

Militantly ‘studying up’? (Ab)using whiteness for oppositional research

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Abstract:

This paper develops the idea of militantly ‘studying up’. Through a discussion of research into the relationship between migrants and social/labour movements in Buenos Aires, Argentina, it explores the way in which my positionality both helped and hindered the (militant) research process. As the possibility for militant research seemed to recede, by interrogating the antagonisms bound up in the disjuncture between my perceived and my performed positionality, I was able to retain a commitment to militant research/research militancy. The movement to a form of oppositional (auto)ethnography was underpinned by an (ab)use of my whiteness. This touched on new possibilities for militant research, and also afforded further reflection on the structuring power of whiteness itself. Situating itself against-and-beyond discussions of militant research, this paper explores not only the rich potential but also the difficulties and limitations of such a methodology. In this regard it foregrounds discussion of failure as a key reflexive strategy. Ultimately it argues that there is potentially value in ‘studying up’ within militant (migration) research, but that concerns surround the (re-)reification of the very identities and structures that are intended to be deconstructed.

Key words: militant research, whiteness, Argentina, autoethnography, positionality, migration

Introduction

This paper explores a potentially self-defeating commitment to 'militant research'. Confronting my failures, however, led to heightened reflexivity that, combined with critical engagement with positionality, opened up new avenues. As initial attempts at militant research failed, certain impediments were subverted and used in (initially) unexpected ways. In particular, a move towards *autoethnography* and oppositional research opened up new possibilities for militant research that 'studies up'.

By discussing my research into the relationships between migrants and social/labour movements in Buenos Aires, I explore this approach's potentials and challenges. However, I also argue that my ability to carry out such research was itself a privilege, and demonstrating these privileges associated with my whiteness highlights a tension at the heart of much militant research. This paper thus broadens debates (including in this journal) around the way militant research is conceived, practiced, and reflected upon. In doing this, however, it also foregrounds emotion and the messiness of (militant) research, arguing that discussion of 'failure' is key, and should be made more visible in methodological papers. It therefore extends reflexive, immanent critiques of militant research, situated 'against-and-beyond' themselves (Halvorsen, 2015).

In particular, while contributing to militant migration research debates, I reflect on their limitations regarding the (re-)reification of the structures/identities that the research desires to deconstruct (De Genova, 2013; Nayak, 2006). Further, the paper engages with ideas of oppositional research (Jansson, 2010), 'studying up' (Aguiar and Schneider, 2012), and autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), highlighting tensions between these approaches' capacities for rendering whiteness's structuring power more visible, and how easily this

foregrounding can become self-defeating. Underpinning this discussion is an original analysis of positionality, which disaggregates a *performed* and a *perceived* component – the relationship between which is central to potentially broadening militant approaches.

The paper first discusses and defines ‘militant research’, before exploring my initial difficulties. These reflections are grounded in critical discussions of positionality, framing emergent possibilities for militant research: an oppositional (auto)ethnography which (ab)used my whiteness to gain access to ‘elites’. While the approach’s potential is explored, this is intentionally interwoven with discussion of its, and my, limitations. Underpinning the paper are therefore two interrelated questions I repeatedly asked myself during the fieldwork and writing processes. First, who is this research for? Second, what type of (militant) research are you best suited to carry out? This paper attempts to answer these.

Militant research/research militancy

Emerging from autonomist Marxists’ workers’ inquiries in the 1960s (Haider and Mohandesi, 2013), militant research has a long history. A thorough, genealogical analysis of the concept (see Counter Cartographies Collective et al., 2012) is not the focus of this paper, rather, it is the recent resurgence of militant research within geographical and migration scholarship, and in particular the concept “*militancia de investigación*”. Developed by *Colectivo Situaciones* following Argentina’s 2001 economic crisis, the concept hinges on a dual meaning – ‘research militancy’ and ‘militant research’. The former a process of radical and reflexive knowledge production, the latter views knowledge production *itself* as radical activism (*Colectivo Situaciones*, 2003). Both aspects are crucial. The second meaning emphasises the importance of producing transformative, radical knowledges, ‘useful’ to those with which you are struggling (Russell, 2015; Taylor, 2014). But this alone is necessary not sufficient. More than

