

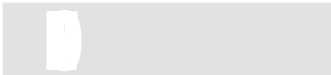
# **INSURGENT ENCOUNTERS**

Transnational Activism, Ethnography, & the Political

JEFFREY S. JURIS | ALEX KHASNABISH | EDITORS

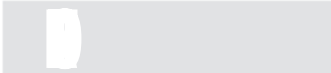
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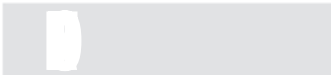
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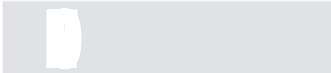


*For a just, democratic, and liberated world—one capable of holding many worlds,  
and to all those insurgent movements struggling to imagine and build them . . .*

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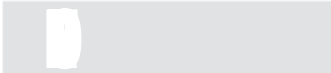
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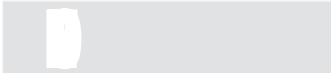
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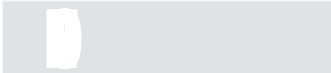
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## Transformations in Engaged Ethnography

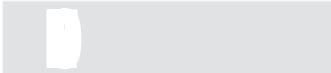
### *Knowledge, Networks, and Social Movements*

MARIBEL ISABEL CASAS-CORTÉS

MICHAL OSTERWEIL | DANA E. POWELL

In this chapter we situate ethnography as a political practice by combining insights from experimental ethnography with an emergent body of interdisciplinary work that recognizes social movements as knowledge producers. We argue for a shift in how we understand the aims and methods of both ethnography and political intervention and suggest that the role of ethnography should be understood not in terms of explanation or representation, but as translation and weaving, processes in which the ethnographer is one voice or participant in a *crowded field* of knowledge producers. Ethnographic translation enables the ethnographer's participation in the creation of new and different worlds and is a vital form of political intervention. While not unique to transnational movements or sites, the tasks of translation and weaving, as we elaborate them, are enhanced by the transnational dimension, in large part, because they become more visible when working in "placed but transnational" multisited translocales (see Conway 2004a).

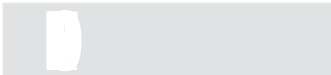
We build upon implications from growing literatures on social movements as knowledge producers and practitioners (see Casas-Cortés 2009; Cobarrubias 2009; Conway 2005a; Escobar 2008; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Osterweil 2010) and ethnographies of complex objects—also re-



1           ferred to as exemplary, experimental, or critical ethnography (see Marcus  
2           2007). As a growing coterie of anthropologists and social theorists have  
3           noted, the nature of ethnographic projects in late or postmodernity has  
4           been radically changing: hospitals, scientists, environmental disasters,  
5           and professionals all form valid topics that require new, or at least differ-  
6           ent, notions of the how and why of ethnographic research. We believe the  
7           innovations and insights arising from current critical impulses and de-  
8           bates about ethnography and other models of engaged scholarship have  
9           the potential to improve the scholarship about, and with, social move-  
10          ments.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, these innovations and insights might also contribute to  
11          the efforts of many contemporary movements whose ongoing work is to  
12          generate the conditions of possibility for social change through the cre-  
13          ation of new political imaginaries, narratives, and theories that support  
14          different ways of being and forms of knowing. Such ontological and epis-  
15          temological contributions by movements are the subject of our respective  
16          research endeavors, as well as those reflected in many of the chapters in  
17          this volume.

18           This shift, which can also be seen as postrepresentational in so far as  
19           it depends on recognizing the ethnographer as contributing to, and not  
20           simply representing, reality,<sup>2</sup> bears on the methods and theories of politi-  
21           cally engaged scholarship within anthropology in particular. But this shift  
22           also has relevance for other social science (trans)disciplines grappling  
23           with what it means to undertake research and produce knowledge in the  
24           crowded and networked fields in which academics find themselves with  
25           many other knowledge-producing actors. These fields tend to be trans-  
26           local, often transnational, and are produced in large part by the ongoing  
27           exchange and circulation of stories, narratives, and political-theoretical  
28           analyses and concepts among myriad movements and other actors with  
29           whom movements engage. The circulation and dispersion of such stories,  
30           narratives, analyses, and concepts is a core practice in the pursuit of alter-  
31           natives to the social, economic, ecological, and political crises we all face  
32           (see Juris 2008a).

33           This chapter is in many ways the continuation of a conversation and  
34           argument we developed in our previous collectively authored piece,  
35           “Blurring Boundaries: Recognizing Knowledge-Practices in the Study  
36           of Social Movements” (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell 2008). The  
37           ideas therein were the outcome of more than six years of ongoing dis-  
38           cussion with other colleagues, especially those affiliated with the Social

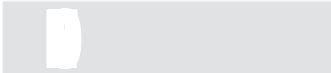


Movements Working Group (SMWG) at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.<sup>3</sup> In that article, seeking to address what we saw as serious limitations in dominant approaches in social movement studies, we argued that it was crucial to recognize how collective action was engaged in a variety of knowledge practices:

Knowledge-practices in our view range from things we are more classically trained to define as knowledge, such as practices that engage and run parallel to the knowledge of scientists or policy experts, to micro-political and cultural interventions that have more to do with “know-how” or the “cognitive praxis that informs all social activity” [Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 49] and which vie with the most basic social institutions that teach us how to be in the world. . . . [W]e claim that movements prolifically produce knowledge—a category often reserved for social and natural scientists, and other recognized “experts.” (2008, 21)

With respect to our specific projects, these knowledge practices include Native American environmental justice activists engaging in debates about energy development and thus shaping debates within expert knowledge regimes (Powell); North American direct action activists developing new forms of democratic practice, therein participating in political theory production (Casas-Cortés); and Italian activists advocating critical and reflexive modes of thinking, thereby participating in meta-discussions about the nature of appropriate political knowledges and epistemologies (Osterweil). Our previous article points to several critical antecedents in various literatures that inform our argument about social movements as knowledge practitioners.<sup>4</sup> However, in that piece, as we elaborated upon the notion that antihegemonic collective action produces its own expertise and knowledge, we confronted additional dilemmas that we were unable to address. Most importantly, acknowledging the centrality of knowledge practices within social movements holds significant consequences for both the methods and aims of any ethnographic engagement on, or with, social movements.

Thus, in some sense, we are picking up where we left off. The present task is to address the methodological, epistemological, and political implications of recognizing social movements as knowledge producers and practitioners because we believe this recognition fundamentally shifts the nature, purpose, and politics of ethnographies of social movements. In



1 this chapter, we begin by describing a discussion that took place in 2007  
2 at the annual symposium of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill,  
3 SMWG, which pointed to an underdeveloped understanding of the impli-  
4 cations of one of the central premises of the symposium and the entire  
5 working group: that social movements produce knowledge. This prem-  
6 ise requires recognizing that social movements are complex, often trans-  
7 local and transnational ethnographic objects, challenging the conception  
8 of a clear-cut ontology of the research object, and, therefore, traditional  
9 notions of research rooted in Cartesian realism. As a consequence, this  
10 premise further challenges the role of ethnographic knowledge itself. In  
11 the chapter's first section, we problematize the nature of engaged research  
12 vis-à-vis these complex objects. We then move on to discuss some of the  
13 emergent trends in ethnographic approaches that work with these kinds  
14 of reflexive and sophisticated objects in combination with trends in re-  
15 search on transnational social movements. In the second section we re-  
16 view some of the ethnographies of complex objects, examining how differ-  
17 ent modes of expertise, "writing machines," and networked objects have  
18 challenged ethnographers to question the nature and role of academic  
19 knowledge vis-à-vis other forms of authoritative knowledge.<sup>5</sup> These other  
20 forms include modes of knowledge production similar to those ethnog-  
21 raphers might offer, such as the knowledges produced within the transna-  
22 tional, networked encounters of the alter-globalization movement.<sup>6</sup> In the  
23 final section, we interrogate the remaining role of ethnography if social  
24 movements (and others) are actively producing knowledge about them-  
25 selves, even as they contend with expert knowledge regimes.

