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**The Ethics of Immersion:
Militancy, Reflexivity, and Knowledge Production in Transnational Activism**

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Abstract

This paper explores ethnographic research conducted from within transnational activist networks linking European radical left collectives and Zapatista communities in Chiapas, examining how political commitment reshapes researcher positioning and redefines the conditions of public engagement. Militant ethnography, which encourages active involvement in the movements being studied, strives to challenge the traditional divide between scholar and activist, advocating for immersive, collaborative research. Through direct participation in initiatives and actions, this approach provides access to insider knowledge and helps co-produce understandings of how activists conceptualize and enact global solidarity. However, militant ethnography also entails crucial ethical and methodological challenges.

Building on multiple fieldwork experiences in Europe and Chiapas conducted between 2015 and 2025, this paper critically examines the interactions between personal militancy and scholarly positioning, addressing how these dynamics simultaneously enrich and complicate the research process. Contrary to the recurrent suspicion that active involvement compromises scientific rigor, being embedded in political struggle often intensifies rather than undermining the possibilities for critique, exposing researchers to demanding and fragile relational balances. In contexts where ideological commitment is constitutive, militant ethnography does not claim to reconcile nor to resolve the tensions it inhabits. It renders them analytically productive, making visible how contested and uneven experiences of dissent are articulated across both activist and academic fields. Without presuming coherence or transformative effects, the paper shows how such immersion can instead reconfigure the conditions and stakes under which reflexivity is produced.

Keywords: Militant Ethnography, Ethics, Transnational Activism, Positioning, Knowledge Production

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Reframing Engagement: Public Anthropology and Anti-Systemic Struggles

“Europa Zapatista¹ is not an NGO: it’s a political project in support of the Zapatista *compas*² and their autonomy!” exclaims a Spanish activist during a meeting organized to raise funds for an operating room in the autonomous territories. It’s not the first time I’ve heard someone express this idea during one of our assemblies (I might have been one of those people). The debate continues for a while, with tones ranging from irritation and impatience to laughter. In the end, a few of us volunteer to write the text of the campaign. The final result – collectively approved by the assembly – states that we are “not a humanitarian organization” as we stand in solidarity with the Zapatistas³ “because they rebelled, crying out *¡Ya basta!* against misery, humiliation, and repression, showing us what dignity means: fighting for Life”. Six months later we achieved double our goal, with donations ranging from 5 euros to several thousand. A German activist asked if we could provide some kind of receipt for larger amounts to allow tax deductions; she was referring to doctors who might be particularly sensitive to the initiative of supporting the Zapatista autonomous health system. Her query provoked indignant reactions: it was not perceived as acceptable that people would expect something in return, their gesture had to be motivated by “political conviction” and not the desire to “save a few euros”. Furthermore, it would reproduce a difference in the treatment of people who are able to donate more, either coming from wealthier countries or just because they have more money. Once again, the implicit mandate was not to reproduce dynamics that are instead normalized in the third sector or in humanitarian and developmentalist projects.

“The understanding that a system is responsible for these pains. The executioner is an exploitative, patriarchal, pyramidal, racist, thievish and criminal system: capitalism. The knowledge that it is not possible to reform this system, to educate it, to attenuate it, to soften it, to domesticate it, to humanize it.

¹ European Network in solidarity with Zapatista communities: it includes collectives coming from over 70 different cities scattered around the continent, tied by the common aim of promoting the Zapatista fight, its ideas, as well as anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial values.

² *Comrades* in Spanish. Translations of conversations and original texts from Spanish, French, and Italian by the author.

³ The term “Zapatistas” is used in this text with deep awareness of the theoretical debates it generated. It refers to members of organized communities in Chiapas, including both the EZLN and its support bases (BAZ). I am aware that this designation risks homogenizing a complex and heterogeneous political and social process. The work of Leyva-Solano (2000) suggests the category of *neozapatismo* to encompass the EZLN and the broader movement converging in its aspirations. Baschet (2024) problematizes the use of *zapatismo* in its singular form, echoing the explicit reluctance of communities in resistance to identify with *ismos*. He refers to the *Zapatista Experience* to underline its processual, open-ended nature. Apostoli Cappello (2013) defined *zapatismo* as “a cultural artefact” capable of inspiring “alter-globalization movements”. I present the constellation of activist worlds and values surrounding the Zapatista experience in a forthcoming article (Gambardella 2026). These considerations did not prevent critical authors from speaking about “Zapatista men and women” or “Zapatistas”, as they self-name. In the context of the present text, my choice is related to how my interlocutors define themselves, collectively and politically, when stating “nosotros somos zapatistas” or “como zapatistas que somos”. This self-identification carries historical and affective weight and distinguishes them from those they refer to as *ciudadanos*, *Sexta Internacional*, *Europa Insumisa*, *firmantes de Una Declaración por la Vida*, according to whom they are addressing and when. Similarly, the activists I engage with don’t call themselves “Zapatistas”. Actions are positioned “in solidarity with” Zapatista *compas* or the Zapatista struggle. I adopt this terminology as a recognition of how political identities are conceptualized in emic terms.

Apostoli Cappello, E. (2013). *Tutti siamo indigeni! Giochi di specchi tra Europa e Chiapas [We Are All Indigenous! Mirror Games between Europe and Chiapas]*. Cleup.

Gambardella, M. (2026). Circulation of Ideologies: Solidarity Activist Networks with the Zapatista Rebellion. *Perifèria, revista de recerca i formació en antropologia*. [Forthcoming].

Leyva-Solano, X., & Sonleitner, W. (2000). ¿Qué es el neozapatismo? [What Is Neozapatismo?]. *Espiral. Estudios sobre Estado y Sociedad*, VI(17), 163–202. Accessed 5 February 2026.

<https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/138/13861708.pdf>

The commitment to fight, everywhere and at all times – each and everyone on their own terrain – against this system until we destroy it completely. The survival of humanity depends on the destruction of capitalism.”⁴

In this anti-systemic scenario⁵, it never stops being important to differentiate our choices and actions from their institutionalized equivalents (or rather counterparts). There’s a critical tension between solidarity as conceived within this form of political activism and institutionalized practices of fundraising and donor relations. Public engagement continuously challenges normative structures of traditional charitable giving, where donations often come with implicit expectations of recognition or reward, such as tax deductions. The demand for tax receipts for larger donations reveals a conflict between the desire for collective solidarity, rooted in political conviction, and practices typically associated with public sector or humanitarian initiatives, seen by activists as commodified versions of their notion of support. The idea that donations should be incentivized by tax breaks is rejected as a form of personal gain. The constant effort is to redefine public engagement as an act of ideological commitment rather than a transaction. The broader critique underlying these practices is the refusal of neoliberal forms of governance shaping public participation, where financial contributions often come with strings attached, reinforcing social hierarchies.