just producing ostensibly ‘radical’ findings, by locating and attempting to overcome contradictions at the heart of movements, (co)produced knowledges should challenge preconceived, comfortable notions – including those about *militancia de investigación* (Halvorsen, 2015). Methodologically the process thus foregrounds messiness and antagonisms, explicitly takes a stance on contentious issues, and is always in a process of becoming (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015).

Underpinning Argentine work (e.g. Colectivo Situaciones, 2002; Mason-Deese, 2013; Sitrin, 2012), the approach resonates globally, recently driving geographical research into: urban commoning (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015), the Occupy (Halvorsen, 2015) and climate (Russell, 2015) movements, and counter-cartography (Counter Cartographies Collective et al., 2012). The heterogeneity of militant approaches is illustrated further by 2013’s *Militant Research Handbook*, and despite the range of topics and locations it covers there are obvious commonalities: a commitment to “work[ing] in and with the movements they are concerned with” (Bookchin et al., 2013: 6). This is manifested in research that focuses *on* the movements themselves, attempting to understand their/our strengths and weaknesses/contradictions. Dovetailing with the initial motivations for workers’ inquiries (Tronti, 1964), such an approach dominates militant research. Despite the enormous value of this research, however, I argue that this prevalence can narrow militant research, which, in my experience, was problematic.

This focus *on* movements can fetishise ‘action’ and the excitement of protest (see Apoifis, 2016). And while extremely important militant work moves beyond the spectacular, exploring everyday, affective politics (Sitrin, 2012) and social reproduction (Precarias a la deriva, 2004), they still focus *on* movements. There is thus an absence of militant research that ‘studies up’ – research that, while working *in, with, and for the benefit of* the movements

they are concerned with, focuses on ‘elites’. This paper explores a number of benefits to this approach (while acknowledging limitations and difficulties). First, it can avoid fatigue among over-researched movements. Second, there is potential to produce tangibly beneficial research for movements, uncovering information they may be unable to access (see Routledge, 2002) – chiming with recent work emphasising the importance of ‘studying up’ for radical research more generally (Slater, 2016). Taken together, these two points illustrate how the approach can produce original, militant findings, and could also complement more ‘traditional’ militant research. But third, and returning to the dual meaning, ‘studying up’ can also aid the research’s militancy: it forces researchers to confront their positionality, complicates neat divisions between ‘elites’ and ‘movements’, and, key to *militancia de investigación*, problematises the method itself.

Also important is emerging work on militant migrant research (see Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013a; Sossi, 2013), which, attempting to confront ‘border imperialism’ (Walia, 2013), emphasises the lack of neutrality surrounding migration (Kasperek and Speer, 2013). Those carrying out militant migration research must “attend to a self-reflexive critique of [their] own complicities with the ongoing nationalization of society” (De Genova, 2013, 252). (Co)Producing ‘partisan’, destabilising knowledges is key to this ambitious, yet necessary, endeavour, but De Genova (2013) points to a tension within militant migration research: how do you prevent the (re-)reification of categories you seek to destroy? This is especially important when well-intentioned migration research can be ‘highjacked’ with lethal consequences (Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013b). Locating and engaging with antagonisms is central to *militancia de investigación*, and therefore militant migration research consistently struggles, against-and-beyond itself, to deal with these tensions. Likewise, extending these ideas to Nayak’s (2006) work, I also argue that a militant approach faces similar issues when

engaging with whiteness. The next section builds on these ideas, showing how the untenability of my initial research design did not preclude the potential for *militancia de investigación*.