26 Confronted with a variety of ethnographic scenarios where these in-  
27 stances are common, we ask: what is the point of the ethnographer's  
28 work in transnational, increasingly populated research fields filled with  
29 a variety of knowledge producers? Understanding such scenarios as  
30 crowded fields, ethnographic experiences with indigenous energy poli-  
31 tics in the U.S. Southwest help us to reflect on the dilemmas and possi-  
32 bilities of such encounters. By exploring the epistemological consequence  
33 of such crowded scenarios, we argue for a decentralized notion of exper-  
34 tise and the multiplication of authorized voices. Moreover, we suggest  
35 a mode of engaging with these actors without replicating conventional  
36 forms of objectifying representation. Based on experience with an alter-  
37 globalization journal, we argue that movements should be understood  
38 as situated sources rather than case studies or research objects. Finally,

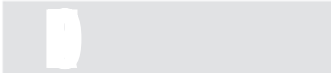
while analyzing transnational collaboration within a feminist collective in Spain involved in its own research on issues of precarity,<sup>7</sup> we discuss how such transnational ethnographic practices might be reconceived as a technology of translation or weaving. Such approaches imply a different vision of the political potential of transnational ethnographic work today.

### REFRAMING DEBATES ON POLITICALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH

Our understanding of the complex, yet vital, relationship between what counts as politically engaged research and the ways that ethnography shifts when complex knowledge-producing objects are taken into account was strikingly reinforced during the 2007 annual symposium of the SMWG at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, “Alternative Cartographies of Social Movements.”<sup>8</sup> During the symposium’s second day, with more than thirty people assembled, a debate arose over what constituted political engagement for academics or researchers, and in particular, for those working with and on social movements. The dynamic exchange became increasingly heated, despite the close political and intellectual affinities that had gathered us together. In question was the relationship of the researcher (ourselves) to the social movements we work with (our subjects—but also in some cases—ourselves). Or, more precisely, a problem emerged concerning how politically engaged our work as intellectuals could be, and through what forms and practices of activism we as academics might participate.

The discussion began to crystallize as a debate when one participant passionately implored those present to acknowledge that as politically aware and critical as we may all be there is a marked difference between the activism movements undertake and our own political engagements as academics or intellectuals. The point, the speaker emphasized, was not to suggest that in another facet of our lives we, as academics, could not be activists as well, but that we should not equate or conflate our intellectual and academic work with our activism, even if our professional academic work might have politically relevant or critical elements. These spheres of action should remain, she argued, separate and set apart from one another.

A frenetic surge of responses reverberated throughout the room. There were personal and political battles of identity, practice, and efficacy that were not easily assuaged. Despite the many more obvious commonali-



1 ties among us in the room, there were numerous unarticulated differ-  
2 ences. The kinds of movements the symposium participants worked with,  
3 and our relationships to those movements, were diverse. Some of us fo-  
4 cused on community organizing initiatives in the southern United States,  
5 others of us worked with alter-globalization movements and World So-  
6 cial Forums, and still others of us had years of experience with indige-  
7 nous rights groups in North and South America. Moreover, we came from  
8 different parts of the world: India, various countries in Latin America,  
9 culturally and historically distinct regions of the United States, as well  
10 as southern Europe and the Middle East. In addition, important voca-  
11 tional distinctions came into view, with some participants holding aca-  
12 demic positions (and the associated hierarchical distinctions, from ten-  
13 ured professors to part-time adjunct employees), while others identified  
14 primarily as activists working in their home communities on pressing  
15 issues ranging from antiwar efforts to local food movements. And yet the  
16 debate's potency was not due only to the ways it touched on our biogra-  
17 phies and identities; the intensity also derived from our shared belief that  
18 academics needed to be politically involved. Despite this shared belief,  
19 we had very different notions of what such political engagement might  
20 look like.

21 In the months following the symposium and through our more re-  
22 cent collaborative reflection, we have come to believe that what this  
23 heated disagreement made clear was that despite our collective articu-  
24 lation and agreement that social movements are knowledge practition-  
25 ers (see Casas-Cortés 2008; Conway 2005a; Escobar 2004), as a group  
26 we fell short of defining what this might mean for our concrete prac-  
27 tice. Nor were we clear about what political impacts, if any, such work  
28 might have. The speaker's sentiment—that our intellectual work, while  
29 critical, should not be thought of as our activist practice, per se—is not  
30 uncommon within Western and Northern social science. Given our loca-  
31 tion in the North American academy and our experience having done ex-  
32 tended ethnographic fieldwork with diverse social movements, questions  
33 regarding the possibilities and limitations of activist scholarship are poi-  
34 gnant concerns for each of us. However, we consider the manner in which  
35 engaged-scholarship practice is usually framed to be part of the problem.

36 Recently, this tension has been posited as one between *activist research*  
37 and *cultural critique* (see also this volume's introduction). In a pivotal  
38 piece, Charles Hale (2006) argues for the primacy of activist research

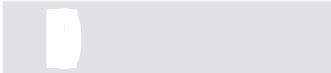
over cultural critique. For Hale and others activist research refers quite explicitly to work on or with social movements,<sup>9</sup> whereas cultural critique, although sharing a political commitment to the historically marginalized and subordinated, refers to purely scholarly work where the research questions are not determined by one's informants or field site. Hale distinguishes between the two approaches primarily on methodological grounds:

Scholars who practice activist research have dual loyalties—to academia and to a political struggle that often encompasses, but always reaches beyond, the university setting; proponents of cultural critique, by contrast, collapse these dual loyalties into one. Cultural critique strives for intellectual production uncompromised by the inevitable negotiations and contradictions that these broader political struggles entail. Activist research is compromised—but also enriched—by opting to position itself squarely amid the tension between utopian ideals and practical politics. (2006, 100–101)

While Hale's assessment of the differences between these research practices hits the mark in acknowledging an all-too-common divide in anthropology departments and the social sciences more broadly, we find this bifurcated frame limiting for moving our ethnographic work toward more politically and intellectually effective interventions. We are sympathetic to the concern with academic work that lacks thoughtful political investment or fails to make clear its own underlying politics. Similarly, we are also frustrated with critiques of engaged academics as muddying their supposed "objective" position and point of view. However, it is precisely because of our affinity with Hale's (and others') aims that we believe this dichotomous way of framing the debate can actually perpetuate the problem of politically disengaged, underengaged, or, worse, irresponsible work. Thus, the dichotomy constrains our thinking not due to its intent but because the bifurcation is premised on epistemological and methodological assumptions that hinder rather than help us develop a better, more creative and effective theory and practice of engaged scholarship.

We see the opposition between researchers working with social movements "outside" the university and those engaged in critical deconstruction and analysis within the academy as overly rigid, imposing a choice between two predetermined, and therefore limited, spheres of practice in-





1       stead of building effective and creative bridges between different spheres.  
2       There are three major flaws with this construction. First, such a bifurca-  
3       tion ignores the diversity of the complex forms of social movements as  
4       entities emerging through contentious practice from enduring struggles  
5       (see Holland and Lave 2001). Second, it assumes a Cartesian, absolute  
6       divide between the world of the researcher and that of the movement.  
7       And third, it underestimates the political potencies and circulations of  
8       knowledge practices.

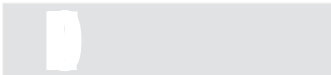
9       Many discussions of activist research, including Hale’s, often begin by  
10      positing a particular ethical solidarity between a readily identifiable social  
11      movement and a concerned researcher as the requisite relationship for  
12      political engagement to ensue. However, in the changing conditions of  
13      fieldwork, social theory, and ethnographic research today, not to men-  
14      tion transformations in the political field, neither the parameters of what  
15      constitutes a social movement nor the relationship between the researcher  
16      and a movement is necessarily so obvious or predictable. The movements  
17      we work with in Europe, the U.S. Southwest, and Latin America are dis-  
18      persed spatially and vocationally, composed of practices and actors that  
19      are themselves diverse, not only overlapping but often inclusive of the  
20      knowledge-production practices of experts and academics. The move-  
21      ments are more accurately perceived as networks, webs, or polycentric  
22      fields, composed of individuals, collectives, discourses, and so on, rather  
23      than as discretely bounded entities (see Alvarez forthcoming; Diani 2003;  
24      Escobar 2008; Juris 2004a, 2008a; Leyva-Solano 2001; Melucci 1996).

