

## ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Navigating Tensions and Contradictions: The Everyday Negotiation of Militant Research

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the tensions and contradictions generated when conducting militant research from within academia. More specifically, it focuses on how they play out and shape militant research on an everyday basis, and how they are constantly negotiated by militant researchers and mediated by their diverse positionalities. Drawing from my own experience of militant research in the British West Midlands, I discuss the three main tensions that I had to navigate and negotiate during my PhD. First, I examine the conflict between collective aspirations and professional motivations, and I call for the need to find a balance between them that allows the militant researcher to stay in academia whilst avoiding the extractivist dynamics of pseudo-militancy. I argue for a strategy of alignment as a principle that can guide the daily process of militant research in trying to bring together collective and professional motivations. Second, I discuss how the unfitting positionality of militant researchers ends up creating a double impostor syndrome that makes us feel like both unworthy academics and activists. Whereas, a supportive institutional environment is crucial to cope with the academic side of it, commitment and reciprocity between the militant researcher and the community of struggle are key elements to negotiate the militant side. Third, I discuss the challenge of operating across diverse knowledges that are hierarchically organised and the need to constantly translate contexts and epistemic settings. I argue that both theoretical and practice-oriented knowledges are important for militant research and that they can get together in feedback loops that spur socio-ecological transformation. In conclusion, by recounting my lived experience, I conceptualise militant research as a complex, dynamic and contested practice composed of multiple intertwined tensions that are mediated by positionality. It is a process of constant negotiation on an everyday basis that can potentially push transformation forward.

## 1 | Introduction

In 2018, I moved to Coventry to start a PhD at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience. Despite having little prospect at the time of pursuing an academic career, I saw the doctoral path as an opportunity to temporarily make a living whilst having enough freedom to devote energies to several

grassroots organisations and community groups. During the nearly three years that I stayed in Britain, I got involved with the Coventry Peace House<sup>1</sup> (a housing coop and self-organised shelter for asylum seekers) and the Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group<sup>2</sup> (CARAG, a group of mutual support for migrated people) in organising a cultural festival, starting a guerrilla garden by the Coventry Canal and setting up a community garden at

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the Foleshill Community Centre. I was also active in the neighbouring city of Birmingham, where I joined a leftist political organisation. I was one of the starting members of the Warehouse Cooperative Cafe<sup>3</sup> and a red gym,<sup>4</sup> and I was a co-founder and one of the core organisers of Cooperation Birmingham,<sup>5</sup> a mutual aid network that ran a solidarity kitchen during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ruiz Cayuela 2020). Some of these activities were the centre and subject of my PhD, which explored strategies for expanding the commons as emancipatory alternatives of socio-ecological organisation (see Ruiz Cayuela 2023). Most of them, though, provided me with valuable commoning experiences that were later indirectly reflected in my academic work, but did not appear in my research. Much of my 'funded research time', then, was dedicated to community work and organising, whilst at the same time, struggling to fulfil all the academic and administrative tasks that my programme required.

My story is by no means unique or exceptional. Engaged scholarship, in its manifold forms and contextual specificities, is historically rich and currently becoming more popular. From workers' inquiry (ranging from the nineteenth century to the present, see Woodcock 2014), to liberatory participatory action research (Fals Borda and Rahman 1991) and to scholar-activism (Derickson and Routledge 2015), all these traditions pursue counter-hegemonic knowledge production for social transformation. In my PhD, I took a militant research (MR) approach—a politicised and partisan form of knowledge co-production from within social movements and sites of commoning (Zechner 2020). Whereas its origins are located outside formal spaces of knowledge production at the beginning of the twenty-first century (see Malo de Molina 2004a), radical academics soon started adopting MR as a framework to produce knowledge for social transformation from within particular struggles and organisations (at least partially). This has led to the development of a body of literature in critical geography (and beyond) that examines and problematises the relationship between MR and academia, mostly from a politically strategic perspective that seeks to maximise the transformative potential of this tradition. Several authors have discussed the opportunities and barriers of conducting MR from within the university, such as subverting available resources from institutions (Halvorsen 2015), creating temporary autonomous zones of transformative knowledge production within academia (Ganji 2017), or even warning about the possible co-optation of MR by the political economy of academic publishing and neoliberal academia in general (Pusey 2017, 2018).