For many anti-systemic activists, public engagement is a form of co-optation by the very system identified as the main common enemy we seek to dismantle. Engaging with public institutions or adopting practices that resemble institutionalized outreach is seen as a way of “giving in” to the capitalist system – *the bad system*, as Zapatista communities and their allies call it –, reinforcing its structures rather than challenging them. From our perspective, any form of compromise, including the adaptation of forms of struggle to fit within the accepted limits and norms of public discourse, risks diluting the radical vision of transformation that lies at the heart of our militancy. This worldview reflects a deep skepticism of traditional public engagement, where the idea of outreach or dissemination is framed in ways that accommodate the interests of powerful political or economic institutions or broader public opinion, thus unintentionally reproducing the dynamics we aim to resist.

Public and engaged anthropology share a desire – often idealized – to step beyond the boundaries of the academic walls to ensure that our work could have more tangible, real-world implications that are able to resonate with the communities we study and stand in solidarity with. Bridging the gap between academia and society is a “collective aspiration”⁶ based on values that are shared more broadly across the discipline, beyond branches that explicitly seek to engage with

⁴ This emic definition of “system” is included in the *Declaration for Life* launched by the EZLN in 2021, signed with the word “we” and followed by a long list of individuals and collectives: EZLN (2021). *A Declaration for Life*. Enlace Zapatista. Accessed 5 February 2026. <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/01/01/part-one-a-declaration-for-life/>.

⁵ The term “anti-systemic” carries complex political and analytical implications. Here, I dialogue with the concept of *Anti-Systemic Movements* as conceptualized by Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein (1989) and Aguirre Rojas (2010) because of the historical and political proximity of these authors to the Zapatista struggle and its role in framing it within a broader horizon of world-systemic transformation. Like most analytical categories, it doesn’t account for the diversity of experiences commonly included under its label. It is important to point out that anti-systemic stances vary significantly across geographies, don’t have the same historical roots, and don’t entail the same degrees of risk. Yet, what the collectivities I refer to have in common is a shared understanding that systemic problems are inherent to capitalism and that meaningful struggles require radical subversion and not just *reform*.

Arrighi, G., Hopkins, T. K., & Wallerstein, I. (1989). *Anti-Systemic Movements*. Verso.

Aguirre Rojas, C. A. (2012). *Movimientos antisistémicos. Pensar lo antisistémico en el siglo XXI*. Prohistoria Ediciones.

⁶ Borofsky, R., and De Lauri, A. (2019). Public Anthropology in Changing Times. *Public Anthropologist*, 1(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25891715-00101002>, 3.

contemporary social issues or openly contribute to social change. On the other hand, we are acutely aware of the dangers of falling into the trap of formalized public engagement, which often entails compromises in order to appeal to a broader audience, obtain funding, or meet institutional expectations. As a militant anthropologist, I find myself constantly struggling with similar tensions. This dilemma – between engaging the public in ways that resonate with my activist commitments and avoiding the institutionalization of my work – is particularly pronounced when I consider the worldview I share with my interlocutors. The rejection of mainstream public engagement echoes my own skepticism about public science that might dilute the radical politics central to both my research and activism. I struggle to find spaces for enunciation that respect the patrimony of principles circulating within movements yet avoid being subsumed into the frameworks of conventional, top-down public engagement. This challenge highlights a broader reflection on how our militancy and our commitment to anti-capitalist values are inevitably and indissolubly embedded with our roles as researchers and public intellectuals. The tension between our critical positions and the need for public engagement often leads to a profound questioning of the neutrality of these spaces, highlighting how they may inadvertently reinforce the structures of power we strive daily to critique and subvert.

These dilemmas permeate every aspect of our work: when choosing sources, references, interlocutors, digital tools, means of transportation, and places of enunciation. I am part of one of those big projects funded by the European Union. Among the outputs promised to our funding institution is a Horizon Scanning report based on a literature review. It's a methodology explicitly encouraged in the context of EU-funded projects where the goal is to assess trends, anticipate changes, and strategically inform policymaking. One of the main declared objectives of our project is to “produce strategic intelligence that can be used to provide practical policy recommendations”. When selecting grey sources for the Horizon Scanning, I had to spend extra time in a desperate effort to avoid mainstream policy briefs such as the ones provided by the World Bank (one of the 3 main known enemies of anti-globalization movements, together with the IMF and the WTO). Neither Google Scholar nor our institutional library browser offered alternatives to the dominant narrative on economic trends. How could I allow my work on Mexican insurgent communities to be framed within socio-economic trends accounted for by one of the main enemies of my interlocutors?

This article aims to explore militancy as a relational and embodied spectrum of practices that emerge through specific engagements and ethical stances, constantly negotiated and relationally legitimized. In our activist lives, we make constant efforts to permeate our actions with political significance: using open-source, alternative digital platforms to communicate, ethical banks to save money, and more in general, trying to build ways of life that promote self-sufficiency, economic solidarity, environmental and community sustainability against consumerism and privatization. Inevitably, our lifestyle choices come into contrast with our capitalist jobs, as the fight doesn't usually pay the bills. The few people I met who do perceive a salary in exchange for their work in solidarity with Zapatism tend to consider themselves “liberated” but are not fully accepted by certain members of the anti-systemic tribe who believe that activism should remain a purely volunteer and moneyless experience. In the various spaces we inhabit, including the workplace, we strive to replicate the same codes of conduct and unwritten rules of the activist world. As academics, this translates into a constant need to question our tools, methods, language, and sites of discourse production. Activist dilemmas echo broader debates within the social

sciences about contradictions in the face of the progressive privatization and commodification of research in the era of audit cultures⁷ and neoliberal governance⁸.

These debates directly relate to the tensions faced by militant anthropologists who struggle with institutional demands while striving to maintain fidelity to the transformative potential we can't help but attribute to our work. Managerial logics mirror the contradictions between anti-systemic movements and institutionalized practices of knowledge production, where research is increasingly evaluated based on its alignment with market-oriented outcomes and technological innovation. These pressures often risk co-opting the political potential of activist research, reducing it to a set of deliverables framed within neoliberal logics. For scholars engaged with the Zapatista experience, this raises critical questions about how to resist commodification while still fulfilling institutional requirements. By adopting alternative methodologies, tools, and modes of expression, we attempt to push back against these limits, yet we remain entangled in the contradictions of working within systems that are inherently at odds with our radical visions.