25      Even though we recognize that academia places many requirements  
26      and demands on scholars that are not necessarily or immediately com-  
27      mensurable with those of social movements (e.g., the production of theses,  
28      papers, grant applications, institutional advancement projects, teaching,  
29      advising, departmental service, and administration), this does not neces-  
30      sarily mean that those working in academia are less accountable politi-  
31      cally. The perception that critical academics are only or primarily loyal  
32      to the rules of academia is premised on the notion that the academy and  
33      academic measures of value exist separately from the contemporary po-  
34      litical world in which movements “move.” Moreover, this perception as-  
35      sumes that academic institutions are secure worlds in themselves—“ivory  
36      towers”—rather than the often precarious, porous, even perilous sites of  
37      labor that they are increasingly becoming. This is especially the case when  
38



the researcher's findings challenge the collusion of institutional powers, such as between the university and the state (see Wing 2002). There are a number of other sites and issues that shape, or at least should shape, our work, including what kinds of research questions we ask and how we arrive at those questions, how we see the effects of our research and its distribution, and what concepts we choose to use, create, modify, and debunk (see Narotsky and Smith 2006).

The challenge is thus to address, head on, the fact that oftentimes the work and aims of a social movement and those of a researcher may occupy a common or overlapping political space, engaging or constituting similar if not identical problems—what we might call *problem spaces* (see Scott 2004). Said differently, we need to figure out how to address the way movements, academics, and a coterie of others—each with their particular location, powers, and, of course, partiality and limitations—together form a complex network of knowledge producers. We believe the fact that social movements are increasingly described as networks, by themselves as well as by researchers, is no coincidence.<sup>10</sup> Describing movements as networks opens up a better understanding of the complex, diffuse, and not easily delimitable nature of these movements. Others have defined movements as “discursive fields of action” (Alvarez forthcoming), recognizing that social movements are no longer bounded, formalized organizations but can be ensembles of actors, organizations, discourses, events, and practices or “expansive, polycentric . . . discursive fields of action that span . . . into an array of other ‘non-movement’ locations” (Alvarez forthcoming). Incorporating the network concept is an important methodological and political step, leading to a shift not only in how we understand social movements—that is, being able to produce knowledge that recursively affects reality, the same realities inhabited and worked on by academics, and being organized in networked structures—but also in terms of our relation to movements. In the next section we discuss a series of trends in ethnographic practice that, in conjunction with the network turn in understandings of social movements, helps us move from ethnography as a purely scientific practice of representative explanation to an understanding of ethnographic practice as relational and creative.



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**ETHNOGRAPHIES OF THE COMPLEX: EMERGENT TRENDS  
IN ETHNOGRAPHIC THEORY AND PRACTICE**

While anthropology is not the only discipline in which ethnography is a vital tool, we believe that several debates within anthropology provide fertile ground for locating this discussion. In fact, a number of recent trends in the field recognize the need to develop new ethnographic practices in order to apprehend increasingly complex, dynamic, recursive, and knowledge-producing objects, or what we term *knowledge objects*.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, central to these “new” ethnographic objects is the fact that many knowledge producers generate products that are just as, if not more, sophisticated than the ethnographer’s own.

However, our intent is not to reinforce disciplinary boundaries. In fact, we believe these discussions are not only pertinent to other fields where ethnographic practice is undertaken (such as education, public health, geography, sociology, cultural and performance studies, and folklore, among others), but that they depend on a series of theoretical and epistemological moves taking place in trans- and postdisciplinary terrains. In particular, the social-theoretical turn to relational and postconstructivist perspectives is informative (see Escobar 2009). Moreover, one of the crucial aspects of contemporary discussions in anthropology is that there are several concurrent conversations in which methodological innovations are understood to be intimately linked with conceptions of the political potentials of ethnography. This is particularly true of the field of science and technology studies as well as the closely related body of ethnographic work associated with emergence, assemblage, and complexity. When brought into orbit with conceptualizations of movements as networks, these literatures suggest possibilities for revisioning the nature of our ethnographic practices.

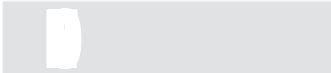
Science and technology studies, for example, has been crucial in challenging the kinds of objects considered appropriate for anthropological studies, and, along with poststructuralist and feminist theory, it has also been key in challenging the nature of the truth claims being made. We see these approaches as offering crucial methodological and epistemological insights into the nature of objects of inquiry, and of the role of social scientific inquiry more broadly. However, as of yet, these approaches have paid relatively little attention to power and the political implications and possibilities of their conceptualizations and methodologies. John Law has

argued that academics working on these complex objects have a responsibility to move beyond the dominant focus on science, technology, and other privileged sites of truth making to lend our conceptual, theoretical, and methodological tools to the study of other sites of knowledge production, lest we risk colluding with or reinforcing current power/knowledge hierarchies (Law 2004, 8).

We are compelled by this call to take other sites of knowledge production seriously. In particular, when we add this to moves to understand social movements as knowledge producers, Law's critique of *collusion* becomes an opportunity for intervention. Given the inextricable connection between the dominant knowledge systems of modernity and current political impasses (what we might describe as the crisis of representation in politics and epistemology) (see Osterweil 2010; Tormey 2005), enabling other ways of knowing and being is absolutely critical for any project of social-ecological transformation.

In another vein of literature, George Marcus (1999) advocates for a mode of engagement that is premised on recognizing the complexity and possible affinities with new ethnographic objects. "Objects," as "producers of powerful and sometimes authoritative representations" (24–25) of the world, complicate a neat distinction between the role of the anthropologist or social scientist and other objects of study and constitute what Marcus terms *writing machines*.<sup>12</sup> Although social movements were not in Marcus's list of instances of complex systems, we feel his conceptualization easily extends to include movements as the complex, unpredictable entities we understand them to be. Over the course of our respective research and personal involvement with various social movements, we have found an explicit turn by many social movements toward practices of developing analyses, writing, and publishing, making them exemplary of the complex objects and writing machines that Marcus proposes as the new focus for anthropology.

In fact the very architectures, spaces, and practices of many activists and other actors working for social change are thoroughly textual and analytic. Many activists employ and produce an abundance of written material to be posted and circulated via the Internet, publishing independent news sites, creating and running independent publishing houses and other endeavors, and, of course, keeping their own documentation. This is particularly evident in strands of the alter-globalization movement, with the increasingly diffuse practice of *encuentros* (gatherings), social forums,



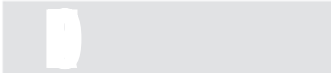
1 and counter-summits. These gatherings, at times of hundreds of thou-  
2 sands of people from all over the world, are designed to develop better  
3 understandings of contemporary economic, social, and political systems  
4 and their problems, and to cultivate alternatives to these systems. These  
5 global gatherings are marked by events and relationships: workshops,  
6 large rallies, speakers, teach-ins, panels, direct actions, and other encoun-  
7 ters in which literature and information are shared and out of which many  
8 publications are created.