In contribution to these debates, in this article, I explore the political, epistemological and methodological clashes that shape the contentious relation between MR and academia from a feminist epistemological standpoint that recognises embodied experience and everyday life as the locus of situated inquiry (Alcoff and Potter 2013). It is precisely from this perspective, which has rarely been explicitly mobilised in the aforementioned literature (with the relevant exception of Valenzuela-Fuentes 2019), that I here reflect on my own autoethnographic (Ellis et al. 2011) or militant ethnographic (Apoifis 2017) experience to look into the messy and conflicting practice of conducting MR from within academia and the specific challenges that militant researchers face. The main goal of this paper is then to explore how the inherent everyday tensions and contradictions of conducting MR from within academia play out and shape the practice of MR,

and how they are constantly negotiated and navigated by militant researchers on a daily basis. I argue that this is a relevant question not only for militant researchers, but for engaged researchers in general since, as Ferreri puts it, '[formal] research, engagement and activism can co-exist, vie for attention, cut across us [and] pull in many directions' (2025, 1).

I start by briefly reviewing the tradition of MR and discussing the positionality of militant researchers in general and in relation to the neoliberal university. I then reflect on how these shaped my experience of MR by discussing the three main tensions and contradictions that I encountered and navigated during my PhD: the negotiation of a strategy of alignment to circumvent the clash between collective and individual motivations, coping with a double impostor syndrome through militant commitment and institutional support, and the knowledge translation process aimed at challenging persisting knowledge hierarchies.

## 2 | Militant Research: Process, Positionality and Misfit

Historically connected to co-research, the post-1968 Autonomist movement and their interest in understanding class composition (Alquati 2019); in the last decades MR has sought to update those traditions to contribute to contemporary struggles (Tubridy 2024). The Counter Cartographies Collective (2012) has broadly characterised MR as a form of knowledge co-production that is in itself a conscious political intervention, whilst claiming that it defies singular and abstract definitions. In its diversity, MR has been described as a slow, contingent, messy and unfinished process of becoming (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015; Pusey 2018). It is thus a situated and implicated approach to knowledge production (Malo de Molina 2004b) that requires radical methodological openness in order to integrate diverse epistemological standpoints and challenge knowledge hierarchies (Ferreri et al. 2024). MR is a relational and embodied process in which researchers intervene not just with their minds, but also with their hands through their direct involvement in struggle (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007; Hooker 2020), aiming to blur the disciplining distinction between thought and practice (Gago 2017). The praxis of MR is importantly shaped by positionality and vice versa, in a co-constitutive and intertwined process that Ganji (2017) has described as 'liminal performativity'.

My own account of practising MR as related in this paper was indeed influenced by the fact that I am a white able cis-man from Southern Europe who was at the time enjoying a prestigious scholarship to conduct my PhD (among other characteristics and personal context). Clare (2017) has highlighted how privilege (such as whiteness) can enable MR, whilst at the same time potentially compromising the whole process by creating power inequalities between the researcher and the community of struggle. My ability to conduct MR, including the contradictions, failures and successes here recounted, was thus mediated by my positionality and its intersection with the positionalities and privilege of those around me. My MR led me to organise with groups where most members were white-British people with university degrees, and others formed mostly by

racialised asylum seekers with little formal education, and the nature of the process was certainly different in each case. But as Herrera (2018) reminds us, positionality is dynamic and performative, which makes MR a subversive practice aiming to challenge unequal power structures. Thus, as we will see below, the power differentials diminished over time, increasing the transformative potential of my MR.

Positionality debates have also focused on inquiring about the role of the university in MR, even claiming that MR cannot be pursued outside autonomous collectives (Colectivo Situaciones 2003). There is an obvious concern among engaged scholars towards the fact that the managerial (even entrepreneurial) logic of the neoliberal university—focused on quantifying outputs and prioritising economic efficiency over anything else—does not provide an optimal environment to conduct transformative research (Zielke et al. 2023). Academics are facing an individualised and competitive institutional environment dominated by time constraints, which is constantly demanding that we ‘do more with less and do it faster’ (Pickerill 2024, 5). However, a growing number of critical scholars have been adopting MR as a strategy and form of struggle able to challenge these dynamics and pursue social transformation. Much of its potential lies in the critique of the separation between research and activism, which ends up reinforcing the reproduction of the university in its current neoliberal form. MR is thus not a combination of both worlds, but a distinct process conducted within, against and beyond universities that can blur the divide and transform academia into a politicised space supportive of social transformation (Russell 2015). Halvorsen (2015) goes even further by conceptualising MR as always against and beyond itself, meaning that it should always challenge any specific form it takes and not shy away from critiquing not just the academic environment but also communities of struggle.

