worked with had various problems with the European status quo and came to the struggle for progressive European alternatives not as Europhiles, but from a variety of different critical perspectives, including as feminists, socialists or anti-racist organisers. Thus, to label them as ‘pro-European’ would have not only done a disservice to the movement, but also produced inaccurate knowledges of a phenomenon that appeared much more complex and nuanced when viewed through a politically engaged ethnographic lens.

Collective knowledges

While I was still in the middle of wrapping up my ethnographic fieldwork in 2018, two of the activists I worked with had already written an entire book addressing some of the questions we were mutually interested in. The book was but another addition to an active tradition of self-publishing within the movement. Many of their publications, magazines and media brought together academic scholarship with the perspectives of artists and activists. Some of my research participants also often contributed articles or gave interviews to mainstream media.

What these examples from my field illustrate is that the ethnographer “is not necessarily the most educated person in the village” ([Calhoun, 2008](#): xxii). Indeed, as several social movement scholars and militant ethnographers have argued, social movements might themselves be regarded as “knowledge producers” ([Casas-Cortés et al., 2013](#): 199; see also [Arribas Lozano, 2018a](#); [Bevington and Dixon, 2005](#); [Halvorsen, 2015](#)). Juris, for instance, pointed out that “activists produce and distribute their own analyses and reflections” ([Juris, 2007](#): 164). Respective forms of knowledge production in movements do not necessarily require the presence of a researcher or take place inside the conceptual or physical boundaries of an academic institution ([Halvorsen, 2015](#); [Russell, 2015](#)). Rather, knowledge production might take the shape of “everyday “research”” that is characterised by “a constant experimentation and reflexive refinement of political ambitions,

organisational norms, forms of democracy, institutional structures and social reproduction” (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 15). Such practices challenge more traditional understandings of the researcher’s role as a specialist with privileged access to truth (see Russell, 2015: 227) and deliberately aim “to overcome a separation between the knower and the known” (Deschner and Dorion, 2020: 208).

As the ethnographer becomes “one voice or participant in a crowded field of knowledge producers” (Casas-Cortés et al., 2013: 199), what, then, might the specific contribution of researchers be, and how might they be more than mere advocates of a given struggle? Casas-Cortés et al. suggest that we might think of engaged activist ethnographers as those who “weave” or “translate” the available knowledges in a given field, rather than merely “explain” or “represent” (2013: 199). Activist ethnographers thus become editors of *collective knowledges* rather than the sole producers of scientific theory. Like a literary editor, the ethnographer works from a position, which does not create knowledges from scratch, but collects the perspectives of others and assembles them with reference to the given context. In this view, objectivity might be achieved, to borrow an expression from Haraway, by assembling “partial views and halting voices” into what she calls a “collective subject position” (1988: 590). Alternatively, we might think of the editor-ethnographer as Berger’s “clerk of the records” (Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 419) who compiles the history of a group of people. Scheper-Hughes understands this position as a kind of witness. This is important, for “witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations” (1995: 419). Rather than resolving all tensions, the task of the researcher as editor or ‘clerk of the records’ is to take responsibility for how they compile the collective ‘account’.

In practice, this can be difficult, given that the groups in questions do not always speak with a coherent voice, which forces the militant ethnographer to negotiate internal differences, conflicts and contestations within the group. As Burdick suggests, we must understand “social movements as internally heterogeneous and contested fields” (1995: 362). I have negotiated this in a similar way to militant ethnographer Valenzuela-Fuentes, who, in such instances “sought to find a balance between taking a stance and remaining in a role of empathetic/attentive listener” (2018: 727). One conflict that continued to come up in my own field was the importance that different activists attested to existing political institutions. Although they were united in the belief that the European status quo needed to radically change, some believed that the way to get there was to influence or indeed found new left wing parties, while others saw this as a less worthwhile path for they believed that we needed to focus on developing alternative ways of relating to one another, focussing on changing everyday practices, narratives, and behaviours rather than institutions, while yet others agreed that both needed to happen simultaneously. I related to this ongoing contestation within the movement by expressing my personal opinion on the matter in question when appropriate or asked to do so *in the field*, but gave space to the different perspectives when writing about it (Scharenberg, 2021b).