Co-Producing Knowledge: Myths, Limits, and Responsibilities

But the question arises: what use could it be for the Baruya to know that their kinship system is of the Iroquois type, or for the French to know that theirs is of the Eskimo type? The answer is clear: none whatsoever.⁹

Godelier considers that the usefulness of anthropological studies is not to be sought within the societies we study, as their relevance is found within the academic world. The fact that an academic discipline proves useful in the context that produced it is not particularly surprising. However, the observation that, in certain cases, the results of anthropological work hold no relevance for the people it discusses deserves deeper exploration. I found myself, despite my intentions, questioning this issue from the very beginning of my first fieldwork in Mexico 10 years ago. My interlocutors compelled me to reconsider my role and, more broadly, the research methods I was applying. I probably shouldn't have been so surprised that Zapatista indigenous authorities would not see what benefit my research could have for their community as a whole. However, I was forced to reflect even more deeply on the reasons that justified my presence in the field, as well as the meanings and forms of knowledge production.

Participatory methods in anthropology have sparked extensive debates, hailed for their decolonial potential while critiqued for their risks of idealization. The epistemic turn was a necessary postmodern pledge for more reflexivity in fieldwork, able to examine how power, history, and positionality shape ethnographic accounts and the ways anthropologists construct, represent, and interpret the world. Emphasizing partial truths and situated knowledges¹⁰ allowed to visibilize the constructed nature of ethnographic authority¹¹, redefining the discipline's ethical commitments and challenging the myth of a neutral, objective science. The ontological turn moves beyond

⁷ Strathern, M., ed. (2000). *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203449721>

⁸ Giroux, H. A. (2014). *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. Haymarket Books.

Fassin, D. (2018). *Ethics of Survival: A Democratic Approach to the Politics of Life*. Polity Press.

⁹ Godelier, M. (2016). *La pratique de l'anthropologie du décentrement à l'engagement* [*The Practice of Anthropology: From Decentering to Engagement*]. Edited by M. Lussault. Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 44.

¹⁰ Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>

¹¹ Clifford, J. (1983). On Ethnographic Authority. *Representations*, 2(1), 118–146. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928386>

epistemology, shifting the focus from understanding how people *know* to how they *exist*, pushing anthropologists to rethink their methodologies and to let these diverse ontologies inform ethnographic practices. It interrogates the assumptions and power dynamics underlying the categories we use to describe and analyze the world and calls for anthropology to decenter Western paradigms and engage more deeply with multiple ways of knowing and being, “recapturing the political”¹². These shifts illustrate the discipline's ongoing commitment to evolving in response to critical self-reflection, together with the diverse realities we seek to understand.

Reading *Cannibal Metaphysics*¹³ irremediably forced me to rethink the ways I was approaching and conducting research. If the epistemic turn fostered “the rise of first-person ethnography”¹⁴ in terms of reflexivity, the ontological turn generated a deep sense of identity crisis around the discipline's epistemic foundations and its ability to account for otherness, critiquing persistent structures of power within processes of knowledge production. Geertz was already describing the “pervasive nervousness about the whole business of claiming to explain enigmatical others on the grounds that you have gone about with them in their native habitat or combed the writings of those who are”¹⁵. We could easily argue that if we have never felt uncomfortable (both in the field and when writing), probably something went terribly wrong. Scheper-Hughes¹⁶ considers that it is the feeling of being uncomfortable in their own lives, cultures, and societies that pushes anthropologists to go on “a desperate search for community life somewhere that makes sense”. Aparicio and Blaser¹⁷ framed the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges in Latin America” within a broader reflection on meaning-making in social movements.

This aligns with broader trends in postmodern anthropology to deconstruct hierarchical binaries between researcher and researched, emphasizing reflexivity and relationality. Yet, the promise of participatory methods often collides with romanticized portrayals rooted in anthropology's supposedly vocational origins as a field naturally destined to echo voices historically unheard. To expiate its own complicity in reproducing paternalistic approaches, it became fundamental to guarantee that the subaltern could speak and be represented in their own terms, accepting that different ontologies might not find any satisfactory equivalent in etic frameworks. The anthropological scope gradually shifted from a more conservative translation of meanings to an ability to account for their potential incommensurability. The discipline manifested a strong need to critically reflect on the risks of “functioning as a factory of differences, constructing and systematizing distances between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ fostering narratives of alterity rather than of similarities or shared experiences”¹⁸. Defenders of “critical universalism”¹⁹ advocate for a “thought in action” able to counteract the artificial reification of others through the relational

¹² Espinosa Arango, M. L. (2020). Missing the political: A southern critique of political ontology. *Anthropological Theory*, 21(4), 411-436. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499620974797>

¹³ Viveiros De Castro, E. (2014). *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Edited by P. Skafish. University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁴ Venkatesh, S. A. (2013). The reflexive turn: The rise of first-person ethnography. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 54(1), 3-8. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24582019>

¹⁵ Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford University Press, 130-131.

¹⁶ University of California Television (UCTV). (2002). *Conversations with History: Nancy Scheper-Hughes*. Accessed 13 October 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYu6VMC_42k

¹⁷ Aparicio, J. R., & Blaser, M. (2008). The “Lettered City” and the Insurrection of Subjugated Knowledges in Latin America. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 81(1), 59-94.

¹⁸ Remotti, F. (1996). *Contro l'identità [Against Identity]*. Laterza.

¹⁹ Kilani, M. (2014). *Pour un universalisme critique. Essai d'anthropologie du contemporain [For a Critical Universalism: An Essay on the Anthropology of the Contemporary]*. La Découverte.

creation on the field of a “third space which would become a common space for sharing and disseminating knowledge”²⁰.

Whether radically differentialist or critically universalist, anthropologists systematically find in the relational construction of the field the ultimate antidote to their contradictions. Anthropology's long-standing emphasis on “giving back” and co-producing knowledge with interlocutors predates the popularity gained by participatory methods, reflecting the discipline's enduring commitment to ethical issues of representation. Similarly to this tireless but necessary debate in anthropology, participatory methods hold the transformative potential of reducing the distance between “objects” and “subjects” of the investigations. Yet, they can perpetuate new myths about egalitarianism and inclusivity if not critically examined.