9 Many workshops held in these spaces include discussions of texts and  
10 theoretical concepts that are remarkably similar to debates in seminars  
11 commonly offered in our universities. For example, during the second  
12 European Social Forum in Paris in November 2003, Osterweil attended  
13 the Radical Theory Forum workshop. In attendance were participants  
14 from around Europe, many self-identified as anarchists. Notably, the  
15 European Social Forum, part of the larger World Social Forum process,<sup>13</sup>  
16 was a thoroughly transnational site physically situated in Paris but consti-  
17 tuted by actors and discourses from throughout Europe and the Ameri-  
18 cas, as well as other members of the alter-globalization movement. At  
19 this particular panel attendees discussed the rise of what they referred to  
20 as “poststructuralist anarchism” as a new theoretical framework for the  
21 movements that had emerged around the protest against the World Trade  
22 Organization (WTO) in Seattle in November 1999, and the Zapatista up-  
23 rising in 1994 in Chiapas, Mexico. It was clear that the coming together of  
24 these actors was the product of the work and convergence of numerous  
25 translocal networks, compelled in large part by the very act of sharing  
26 stories and experiences in what some have termed a *new politics*, which  
27 can be understood to centrally involve underlying logics of networking  
28 and theoretical production.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the nature of the discussions at  
29 this workshop, as well as at many others, was as sophisticated (if not more  
30 so) than any academic seminar on social theory.

31 Related to this, and in marked contrast to forms of theorizing in past  
32 Leftist movements, these networking logics and the kinds of analyses  
33 being produced tended to be partial, situated, and based on a critique of  
34 universalizing narratives or solutions, in large part because relationships  
35 with other networks and actors from various localities challenge any pre-  
36 tensions to universality. In fact, the critique of universalism did not pre-  
37 clude the interchange of stories, concepts, and ideas from various locales  
38

throughout the globe, nor the desire to investigate and share diverse local experiences, but allowed for a different place-based ethic of translation and storytelling, similar in many ways to the conceptions of ethnographic practice we are developing here. As Jeffrey Juris explains, “Transnational activist networking always already involves a form of militant ethnography, while militant ethnography among contemporary local/global movements necessarily requires the practice of transnational networking” (2008a, 23). In line with this, there seems to be a sense of this affinity between the nature of ethnography and contemporary activist practice. At the Radical Theory Forum workshop, a Scandinavian activist suggested that the kinds of practices emerging from social forums, and the alter-globalization movement more broadly, bore a striking resemblance to ethnography; he even joked that “anthropology was the discipline of the movement.”

More than one hundred people attended the European Social Forum, and by its end at least fifty people showed their interest in starting a new journal for theoretical elaborations for the movement. While the actual constitution of the journal changed, this initial meeting during the 2003 European Social Forum can be seen as an important foundational moment for the journal-cum-newspaper *Turbulence: Ideas for Movement*,<sup>15</sup> itself a complex object that crosses between, therefore blurring and even working in collaboration with, academic and activist spaces.<sup>16</sup> As we discuss below, *Turbulence* and the European Social Forum are examples of the translation and networking logics of knowledge creation, circulation, and coproduction that alter our very notion of what ethnographic engagement can be. Given the changing conditions of fieldwork today, we propose that social movements be included among the complex objects that anthropologists use to rethink the nature and goals of our work. In the highly self-reflexive environment of activist groups with which we each have conducted research—namely antiprecarity activist research groups in Spain, translocal alter-globalist networks in Italy, and indigenous environmental activists in the U.S. Southwest—participants have highly refined practices of self-representation and are conducting tasks that are similar to those that a traditional researcher might carry out (e.g., interviewing, observing, and taking notes on what is happening for subsequent reflection and analysis). Although both careful observation and detailed note taking are clearly emblematic of ethnographic practice, such analyti-



1 cal writing tasks are not exclusive to the ethnographer, especially when  
2 dealing with populations engaged in explicit practices of analytical pro-  
3 duction and self-reflection.

4 For example, Casas-Cortés, while researching transformations in cul-  
5 tures of labor and structures of care work in the European Union, encoun-  
6 tered an important civil society initiative, the members of which practiced  
7 a form of inquiry they called “activist militant research.” When referring  
8 to the resulting doctoral research experience, however, it has been diffi-  
9 cult to use conventional ethnographic terms such as informants, or field,  
10 or even participant observation. This was in large part due to the explicit  
11 knowledge production practices enacted by these social actors, in this case  
12 antiprecarity and activist research movements engaged in practices ordi-  
13 narily associated with “experts.” These forms of do-it-yourself science in-  
14 clude conducting empirical research projects, arranging a series of theory  
15 seminars, organizing research laboratories, participating in conferences,  
16 engaging in translations and publications, and producing teaching insti-  
17 tutions, such as alternative universities. From the very process of engage-  
18 ment with these actors, numerous instances arose where the fundamental  
19 division between subject and object—so cherished and presumed by the  
20 traditional social sciences—was complicated and blurred. At times the  
21 typical roles of the ethnographic field scenario were completely inverted,  
22 fracturing the conventional epistemological rules. The following account  
23 evokes this fracturing of expertise and the associated rearticulation of  
24 ethnographic practice:

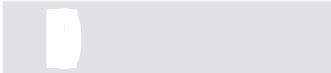
25 I was excited to participate in an activist conference on “Precarity,  
26 New Rights and Crisis of the Welfare State.” The workshops were  
27 held at a squatted historic building in downtown Sevilla and my  
28 goal was to examine the discourses of a group of pan-European  
29 networks working on issues of precarity and care work in Europe.  
30 As I vigorously took notes relevant to my doctoral dissertation  
31 project in anthropology, a participant sitting next to me—a poten-  
32 tial “informant” in the conventional research framework—asked  
33 me to polish my notes as a conference report to be published in the  
34 e-journal *Transform*, a hybrid cultural studies and activist publica-  
35 tion based in Austria. When the draft was ready, before the publi-  
36 cation was out, the text was already circulating via pan-European  
37 precarity network listservs. Another “informant,” this time from  
38

Italy, who was actually part of my list of potential interviewees, unexpectedly responded with several corrections. That same text was posted on a blog where I regularly posted my research notes, a blog shared with other members of my activist collective back in the United States. (Casas-Cortés fieldnotes, April 2007)

Without providing any further detail, this apparently simple translocal itinerary of a text evokes the multiple uses of ethnographic material, the blurring of the roles of researcher and researched, and the messiness of the ethnographic process. Originally written for a doctoral dissertation but also requested for inclusion in an academic-activist publication and distributed via antiprecarity network listservs, the text was corrected by one of the informants and posted in Casas-Cortés's research collective's blog and was later used as course material by a university professor involved in precarity struggles. In this fluid itinerary, where is the neat division between object of study and subject of research? In this spontaneous cotinkering of a text, who is the knowledge producer? Such blurring is becoming increasingly common when ethnographers encounter complex objects like social movements. While such behind-the-scenes intricacies of the research process are usually ignored or taken for granted, they are an important impetus to reflecting on a series of transformations in ethnographic practice, including the epistemological, methodological, and political consequences of recognizing social movements, and their diverse constituents, as knowledge producers (see Casas-Cortés and Co-barrubias 2008).