Research context

Armed with a methodological framework grounded in *militancia de investigación* I began my PhD fieldwork in Buenos Aires. Having already been in contact with social movements and migrant organisations based predominantly in urban ‘informal’ settlements, I intended to carry out an embedded ethnography, emphasising observant participation to examine relationships between radical social movements and migrants from Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay – ultimately desiring to produce research *for* and *with* these social movements and migrant groups. In hindsight delightfully naïve, at the time it was exciting enough to scratch my (then) ‘capital A’ activist itch (Taylor, 2014), sufficiently robust to satisfy my institution, and an appropriate methodological framework given its endogeneity. Upon beginning the research, however, things unravelled. I had grossly underestimated ‘research fatigue’ (Clark, 2008). Since the 2001 economic crisis, Argentina has become an anti-capitalist ‘laboratory’ (Colectivo Situaciones, 2014) for many (Western) researchers/activists. Consequently movements felt inundated and over-researched, something exacerbated by extractive research practices. Compounding this was frustration at the perceived imperialist arrogance of researchers from Western institutions, who, in the words of movement members I spoke with, assumed a right to carry out research in the ‘third world’ or ‘periphery’ – especially when research only tangibly benefitted researchers’ careers.

These concerns were wholly reasonable, and fundamental to assuaging them was the development of rapport and trust. But in the wake of high-profile state infiltration, issues pertaining to both my positionality and my personality (cf. Moser, 2008) made this

challenging, see below. Movements not only felt over-researched, but also under threat – I witnessed heated exchanges between movement members and researchers, occasionally ending in the physical ejection of the latter. In this climate I felt uncomfortable and unwilling to place extra stresses on already (justifiably) anxious movements, as the significance of my research paled into comparison with their work. I thus stood in tension with research militancy – there was no (co)production, and any attempt to persist with research *on* movements was problematic. But a lack of research militancy was not the only problem I faced.

Given Argentine movements' emphasis on self-education and publishing (Sitrin, 2012), it was unclear what I could usefully offer back. 'Original' thoughts disappeared as I explored the breadth and depth of self-published work accessible in Buenos Aires. Such was this works' quality that my initial plans would not have produced anything useful, transformative, or radical, merely a simulacrum of a richly reflexive (unemployed) workers' enquiry. This made me reluctant to continue as the proposed research seemed solely for my benefit, and with this, militant research seemed as far-fetched as research militancy. However, by examining my occupation of such a contradictory, antagonistic position in-and-against *militancia de investigación*, I attempted to move beyond this impasse.

Performed and perceived positionality

Reflecting upon these challenges it was clear how my position as a white, Western researcher affected the research process. Consistently my social class position was assumed to be higher than I self-defined, and even for some left-wing activists more affluent than I was (relatively and absolutely), my whiteness and Europeanness was problematic. While frustrating, particularly when those very activists were of recent European descent and members of the

white bourgeoisie themselves, this reinforced the contradictions embedded in Argentine conceptions of whiteness and Europeaness (Joseph, 2000). However, while my whiteness caused mistrust, it inevitably afforded me privileges. People and groups I assumed would be suspicious of my presence and research – such as middle-class neighbourhood groups and members of city and national governments – were welcoming. In these situations, being white and from a European university was a positive. Initially this put me in a difficult position. The gap between how others read me (extremely rich, white, and European) and how I viewed myself (white and European certainly, but most importantly a migration activist/researcher) indicated a need for critically reflexive and ‘holistic’ understandings of positionality (Sultana, 2007), while also problematising neat distinctions between ‘elite’ and ‘movements’. To frame this disjuncture, I refer to the former as my *perceived* positionality and the latter my *performed*. Although full knowledge of either type of positionality is impossible (Lynch, 2000), critical reflection on the shifting relationship between my *perceived* and *performed* positionalities afforded me new militant potentials.

