“WE ARE FED UP …BEING RESEARCH OBJECTS!”
NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES AND SOLIDARITIES IN MILITANT ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract: This article describes experiences of long-term ethnographic fieldwork on disobedience, disloyalty and dissensus among women in public space in selected (post-)Yugoslav cities. I focus on the opportunities and pitfalls of feminist ethnography and methodology in the context of positionality, engagement and solidarity as essential elements of research into activist networks. In order to problematize the emerging field positionalities and solidarities, I examine the “militant ethnography” methodological approach (Jeffrey Juris), which seeks to move beyond the divide between research practice and politically engaged participation. It is about being among and within the activist network and adopting many identities and roles by constantly shifting between reflective solidarity and analysis. In trying to shed light on the critical self-reflective research process of embodied understandings and experiences, I focus on ethnographic practices embedded in transnational “crowded fields” that encompass the dynamics of relationships and dependencies between knowledge producers.

Keywords: activism; engagement; feminist ethnography; militant ethnography; solidarity.

Introduction

The testimony of war is usually of such a nature that it reduces women to the role of victim. She sees herself as a victim, and so do others. I am fed up being seen, even by foreign feminist journalists and activists, no matter how much they resist it, mainly through the victim role. It is a stereotypical way of looking at militarism, in which women are not seen as resisting militarism. […] We are fed up being research objects. We don’t gain anything from it. We don’t regain our energy, nor does it help us to reflect upon different ways of working and solidarity... it just wears us out. (Janković, 1997, p. 6).

I have known Staša, a Women in Black activist, for a few years now. The first time we met was in December 2013 when I decided to move, firstly to Mostar and Sarajevo, and then to Novi Sad and Belgrade for one year. Since then, almost every year I have returned to those cities for at least a few months. In the beginning, entering the field and gaining access to the activist community involved being a constant “presence” in various activist places and workshops. It was an anthropological “deep hanging out” during which I engaged
with regular visitors to the now-defunct Matera Mesto and participants of the feminist performance workshops in CK 13. Both these places were alternative, educational spaces where there were frequent meetings and open discussions with activists. That is how I met Luna and Dragana, the independent activists who became my gatekeepers and helped me to reach out to the Women in Black network as well as other organizations and independent activists.

Entering the field and gaining access to the worlds of (post-)Yugoslav women activists forced me to make dynamic decisions related to my positioning, status and agenda. It was not just me observing “them”; I was also being observed and studied by my field partners. Although, I had not identified as an activist back home and did not belong to any feminist activist organizations, I was actively involved in the ongoing public debates and protests in Poland. The collaboration with the (post)Yugoslav activists has helped me to better understand what practising activism means. In addition, it has not only broadened my anthropological knowledge, but was also a personal and political lesson.

Doing fieldwork on disobediences, disloyalties and dissensus in the (post-)Yugoslav space, I often talked with Staša, as well as other women activists, about their boredom, fatigue and lack of political alliances, including acts of solidarity that fully recognize difference and unequal power and knowledge relations during their meetings with feminist researchers. Staša’s concerns led me to think again about feminist ethnography, the methodological challenges, and “the practical and ethical dilemmas of research and knowledge production” (Speed, 2006, p. 71). Furthermore, they point to the existing traps, pitfalls and landmines, which stem from the optics of “culture areas” deployed by feminists and researchers (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Following the idea of geographically defined fields, they often reduce women to victims of patriarchal cultures, traditions and politics (Mohanty, 1991, p. 51–57). These kinds of dichotomous and hierarchical methods of conceptualization have left a deep mark on the discourse of women’s representation not only in the so-called Third World, but also in the Second World of Central and South-Eastern Europe, including the “Balkans” (Matešić & Slapšak, 2017; Todorova, 2009). This has led to the construction of ethnographies which victimize Balkan women and present them as a monolithic and ahistorical entity, paradoxically deprived of both global participation and local contexts (Mohanty, 1991; Matešić & Slapšak, 2017). The problematic identity of the (post-)Yugoslav space meant it failed to protect itself from colonial dependency in the international academic environment. In a way, this has been reflected in various studies, “grabbing and banalising the “hot” topic”, and “approaching the subject matter with sometimes open ignorance and disrespect for local sources” (Bilić, 2019, p. 221). They contain little or nothing about the agency of the interlocutress in the field or are simply reduced to emblematic “specimens” of selected research problems in specific geographic and “culture areas”.