You and your informants have different concerns— when they intersect it's a miracle, and miracles, in case you don't know, are rare...²¹

Participatory action research explicitly seeks to empower participants as co-researchers, reproducing the implicit assumption that the people we include in our studies could share any interest in our work. *Cannibal Metaphysics* opens with a fundamental question: “What does anthropology conceptually owe to the peoples it studies?”²². In an article dedicated to militant ethnography in Latin America, Valenzuela-Fuentes²³ asks whether it is “possible and/or appropriate to approach these political subjects from conventional epistemologies and methods”. She asks herself if we should “join the movements’ quest for horizontality” if it is “feasible to produce collaborative research within Latin American autonomous movements whilst studying a PhD in a European University”. Similar concerns were already addressed in some of the contemporary classics of the discipline, such as *Righteous Dopefiend*,²⁴ where Bourgois and Schonberg explicitly address the collaborative nature of their ethnographic work, acknowledging the agency of participants by stressing how their voices and stories significantly shaped the narrative and analysis. They chose to include pictures in their monography so that people would not be depicted merely through the words of researchers’ accounts. Creative and artistic methods have been progressively applied to foster participation and inclusiveness. With their *cinéma vérité*, Rouch and Morin pioneered participatory ethnographic documentaries. In the last scene of *Chronicle of a Summer*²⁵, the anthropologist and the sociologist chose to portray participants watching the footage and discussing its content. At the time, involvement was more concerned with assessing the level of reality than fostering participation *per se*. Nevertheless, it would be paternalistic to still consider that anthropology “exoticist and primitivist by nature, it can only be a perverse theater where the ‘other’ is always ‘represented’ or ‘invented’ according to the sordid interests of the West”²⁶. Other attempts to creatively blur the lines between the observers and the observed include becoming part of graffiti performances in the streets of Barcelona²⁷, engaging

²⁰ Saillant, F., Kilani, M., & Graezer Bideau, F. (2011). *Manifeste de Lausanne. Pour une anthropologie non hégémonique* [The Lausanne Manifesto: For a Non-Hegemonic Anthropology]. Liber, 119.

²¹ Latour, B. (2004). On using ANT for studying information systems: a (somewhat) Socratic dialogue. In *The Social Study of Information and Communication Technology* (pp. 62–76). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199253562.003.0004>, 71.

²² Viveiros De Castro 2011: 1.

²³ Valenzuela-Fuentes, K. (2019). Militant ethnography and autonomous politics in Latin America. *Qualitative Research*, 19(6), 718–734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794118787712>, 719.

²⁴ Bourgois, P., & Schonberg, J. (2009). *Righteous Dopefiend*. University of California Press.

²⁵ Rouch, J., & Morin, E. (Directors). (1961). *Chronicle of a Summer* [Film]. Argos Films.

²⁶ Viveiros De Castro 2011: 5.

²⁷ Muñoz Morán, P. (2016). Tactile Encounters and the Ephemerality of the Graffiti Image. *Field Notes: A Journal of Collegiate Anthropology*, 8(1), Article 2. <https://dc.uwm.edu/fieldnotes/vol8/iss1/2>

in artistic community projects with the youth of Brazilian favelas²⁸, tacit knowledge production through art in Occupied Palestinian Territories²⁹, or using “Theatre of the Oppressed as Critical Ethnography”³⁰ for both “empowerment and research”³¹.

Nevertheless, the increasing institutional demand to promise participatory methods risks reducing them to performative checkboxes, detached from their ethical and political implications. The appropriation of ethnographic methods by other disciplines (or even beyond academia, especially in policymaking) can debase core concepts like participant observation, diluting its original scope and intent. These appropriations flatten the long-term engagement central to anthropological praxis, reducing participation to superficial consultation or setting it back to extractivist data collection. Action research prioritizes problem-solving in collaboration with communities, feeding social scientists’ deeper needs to find applicability to their studies. For militant ethnographers, the stakes are even higher. Our inability (or unwillingness) to separate militancy from academic work intensifies the imperative to engage horizontally with interlocutors. This commitment stems from both ethical responsibility and shared political goals. Through horizontal methods of study, analysis, restitution, and dissemination, we strive to respect the anti-hegemonic values we share with the communities and movements we work with. However, this process is fraught with complexities: while some interlocutors may demand accountability and co-ownership of narratives, others may disengage entirely, uninterested in the research’s trajectory. Zapatistas communities repeatedly manifested their reluctance to be reduced to objects of study and to end up in accounts they feel do not represent them. Engaging with these dynamics requires deep humility, self-awareness, and constant reflexivity, as well as recognition of the delicate balance between representation and co-optation. Ultimately, participatory methods are neither panaceas nor mere tools; they are dynamic practices that demand ongoing negotiation of power, responsibility, and epistemic justice³².

Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra: Academic Militancy and the EZLN

Le Bot included Marcos as his co-author in the book³³ published in 1996 as a result of his conversation with the iconic spokesperson of the EZLN. Earle and Simonelli³⁴ were actively seeking collegiality and a new kind of experimental ethnography when writing about “sharing the Zapatista journey”, engaging in ethnographic work that does not reproduce dualisms between personal commitment and analytical depth. The EZLN has included many intellectuals in shared publications, such as the volumes on *Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra*³⁵ that

²⁸ Angelini, A. (2016). Favela in replica: Iterations and itineraries of a miniature city. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 21(1), 39-60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12174>

²⁹ Abu Eishah, B. (2024). *Breathing Archives: Art and Tacit Knowledge in the Post-Oslo Accords’ Palestine*. PhD Thesis. University of Westminster. <https://doi.org/10.34737/ww44q>.

³⁰ Dennis, B. (2009). Acting Up: Theater of the Oppressed as Critical Ethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(2), 65-96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800208>

³¹ Košák Felcmanová, A., Pospíšilová, T., and Moree, D. (2024). Theatre of the oppressed for empowerment and research. *Educational Action Research*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2024.2419500>

³² Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199570522.001.0001>

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.

³³ Le Bot, Y. and Marcos, S. (1996). *Le rêve zapatiste*. Éditions Verdier.

³⁴ Earle, D. M., & Simonelli, J. (2005). *Uprising of Hope: Sharing the Zapatista Journey to Alternative Development*. AltaMira Press.

