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# Life Before the Paper: Resisting the Segregation Between Theory and Action Through Research and Asylum Activism

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## Abstract

Dismantling oppressive power relations through academic papers *and* action is key for critical geographers. However, some geographers may prioritise writing "theoretically detached" papers over concretely contributing to the struggles of the people concerned by those papers. They may overlook reflexivity, ethics, and politics, thus spatially and temporally segregating their academic work from action and from their own situated humanity. In violent contexts, separating research from activism and prioritising in time disembodied theoretical papers risks reproducing the status quo in academia and society, reiterating the violence that erases racialised people. As researchers, we have a responsibility to use our power to resist, together with others, dehumanising dynamics. I use autoethnography to analyse some encounters that I have had, as a researcher and activist, with people seeking asylum, activists, researchers, and others in the politicised context of asylum in Finland. Some encounters allowed for the subjectivities and practices of activism and research to co-exist, although with some challenges, while others segregated and marginalised activism. Combining works by critical and feminist geographers, researchers of forced migration, and Black feminist theorists, I examine how *where we put our time* has ethical, epistemological, and political implications. I invite researchers to re-centre our situated humanity in our work and to engage more with politics. My novel focus on temporalities enriches discussions about crossing the borders between theory and activism. Lastly, I suggest ways to meet people navigating injustice in the times and spaces relevant to them, both within and beyond academia.

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## Keywords

asylum activism, ethics, temporalities, autoethnography, theory

## Introduction

Examining and dismantling unjust power relations through academic research and praxis is central to the work of many human geographers, across methods and subdisciplines (Wood, Swanson, and Colley III 2020, 427). Geographers have developed various approaches to conduct research which is meaningful to the lives of the people and communities it concerns, including activism (e.g. Mountz 2002; Torres 2019, 162). Nonetheless, there are contexts where researchers' activist engagement is ignored or marginalised. Some academics may build careers on studying questions of social justice, but they separate theory from politics and research from activism spatially and temporally, privileging academic-only, disembodied theoretical knowledge. By "politics," I mean the uses of power and the power relations, motivations, and consequences of human interactions in everyday life and in doing research. I understand this tendency to research for the sake of publishing as a form of "commodification" of theory (hooks 1991, 9). When ignoring politics, we overlook our own embeddedness in the phenomena we study. The ensuing spatio-temporal segregation of subjectivities and practices affects geographers as well as the people navigating migration regimes, although in very different ways. Ignoring politics, researchers can become complicit, which bears epistemic and embodied consequences within and beyond academia (Abdelnour and Abu Moghli 2021). I argue that, in violent contexts, separating research from activism and prioritising in time disembodied theoretical papers reproduces the status quo in academia and in society, and such segregation reiterates violence that erases racialised people and those navigating migration regimes (Marucco Al-Mimar 2024, 43; Vasudevan 2021). Researchers have a responsibility to use their power to resist, together with others, dehumanising immigration policies. Therefore, this paper urges researchers studying violent contexts, such as the asylum regime, to interrogate the ethical and political ramifications of our work.

The title "Life before the Paper" has a dual meaning. Firstly, it encourages academics to prioritise, in time and purpose, the questions and practices that communities navigating oppressive regimes see as contributing to justice—here, to resist deportations and demand humane immigration policies. Supporting migrants' right to live and publishing academic papers about their lives are both important and can coexist. However, we need to interrogate the ethics and politics of *what we do, when we do it,* and *where we put our time*. Secondly, this paper invites more researchers to re-centre migrants' humanity as dignity and equity vis-à-vis "papers," i.e. residence permits and passports, as technologies of migration regimes.

Through autoethnography, I discuss some encounters: encounters with people seeking asylum in Finland, who are the source of my knowledge on the topic of asylum and who reoriented the purpose of my research through activism broadly understood (i.e. in its nuances beyond the public dimension too, see e.g. Brickell et al. 2024); and encounters with various people—especially geographers, some of whom may identify as critical—who would segregate theory from action and research from activism, ignoring the politics of the power-laden contexts they would research and inhabit. The encounters took place between 2016

and 2019 in the violent context of asylum in Finland. The autoethnographic accounts portray everyday marginalising processes, unveiling subjectivities and practices in geography, academia, and beyond (Mountz 2002, 188). The discussion unravels the temporalities, ethics, and politics of academic work and action around asylum, suggesting ways to embody critical and feminist theories through research and activism.

This paper builds on a multidisciplinary body of literature, including the writings of Black feminist theorists (e.g. hooks 1991; McKittrick 2006; Nayak 2019), critical and feminist geographies embracing reflexivity, politics, and engagement (e.g. Jacobsen and Gilmartin 2021; Staeheli and Lawson 1995, 333), and works on ethics in forced-migration studies, which aim to be both rigorously academic *and* applied (e.g. Lyytinen 2022). The present paper disentangles some ethical, political, and epistemological tensions implied in blurring between research and activism, thus enriching discussions on crossing the borders between these two practices (Kramsch 2012). Also, it contributes new insights about the temporalities of research and activism, which deserve more attention in feminist geographies and studies on activism.

In what follows, I firstly illustrate the conceptual framework and the methods. Then, I present some autoethnographic accounts to examine the transformation of my subjectivities and practices as a researcher, a human being, and an activist. Lastly, I summarise the contributions of this paper and share examples of how fellow geographers could practise more activism.