The shift to recognizing movements as complex objects and knowledge producers also corresponds and returns us to the notion of movements as networks and polycentric fields emerging in diverse scholarly disciplines, as well as beyond the academy (see Diani 2003; Escobar 2008; Juris 2004a, 2008a; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Levya-Solano 2001; Melucci 1996; and Notes from Nowhere 2003). In other words, thinking in terms of networks better conceptualizes the complex objects and actors under consideration as well as the patterns of interaction they produce. The concepts of networks and fields are crucial in rethinking not only the nature of movements, but also our relationships with, in, and to them. However, for the most part, researchers have deployed these two terms as a way to rethink the subject of their study—but not to rethink their own location and practice. In other words, many researchers' use of theories of net-





1 works and fields in social movement studies have not fully imagined, ana-  
2 lyzed, or articulated scholars' own relation to the network or field, failing  
3 to recognize that they are often deeply connected to, and at times even  
4 constitutive of, the very networks and fields they study.<sup>17</sup>

5 In the example of the activist conference, the texts and research gener-  
6 ated about precarity did not belong exclusively to the world of precarity  
7 groups or to the world of the researcher. Instead, each sphere played dif-  
8 ferent yet important roles in a network of meaning making to increase  
9 knowledge and practices in light of the growing prevalence of precarious  
10 work conditions in both Europe and the United States. Throughout our  
11 research we have encountered difficulty in discerning when we are learn-  
12 ing about "our object" or when we *and* our objects are interrogating and  
13 producing knowledge about a particular problem or conjuncture, situat-  
14 ing all of us in a common political field or problem space. In the case of  
15 *Turbulence*, all of the journal's issues have involved inviting and engaging  
16 diverse contributors, many of whom Osterweil first met during fieldwork.  
17 In addition, Osterweil's essay in the first issue of *Turbulence*, "'Becoming-  
18 Woman?' In Theory or in Practice?" (June 2007),<sup>18</sup> directly engaged the  
19 political problem of the absence of women's voices, something she writes  
20 about as a political problem she herself is dealing with, building on her  
21 personal experiences as activist and researcher. That text was published  
22 and circulated in many of the spaces about which she was "researching."  
23 There was no clear distinction between the world of researchers and that  
24 of activists. While more fully recounting the complex intermingling of  
25 moments and relationships between and in these new complex research  
26 sites is beyond the scope this chapter, this discussion begins to move us  
27 toward a networked vision of ethnography.

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29  
30 **METHODS AND POLITICS: IMPLICATIONS OF**  
31 **KNOWLEDGE AND COMPLEXITY**

32 If the role of the ethnographer is not to explain, in the traditionally sci-  
33 entific, representational sense, then what is it?<sup>19</sup> If social movements (and  
34 potentially other knowledge objects) are themselves producing a great  
35 deal of knowledge and analysis, including about themselves (and perhaps  
36 even about the role of research), what does the ethnographer contribute?  
37 The answer to these questions requires rethinking the ethnographic en-  
38 counter. First, instead of being studied as cases, movements' practices



become situated sources of analyses and concepts that in turn shape our understanding of the problem, and potentially the solutions we are exploring. This in turn requires that we recognize that social movement activists are often engaging the very same or similar contemporary problems confronted by researchers. The fields within which movements move are in fact quite crowded. The key thus becomes articulating the potential benefit or specific contribution of the ethnographic perspective and its products.

For Powell, this realization that we increasingly inhabit crowded fields of common problems crystallized during an early morning propeller aircraft flight over the region surrounding Farmington, New Mexico, including the northeastern edges of the Navajo Nation. Far below, stitched together like the pieces of a quilt, the patchwork landscape held together disparate populations—urban and rural, Navajo and non-Navajo, ranchers and energy workers—each transformed by decades of intensive oil, gas, and coal extraction. A diverse group of grassroots leaders, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and overlapping jurisdictional zones (tribal, state, and federal) currently engage these contentious energy issues, turning them into vibrant arenas of knowledge production and contestation.<sup>20</sup> Many of these actors move between the poles of resisting fossil fuel extraction and pursuing it, spanning political and ecological geographies, traversing overlapping jurisdictional and cultural boundaries as they engage allies and adversaries involved in transnational energy debates.

Pressed into the tiny six-seater Cessna airplane, I adjusted my bulky headset as the ground receded quickly beneath us, revealing the whole borderland below: the sprawling town of Farmington giving way to a strip of verdant farms flanked by oil well pads, buildings, highways, and sandstone outcroppings running along the wide San Juan River. The pilot, the environmental policy specialist, the activist, the reporter and photographer from the *Los Angeles Times*, and I, the anthropologist, were off early this morning for an aerial view of the river basin, its tributaries, and the energy infrastructures nearby. Each individual in the airplane embodies a numerous set of actors deeply invested in the controversies over energy development on the Navajo Nation. The pilot stands in for others with mechanical and technical expertise: re-

newable energy entrepreneurs, engineers, economists, and creative businessmen like himself, having started an “eco-flight” company to show these geographies to reporters, researchers, and policy-makers. The environmental policy specialist is a leading activist in the region and an ally to Navajo tribal members fighting the proposed power plant, but also represents a cadre of professional environmentalists from Flagstaff to Washington, D.C., involved in the debate. The activist, herself Navajo, represents one group in particular, but also hundreds of other tribal members involved in the dispute, whether through nonprofit organizations, tribal agencies, or grassroots campaigns. Her group has recently begun research on a technical and cultural document to outlay energy alternatives for tribal economic development. The reporter and photographer were two of hundreds of reporters following the controversy, creating a media maelstrom of interest in the issue. And I, the silent observer in the plane, stood in for other researchers, students, and allies interested in the debate and its broader effects. (Powell fieldnotes, August 20, 2007)

The aerial view and company on the plane made visible the very crowded field of action and knowledge production surrounding energy politics in the Navajo Nation. Here the ethnographer is but one interested and invested actor in a teeming arena of experts, who in many cases possessed and produced more critical, emplaced, and historical knowledge. In this instance, those experts have become Powell’s collaborators, in processes of research and writing (Powell and Curley 2009; Powell and Long 2010).

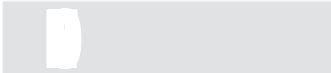
As in many ethnographies today, not only are we joined by others with shared interests or pursuits in our research location, but we may find ourselves in direct competition to prove the relevance of an ethnographic perspective vis-à-vis the more seemingly pragmatic offerings made by reporters (who offer the hope of getting the movement’s story into national or international news), policy analysts (who offer the hope of affecting local, state, and federal policies), attorneys (who offer the hope of litigation as a means to effect lasting change), aid workers (local or imported), and long-term, regional activists (who offer the hope of raising funds and awareness at the grassroots level). The sheer number of other producers of knowledge and action means that ethnographers have to work much harder to articulate the “what for” of our methodology and the unique

contribution to these shared matters of concern (e.g., labor issues, energy development, regional violence, environmental degradation, sexism, and failing economies), particularly when our critical perspective is not always welcomed by others in the crowd.

Once again, the Malinowskian trope of the lone ethnographer in the field haunts and increasingly fails the ethnographer, perhaps especially in ethnographies of contemporary, complex issues, which garner interest from many other types of so-called experts. And yet, perhaps increasingly, ethnographers can see this as hopeful. They can realize they are not alone in the field—or alone in their concerns and analyses. They are instead among a broader network of people working on a shared problematic, with their various tools, disciplinary trainings, audiences, agendas, and alliances. In this way, the crowded field may be more of a norm in fieldwork today, a norm that pushes anthropologists toward sharper articulations of their unique contributions to collective analyses and courses of action. For us, this has to do with recognizing a shift toward conducting anthropologies of common problems, as well as new aims toward translation, rather than explanation.

One of the reasons we need new conceptualizations and designs of the fieldwork endeavor is because we are part of a coterie of anthropologists trying to move from doing ethnographies of a people (the classic area studies approach) to doing ethnographies of a problem (see Dombrowski 2001). The politics of this shift implies a relational reconstruction: we are shifting from seeing our informants as the subjects of our research to collaborating on common problems. Such a relational reconstruction also allows for the translocal nature of ethnography today; problems can no longer, if they ever could, be understood as purely localized phenomena. The ethnographer often travels with collaborators, following them to other sites of knowledge practice and action. This shift from a people to a problem further reimagines the way relationships are conceived in ethnographic practice.

However, joining others in crowded fields of knowledge production does not foreclose the possibility of critiquing (theirs and the author's own) practices and positions. Nor does it mean that the interest in knowledge production and development issues always converge with local actors' most urgent concerns. Working in a crowded field on commonly defined problems frequently involves difficult negotiations with the researcher's own perspectives (and biases of disciplinary training) and



1 those of activists with whom the researcher is collaborating. The products  
2 of such alliances—themselves rarely smooth—are never predictable and  
3 cannot be taken for granted. However this does not negate the impor-  
4 tance of such attempts. By setting the research compass on understanding  
5 a problem, we, as researchers, relate with people across multiple markers  
6 of difference, finding common ground where understanding is not predi-  
7 cated on homogeneity. This relational (re)orientation has the potential to  
8 refresh and rewrite the practice of ethnography both in and with indige-  
9 nous communities, in particular, where the history of anthropology is  
10 fraught with malpractice, as well as in other communities and countries  
11 where our differences as researchers may be based on other distinctions  
12 than ethnic or political ones.