³⁵ EZLN. (2016). *Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra I: Contributions by the Sixth Commission of the EZLN*. PaperBoat.

followed seminars bearing the same name. At public events, the academics invited are addressed as *compas*. In Mora's work with Zapatista communities, dilemmas around horizontality are particularly evident as she presents the long negotiation process with communitarian authorities. She considers that decolonizing research entails reversing "the effects and legacies of colonial power-knowledge [...] through the production of subaltern knowledges and their visibilization"³⁶. I experienced firsthand how exhausting it can be to adapt to communitarian rhythms of decision-making. After a full year negotiating with a coffee cooperative the terms of their participation in the research, I had to start the process all over again because responsibilities within the organization rotate. When I was invited to meet the new authorities, at the table where I sat for hours sharing coffee and *caldo de pollo*, the people next to me were mostly long-standing interlocutors—only a few I had not met before. Yet I had to re-explain from the beginning what I was doing, why, and patiently wait once again for them to gather and discuss everything collectively within the assembly. For me, this was far more than a mere procedural formality or a blind adherence to organizational rules; it was an ethical and political responsibility to go through the collective process, despite its unpredictability and the risk that it might not align with the temporalities of academic research.

These efforts are part of a broader reflection on the ethical and political implications of academic methods. In this context, engaged research becomes an act of commitment that generates social and political relations. Dialogic exchanges and shared experiences become *sine qua non* ingredients of a quest for self-awareness, reflexivity, positionality, and the construction of common political projects. A few years before Mora published the book and without any knowledge of her work, I had very similar expectations the first time I came to Chiapas to conduct my fieldwork. A deep motivation was behind my intent to include my interlocutors in a sort of shared brainstorming space that could shape the future of the research, guaranteeing its hopes of impact and support for the cause. I vividly remember the feeling of a cold shower running through my veins when they simply replied that they were not interested. Retrospectively, it was probably one of the most teachable moments in the field, when I suddenly had to realize that I was the only one taking for granted the usefulness and applicability of my research. Over the years, I progressively emancipated myself from the conviction that my work was inevitably destined to have any kind of use for the people involved or even provoke their interest. Letting go of this expectation never extinguished the desire to "change the world together with informants/comrades,"³⁷ not only through activism but also through research. Rather, it meant accepting that the relevance of an investigation cannot be assumed in advance, nor demanded from an emic perspective. Years later, and without interpreting this as a form of validation or recognition, I was at times approached by fellow activists and members of Zapatista communities who asked me to mobilize the knowledge and experience gathered through my research in specific contexts. These moments did not resolve the ethical and epistemological tensions I had been grappling with; quite the opposite: it reopened them, confirming that any assumed usefulness is always partial, unpredictable, and unevenly distributed. I found myself facing dilemmas very similar to those I tackle daily: when writing an academic text that will bear an individual signature or a collective political statement, I know that my positionalities overlap in both acts, as much as I might strive to stretch one or the other. This is why I chose to use the word "we" in this article, including myself in the worlds fueling my reflections. It is not just an attempt to question the role of the observer or an idealized quest for horizontality. It is about acknowledging that I am a part of these movements and that I share major political and conceptual frameworks with most of my

³⁶ Mora, M. (2017). *Kuxlejal Politics: Indigenous Autonomy, Race, and Decolonizing Research in Zapatista Communities*. University of Texas Press.

³⁷ Boni, S., Koensler, A., and Rossi, A. (2020). *Etnografie militanti. Prospettive e dilemmi* [Militant Ethnographies: Perspectives and Dilemmas]. Meltemi, 82.

interlocutors. This clearly doesn't imply that we must embody all our identities all the time at the same time, but it certainly complicates any attempt to define limits.

The epistemologies produced by and around the Zapatista experience shape my academic work. The Zapatista Critical Thought represents a clear theoretical reference that influenced many of the scholars I regularly quote. For me, the question was never whether I should join the quest of my interlocutors, because I was already involved in it. The issue becomes rather how to produce forms of knowledge able to hold critical and emancipatory weight and to ethically dialogue simultaneously with the codes of conduct of academic and activist worlds. Ambitions to become *organic intellectuals* are still surrounding the EZLN and were repeatedly problematized by its spokespersons. "As activists increasingly generate and circulate their own analyses, the classic role of organic intellectual is undermined"³⁸. Being a militant and an ethnographer has shown me that the reflexive dimension doesn't systematically come from the academic side, nor does it move unidirectionally. Many political spaces I inhabited (both in Europe and in Chiapas) demonstrated a level of critical awareness that I often miss within university walls. Fellow activists who read some of my works gave me specific expert feedback that none of my colleagues were able to provide. The EASA³⁹ network I currently co-convene is called *Anthropology and* (and not *of*) *Social Movements*, in a claimed effort to recognize our involvement, and with whom we produce knowledge. Militancy here is understood as political action, but also as a mode of being, relating, and producing critical thought, shaped by shared epistemologies and practices.

I usually leave the most important question at the end of interviews and conversations: what utility (if any) could a study on this subject have? Common answers include the hope that the cause could gain visibility (in the academic context, in the Global North, within European activist networks, depending on how I'm being perceived by my interlocutors) and creating a space for self-reflection and discussion within and across the collectives (fulfilling the erotic dream of any militant ethnographer working with social movements). Unexpectedly, the most interesting answers were the ones I never got: on multiple occasions, my question was just not understood – whether I was talking to a Zapatista coffee producer, a Mexican or European activist, or an "expert" on social movements. Without answering negatively to the question, they allowed me to acknowledge that the problem of utility was an inherently anthropological dilemma they didn't even see. The usefulness of the research didn't need to be explained or justified as it tautologically resided within science itself, without needing to depend on applicability or engagement criteria. Academic knowledge remains perceived as ultimately destined to find its existential scope within library walls. Yet, as militant researchers, we cannot help but feel compelled to demystify this assumption. We struggle to redefine our role as engaged participants rather than detached observers, emphasizing the transformative potential of our praxis. Challenging traditional hierarchies of expertise and advocating for co-produced knowledges, we hope to reduce the gap between our disciplinary ethics and the values and struggles we share with research participants. What this quest might fail to realize is that research itself is not going to be systematically recognized as a tool for change. It is not uncommon to hear activists say they want nothing to do with universities, accusing academic interests to dilute adherence to the cause. Within the radical left movements I am a part of, it can be extremely challenging to juggle institutional affiliation with personal militancy. On one side, being an insider opens doors that would just remain shut to a "neutral" researcher (assuming they exist). Many interviews I obtained were only possible thanks to relations of trust built over years of activism. On the other hand, we never stop having

³⁸ Juris, J. S. (2007). *Practicing Militant Ethnography with the Movement for Global Resistance in Barcelona*. In S. Shukaitis & D. Graeber (Eds.), *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization* (pp. 164–176). AK Press.

³⁹ European Association of Social Anthropologists.

to legitimize our role in both worlds: perceived as biased in academia and impure in social movements.