In the next sections, I will draw from my own experience to discuss MR as a contested and dynamic practice constituted by a series of interweaving tensions mediated by ambiguous and changing positionalities. I will vividly recount the constant negotiations that I had to deal with and the contradictions that I had to face, both within communities of struggle and my research centre, in an uncertain process of creating insurgent spaces of counter-hegemonic knowledge co-production for social transformation.

### 3 | Negotiating a Strategy of Alignment

Militant investigation is often spurred by multiple coexisting motivations that tend to clash with each other. Besides the obvious interest in advancing collective struggle, many militant researchers are simultaneously making a living and seeking professional gains through our activity. This poses a contradiction that can be summarised by the apparent dichotomy between careerism and militancy, two seemingly polarised and confronted approaches. From the perspective of the militant researcher operating from within the university, it is not desirable to fall too close to any of the two poles. An excessive focus on militancy can lead to academic underperforming, compromising our ability to stay in academia and conduct MR. Conversely, prioritising our professional career can be extremely problematic,

reproducing extractivist dynamics of pseudo-militancy that aim to build a profitable image of a ‘radical academic’. A central element of MR, then, is the constant negotiation of individual interests (often connected to career goals) and collective aspirations.

Far from being monolithic entities, universities—as well as related institutions and funding bodies—are heterogeneous spaces where different interests coexist. This means that despite their systemic functions actively obstruct engaged and transformative research (Millar et al. 2024), we can usually find interstices from where to conduct our ‘praxis of resistance’ (Valenzuela-Fuentes 2019). One of the ways in which militant researchers have historically coped with this tension is by trying to align both individual and militant goals (Pain 2003) and establish relations of mutual legitimacy in which collective and professional gain can be simultaneously advanced (Matheney et al. 2023). Rather than a well-defined strategy, though, this is a principle that should guide the work of militant researchers. Moreover, the practice of MR is embedded in complex contexts shaped by institutional, social and political processes that will partially determine the extent to which the militant researcher will be able to challenge the careerism vs. militancy dichotomy and align both motivations.

During my PhD, I always tried to steer my research to align with the goals of the struggles in which I was involved, navigating between my commitments as a militant and the pressure to perform successfully according to scholarly standards. In 2019, for instance, I was able to secure a small grant from Coventry City of Culture addressed to university staff and aimed at promoting knowledge transfer and collaboration with local communities. With the support of well-established local organisations, the grant led to the celebration of a self-organised festival attended by 250 people that reclaimed and celebrated the Coventry Canal as an environmental and cultural asset for the neighbours. Even more importantly, the organising process involved 10 open meetings and collective meals that brought together community organisers, refugees, asylum seekers and researchers, breaking barriers between so-called experts and marginalised people and democratising the decision-making process of the festival. Far from romanticising the experience, and acknowledging existing challenges and complexities, the festival had a very tangible impact on the local communities, fostering commoning relationships and urban transformation from below. But it is fair to also recognise that I benefited from it professionally. Viewed from the perspective of the university management, I proved my ability to secure funding, to lead projects and to generate social impact, which strengthened my profile as a professional researcher.

Another relevant example took place in the period between March and August 2020, when I combined a very intense involvement in the Cooperation Birmingham solidarity kitchen with a MR process that sought to understand the potential of the organisation for surviving the pandemic turmoil and enduring as a commons ecology within the city. Whereas the research was reflected in several non-academic publications seeking to engage with the activist community such as articles, online discussions on forums and newsletters; in parallel I also produced two scholarly publications (see Ruiz Cayuela 2021; Ruiz Cayuela and Armiero 2021). The more theoretical and reflective work on the academic texts allowed me to produce

strategic insights that were later brought back to militant circles. Moreover, the scholarly publications were strategically aimed at reflecting on and discussing relevant political debates and concerns of the organisation. Thus, I was able to articulate a knowledge co-production process that would serve the goals of Cooperation Birmingham whilst simultaneously getting important professional rewards in the form of publications. Far from being neat and well-defined processes, both of these examples required constant reflection and internal negotiation in the myriad of small decisions that constituted my everyday practice of MR, reinforcing the notion of the strategy of alignment as a compass that guides the militant researcher in trying to find a balance between individual and collective motivations.