Additionally, a focus on the collective dimension of knowledge production does not only raise questions about the notion of objectivity, but also about how ethnographic research might function as a mode of producing, owning and distributing knowledge collectively. As different scholars’ militant ethnographic work demonstrates, precisely

how this may be done depends on a number of factors, including how one gains access to the field. For instance, Donovan describes how she “did not show up to the [Occupy] movement with the intent of studying it” but how she was instead asked to do so by fellow protesters due to her experience “as an academic with knowledge about networks,” as the activists were interested in visualising and mapping their movement infrastructure (2019: 489). Of course, Donovan’s case is the perhaps most fortunate scenario for an engaged activist ethnographer. In my own case, it was fairly easy to gain access to the movement because – like other militant ethnographers (such as [Donovan, 2019](#); [Pusey, 2018](#); [Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019](#)) – I had already made connections and built relationships with key research participants *as an activist* before I became an activist-*ethnographer*. However, precisely how I was going to produce knowledges that were actually useful to the movement at stake (besides making myself useful during the organisation and performance of events and actions) was something that took me some time to understand and negotiate. Eventually, as mentioned above, I realised that one of the most useful things I could do in my particular context was to help (co-)publish movement knowledges, which I believed made a critical contribution to ongoing public discourses, and thus helping to make existing alternatives to the status quo accessible to a wider public.

Besides the aforementioned possibility of co-publishing, I did this through the collective organisation of public events. Similar to how Juris (2007: 171) and other engaged activist scholars have distributed knowledges through the (co-)organisation of, participation in and presentation at different forums, events, and workshops (for instance [Apoifis, 2017](#); [Arribas Lozano, 2018a](#); [Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019](#)), I also contributed to different conferences and panels organised by and with activists throughout my research. Once again, this did not necessarily mean uncritically celebrating the movements at stake. Indeed, by moderating some of these events myself, I was able to ask critical questions which did not only allow participants to respond to points of critique, but also allowed audience members to make up their own minds. Nevertheless, even though such events focus on creating public relevance, rather than merely “producing the next round of journal articles to benefit the academics’ own career” ([Calhoun, 2008](#): xx), it is crucial to remain critical of the fact that academics who engage in such efforts ultimately do gain from engaging with activists. As one of the activists in Juris’ study put it: “You go back to the university and use collectively produced knowledge to earn your degrees and gain academic prestige. What’s in it for the rest of us?” (2007: 171) Such remarks illustrate both the need for researchers to take their privileged position seriously as well as that the knowledges produced are negotiated in an open-ended process of contestation.

Concluding remarks

This article reflected on what it means to practise politically engaged ethnographic research with alter-European activists, suggesting that the knowledges produced in this context may be understood as *contextual*, *corporeal*, *contradictory*, and *collective*. Ultimately, taking inspiration from scholars like [Seidman \(2013\)](#) and [Haraway \(1988\)](#), who ask us to pay attention to the aspect of contestation in processes of knowledge production,

what I meant to demonstrate through my discussion of these four epistemic pillars that have been useful to navigate the challenges and contradictions in my own field, is that *contestation* does indeed sit at the heart of the knowledge production process in politically engaged activist ethnography. Moreover, what I meant to show is that this negotiation is not impossible but may be navigated with a (dynamic, rather than fixed) set of epistemological orientations (see Russell, 2015).

In practice, this means that every emerging finding is contested by different perspectives and lenses through which the activist ethnographer may view what they see in the field. As such, the engaged activist ethnographer may continuously ask themselves: how does what I observe in the field matter within the particular political context within which it unfolds (contextual knowledges); how may the researcher's body and position influence what I see and how I write (corporeal knowledges); how do the researcher's own internal conflicts produce different perspectives on the matter at stake (contradictory knowledges); and, finally, how do different external and often equally conflicted positions influence the knowledge co-production and distribution process (collective knowledges). The goal here is that in interrogating and contesting the emerging findings from these different perspectives, researchers take responsibility for the *political* dimension that is inherent to the process of knowledge production.

Finally, what I am *not* suggesting is that there might be a single right way of doing militant ethnography or engaged activist research. For instance, while my own research is situated in a European context, there is much to learn from scholarship from the Global South (see, for instance, Arribas Lozano, 2018b; Mignolo, 2000; Reiter and Oslender, 2015; Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019). My objective in this article was to contribute to these wider discussions to demonstrate that engaged activist ethnography *can* produce knowledge that is at once academically rigorous and also contributes towards progressive social change. Reflecting on the epistemic politics of engaged activist ethnography in the particular context of working with alter-European activist networks, my aim, then, was to point to methodological and epistemological questions that can help, as Calhoun (2008: xxv) suggests, to "make social science better."

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