According to the EU funding my project, their logo should be the first element appearing on the paper we use to obtain formal consent. If I were to present to an anti-systemic activist a piece of paper with yellow stars on a blue flag, the conversation would be over before it even started. Without ever concealing any aspect of my research, I often prepare different documents: the formal one presenting the academic side (with or without colored logos, depending on the interlocutors) and another one presenting the collective. When it comes to explaining who's funding the research, I include the information in a self-critique of the potential contradictions of my work. Paradoxically, this element often generates empathic reactions as many interlocutors face similar dilemmas concerning who they accept funding from and what they do with it. These apparent practicalities convey the profoundly conflictual experience of engaging in the hybrid condition of being militant ethnographers.

At a recent Zapatista public event⁴⁰ a series of Mexican scholars were invited to contribute to the debate about resistances and rebellions in the face of the current capitalist "storm". Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas inaugurated his speech by stating: "I am a professor, researcher, academic... no one is perfect, somehow you must make a living. And I can tell you that I have learned much more from the Zapatista comrades than I have been able to learn from books, conferences, and discussions with my fellow academics". Similarly, Sylvia Marcos opened her contribution by stating: "I am a feminist, and I never stopped learning from the Zapatistas [...] To establish my place of enunciation, I am an academic scholar who writes books, but I have never stopped fighting alongside Indigenous women". Respectively, both the historian and the anthropologist felt the need to position themselves, recognizing how much they learned from the Zapatistas over the years and attributing to that knowledge a greater importance compared with formal academic training, spaces for debate, and reflection. It is not unusual to hear such statements opening the speech of intellectuals invited to speak at Zapatista seminars. Their explicit intention was not only to relativize forms and spaces of knowledge production and enunciation but also, above all, to point out how much the organization impacted their academic lives. In such a formalized context in which they were sitting next to Zapatista authorities, they felt compelled to prioritize their political belonging over their institutional affiliation, almost as if they were incompatible, and transmitting a sense of shame when admitting they write books for a living.

The Insurgent Captain Marcos had just inaugurated the meeting with sharp, sarcastic words: "So, you came prepared. You brought your notebook filled with numerous quotes from obscure authors, from prestigious universities and research centers because you have a reputation to uphold". He also explained that they instructed the people invited to speak not to use bibliographic citations so that "they would speak without mediation or tricks and take responsibility for their words, for better or worse". Marcos is well known within the community surrounding Zapatism for his stance on sciences and the academic world. Just a few months ago, in a statement about "applied sciences", he provocatively asked his readers: "if the sciences are not able to glimpse the day after, then what are the sciences for?"⁴¹. In the Zapatista vision he conveys, sciences are only useful if engaged in the prefigurative effort of envisioning and building *another possible world*.

⁴⁰ International Meetings of Rebellions and Resistance 2024-2025. Accessed 15 October 2025. Tables of the First Session of the Meetings: <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2024/12/27/transmision-en-vivo-de-las-mesas-de-la-primera-sesion-de-los-encuentros-de-resistencia-y-rebeldia/>

⁴¹ EZLN. El Capitán. (2024). *On the topic: The Storm and the Day After. Part Six: Applied Sciences*. Accessed 15 October 2025. <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2024/11/06/on-the-topic-the-storm-and-the-day-after-part-six-applied-sciences/>

In this context, it is understandable that any invited scholar would feel the need to open clarifying their positioning and a publicly renewed commitment. Baschet⁴² goes even further:

In this regard, instead of feigning an impossible and undesirable neutrality, I acknowledge that I write this book from the experience of living in Chiapas, which—from the first moment I felt interpellated by the Zapatistas—radically changed the course of my life. This awakened me from the resignation imposed by the triumph of neoliberalism, allowing me to discover other worlds, to move away little by little from academic life, until I made the decision to largely give it up. I write this book, then, from the premise that I identify with the Zapatista struggle—or perhaps, more precisely, that I look for myself in it.

This message is interiorized at different levels by those of us who embody simultaneously the militant and academic identity in relation to the Zapatista experience. Mora⁴³ explains that political positioning still tends to remain unspoken in academic texts because of a widespread fear that it could affect scientific rigor, a belief surviving despite abundant critiques of positivism within the social sciences. She suggests that Latin American engaged researchers have contributed to moving past the passivity of this apparent neutrality to a more active attitude that formulates critical questions in support of collective actions seeking social and political transformation. Stahler-Sholk⁴⁴ considers Speed's engaged ethnography in Chiapas to be one of the first to propose "an alternative to the positivist epistemology that keeps so many academics at a distance from, and in their own minds superior to, their 'objects' of study". Almost 20 years ago, Speed was already drawing on feminist and decolonial approaches to situate and complexify her own positioning. The problem of reducing the distance with interlocutors has certainly been amplified but not inaugurated by activist scholarship. Yet, even though "positivism, with its authority and trust in those who discover facts or describe reality, has been largely overcome and supplanted by more self-critical and relational approaches"⁴⁵, engaged, activist and militant anthropologists constantly have to legitimize their choices and defend their studies from accusations of being biased because they're taking sides, as if "not taking sides" didn't tacitly imply "taking sides"⁴⁶ in such unequal world. Boni, Koensler, and Rossi⁴⁷ draw our attention to the fact that, as militant ethnographers, we haven't fully stopped presuming that our work could somehow inevitably have an impact, increasing the potential for social movements to be more self-aware about their internal contradictions, biases, or limitations. The authors argue that, in such contexts, participatory methods are applied in the attempt to neutralize or at least counteract "inevitable tensions, imperfections and paradoxes" of our "hybrid condition"⁴⁸.

⁴² Baschet, J. (2024). *The Zapatista Experience: Rebellion, Resistance, and Autonomy*. AK Press.

⁴³ Mora 2017.

Among the people invited repeatedly by the Zapatistas to speak at their public events.

⁴⁴ Stahler-Sholk, R. (2013). [Review of the book *Rights in Rebellion: Indigenous Struggle and Human Rights in Chiapas*, by S. Speed]. *The Americas*, 69(4), 545–546. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2013.0032>

⁴⁵ Boni, Koensler, and Rossi 2020: 21.

⁴⁶ Delgado, M. (2023). *Es possible una antropologia no implicada?* [Is an Unengaged Anthropology Possible?]. Inaugural Conference Course 2023-24. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona: Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology.

⁴⁷ Boni, Koensler, and Rossi 2020: 82.

⁴⁸ Boni, Koensler, and Rossi 2020: 89.