#### 4 | Coping With the Double Impostor Syndrome

Militant researchers operate from a distinctive positionality that challenges the separation between knowledge (co-)production and struggle. However, in our daily practice, we need to deal with both the academic and activist worlds. Whereas traditional academics usually show distrust towards us for our 'lack of objectiveness', we are also met with suspicion by hardcore militants used to extractivist or intellectualist academic logics. These critiques are based on narrow and compartmentalised definitions of science and activism and ignore the huge potential of mutually supportive and horizontal relations between the academic world and grassroots activism (Anguelovski et al. 2025). And yet, such binary and divisive definitions are often internalised by militant researchers, who end up suffering impostor syndrome (Imray Papineau 2024) or an impostor positionality (Taylor and Breeze 2020). Bringing this argument further, I claim that we end up coping with a *double* impostor syndrome: we feel like we are not good enough neither as militants nor as academics and that we don't really belong to any of those worlds.

In my experience, there are two crucial elements that can help militant researchers cope with this tension. On the academic side, a supportive institutional environment is crucial. By this I don't mean symbolic or rhetorical support, but a committed team that is willing to accept the consequences of following a militant approach within a neoliberal institution. The compromises faced by militant researchers transcend the individual and ripple across working environments, affecting several people to differing degrees. I was very lucky to conduct my PhD at a research centre where I wasn't just allowed but even encouraged to conduct engaged forms of research. I had very understanding (even engaged) supervisors who supported me whilst giving me space to follow the rhythms of the organisations where I was involved. Typical PhD planning does not fit well with MR, since the temporal horizons of grassroots organisations and academia are usually very different (Valenzuela-Fuentes 2019). Thus, my supervisors accepted going the extra mile and coping with the contingency and uncertainty associated with MR. The clearest example of this coincided with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. After 18 months of research focused on ReCC, I decided to shift the central focus of my PhD to Cooperation Birmingham. Despite the trouble that this certainly caused them, my supervisors completely supported my decision. For militant researchers to thrive in

institutional environments, thus, we need engaged supervisors and/or managers willing to trust and support us, and to risk some academic rewards in favour of collective struggle.

On the militant side, commitment is crucial since it creates a reciprocity and identification between the militant researcher and the community in struggle (Pulido 2008). Commitment should be seen as a compass steering the actions of militant researchers through the manifold tensions and contradictions that they will certainly navigate, forging trusting relations with the community in question and preventing extractivist research practices (Gorman 2024). In Cooperation Birmingham, for instance, I was perceived to be just another member of the organisation who incidentally happened to also be a researcher. Some people would show interest and engage in my investigation, whilst others would just ignore it, but my involvement was never questioned. My insider condition was granted by the fact that, besides being a co-founder of the group and a core organiser, I was willing to 'get my hands dirty' and dedicate time to the organisation. Or, in other words, I showed commitment. This contrasts starkly with the attitude of the organisation towards dozens of diverse requests that we received during that time from diverse researchers and which were all systematically turned down or ignored. The general feelings towards researchers were suspicion and distrust since many people in the organisation had suffered cases of research extractivism in the past where they felt like passive research objects to be used and disposed of. Therefore, everyone had to pay for the sins of a few, and the principle applied was: 'we are too busy to speak to researchers, if they want to get to know us they are free to get involved' (which, by the way, never happened). Commitment, then, can lead to reversing relations of extractivism in research so that struggles can benefit from strategic knowledge production and even material resources to advance their social transformation agenda (Derickson 2024).

#### 5 | Translating Diverse Knowledges

Persistent knowledge hierarchies organise our forms of understanding the world and have material effects on people's lives, legitimising and sustaining structures of domination. In short, professional and expert knowledges mobilised by a powerful minority rule over vernacular and situated knowledges that mediate the existence of most of the population. MR is a form of struggle that aims at challenging these knowledge hierarchies by engaging in the production of what has been called 'minor' or anti-hegemonic knowledges (Pusey 2018). However, 'expert' knowledge should not be completely disregarded in the process. First, because existing hierarchies do not automatically invalidate all expert knowledge. There is a lot of critical academic production, for instance, that can be very useful for anti-hegemonic struggles. Second, because echoing the careerism vs. militancy contradiction discussed above, engaged researchers with institutional affiliations are forced to engage with (and produce) expert types of knowledge that still may prove very valuable for social transformation. In other words, theory plays an important role in stepping back from concrete practices and processes of struggle to provide concepts and framing to help understand similar dynamics in other backgrounds. Thus, MR involves dealing with a diverse set of (sometimes antagonistic) knowledges, requiring constant translation between different



contexts and their respective epistemic settings (Ellison and Van Isacker 2021).