13 Recognizing such power dynamics is nothing new to critical anthro-  
14 pology, although the field continues to struggle to find productive ways  
15 to negotiate these historically fraught relations. As many feminist anthro-  
16 pologists have argued, epistemology is intimately linked with practice and  
17 never is outside relations of power (see, e.g., Behar and Gordon 1995; Vis-  
18 weswaran 1997). What we can know is related to how we go about know-  
19 ing, and no knowledge production is free of historically particular power  
20 dynamics. Others such as Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela link  
21 practice, epistemology, and ontology in claiming that “every act of know-  
22 ing brings forth a world” (1992, 26). That is, how we go about knowing is  
23 constitutive of the worlds we seek to know and seek to create. This triad of  
24 doing, knowing, and being in research practice does not require complete  
25 homogeneity and erasure of all markers of historical difference among  
26 actors. Thus, uniting doing, knowing, and being while still accounting  
27 for historical relations of difference and power in research relations may  
28 offer the more honest and productive means of (re)building relationships  
29 as part of the still underestimated value of research interactions. In other  
30 words, the relational reconstruction we are arguing for goes beyond shift-  
31 ing from a people to a problem to also including a shift from a product  
32 to a process. If producing the article (or the dissertation, the report, the  
33 book, the data itself) is subordinated to cultivating a process of mean-  
34 ingful, intersubjective human (and nonhuman) relations, then the very prac-  
35 tice and quality of relationality in research methods may be transformed.  
36 As such, this shift is an intellectual one but, moreover, it is a shift in our  
37 politics of engagement, and in some sense the nature of political engage-  
38 ment in translocal sites where knowledge circulates and is produced.

These examples demonstrate how our research practices—and their effects—are transformed through the recognition of movements as complex, knowledge-producing objects. We understand that movements are complex in the ontological and epistemological work they do: being able to produce knowledge that recursively affects reality—the same realities inhabited and worked on by academics—and organizationally operating through networked relations and fields.

**BEYOND ETHNOGRAPHY AS REPRESENTATION: ETHNOGRAPHY  
AS TRANSLATION, AS WEAVING**

Thus far we have addressed an epistemological shift in the research framework, emphasizing the proliferation of knowledge producers where the traditional “objects” become authoritative voices. We have also introduced the notion of a more relational understanding of research founded in a networked notion of reality. That is a reality composed of crowded fields, common problems, myriad nodes, relationships, and interconnections rather than separate compartments filled with delimitable objects and stable, expert positions. At this moment, the conventional research task of piecing together a chaotic jigsaw puzzle of data to explain what the natives/locals are saying is no longer valid. Not only are the natives/locals able to speak—and often quite eloquently—by and for themselves, the notion of a stable reality out there waiting to be explained has been definitively superseded. It has been done away with and replaced by a notion of reality transformed and affected by the very knowledges and stories being produced by that reality. This introduces yet another layer of dynamism and recursivity into the ethnographic project, which moves from representation and explanation supported by grand theories of the aims of science to the tinkering and more artisanal task of translation.

We are well familiar with Gayatri Spivak’s (1994) famous query as to whether the subaltern can speak. How does this change if we recognize a field composed of interrelated knowledge producers actively making worlds? If we answer her question in the affirmative, we raise the question of the nature of what the subaltern (or movement) might be saying and the role of the ethnographer vis-à-vis this actor who holds epistemic authority in her or his own right. The researcher then cannot be the spokesperson for people considered to lack audibility or voice. Rather, as a member of *Precarias a la Deriva* (the *Precariat Adrift*, an activist re-

1 search group based in Spain) suggested: “Researching is not about dub-  
2 bing, but providing accurate subtitles for unique films” (Casas-Cortés,  
3 personal interview, January 20, 2008).

4 Rather than speaking for, we are interested in the careful, though still  
5 difficult, task of crafting appropriate subtitles to enable the content to  
6 travel to other terrains and audiences. In this specific regard, the ethnog-  
7 rapher’s role is more akin to a translator, a sorter, or a relay (Latour  
8 1993)—and to a connector among situated knowledges (Haraway 1991)—  
9 than to a scientist seeking to represent or explain a truth from one distant  
10 land to another. Similarly, Arturo Escobar suggests that his book *Territo-*  
11 *ries of Difference* is an attempt “to build on ethnographic research in order  
12 to identify the knowledge produced by activists and to use this knowledge  
13 and analyses to conduct [his] own analyses about related topics . . . to  
14 build bridges between political-intellectual conversations” (2008, 25). The  
15 task of translation is not just about reproducing what others are saying;  
16 it is rather a practice of careful listening akin to what Romand Coles calls  
17 the “political arts of listening” (2005). These are skills of attuning oneself  
18 to others’ utterances and modes of living, and putting what others are say-  
19 ing into another code (in this case the code of Anglo-American social sci-  
20 ences). Through that process, the ethnographer is also adding his or her  
21 own experiential and intellectual background, including anthropological  
22 knowledge and training. It is then a process of reappropriation and tin-  
23 nering from which novel analyses might emerge.

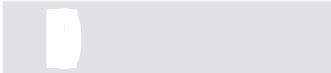
24 In this scenario, and using terms from anthropological traditions, we  
25 need not understand the role of ethnographer in the crowded field as *ven-*  
26 *triloquia* (Bretón Solo de Zaldívar 2008), in the sense of speaking for, but  
27 rather see our work as *translation* (Asad 1986; Tsing 2005). The notion  
28 of translation evokes one of the principal ethnographic transformations  
29 we are envisioning. We situate our argument within the orbit of social  
30 theorists working with this provocative metaphor as an intellectual prac-  
31 tice attuned to the recognition of multiplicity, furthering a more rela-  
32 tional mode of engagement among different knowledge producers. Boa-  
33 ventura de Sousa Santos discusses translation as a political alternative:  
34 “To my mind, the alternative to a general theory is the work of transla-  
35 tion. Translation is the procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility  
36 among the experiences [and knowledges] of the world without jeopar-  
37 dizing their identity and autonomy, without, in other words, reducing  
38 them to homogenous entities” (2006, 132; see also Juris, this volume). In

1 this formulation, ethnographic work as translation involves processes of  
2 cross-articulation among knowledges, rather than representation or ex-  
3 planation. While we do not eschew explanation altogether, our intent is  
4 to contribute to theoretical insights and action-oriented problem solving  
5 on the part of transnational networks of activists and academics by ad-  
6 vancing the work of ethnographic description in multiple points of con-  
7 tact. By using the concept of translation we do not seek a perfect scientific  
8 correspondence from one language to another, but an effort at communi-  
9 cation and ongoing conversation. This implies recognizing (with Gayatri  
10 Spivak and Bruno Latour), that translation, despite the best intentions,  
11 can never achieve a complete one-to-one correspondence of meaning.  
12 Something is always lost, but much can also be gained and added. Trans-  
13 lation then can be understood as constituted by engaging with knowl-  
14 edges advanced from particular and transnationalized locations to put  
15 them into other codes of knowledge produced elsewhere without erasing  
16 the fact that there is a difference in every site and process of translation.  
17 This relational and more networked, or horizontal,<sup>21</sup> approach contrasts  
18 with the historical role of the researcher, who is granted an aura of cog-  
19 nitive superiority.