Relational Ethics and Positioning

“Shit! Another anthropologist!” says an activist in the car next to me while we run to the daily meeting of the *support team* helping to coordinate a cultural event organized by the EZLN. He already knew I was in Chiapas also for research, but he didn’t know the details. I’m one of the few internationalists; the rest are local activists *Adherentes a la Sexta*⁴⁹. Reactions like his don’t surprise me anymore, but I sometimes miss less destabilizing questions like “Anthropo... what?”. I rarely found myself having to explain why I chose to become an anthropologist, and yet I regularly had to defend my choice.

The first time I arrived in Chiapas for fieldwork I was 25 years old. Colleagues have asked me if I knew about those rebel communities before my research, and this question still doesn’t stop surprising me: how could I not? This feeling of surprise repeatedly reminds me of my specific background and pushes me to reflect on my positionality and contextualize the academic work within my personal biography. In 1994, I was only 4 years old, I obviously couldn’t be aware of indigenous insurgency in the South-East of Mexico, but I wasn’t too young to shadow my mother at demonstrations, assemblies, party congresses, and trips to the Museum of the Revolution in Cuba. Extracts from Marx’s *Capital* were read to me before I was able to understand their content. I can’t say when my political education started, because it’s been a constant presence throughout my life. Family dinners regularly ended up with my uncle picking up a guitar and everybody singing old partisan songs, embedding politics with intimate social interactions and kinship relations. At 16, I joined the students’ union and shortly after the communist youth of the only radical left party in my region. With university, I got closer to anti-fascist collectives, struggles for the right to housing, freedom of movement, degrowth, and feminisms. We organized demonstrations, helped stop evictions, supported occupations, gave language classes to asylum seekers, and cooked free soups with recovered vegetables. I find it especially uncomfortable to share personal details and write in the first person, but I believe it is particularly relevant for an ethnographic study to be rooted in an embodied knowledge of the field. I couldn’t imagine talking about activism without acknowledging that I know first-hand what it means to sit for hours in an assembly, write a collective statement, put up an illegal poster, pick up a megaphone, or run from the police after a demonstration. These experiences are not meant to provide a checklist of activist credentials, nor to reduce militancy to a set of recognizable forms of action, but as markers of a situated and deeply personal relation with the field—as someone whose life experiences have been shaped by activist cultures that inform my ethnographic lens. It might also explain—starting from “politics and dinner table conversation”⁵⁰—why, together with Nader, I prefer Gramsci to Foucault. Yet, activism in Mexico made me realize how different our militant experiences could be, particularly regarding possible consequences.

Every day, after the Zapatista cultural event, we would run to a camp that teachers on strike had organized on the highway exiting San Cristóbal de las Casas. Occupying highways is a popular style of protest in Latin America, a disruptive act symbolizing resistance and the reclaiming of public space. The EZLN was openly supporting the cause; they decided to give food reserves accumulated for the festival to the teachers, and a Zapatista delegation was ceremonially

⁴⁹ EZLN. (2005). *Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona*. Accessed 15 October 2025.
<https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/sdsl-en/>

⁵⁰ De Lauri, A. (2021). Introduction. *Public Anthropologist*, 3(2), 181-186.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/25891715-03020001>

welcomed for this moment of sharing. We had our own tent in the middle of the camp; a presence intended to witness and document the struggle and prevent human rights violations. We reunited daily in circles outside the tent, updating our escape strategies and coordinating what we would have done in case of police intervention. Political activity is not allowed in Mexico with a tourist visa. Yet, I vividly remember feeling especially uncomfortable knowing that, in the worst-case scenario, I was risking deportation, while local activists were risking disappearance. That feeling still follows me at conferences and seminars, every time Mexican colleagues can't hide their surprise when they hear me talk openly about militant research. After a recent presentation, a professor approached me to ask if it was normal for scholars from European universities to be so explicit about our engagement and the way it intersects with academic work. Initially, I was surprised by his surprise, but after discussing this topic with other colleagues, I realized that what I considered a necessary act of positioning and reflexivity entailed for them a risk of persecution I hadn't even seen.

One could argue that anthropology is relational by nature. Its relationality has, though, progressively taken new forms, following broader societal changes like the digitalization of communications and the decrease of travel costs. PhD programs and funding opportunities are increasingly shorter, making Malinowskian fieldworks seem like a distant mirage of a bygone era. The ethical concerns of our research practices must retain flexibility to adapt to constantly evolving and specific settings. Ethics itself, as a concept, varies significantly across geographies and cultural frameworks, often encompassing assumptions that resist full translation. The relationality of fieldwork experience amplifies these challenges, exposing anthropology to the impossibility of fully anticipating the effects and consequences of research. The reliance on ethnographic methods inherently precludes rigid, pre-defined ethics protocols capable of addressing every aspect of the research process. Anthropologists cannot entirely control how their work will be used or perceived, though we bear responsibility for the data collected, the impact of our presence, and the potential effects of dissemination.

This intrinsic uncertainty emphasizes the importance of a continuous and collective debate on the ethical and political dimensions of anthropological praxis. Anthropology's engagement with otherness, as Delgado⁵¹ warns, risks complacency by presuming activism inherent in a discipline that historically seeks to amplify marginalized voices. This critique challenges researchers to confront their perceptions of the utility and impact of their work, including the possibility of rejection or resistance from the very communities we aim to support. A non-hegemonic anthropology emerges from the imperative to dismantle essentialist and dichotomous frameworks that reduce interlocutors to passive subjects. It seeks to account for inequalities and power imbalances while resisting the temptation to position anthropologists as the sole arbiters of others' agency. When researchers expect their work to confer visibility or recognition, they risk replicating neocolonial dynamics, implying that their engagement is essential for others' worlds to be seen. Other worlds exist despite us, and our presence may be neither needed nor desired. Therefore, it is urgent to critically interrogate whether the knowledge produced aligns with the interests and struggles of the communities involved and whether their ontologies can inform, challenge, or disrupt the Western frameworks through which we analyze them. A relational ethics of research calls for methodologies that embrace humility and reflexivity, recognizing the limits of representation. Participatory and co-productive approaches promise to democratize knowledge

⁵¹ Delgado 2023.

creation but risk becoming tokenistic without a critical examination of power dynamics and ethical responsibility. Positioning should systematically be relational to avoid simplistic biographical accounts that only superficially tackle the deeper implications of our work. Naming our privileges is certainly a start, but it cannot be a satisfactory conclusion to the ultimate quest for epistemic justice.