Judith Stacey, back in the 1980s, drew attention to the irony of choosing feminist methodology in ethnographic research (1988), which, it was assumed, was based on a shared belief in reciprocity, equality, commitment, mindfulness, empathy and activism. To be sure, feminist approaches have challenged the assumption that knowledge is objective, impartial and neutral (England, 1994) and have revealed that the interpersonal, engaging nature of ethnographic work could lead to even greater exploitation. One cannot deny that a particular
strength of feminist research is its problem-driven nature and the fact it treats experience and emotions as valuable cognitive sources of knowledge. However, it has failed to overcome the inequality between female researchers and their respondents (Huisman, 2008; see also, Stacey, 1988; Visweswaran, 1994; Abu-Lughod, 1990). Moreover, feminist ethnography has also failed to protect itself from what Kamala Visweswaran describes as “the university rescue mission in search of the voiceless” (1994, p. 69). It has led to important questions about the ethical and methodological dilemmas in feminist ethnography, such as new conversations about telling the stories “on behalf of someone else” (Minh-ha, 2000), which always involves a process full of “representational and ethical landmines” (Schrock, 2018, p. 50). Another challenge, as Sherry Ortner (2014) emphasizes, was the long-standing tensions between Western feminism and feminist scholars in other parts of the world over the identification of pressing problems and prioritizing challenges (see Mohanty, 1984). Those concerns were not without significance for many researchers, who in their ethnographic studies criticized ‘feminism’ for trying to impose “impose anti-patriarchalism, as well as Western and/or middle class and/or “liberal” values of personal autonomy, on non-Western women and communities”(Ortner, 2014, p. 532; see also Abu-Lughod, 2005).

Today, we also know that our research project ideas are never neutral, especially in fields related to activism, politics, social justice and engagement. Furthermore, as Magdalena Kazubowski-Houtson points out, “the on-the-ground realities of ethnographic work are frequently unpredictable, contradictory, unfinished, and ever-changing, constantly throwing into doubt what it means to be an activist” (2018, p. 418). One should also recognize that “even research with emancipatory intentions is inevitably troubled by unequal power relations and ethical and political contradictions”(Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009, p. 3). Ignoring these complexities might lead to the twofold risk of either romanticizing disobedient practices, disloyal activists and feminist networks or idealizing our own ethnographic engagement, solidarity and cooperation.

When I was in the field in 2013, attempting to follow the disobediences, disloyalties and dissensus among women activists in (post-)Yugoslav cities, Staša’s understanding of research collaboration became a beacon for my ethnographic conduct. It was a cautionary tale that prompted me to reflect on the raison d’être of my project and led me to reassess my research practice (Huisman, 2008), giving me the opportunity not only to question feminist methodology and the field itself but also to reflect on engagement and solidarity.

There was no doubt my research project was feminist since it emphasized the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender (Reinharz, 1992, p. 46) in the research process and data analysis. However, I was also concerned that feminist methodology, given its contradictions and epistemological fragility, might be insufficient (Mauthner, 2000). Thus, considering the specifics of my fieldwork, the tensions between my identity as a scholar and activist, the dynamic field positioning, the ethics of knowledge relations, and the need to build solidarity alliances, I decided not to give up but rather place them in wider methodological and theoretical contexts than those labelled feminist.

Therefore, in this article, I focus on the ethical and methodological procedures I followed in my ethnographic field, while collaborating with the Women in Black network’s activists in the (post-)Yugoslav space. In the following sections, I will attempt to unveil the methodological toolbox I used in my ethnographic research on disobediences, disloyalties
and dissensus. I will thus draw on the previous “bad” experiences of activist–researcher encounters, the need to rebuild trust and solidarity in the research process, and attempt to elaborate on a perspective that allowed me to study female activists network from within. Firstly, I present the specificity of my field and methodological challenges that resulted from my perceiving field partners as counterparts with an equal voice and as producers of knowledge. Secondly, I introduce the concept of militant ethnography as a collaborative and politically committed form of creating knowledge that requires activist participation in understanding daily practices, experiences and the logic of activist networks and movements (Juris, 2007; 2008a; 2008b). Next, I explore the potentialities and challenges of being a “militant ethnographer” that forced me to see myself in the field as one actor among a range of others, constantly shifting “between back- and front-stage positions during a research interaction” (Schwandner-Sievers, 2009, p. 183). The last part is devoted to a reflection on what solidarity means in our ethnographic encounters with activists. I conclude by reflecting on the blurring of the lines between being an activist and a researcher.