Often my beliefs and how I viewed myself were of little obvious importance, given how my appearance and (perceived) social status closed/opened doors of opportunity. Consequently as I withdrew from the research I had intended, I was also becoming aware of the ease with which I could gain access to more affluent, non-migrant groups and arrange ‘elite’ interviews and observations. ‘Elite’ is of course a contested and complex category, but in this paper I use it to refer loosely to members of city and national governments, judges, high-profile academics, and prominent members of middle-class (un)civil-society groups. The political stances and attitudes towards migrants of these ‘elites’ ran a gamut, but fundamentally they had positions of power, influence, and social capital far beyond the

majority of movement members. The use of the term should thus be seen heuristically rather than a commitment to an 'elite'/'movement member' binary.

Crucially, from discussions with activists and migrants, this access to 'elites' was not something they could achieve as easily. Therefore, a methodological approach with the potential to be useful and transformative to groups in struggle emerged: I could conceive of *militancia de investigación* once more. However, unlike examples cited above, I argue that (ab)using my whiteness and associated privileges to gain access to various 'elites' is a militant form of 'studying up'. Rather than downplaying my social status and privilege, I instead sought to confront and subvert it, making research that was not a watered-down version of social movements' possible. Underpinning this approach, therefore, is Routledge's (2002, 487) idea that when "[d]ifference is not denied, essentialised, or exoticised but rather engaged with in an enabling and potentially transformative way", the (ab)use of privileges (in this sense whiteness and an 'outsider' status) can have radical potential.

It is important, however, not to portray perceived/performed positionalities as discreet. Instead, much as each type was itself dynamic, so too was their relationship. For example, reflection on my perceived positionality in different situations – especially when it departed from how I viewed myself – often led me to try and over-/under-perform to compensate, playing up/down the factors that seemed either a help or a hindrance. In turn, these performances inevitably influenced my perceived positionality, and so on.

This relates to an important theme of this paper: failure. Ethnographic literature is replete with excellent discussions of challenging fieldwork, although these are sometimes framed slightly euphemistically as 'messiness' (Donnelly et al., 2013) and 'awkwardness' (Koning and Ooi, 2013). Militant research requires deep reflexivity, and part of this is thus a

need to foreground emotions associated with failure and anxiety in the (militant) research process, to help precipitate a move beyond the macho and the spectacular. In my case, there was a 'fear and [self-] loathing' (Down et al, 2006) that came with a perceived failure to produce even a 'good enough' ethnography (Luttrell, 2000), let alone a perfectly-crafted militant one. Exacerbating pre-existing mental health issues, the anxiety-inducing effects/affects of my failures undoubtedly influenced my performed (and thus, ultimately, my perceived) positionality. This was especially acute at the start, as only towards the end of the fieldwork did I begin the confrontation and processing of the shame associated with my perceived failure to carry out militant research.

Emphasising the need for dynamic and iterative reflexivity, my experiences also illustrate extra pressures associated with militant research. Combatting these are two of this papers' interrelated aims. On the one hand, broadening the militant research's purview to emphasise a wider range of approaches, and reduce the pressures associated with carrying out a 'correct' version. On the other, foregrounding failure as not just an inevitable part of research, but in fact a powerful and beneficial element – even if only in hindsight.

Oppositional (auto)ethnography

The ease with which I arranged meetings and interviews with 'elites' was initially surprising. Given the xenophobia, racism, and animosity towards labour/social movement of Buenos Aires' middle classes, I imagined my research and I would be unwelcome. But this could not be further from the truth. 'Elite' interviewees were disarmingly helpful, often introducing me to their 'hard to contact' acquaintances, making 'snowballing' extremely easy. At times I was even approached and interviews offered to me – most surprisingly when, unsolicited, a national government representative sought me out to organise an interview for/with their

boss. Like Benwell (2014), the 'outsider' status of my nationality had tangible benefits. Mediated through the 'prestige' of university affiliation, it was assumed that, at worst, I was some neutral arbiter of migration policy. Or, more commonly, that I was researching migration because, like many of my interviewees, I thought it was, I quote, a "serious problem that needed solving". These assumptions built unintended rapport, leading to extremely unguarded responses. While my surprise at being received thusly belied a hubristic militancy, grounded in an exaggerated *performed* positionality, it ultimately paved the way for further reflexivity, discussed below. More prosaically, however, it highlights scope for producing useful, radical knowledges.