20 In anthropology, this assumed authority was historically used to con-  
21 fer upon the ethnographer the role of interpreting for those who made no  
22 sense, or speaking on behalf of the voiceless. The debates on the politics of  
23 representation tried to address this problematic position. The discipline  
24 of anthropology was crucial in the advancement of a new awareness with  
25 regard to the question of representation (Behar and Gordon 1995; Clifford  
26 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus 1999a). Reflexivity was one of the  
27 solutions to this dilemma, although many contend that being reflexive  
28 is not sufficient to address the asymmetries of the established epistemo-  
29 logical order (Probyn 1993). Building on these efforts, and together with  
30 other authors, we propose thinking of ethnography as translation as an  
31 epistemological alternative to the geopolitics of knowledge inscribed in  
32 conventional scientific research.

33 In addition to addressing this epistemological problem, translations  
34 are creative and productive, seizing upon the moments that transna-  
35 tional connections make available. They generate encounters across dif-  
36 ference; they introduce new figures to determined circles of thought; they  
37 put debates that were hitherto unconnected in contact with one another;  
38 and they bring disparate and distant locales into orbit with one another





1 through the subjects that travel and translate across borders. Overall,  
2 translations facilitate transnational processes of relation making and ex-  
3 change.

4 Translation is also a critical step of putting distinct spheres of knowl-  
5 edge into conversation. By this we mean engaging the knowledge practices  
6 of the movements we are working with, putting them in relation to other  
7 sources, and at times putting them into other words. In this spirit, Casas-  
8 Cortés tried to compile and reflect on the findings advanced by a feminist  
9 activist research project on precarity, treating *Precarias a la Deriva* as a  
10 situated source on topics related to the EU, globalization, and transfor-  
11 mations of labor. She related their analyses and concepts to other tradi-  
12 tions, coming mainly from anthropology and other fields. Putting these  
13 analyses into dialogue with one another provided a solid basis for a richer  
14 understanding of current problematics, in particular transformations and  
15 efforts at social change in the EU. These “results” were then useful to both  
16 the author and the activist group with which she was working.

17 *Precarias a la Deriva* brings the question of care work to the de-  
18 bates on labor transformations in post-fordist economies and  
19 knowledge society. My ethnographic engagement with their texts  
20 and broader set of research activities generated a genealogy of the  
21 social movements’ concept of precarity and a glossary of *Precarias*  
22 *a la Deriva*’s own terms related to care. . . . The concept of care is  
23 simultaneously emerging in different disciplinary fields and spheres  
24 of knowledge: from ecology, to feminist economics, and even lib-  
25 eration theology. By engaging the different literatures on care, I was  
26 able to identify what was distinct about *Precarias*’ contribution: it  
27 was especially the site and format of enunciation. Coming from a  
28 location of struggle, their theory of care is presented as something  
29 in the making, more in search of a common lexicon of conflict than  
30 a coherent and fixed series of answers. (Casas-Cortés 2009, 423)<sup>22</sup>

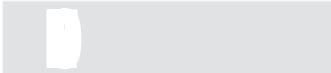
31  
32 Those heterodox sources about the EU are put in tandem with other lit-  
33 eratures on the question of care work and labor changes, mainly femi-  
34 nist economics and anthropology of the EU, connecting those further and  
35 fostering a web of critical knowledge producers on those shared matters.  
36 These webs of critical knowledges are themselves multifaceted and dy-  
37 namic, interpolating and involving others in various locales, including  
38 in other movements and the academy. In fact, at times our own posi-



tions and relations to spaces where information is shared put different people and networks into contact—this was certainly the case with precarity work and university struggles taking place in Europe and North America in 2008 and 2009.

The work of translation also has the goal of spreading, sharing, and building connections among transnational nodes of engaged knowledge producers, a practice akin to weaving. Recognizing ethnography as a technology of weaving begets recognizing that we move within a social reality that is constituted by networks.<sup>23</sup> Embracing the relational, networked dimension of the social implies a series of ontological and epistemological consequences for our research. A relational approach to ethnography would transform both researcher and researched into distinct nodes, knit threads, or rootstocks, each rooted in particular “territories of difference” (Escobar 2008). In this way the relationship would be flattened, or dehierarchized, although not made equivalent, and opened to mutual influences and explicit contagions. Ethnographic materials traveling among those networks facilitate these productive contagions, making ethnographic practice a weaving technology, of sorts.

The shift from representation and explanation to weaving and translation as the goals and effects of ethnography opens up possibilities for renovating the ethnographic endeavor. Within this framework it is possible to envision a new role for the ethnographer acting as a connective node knitting broader nets of engaged knowledge producers. Within this net, ethnographers are neither totally outside the arena of inquiry, in the sense of maintaining a necessary position for critical distance or signaling the neutral “god-trick” that Donna Haraway (1991) warns us against, nor are they completely inside, positioned as what some might describe as “going native.” Instead, seeing the ethnographer as a translator as well as weaver or knitter in the midst of a crowded field entails accepting the fact that one—intentionally or not—becomes woven into denser and denser webs through the labor and politics of ethnography. In other words, the ethnographer goes networked (or, perhaps, “knitworked”). The embracing of networks as sites of enunciation and practice helps to advance the practice of ethnography as a more relational methodology. The ontological foundation of this approach is one of a different realism, which is based on the blurring and flattening of reductionist binaries, including the subject/object divide, a foundational part of the modern scientific tradition. This new realism involves the breakdown of the rigid border



1 between self and others (see Escobar 2008). Rather than discrete, we can  
2 see entities as weblike: webs of interrelationships in which learning from  
3 each other, including sharing intellectual antecedents and political affini-  
4 ties, is a true possibility, and a political necessity.

5 The nature of the ethnographic approach—sustained inquiry, careful  
6 observation and participation, immersion in a place, and the ability to  
7 work translocally—makes ethnography a uniquely positioned research  
8 practice for much more than recognizing counter-hegemonic and sub-  
9 altern knowledges. The ethnographic sensibility and its concrete research  
10 procedures are well positioned to see resonant forms emerging among  
11 various sites of knowledge production, drawing together literatures in  
12 innovative ways and seeing patterns of theory and practice across various  
13 sites of action.

14 Under the premise of social movements as situated sources and knowl-  
15 edge producers, ethnography, more than an interpretative or explanatory  
16 mechanism, becomes a process of translation and weaving, articulating  
17 distinct, often unrelated and widely dispersed knowledges in novel ways.  
18 In that process, the position of the ethnographer is not one of being totally  
19 “in” or completely “out.” In this ambiguous position, the ethnographer  
20 is woven into the relational web that constitutes his or her own research  
21 topic intermeshed with her or his life trajectory. Still, the blurring does  
22 not entail equating researcher and researched. Going networked allows  
23 for the awareness and the openness toward unexpected multiple affini-  
24 ties, shared experiences, and common notions among the various parties  
25 involved. Moreover, such a strategy is premised on recognizing the rela-  
26 tionships and networks crisscrossing the reality of academics, researchers,  
27 and the Others with whom the ethnographer engages. Indeed, these re-  
28 search practices are somehow intended to coconstruct a broader archive  
29 with the movement; this is why we talk about the possibilities of a post-  
30 representational notion of ethnography. In that sense, these techniques  
31 are not only about redrawing or even doing away with the subject/object  
32 divide but are also about generating research methods that are appropri-  
33 ate for a new politics of research.