Knowledge Production and Methodological Dilemmas in Crowded Fields

I had to construct my field without falling prey to the temptation of a ‘place-focused concept of culture’ (Hastrup, Olwig, 1996). Although my ‘small place’ was (post-) Yugoslav space, it was the ‘large issues’ of disobedience, disloyalty and activism, which often transcend geographic and national boundaries, that dominated my anthropological problematizations.

The ‘disobedient citizens’ with whom I collaborated for six years live in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Zrenjanin, Leskovac, Sarajevo, Đulići, Zvornik, Zagreb, and Pljevlja. They create women’s alliances across the former Yugoslav borders and work together within the Women in Black network driven by solidarity and cooperation. From a global perspective, Women in Black is an international women’s movement that is feminist-oriented and engaged in anti-nationalist, anti-militarist and anti-violence discourses. One of its identifying marks is its consistent method of protest in public spaces: displaying disobedient women’s bodies in silence and blackness. The activists aim to change “contemporary political debates by also experimenting with new organizational practices” (Juris, 2008b, p. 9) and by creating a decentralized and peaceful Women in Black network in the (post-)Yugoslav space. They meet up and fight against militarism, war, sexism, and nationalism as well as other forms of violence and discrimination in everyday reality. The women’s activists not only explain, discuss and analyse their lived experiences, but also archive their stories in order to make sense of them. They used them as a vehicle for engaging in the public space, which takes the form of peaceful street actions, protests, Women’s Court, debates and workshops. These kinds of disobediences, disloyalties and dissensus are not so much interventions as civic initiatives and practices based on their situated and embodied knowledge and experience (Haraway, 1988). The polyphonic voice of network activists expresses the demand that the past should be dealt with and responsibility attributed for the (post-)Yugoslav wars. It introduces the narrative of herstory and other ‘inconvenient’ stories into the public debate. Their voices are not only passionate and active, but also disrupt the dominant politics of memory (Kašić, 2001).
For several years, my field was not so much the network itself, but the idea of following the disobedient and disloyal practices of activists. Selected ‘locations’ were designated by places, relationships and practices, which served me not only as the fields of my ethnographic observations, but also as embodied experiences of activist endeavour. I spent time in the office of one of the activist groups, participated in the street actions in black and silence (stajanja), attended Women in Black meetings and workshops, and engaged in mundane activities, such as cleaning, cooking, shopping and travelling across borders. The spaces in which the activists operated were not limited to specific, localized places, but were dispersed owing to the ‘networking’ (Juris, 2008a). While collaborating with the Women in Black network, I have attempted to follow the advice given by Jeffrey Juris and Alex Khasnabish, and openly align with the activists struggle while seeking, if possible, “to break down, or at least unsettle, the divide between subject and object, theory and practice” (2013, p. 371). Joining the network and following the activists enabled me to be part of the ‘flows’ of their knowledge, interaction, communication and solidarity (Routledge, 2008) and led me to constantly negotiate my ethnographic positionalities and the relationships and obligations arising from them.

In addition, I realized that as anthropologists we are not alone in the field nor in our fears and critical conduct. Our ethnographic practices are embedded in contexts in which others, non-anthropologists, also work on a common problem using their research tools, disciplinary preparation, strategies and alliances. In the words of Maribel Casas-Cortés, Michal Osterweil and Dana Powell, our fields are ‘crowded’ (2013). In such ‘crowded fields’ many actors cross national, social and cultural boundaries, engage and create networks that embrace the dynamics of relationships and dependencies between different producers of knowledge. As anthropologists, we are simply another subject among a range of others interested in critical debates about the world we live in together and how it can be changed. That forces us to rethink the traditional role of the anthropologist as a neutral, dispassionate, disembodied, rational and objective observer of the human condition (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). This is what Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) calls an anthropological bluff, proposing instead that we should imagine what forms of political and moral engagement anthropology might take.