Migrants/movement members struggled to access 'elites', and if they did they received rehashed official lines. Conversely, I often got lengthy, open responses from officials, and alarming honesty (typically racism) from members of middle-class neighbourhood organisations. Both types of responses proved interesting and useful. The latter shaped much of my analysis, and the former included details of future policies, legal cases, and hitherto unannounced plans for eviction of 'informal' settlements – all significant to the everyday lives of migrants and movement members.

However, I am loath to self-aggrandise and overplay the quantity/quality of the information I elicited, rather pose the approach's militant potential. In particular, while I relayed some of this information, with closer ties to movements, I could have imparted more, and it been more useful: there was potential for more militant research outputs and heightened research militancy. With the latter, working in tandem with movements to (co)produce interview schedules that touch on topics most important to them could have real, radical, and transformative benefits. Research militancy thus increases the militancy of

the research, emphasising the importance of, and relationship between, the dual-meanings. Returning to failure and its reflexive importance, while my own research did not maximise its militant potential, the approach of militantly 'studying up' is potentially fecund.

Ultimately, this reflects an important shift in my research focus, grounded in the desire to produce militant research and a commitment to reflexivity throughout the entire research process. With the aforementioned quality and quantity of movements' research, there was very little original I could offer back. But more than this, the problems of speaking for, and thus silencing (Spivak, 1988), were becoming increasingly obvious. So instead of focusing the research entirely on migrants' experiences, the research was adjusted to consider attitudes *towards* these groups, and the way in which intersectional, territorial subjectivities mediated these relationships. This combatted a gap in the literature, and produced knowledge that was in some sense 'new'.

Carrying out the research described here obviously brings with it ethical considerations. While I never encouraged discrimination, I struggled when participants spoke and behaved in discriminatory and (to me) offensive ways. Although this information was interesting and potentially 'useful', my failure to interject was out of character, and could be read as tacit consent. Similarly, while going 'undercover' can yield powerful results (Routledge, 2002), concerns remain about being intentionally misleading in (oppositional) research. Navigating these difficulties is challenging, and while I never lied about my political beliefs or research affiliations, staying silent and allowing beliefs to be perpetuated is ethically similar. This touches on broader ethical debates relating to explicitly partisan research, but, returning to Routledge (2004), for whom a 'relational ethics of struggle' underpins scholar-

activist research, non-militant forms of research themselves arguably raise ethical concerns – especially surrounding migration.

Whiteness and autoethnography

My research experiences shared similarities with Oglesby (2010) whose ‘outsider’ status meant ‘elites’ never viewed them as a ‘threat’, and were very forthcoming. However, in my case, the ‘insider’/‘outsider’ identities were not clear-cut (cf. Mohammad, 2001), and contrary to Oglesby’s experiences, my whiteness did not always mark me as an ‘outsider’. Dominant constructions of the Argentine national identity write non-white groups out of their history, attempting to exclude certain nationals along class and racial lines (Bastia and vom Hau, 2014). Therefore, for a number of ‘elite’ research participants, my whiteness enabled me to become an ‘insider’ of their imagined Argentine community. I therefore inhabited multiple and contested positions, being both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ at different times and places. Reflections on this emphasised the complex and constant identity construction and (re)production carried out by much of Buenos Aires’s middle classes. My research unpacked these territorialised processes which impacted the daily lives of migrants through micro-/macro-aggressions and both symbolic and physical violence. The nature of these structures and their intersections were teased out through *autoethnography* in an attempt to unpack whiteness’s structuring role (cf. Warren, 2001).