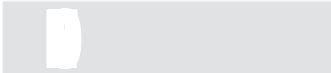
34 Ultimately, we suggest that rather than remaining with such a stark dis-  
35 tinction between political practice and academic ethnography, we would  
36 do well to consider what special strengths our practices as ethnographers  
37 contribute to the day-to-day and longer-term work of movements. While  
38 at times this means speaking as an expert on a court case for land rights

explicitly for a social movement, at other times it might mean creating, defining, or generating concepts; destabilizing the hegemony or seeming solidity of expert knowledges; helping to make the case for different ways of knowing; or being the knitworker who builds conversations within conversations, broadening participation and deepening understanding. Transnational movements may find themselves working with ethnographers to generate and co-author the discourses, imaginaries, and plans for organizing things differently—based either on our work in nonhierarchical societies (something anthropologists might have a special sensibility for; see Graeber 2004, 2009) or simply on the fact that we have engaged, observed, recorded, and looked after their (or our own) practices ethnographically.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, studying movements as complex objects and networks that are prolifically producing knowledges, often across a broad geography of locales, poses a series of methodological challenges and possibilities. These challenges are raised to previous approaches in research on social movements, particularly within the subfield or discipline known as social movement studies, as well as to commonsense notions of the goals and purpose of research. When the researcher recognizes that she or he is dealing with objects and actors who are themselves producing analyses, data, and reflections, which in turn inform and even produce new realities for the actors involved, the act of research changes drastically. Rather than digging into social movements' own documents to justify extant theories or otherwise produce definitive representations of a social phenomenon "out there," ethnographers encounter authorities in their own right who are generating particular knowledges and stories, some that, at times, challenge the role and epistemic authority of the ethnographer. This not only shifts conventional notions of the ethnographic endeavor but also expands the traditional social scientific mandate of interpretation and representation toward unforeseen political possibilities.

#### NOTES

- 1 See Holland et al. 2010 for a discussion of some prominent models of engaged scholarship as recognized by university-based practitioners.
- 2 The term *postrepresentational* refers to an epistemological and political move that can be seen to be taking place both within social scientific disciplines and in the realm of politics (see Tormey 2005). In relation to the discipline of

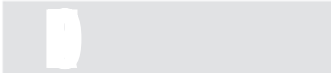


1 anthropology and the methodology of ethnography, the term refers to a shift  
2 away from a conception of ethnographic analysis and writing as accurate and  
3 objective representations of reality to recognizing that ethnographic analy-  
4 sis is always involved in creating and producing that reality (see Clifford and  
5 Marcus 1986).

- 6 3 We have in mind, in particular, the voices of Arturo Escobar, Dorothy Hol-  
7 land, Charlie Kurzman, Don Nonini, Charles Price, John Pickles, Wendy  
8 Wolford, Juan Ricardo Aparicio, Mario Blaser, Elena Yehia, Gretchen Fox,  
9 Sebastian Cobarubias, Ana Araujo, Carrie Little Hersh, Georgina Drew, Vinci  
10 Daro, EuyRyung Jun, Joe Wiltberger, Alice Brooke Wilson, and others at the  
11 University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, as well as colleagues elsewhere  
12 who have participated in SMWG's discussions: Xochitl Leyva-Solano, Marisol  
13 de la Cadena, David Hess, Sonia Alvarez, Orin Starn, Janet Conway, Gustavo  
14 Esteva, and Jeffrey Juris, among others. We find it no coincidence that several  
15 of the contributors to this volume have been part of the SMWG conversations  
16 since its inception in 2003.
- 17 4 These antecedents include feminist epistemology, traditions of popular edu-  
18 cation and participatory action research, as well as some recent trends, such  
19 as the decoloniality paradigm together with certain voices within science and  
20 technology studies. Moreover, we argue that among some working on and  
21 with social movements there is a recognizable "knowledge turn."
- 22 5 *Ethnographies of complex objects* is a term we use to refer to a trend in ethno-  
23 graphic work in the discipline of anthropology, closely related to science  
24 and technology studies and associated with the work of Kim Fortun (2001),  
25 George Marcus (2007), and numerous others, as well as some sociologists,  
26 including Karin Knorr Cetina (1997).
- 27 6 The alter-globalization movement is also known as the antiglobalization  
28 movement, the counter-globalization movement, and the global justice and  
29 solidarity movement, among other names. It is the movement most often  
30 associated with the spectacular counter-summits against the WTO, Interna-  
31 tional Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and other multinational institu-  
32 tions enforcing neoliberal corporate-driven globalization. Whether it is in  
33 fact a movement, or can be more accurately understood as a movement of  
34 movements, or even a network, is debated in academic and activist circles  
35 alike (see, e.g., Daro 2009; Juris 2008a; Routledge and Cumbers 2009).
- 36 7 Coined by social movements in Italy and now widely diffused, the term *pre-*  
37 *carity*, perhaps better put as precariousness, refers to labor conditions asso-  
38 ciated with increasingly intermittent and short-term work. The term also  
refers at some level to the precarity of living conditions in post-Fordist capi-  
talism overall and the knowledge economy in particular. While the word

sounds rather awkward in English, it is a perfect example of the kinds of translations being done in transnational movement networks. For more on precarity and the transnational networks involved in organizing around the term, see Casas-Cortés 2009.

- 8 A longer version of this argument, based on the same episode, can be found in Osterweil 2008.
- 9 Hale writes: “By activist research, I mean a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results” (2006, 97).
- 10 Juris (2008a) does a thorough job of describing not only the network-like nature of movements but also the networking logic that underlies and even drives them. Moreover, Escobar (2008) provides very useful reviews of the various social-theoretical and political implications of the notion of networks when applied to social movements, in particular transnational ones.
- 11 “Knowledge Objects: Finding the Political in Ethnographies of the Complex” is the title of the panel we co-organized for the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in Philadelphia in 2009.
- 12 Similarly, Michael Fischer astutely argues for recognizing that anthropology is increasingly acting in a series of “third spaces,” sites for the “emergence” of “new forms of life” in late- or postmodernities (2005, 5). This in turn offers another idea of the political force of both knowledge production and movements that produce knowledge.
- 13 The World Social Forum is a critical part of the alter-globalization movement. For more on the World Social Forum, see Conway 2012; Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Juris 2008a; Santos 2006; Sen and Waterman 2007; Jackie Smith et al. 2007.
- 14 For more on these underlying cultural logics and theoretical practices, see Juris 2008a; Osterweil 2004a, 2010.
- 15 See *Turbulence*’s website, [www.turbulence.org.uk](http://www.turbulence.org.uk) (accessed December 23, 2011).
- 16 Osterweil is also on the editorial board of the newspaper.
- 17 This applies in particular to theories of networks in social movement studies, e.g., Diani 2003 and Keck and Sikkink 1998, as well as traditional social network analysis in sociology.
- 18 <http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-1/> (accessed August 2009).
- 19 We do not want to suggest that there is not some form of cognition, or sense and meaning making, going on here, but rather that the notion of explanation, which tends to be thought of as univocal and correspondent to a sin-



1 gular, objective truth, is not appropriate. In this sense we are working very  
2 much in the vein of Charles Taylor (see, e.g., Taylor 1971) and others who  
3 recognize the difference between interpretive sciences and the explanatory  
4 and representational ones (see Rabinow and Sullivan 1979).

5 20 See Powell and Long 2010 and Powell 2010 for further discussion of the  
6 politics of knowledge production in relation to controversies surrounding  
7 energy development on Native territories.

8 21 For us horizontality does not mean complete equivalence or equality, and we  
9 are in fact critical of positions that see no difference between ethnographers/  
10 researchers and other actors.

11 22 Precarias a la Deriva's unique contribution stems from its innovative politici-  
12 zation of the care-precarity complex. The current work of the group centers  
13 around fighting back the emergent "care crisis," exploring the possibility of  
14 "care struggles" via the articulation of alliances between different care givers  
15 and care receivers, and posing innovative political proposals such as a care  
16 strike, care citizenship, and new care rights. These conceptual developments  
17 are not always at ease with the traditional analysis and politics of the Left.

18 23 Concepts of weaving and translation are not only related to the social theo-  
19 retical turn to networks, they are also relevant to the stitching together of  
20 new assemblages associated with late modernity. Social movements can and  
21 should be understood precisely as the kinds of entities that are (re)assem-  
22 bling the social (Latour 2005), and positing new ethical and practical pla-  
23 teaus for emergent forms of life (Fischer 2003). The key is to recognize that  
24 the notions of emergence and assemblage are themselves premised on a  
25 vision of reality that is distinct from traditional positivist (Cartesian, mod-  
26 ern) conceptions of the real.

27 24 Some have made the claim that one notable aspect of many contemporary  
28 movements is the ethnographic nature of activists' own research practice (see  
29 Juris 2004b, 2008a).