I understood that disobedient and disloyal activists create an extensive network of entities, collectives and processes through which knowledge is generated, modified and mobilized’ and practised (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, Powell, 2008, p. 28). The production of knowledge by Women in Black takes the form of alternative education, which includes critical publications, theoretical seminars, discussion meetings, research projects, workshops and conferences. As such, it reveals a “multiplicity of interconnections, articulations, moments of action, meeting points, desires, intimacies” (Routledge, 2008, p. 203).

Recognizing these forms of knowledge production, together with the exchange of life experiences, has important methodological and theoretical implications. Importantly, it requires not only a change in the research process, but also in our perceptions of activists as our counterparts with equal voices, “experts” in their own lives (Reinharz, 1992) or even “paraethnographers” (Holmes, Marcus, 2005), who often “have knowledge and perspectives that challenge the way academic researchers think about issues” (Calhoun, 2008, p. xxiii). The various forms of activists’ knowledge-practices, including political analysis, methodological concepts and theories, are more than simply a “source of information”,
“existing data’” or a “grist for the academic mill that becomes commodities of privilege to improve our status in the academic worlds while reproducing structures of domination” (Langellier, 1994, p. 75). The distinction between activists and the researchers who “study” them becomes much more complicated, unclear and even blurred.

Being a Militant Anthropologist

I realized very quickly that taking on the role of ‘circumstantial activist’ (Marcus, 1998) was not enough. Rather, as Jeffrey Juris insists, “one has to build long-term relationships of mutual commitment and trust, become entangled with complex relations of power and live the emotions associated with direct action organizing and activist networking” (2007, p. 165). Thus, methodologically, I tried to follow the path of ‘militant ethnography’ which, according to Juris, consists of a “politically engaged and collaborative form of participatory observation, carried out from inside rather than outside” (2007, p. 164). In other words, I adopted a methodological solution whereby I constantly shifted between deeper levels of socio-political identification with my field partners and more distant moments of critical analysis driven by the embodied experiences of activist engagement. The use of the militant methodology allowed me to go beyond feminist ethnography, which ultimately lacks a single and coherent definition and seems to be trapped between struggles over the definition and goals of feminism and practices described as ethnography (Schrock, 2018). Therefore, we should reflect upon feminist methodology and its practical application in our ethnographic research and take into account the construction of the field, our ethnographic positionalities, behaviours, choices and their implications for our field partners (Irwin, 2006). The lack of solidarity and reciprocity, as Staša points out in the introductory comment, should be reflected not so much in the theoretical assumptions and ideas of feminist ethnography, but rather in the concrete practices and activities in which knowledge emerges beyond the safe space of interviews – in the streets, borders and factories, where disobedience often takes place. In the context of my feminist ethnography, it was also important to reflect on the “politics of localization”, advocated by Adrienne Rich (1986). I was thus constantly reflecting upon how the politics of localization is played out in the hegemonic relations and the East–West divide in Europe. These geopolitical dependencies and divisions also obliged me, as a European feminist, to pay attention to my own position and to avoid speaking and writing for the essentialized Other and to be wary of using universalistic notions of “we”.

Following Juris required me to step out of the shadows and comfortable observation and move towards more public spheres of active participation and engagement. I gave up ‘waiting’ for something to happen and actively participated in the acts of disobedience. I engaged my body in street actions and protests, helped organize interventions and accompanied my fellow activists on their cross-border journeys and participated in their ordinary lives.

I quickly realised that most of the women activists I met were not just doing activism, but also living it. By being intimately embedded in their everyday lives, I was able to feel their fatigue, anger, uncertainty, fear, dejection, but also joys and successes. Furthermore, I could see the contradictions and ambiguities between their practices and their declarations. The intense commitment in the disobedient actions, and the induced emotions it entailed, allowed
me to understand the subtleties of the field and question my problematizations about the ways activists "perform their networks through diverse bodily movements, techniques and styles, generating distinct identities and emotional tones" (Juris, 2008a, p. 89). In this sense, as a militant and feminist ethnographer, I have used my own body and emotions as specific research tools that allow me to learn "to know as others know through embodied practice” (Pink 2009, p. 70). Moreover, the body has become a place for locating us as subjects in our ethnographic encounter, and thus in a network of related and intersecting variables (Braidotti, 1994; Spivak, 1989).