For too long critical interrogation of whiteness was lacking in (geographical) literatures (McGuinness, 2000). Slowly changing, work now emphasises whiteness’s role as an “invisible and normative” (Rhodes, 2013, 52), socially-constructed ‘organising principle’ (Nayak, 2007). Whiteness is also erroneously conflated with conceptions of Westernness and/or Europeanness (Bonnett, 2008), creating a mutually constituting relationship that marginalises

migrants, people of colour, and indigenous groups – particularly evident in Argentina. Using myself and my whiteness as a research object/subject, I further problematised the researcher/researched binary by occupying a liminal research space (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). The very fact that I could carry out the research described here demonstrated the privilege of whiteness. For instance, (ab)use of my whiteness afforded me preferential treatment from security at private university and government events (which I frequently attended uninvited), made it easy to gain access and talk to ‘elites’, and literally and figuratively opened doors to exclusive parts of the city. Alongside others, these experiences demonstrated whiteness’s power in Buenos Aires first-hand, and also the intersecting structures whiteness subsumes and reinforces – particularly class and national identity.

I also explored the status and hierarchy of migrants, intentionally overstaying my visa, therefore technically becoming an ‘illegal’ immigrant. Yet whenever I explained this to the majority of Argentines, the idea was dismissed outright: I was barely an immigrant, let alone ‘illegal’. (Ab)Use of whiteness enabled me to ‘study up’, affording further reflexivity and ultimately the exploration of the ‘biopolitical privileges’ (Bunds, 2014) whiteness holds in Buenos Aires (and beyond). Through an interrogation of my *perceived* and *performed* positionalities, and the often antagonistic relationship between the two, militant research potentially reappeared.

Essential to *militancia de investigación*, however, is reflexive critique and acknowledgment of failure. Returning to De Genova’s (2013) and Nayak’s (2006) concerns over (re-)reification, while necessary to interrogate and recognise one’s own privileges, it is another thing to deconstruct them. Despite intentions to move militant research beyond the spectacular, undercurrents of machismo and a white-saviour complex inevitably remain.

Frank reflexivity is, therefore, necessary but not sufficient, and this paper is hopefully a partial attempt at such an endeavour, rather than mere self-indulgence. Ultimately the challenge for militant migration research that *autoethnographically* engages with whiteness is to be self-negating and deconstruct its own edifice. But arguably it thus runs headlong into concerns over using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 1984).

Conclusions

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning, the reflection found herein was grounded in a fundamental desire to undertake research not solely for my benefit, although this aim was ultimately frustrated. Second, to think critically about the research to which you are best suited should not be read as essentialistic, but rather an explicit exhortation to confront privilege through critical analysis of positionality – attempts to combat (re-)reification must first be carried out autobiographically. My responses to these two questions, grounded in a confrontation of failure, led me to the idea of militantly 'studying up'. That is, research that, while attempting to work *in, with, and for the benefit of* radical movements, placed focus on 'elites' rather than *on* movements themselves (simultaneously also troubling both categories). Explicitly trying to avoid research fatigue, this approach also attempted to locate a space for original and potentially transformative knowledge-creation. This shifted focus allowed me to combat gaps in the literature, and at times also revealed important information for movements in struggle – however, as noted, a lack of research militancy limited the research's militant potential. Responding to these failures drove further reflexivity, grounded in an (auto)ethnographic exploration of the dynamic, iterative relationship between my *perceived* and *performed* positionality.

This paper is a continuation of this reflexivity, arguing for radical honesty and discussion of failure as fundamental for militant research/research militancy. And so despite the described shifts in research focus, I have openly documented my research's limitations. A further question remains pertinent however: can militantly 'studying up' be done without a self-defeating (re-)reification? I remain unsure – especially when exploring migration and whiteness. The potential to satisfy both aspects of *militancia de investigación* is apparent, but at what cost? However, not only disingenuous to provide a definitive answer, it would also be incompatible with 'militant research', which should always work, against-and-beyond itself, to destabilise. The hope, therefore, is that in broadening the approach's purview, this paper can start a debate from which new militant methods and reflexive critiques can emerge.

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