



From the Centre of Europe to the End of the World: Intimate reflections on activism, healing and belonging in the field

written by Mina Baginova
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I was not feeling any particular excitement or thrilling feverishness. Preparing for the unknown journey into fieldwork in Santiago de Chile to research inner dynamics of the student social movement, I felt extraordinarily calm and peaceful,



with a firm sense of knowing that everything was as it was supposed to be. I knew that, somehow, I was departing to a place where all previous journeys both academic and the most personal have lead me to. Even the streets of Santiago and my first contact with fellow activists in the field seemed strangely familiar almost immediately upon my arrival. These emotions of intimate affinity towards a place and people with which I have seemingly only little in common have become a tool for a profound self reflection about who I am both as a researcher and an activist, identities that have in time merged, unapologetically, into one.

My research methodology is firmly grounded in the tradition of activist ethnography, produced in conviction that today research can not be impartial. After all, activists are rarely interested in why I am doing this research. Instead, they ask me how exactly I am engaged in activities elsewhere and for what reason I want to collaborate with them, leaving little room for mere observation. With such a close engagement, intimate self reflections on how I got to this particular field have therefore become an important part of my research. I was intrigued by the [article](#) on Allegra by Anne-Marie Martindale about the significance of emotional work during the whole process of an anthropological research. In a similar vein, I have found that emotional work is essential in activist research. Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) whose [book 'The Radical Imagination'](#) incorporates key elements of how I think about social movements research, emphasises the importance of creating the safe space within social movements that offers spheres for both personal and collective reflection of activists, opening thus zones of healing and possibility of rearticulating the political and ideological direction during the time of collective crisis within and outside of social movements. Bearing in mind that activist research does not stand merely for documenting social movement's activities and networks but is an element directly engaged in the collective social struggle, taking time for my own activist meditation has become necessary. How have I gotten here? What can I give back by being here? What can I take away with me from this invaluable experience?

I have no roots in Chile, or Latin America for that matter. It took me 30 years of various experiences and life journeys across many places to reach the point of



choosing to conduct this particular research, and to come from the centre of Europe where I was born to Chile, a country at “the very end of the world”. I was born in 1980s in the Soviet Union and growing up in early 1990s in the new aggressive capitalism, I have no memories of the political as related to social excitement and dedication. I only recall distorted pictures of collective and personal defeat followed by social paralysis. The excitement of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 very quickly turned into an economic shock that followed the fall of the the Soviet regime, resulting in social breakdown of early 1990s. My earliest memories of the political include disillusioned dissidents and aggravated former political prisoners, recollections which, for a large part of my growing up years, resulted in associating of doing politics with unavoidable cynicism, bitterness and sarcasm towards anything that may have potentially breathed hope.

The crisis of the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe has, from a very early age, shaped my life as a ‘perpetual migrant’ who spent her life either waiting for migrant worker parents to come home or migrated to other parts of Europe herself. Themes of movement and looking for alternative ways of belonging have been a fundamental aspect of my life and, ultimately, these were also the main reasons for my decision to study anthropology.

Mostly because of my diasporic background, it came naturally that I have been involved for the last 10 years in activities concerning immigration and wellbeing of asylum seekers across Greece, the UK and the Netherlands, witnessing first hand the cruelty of the discriminatory European system that includes only few and excludes most. There are several crucial moments in a form of snapshots that I recall as decisive for my eventual journey to Chile. One is being forced to live on the streets while trying to finance my studies and fighting for the labour conditions and legal wage at several precarious jobs. Another, international student friends being forcefully deported to unsafe countries of their origin by the police and immigration officers. It also includes witnessing a suicide of an undocumented immigrant in a cold cell of the detention center. It was also when



watching refugees and asylum seekers begging for the sip of water on European borders.

But the breaking point that has changed my whole life and how I see myself fitting into the academic and activist world came when I myself became a part of the unaccountable number of women who have been subjected to gender based violence. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to find refuge in my studies and I chose to conduct research in Colombia, my dream destination for years. Interestingly, my professors initially did not support my decision as I had no previous experience or knowledge of Latin America and thought of my choice as strange and irrational. Survivors of violence often talk about dissociation from oneself and I could not bring myself at that time to explain that, not only had I never felt that I belonged to any place in particular, but that going to strange places and opening myself to strangers is a natural aspect of who I am. I did not feel comfortable or obliged to explain that, somewhere at the moment of the violent attack, I had lost a part of myself which I needed to rediscover anew and being a new researcher was a way of pursuing that. Indeed, in Colombia I learnt more about myself and how I fit collectively into the wider society than I had ever done previously in Europe. My research topic was not based around activism as such but my journey towards healing started somewhere in the meetings of the displaced campesino women who showed me that, before they could protect and help their communities, it was essential to create a safe zone and a healing space for themselves. Creating such spheres is today widely used as a methodology tool in activist ethnography, which helps to develop the radical imagination as a collective process within social movements and among activists individually (see for example [‘Insurgent Encounters: Transnational Activism, Ethnography and the Political’](#)).

At last, choosing my latest fieldwork in Chile was a result of a conscious, well-thought, almost logic decision that came to be born at the right time of my life when I was ready to commit and fully appreciate this particular type of research. It has taken me all those previous journeys to translate my most intimate experiences into the political as I understand it today, which has



further enabled me to exchange my experiences and connect with my fellow activists in Santiago.

Like my previous work in Colombia or any other activist commitment for that matter, working closely with activists has become an opportunity to find a space for healing. A large part of my research includes a close engagement with political victims of Pinochet's dictatorship. Knowing intimately people who experienced torture, rape and disappearance of their loved ones, but who are nevertheless continuing to fight for the justice and recognition while working with the younger generations of activists has, perhaps strangely, made me think of the field as I imagine more rooted people feel about their home. In Santiago with my fellow activists, after years of moving from one place to another with a silent acceptance that I am a 'foreigner' everywhere including my country of origin, I feel a new emotion of belonging. I feel at ease with my fellow activists with whom I am comfortable sharing my past. It is here that I have taught myself to counteract cynicism, a feature I despise the most and yet I am often guilty of, both as an activist and a researcher. I keep thinking of another Allegra [post](#) by [Charis Boke](#) who asked herself if "is 'going native' anything other than letting go of our specific agendas, simply feeling like we belong?". It certainly has been my case, in which activism has become an opportunity for healing, a fresh space to explore myself as a researcher and a way of returning to myself as a more dedicated activist.

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