From a merely participating observer, I transformed into both an observer of my own participation (Tedlock, 1991) and a ‘participating witness’ (Gordon, 1995). As Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) emphasizes, to be a witness means something entirely different from being a spectator. Witnessing concerns the position “inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being, one who will ‘take sides’ and make judgments” (Scheper-Hughes, 1995, p. 419). Thereby, the position of the participating witness carries challenges and the necessity to negotiate difficult and unstable positionalities and the roles of being an activist and researcher. It also promises the possibility of moving beyond the production of “disembodied” information about the network and its activists (Routledge, 1996).

**Back and Forth: the Dynamics of Ethnographic Positionalities**

Throughout my fieldwork, I experienced a strong dynamic in my ethnographic positionalities, which made me move forwards or backwards at the same time. This dynamic not only depended on my chosen identities, positions and belongingness, but also on whether my field partners accepted, rejected or redefined them (Huggins, Glebbeek, 2009).

This seems to be perfectly illustrated by a situation that occurred during one of the weekly afternoon meetings at the Women in Black headquarters. Milica walked briskly across the room and asked about my plans for next Friday. Before I even had a chance to reply, she added in a menacing tone: “Magda, you have to take Anisa to an interview with Irina and translate the meeting”. "It will have to be Thursday, I cannot do Friday”, I said without any objection. Anisa was a young researcher from Turkey who had come for a short “field visit” and was spending two weeks trying to interview as many activists as possible. The “task” I was given was not complicated; after all, I had known Irina for a long time, had a driving licence, and the place was only an hour away. However, on my way home, my thoughts and reflections revolved around my position and role in the Women in Black network. After returning home, I immediately did my fieldnotes, writing down the whole situation and asked myself: “But why me? So, who am I? An activist? Ethnographer? A friend who can help? Am I so naive to think I’m one of them? Have I managed to blur the lines? Or has everyone just got used to me?”

A retrospective reading of my fieldnotes gave me an opportunity to gain analytical insights into the dialogic process of renegotiating identities and positionalities, "in which the research situation is structured by both the researcher and the person being researched” (England, 1994, p. 85). Not only was I looking for the meaning of my insiderness, but the activists, in certain situations, were also trying to interpret my position and presence
among them by placing me in meaningful cultural and social roles. I was a friend, activist, Polish and occasionally an anthropologist. These fluid, unstable and multiple identities were the result of our complex collaboration, in which each of the actresses “goes as far as she can and will go in creating and accepting her own and the others’ selective positionalities” (Huggings, Glebbeek, 2009, p. 10). While I was positioning myself, observing and participating in their lives, ”they were also laboring, watching me, made meaning of me” (Meadow, 2013, p. 467–468). The dynamics of positioning was an ongoing process, especially during my involvement and immersion in the daily activities of my field partners. It forced reflexivity, which is the key to interpreting complex and multidimensional power relations in the research process and questioning them in order to seek moments of understanding and coalition. In other words, recognizing these dynamics and “checking” privileges has become an essential element in understanding the political differences and situativeness that have influenced our relationships (Franks, 2002). It was particularly important for my research, which after all, took place in a social setting where women from different social, educational, class and ethnic backgrounds came together and created a common, safe space across borders (Křížková & Romero, 2018). Thus, our mutual positioning had to take into account all these intersections related to the specificity of our locations: selected, assigned and imposed, “in which various forms of power cross-cut, cross-fertilize, and amplify one another” (Ortner, 2014, p. 531).

The necessary renegotiation of my identities allowed me to feel helpless and enter into an uncomfortable experience, which Staša described during one of our conversations when commenting on researchers: ”I felt they were being pushed into a specific identity, not allowing me to express my identity, which I had built up over the years. Every time I spoke outside of their code it somehow became problematic.” It made me understand better that our encounters were never completely innocent, and that both me and the activists were involved in creating meaning, which sometimes requires ’forcing’ others to adopt specific identities (Kondo, 1986). Although it sometimes took the form of a less subtle bargaining for one’s own identity and social position, I did not see in it ”symbolic violence” (Rabinow, 1977), but rather the activists’ agency in shaping and controlling our ethnographic encounter. Perhaps this is related to the refusal to ”be the subject of research”, mentioned by Staša at the beginning, which feminist ethnographers also describe as ”models of rape” (Reinharz, 1979).