Discussion and Conclusions for a Non-Hegemonic Anthropology

Being Zapatistas means doing activism 100%, it means you wake up, work, go to the fields, and when you're done working, you have an assembly [...]. I mean, it's like those who do activism 100% here. How many times does it happen that you get fed up and say 'Fuck this' and quit?⁵²

Militant ethnography entails embracing discomfort, resisting commodification, and remaining accountable to the communities we engage with. A non-hegemonic anthropology is a methodological commitment as well as an ethical and political stance, an ongoing negotiation of the roles and responsibilities we inhabit as scholars and activists. Yet, it might not assume the form of the horizontal collaboration we secretly envision, as embedding relationality with ethics means accepting that our interlocutors/comrades could not share the same interests or, if they do, they might not be able to engage. Reciprocity is hard for any ethnographer to deal with, as we struggle to find a balance between institutional pressures, ideals of inclusion, and the expectations of our tribe. Relationality is not automatically a synonym for co-creation, nor does it fully guarantee the avoidance of extractivist tendencies and tokenistic gestures that undermine the transformative potential of creative and collaborative approaches.

Activist contexts are filled with contradictions, tensions that often remain unspoken, and unresolved conflicts. Navigating these dynamics is an intimate and delicate process that can become strenuous and overwhelming. Militant lives rarely follow schedules; they blur the limits between personal and political as we radicalize our everyday. Prioritizing alignment with the causes we study inevitably entails redefining the purpose and impact of our academic endeavors. To maintain intellectual rigor and ethical and political commitment, we must constantly question the frameworks and systems in which we operate. We must be ready to accept that our research might not meet expectations and even generate irreparable fractures. As anthropologists, especially engaged ones, we tend to define our work through its dialogical dimensions, constantly striving to build relationships of trust that, in activist contexts, take the form of *compañerismo* (political comradeship). Nevertheless, the dual role of activists and academics often inspires quite the opposite, bringing inherent dilemmas and showing that the commitment to reflexivity and epistemic justice is an evolving process and cannot remain a static destination.

Anthropology has long struggled with the challenge of representing the perspectives and experiences of groups outside dominant cultural frameworks, initially with a focus on documentation and later, increasingly, on advocacy and partnership with those communities. This shift reflects a broader evolution from objectifying otherness to creating participatory and reciprocal research relationships that prioritize ethical, co-constructed knowledge production. Reflexive approaches also require us to continuously and carefully evaluate our roles, confronting the potential for unintentional paternalism, co-optation, and the challenges of legitimacy within

⁵² Italian activist: personal conversation, May 2016.

both academic and activist circles. Despite these difficulties, the relational methods we apply are part of a conscious attempt to move away from positivist assumptions toward a collaborative and transformative process that aims to radically support and change the social worlds we study alongside those who inhabit them. This self-critical stance helps to bridge the academic and activist worlds, making research not only an analysis of social change but an active participant in it. This way, relational methods embedded in ethnography recognize our role as inherently entangled with the social worlds we study, inevitably complicit in maintaining or disrupting the social order. Without falling into arbitrary simplifications or romanticizations, engaged methods help contextualize findings within local knowledge systems, working to counteract historical misrepresentations and moving beyond mere observation to acknowledge mutual agency. This approach responds to critiques within the discipline that demand not only a respectful understanding of otherness but an active role in processes of visibilization and dignification, especially in cases where communities face socio-economic exclusion and political repression. It is about restoring a political ethics of research “from and for anthropology”⁵³, allowing our knowledge to be directly called upon by the concerns we share with our interlocutors.

In the context of Zapatista solidarity networks, militant ethnography can serve as a tool to document the perspectives of indigenous communities and activist groups. The challenge remains: namely, how to simultaneously witness, support, and critically analyze resistance while ensuring that the research is held accountable to the people involved in it. In this context, the research relationship can only be conceived as a series of exchanges that progressively engage us as we attempt to give them meaning. The Zapatista black balaclava metaphorically represents an effort to hide individual identity and constitute collective political subjectivities. Similarly, our engaged positioning constantly struggles to resist within the liminal space between recognizing individual responsibilities and the desire to blend with the collective realities we are part of. In a phenomenological effort to dispel finitude and essentialization, we try to sit in movement, searching for dynamism and perpetual questioning. We need our interlocutors to be a mirror to our gaze to make sure we remain vigilant, vulnerable, and exposed, in constant tension toward an active and relational engagement with the world. Intentionally attending⁵⁴ to how we observe and are being observed is part of the process of being dynamically and attentively connected to others. A possible change that concerns us requires time and an “ethics of the other”⁵⁵ that doesn’t work without contact, co-presence, and shared responsibility for the words spoken, which, once uttered, become a stance. We shape the world while we let it involve and transform us. In this sense, militant ethnography does not claim to reconcile critique and commitment, nor to resolve the tensions it inhabits. It renders them analytically productive, making visible how contested and uneven experiences of dissent are articulated across both activist and academic fields. Contrary to the recurrent suspicion that active involvement compromises scientific rigor, being embedded in political struggle often intensifies rather than undermining the possibilities for critique, exposing researchers to demanding and fragile relational balances. Without presuming coherence or transformative effects, the paper shows how such immersion can instead reconfigure the conditions and stakes under which reflexivity is produced.

This is how these men and women learned that one can look at the other, know who they are and what they are, and that they are another, and in this way, not clash with them, not hit them, not run over them, not trip over them. They also learned that one can look inside

⁵³ López y Rivas, G. (2010). *Antropología, etnomarxismo y compromiso social de los antropólogos*. Ocean Sur.

⁵⁴ The concept is central to Ingold’s notion for an “ecology of attention”, where *ad-tendere* (meaning “to stretch toward”

) is seen as a continuous movement of responsiveness and involvement.

Ingold, T. (2018). *Anthropology and/as Education*. Routledge.

⁵⁵ Ricœur, P. (1992). *Oneself as Another*. Translated by K. Blamey. University of Chicago Press.

the other and see what their heart feels. Because the heart does not always speak with the words that come from the lips. Many times, the heart speaks with the skin, with the gaze, or with steps that speak. They also learned to look at those who look at them, those who search for themselves in the gaze of others. And they learned to look at the others who look at them looking. And all the gazes were learned by the first men and women. And the most important gaze they learned is the gaze that looks at itself and knows and understands itself, the gaze that looks at itself looking and seeing itself, that looks at paths and looks at tomorrows that have not yet been born, paths still to be walked, and dawns yet to be birthed.

*The Story of the Glances*⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Subcomandante Marcos. (2001). *Zapatista Stories for Dreaming An-Other World*. Translated by Wypijewski. PM Press.