During my PhD research, I was able to generate feedback loops in which my embodied militant experience and the strategic political notions that I gained from other comrades would enrich my academic writing. Moreover, looking at the daily militant practices in which I was involved through relevant theoretical lenses would help me develop insights that would add nuance or new perspectives to our political strategies and even uncover potential limitations. From March to August 2020, I combined a very intense involvement in the Cooperation Birmingham solidarity kitchen with the writing of a scholarly paper that would eventually become the centrepiece of my PhD. The argument of my paper changed several times in response to the rapid succession of events typical of the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Every time the organisation faced a new challenge or developed in a certain way, I would assess the validity of the existing analytical and conceptual frameworks and expand or modify them accordingly. At the same time, my interventions in assemblies and other spaces of Cooperation Birmingham were informed by my research and by discussions with my supervisors and other engaged academics. Therefore, the constant translation of knowledges and bridging of the militant and academic worlds fuelled the knowledge co-production process, whilst keeping it aligned with the goals of the organisation.

But the knowledge translation process in MR does not stop there. It also requires wide and strategic dissemination by adapting the core findings to a diverse set of outcomes directed at specific audiences (Apoifis 2017). In a practical sense, this has led me to write academic articles and blog posts, produce newsletters, give seminars, facilitate workshops, have endless conversations and give talks (including the time that I was invited to address a whole Methodist congregation during mass). It is interesting here to embrace Ellison and Van Isacker's (2021) description of MR as being comprised of a double movement. On the one hand, it is a knowledge co-production process directed to building collective capacities for a particular struggle. A good example of this is the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter, a pamphlet and poster that was printed and distributed with every meal at the solidarity kitchen.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, MR aims at amplifying the knowledges and strategic insights gained in a particular context beyond specific struggles. One of the militant-oriented articles that I wrote about Cooperation Birmingham, for instance, became widely republished and circulated during the pandemic in several online sites (Ruiz Cayuela 2020). Solidarity and cross-pollination, then, are at the heart of MR, which, eventually, is never about co-producing knowledge for a particular struggle but rather aspires to spur action and organisation towards a wider just socio-ecological transformation.

## 6 | Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have discussed MR as a particularly complex, dynamic and contested practice composed of multiple tensions that need constant negotiation by militant researchers at the everyday level. Of these, three proved particularly relevant during my PhD: the negotiation of a strategy of alignment to circumvent the apparent dichotomy between collective

aspirations and individual motivations, coping with a double impostor syndrome in militant commitment and institutional belonging, and the knowledge translation process aimed at challenging persisting knowledge hierarchies and spurring transformative action.

Importantly, and despite having discussed them separately for analytical simplicity, the three tensions (and many others that were not mentioned here) need to be understood relationally, as part of a whole. In fact, they are all so closely intertwined that they co-constitute each other in a messy, contested and dynamic practice mediated by the specific positionalities of all the people involved (militant researchers, but also supervisors, university staff, community organisers, neighbours, etc.). The double impostor syndrome discussed above, for instance, can complicate the whole process of knowledge translation and distort the negotiation of a strategy of alignment by creating feelings of unworthiness and insecurity in the militant researcher. Or the way in which we negotiate a strategy of alignment can also affect the time and effort that we end up devoting to knowledge translation and dissemination. MR, then, is the art of dealing with a myriad of tensions and contradictions on an everyday basis by making compromises and gradually building a distinct positionality that will allow militant researchers to carry on our praxis of resistance.

However, the stability of the whole process is fragile, and minor disruptions or unresolved tensions can eventually compromise our ability to conduct MR or its transformative potential. This opens up an important question that needs to be addressed from an embodied and everyday perspective: the meaning and political consequences of failure in militant and engaged research. The distinct perspective of the militant researcher offers a vantage point to challenge sanitised narratives of failure, which in neoliberal academia is romanticised as a necessary step in the learning process towards individual success (Clare 2019). We need to redefine failure and consequentially recalibrate success to include collective interests and transformative impact, in the task of carving careful and insurgent spaces of resistance in academia. I highly encourage engaged researchers of all kinds to take over this important task.

To conclude, it is important to recognise MR itself as an anti-hegemonic struggle whose main potential lies in expanding the realm of the political from the everyday practices and negotiations of militant researchers. Against the push of the neoliberal edu-factory willing to enclose knowledge production as an individual and profit-making activity, we stand up and resist. MR is a collective and very political act through which we transcend the academic community and redefine its ethos, thus prefiguring a more just future through our research practices.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://coventrypeacehouse.wixsite.com/coventry-peace-house>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.carag.co.uk/>.

<sup>3</sup> Which recently went out of business.

<sup>4</sup> <https://brumports.org.uk/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/newsletter-1-all-we-have-is-each-other/>.

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