On the one hand, silencing my status and role as a researcher made it difficult to involve the activists and their perspective in the research process at the various stages. On the other hand, the fluid, unstable and multiple identities repeatedly fostered direct engagement in activist actions. I did not want to be seen as someone who showed up to merely record interviews, listen to what they had to say and then simply disappear. I wanted to remain closely related to the activists and their lives. Thus, I gave up ’demanding’ my collaborators see anthropology as an essential part of my identity and inseparable aspect of my presence in their world. Although I was following a militant ethnography, I was also interested in making new friendships and maintaining commitments long after my fieldwork.

By adopting friendship as a method, as suggested by Lisa Tillmann-Healy, I did not consider it a strategic plan to gain access, but rather a ’level of commitment’ to the lives of participants in a research process that ”puts field relations on a par with the project” (2003, p. 735). This meant that the problems and issues related to my research project emerged
"organically, in the ebb and flow of everyday life" (Tilmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735). The friendships resulted in spontaneous situations of solidarity, such as the presence of female activists at my conference presentations, which allowed us to discuss my research in front of other academics and thus include the activists and their perspectives in the analytical and writing process.

**Commitment to Solidarity**

Solidarity, as a leading slogan, practice, and a declared and cultivated principle based on the awareness of differences and local contexts, was an essential element of my 'crowded area'. From the very beginning, it was clear to me that within the anti-militarist and anti-nationalist-oriented Women in Black network, solidarity went beyond an essentialist figure of femininity and took the form of political mobilization above differences (Ulasowski, 1998). As such, it goes much further than the situational support and is more concerned with collective action, the creation of alternative solutions and the moral "ongoing commitment" (Vasiljević, 2018, p. 362). However, in practice, the alliances and solidarity were obviously not without limitations, frictions or tensions, even ones that were difficult to solve and negotiate.

Indeed, I wanted to problematize solidarity by setting it in the context of broader methodological deliberations, as well as by taking into account its political dimension and importance within feminist theoretical and practical involvement. After all, I was studying solidarity initiatives among activists and was trying to 'practice' solidarity. Yet, the notion of solidarity is difficult to define, not only because it can be 'confused' with other social feelings (empathy or compassion), but also because it can be a very subjective experience in the field. What practical, that is, personal, social, or political, actions should I take to demonstrate solidarity? Does the militant methodology I adopted meet the expectations of female activists about solidarity in a research project? How can I avoid the risk of idealizing solidarity?

The troublesome concept of solidarity has sparked a debate among feminist theorists about the need for its rehabilitation and the constructions of new forms of 'neo-solidarity' in research encounters and relations between feminist academics and activists (Mohanty, 2003; Hooks, 1986). According to Nina Ulasowski, “neo-solidarity” is characterized by the recognition of differences, the requirement for sustained engagement and the questioning of the priority of academic careers in the research (1998). The existing methodological and theoretical propositions seem to correspond perfectly with well-established notions of "transversal politics” (Yuval-Davis, 1997), "reflective solidarity” (Dean, 1996), "empathetic cooperation”(Sylvester, 1994) and "common differences” (Mohanty, 2003).

The policies and practices of solidarity, therefore, require a strong commitment to open membership in the network and self-reflexivity upon "specificities of geographical, socioeconomic, and institutional locations of those who enter into intellectual and political partnerships, and to the particular combination of processes, event, and struggles underway in those locations” (Nagar, 2014, p. 5). Thus, as Richa Nagar (2014) proposes, solidarities are better understood and practised as 'situated solidarities', which resist simplified assumptions.
about shared sensitivities and political identities. Furthermore, “situated solidarities” should be understand as particularly important aspects of the knowledge production among different social actors in “crowded fields”.

However, one should not forget that there is a danger that solidarity with those with whom we have lived for a long time might result in acts idealizing our collaborators and our role in the emerging alliances. Therefore, it was important for me that the ‘situated’ and ‘reflective’ solidarity that I was practicing did not overshadow my critical approach to the phenomena of disobedience and disloyalty of activists’ network. According to Stef Jansen (2005), criticism means not only seriousness and respect, but also the recognition of the localized embodied and critical knowledge-practices of our field collaborators and gives the priority to the experience as the main epistemological category (Casas-Cortés, 2006). Moreover, this critical approach helps us to avoid easy relativisms, in favour of recognizing that the positionalities of activists and researchers are not “exempt from critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation” (Haraway, 1988, p. 584).

There are two key issues which must be considered in solidarity-based research processes. Firstly, both the positioning of activists and the ethnographic strategies of flexible positioning produce situated, critical knowledge. Secondly, the dialogical solidarity between these situated and critical types of knowledge “promises something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination” (Haraway, 1988, p. 585). In other words, we should be aware of not only the “partial nature of our ethnographic accounts” (Juris & Khasnabish, 2013, p. 373,) but also the fact that activists have their own knowledge and reflexivity. They are not simply knowledge “suppliers”—they are also engaging in work and solving the same problems as we are (see Casas-Cortés et al., 2013). This research perspective requires shifting from people’s ethnography to the ethnography of the problem (Spencer, 2011). The conventional research task of putting together a chaotic jigsaw of ethnographic data to explain what local activists are saying is thus not sufficient. Therefore, the “Not in My Name” slogan of the Women in Black in Belgrade, is gaining new importance not only for activists but also for researchers.

Instead of representing the supposedly “unheard”, Casas-Cortés, Osterweil and Powell propose “translation and weaving” as processes “in which the ethnographer is one voice or participant in a crowded field of knowledge producers” (2013, p. 199). In these processes, the researcher should abandon her claims to be an “arbitrator of truth” and instead remain in a dialogue with other knowledge producers as well as facilitate communication between them (Juris & Khasnabish, 2013).

In my research, solidarity was not only practised through my engagement but also in my attempts to understand the often uncomfortable roles and identities assigned to me by the activists. It is thus necessary to accept the “mess of solidarity and responsibility” (Nagar, 2014, p. 2) as well as one’s seemingly “conflicting” identities of researcher and activist. There are no established rules of engagement, but they do need to be negotiated within the network and with oneself. However, neglecting the uncertainties, friction, fears and criticism that emerge in the field may result in a naive relativism, unrealistic expectations and, consequently, the loss of opportunities for solidarity (Checker, 2014).
Conclusions: Double Loyalty

Critical discussions about the activism–academia nexus and ethnography as a politically significant practice are not new. Jeffrey Juris and Khasnabish have identified several dominant challenges within the activist and militant approach to ethnography (2013), including concerns about the field itself and tensions and friction between researchers and activists as well as the difficulties of being consistent in shifting between academia and activism. There are also the realities and limits of engagement in the field and ways of practising double loyalty to academia and the political struggle, which pose challenges for militant research projects. The combination of personal and professional roles is often perceived not only as a "messy experience" but also as outright, dangerous or inappropriate (Marcus, Fisher, 1986; see also Checker, Davis & Schuller, 2014). However, as Charles Hale points out, the double loyalty ‘to the space of critical scholarly production and to the principles and practices of people who struggle outside the academic setting’ might be very productive (Hale, 2006, p. 104).

This kind of productivity allows one to rethink the methodological “toolbox” or even transform the entire research process and its ethical outcomes. Moreover, the dynamics of ethnographic positionalities, the emerging field interdependencies and solidarities as well as the blurring lines between the political, the personal and the professional might induce the feeling Michael Herzfeld calls ”productive discomfort” (1996). The dynamics of my identities and positioning, doubts and hesitations, frictions and tensions, but also familiarities and intimacies in my field became essential and productive elements of my anthropological investigations and problematizations. They forced me to keep questioning my methodological and theoretical assumptions, choices and their outcomes as well as enabled me to reconfigure my research conceptualizations through my fieldwork.

In the context of the existing complexities in the relationship between activism and academia, Paul Routledge proposes a ‘third space’ “as a site from where we may negotiate the locations of academia and activism”, (1996, p. 400). It refers to the process of shifting between sites of different practices, positions and knowledge production, and drives us not only to abandon the position of spectator – and replace it with situated knowledge and embodied experiences – but also to consider how our positioning affects the knowledge itself. In this sense, the ’third space’ reveals the unexpected and dynamic research alliances between different knowledge producers in ’crowded fields’.

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