## Temporalities, Ethics, and Politics

This section highlights the entanglements between temporalities, ethics, epistemologies, and politics in research and activism in violent contexts. Also, it defines the concepts of asylum regime, deportability, and humanity.

Several geographers engage with the spatialities of activism (see e.g. Asylum-Network 2015, 444; Blomley 2008), but only a few analyse time in relation to activism (Maxey 1999, 205). Feminist geographies could benefit from more engagement with temporality (Gökarıksel et al. 2021, 13). Time—and the lack thereof—is essential when pondering the possibilities for radical care in academia (Wood, Swanson, and Colley III 2020). Moreover, time is increasingly recognised as central to asylum and migrants' resistance (Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2021).

Temporalities are multi-scalar, intersecting, and non-linear lived experiences of time (Marucco 2022). Migrants' temporalities are "a constellation of interrelations," also relations of power, in which researchers are situated (Drangsland 2021, 87). These relations include the differential positions that we inhabit in the intersecting global orders of e.g. race, class, and gender (Brankamp and Weima 2021, 5). Through our research and writing, we are "constituted by and constitutive of the state" (Mountz 2002, 191). Thus, temporalities are central to political imaginations that counter oppressive power relations (Clark-Kazak 2023, 1153).

I focus on activism by and with people navigating the "asylum regime," meaning:

> the power enacted through the asylum system in addition to the wide range of differently situated subjects and bordering practices engaged within the regime and the broader politics of racialised exclusion, criminalisation, and hostile environment that seek to control the entry, lives, and deaths of people racialised and criminalised as migrants. (Meier 2023, 1861)

The contemporary asylum regime has colonial roots and heritage:

> [T]he coloniality of asylum informs the hierarchy of lives, rights and freedoms for which certain bodies are subjected to practices that are seldom experienced by others, [especially] white Western citizens and privileged non-Western people on the move, . . . both placed at the higher end of the 'human' spectrum. (Picozza 2021, xvii)

Thus, coloniality can affect activism and reproduce people seeking asylum as external to Europe by positioning them as recipients of other people's protection, compassion, or political engagement (ibid.).

Deportability means the constant possibility of being deported lived by migrants (De Genova 2002, 438). Researching questions of asylum and deportability means engaging with "contexts where (political) nationalism materialises through law and policy" (Drangsland 2021, 80). Through embodied encounters in fieldwork and everyday life, we become increasingly implicated in the temporalities of asylum as researchers and humans. This urges us to expand our reflexivity beyond an analysis of our positionalities, to recognise how we imagine, produce, and participate in temporalities throughout the research process (Drangsland 2021, 85).

Feminist scholars have highlighted how theory, method, and purpose are inseparable from each other (Staeheli and Lawson 1995, 321). Because "method and content are mutually constitutive and mutually contingent . . . traditional fragmentation or partition between action and thinking, practice and epistemology or activism and theory are transgressed" (Nayak 2019, 354–355). Similarly, in forced-migration studies, the crucial questions include: Who defines the agenda and relevance of research? What are the researcher's motivations and purposes? Does the research challenge oppressive structures, and how? If not, how does the researcher justify the need for this study? (Leinonen et al. 2020) Researchers studying migration bear a responsibility to examine power asymmetries, to challenge marginalising dynamics, and "to reflect and act on the implications of this knowledge for our understanding not just of migrants, but of the institutions and people who are implicated in encounters"; thus, ontology and politics are inextricable in migration research (Jacobsen and Gilmartin 2021, 71).

To orientate ourselves and our work towards the priorities of people navigating injustice, we can use various approaches and methods, such as PAR (e.g. Klocker 2012), feminist legal collaboration (Jacobsen 2021), public intellectualism (Alderman and Inwood 2019), and activism (Maxey 2004). Here, I focus on activism: "The word 'activism' is inextricably bound up with the word 'theory'." The "active" in "activism" "comes out of life, is lived, is alive and is transformative" (Nayak 2013, xii).

Activism encompasses multiple ways, spaces, and scales through which everybody can create fairer futures—within academia, outside academia, and on its boundaries (Torres 2019,

162). I see activism as being human to one another, as doing "as much as we can from where we are at" (Maxey 2004, 160). Activism is inseparable from our everyday lives; it includes practices performed by people who may not call themselves activists (Maxey 1999, 200). We become activists when, in our work and daily life, we decide to stand with and for people facing oppression in their everyday spaces (Fuller and Kitchin 2004, 5).

Lastly, I illustrate the theoretical meaning of "Life before the Paper." This title is an invitation for researchers to centre humanity in all our different positions—e.g. as researchers, activists, and/or as people variously navigating the state and the asylum regime. I centre the lives of people seeking asylum to emphasise their fundamental, complex humanity and multiple subjectivities (Gökarıksel et al. 2021, 17; Brankamp and Weima 2021, 5). While appealing to the right to live of the people navigating asylum to support their resistance, I am aware that the discourse of human rights has liberal and imperial roots, and that "the fullness of humanity was itself defined through the right to own property and subjugate others" (Gökarıksel et al. 2021, 5).

As "geography is always human," so "humanness is always geographic" (McKittrick 2006, ix). By calling on researchers to recentre our humanity, I urge us to recognise our standpoints and embeddedness in the phenomena, power relations, and temporalities that we inhabit by researching and/or living them. In other words, I call on academics to pursue, in academic and everyday efforts, the priorities and right to live of the people struggling for justice. As an activist, together with others navigating asylum, I have faced urgency, emergencies, and crises. As a researcher, I often perceive academic processes of knowledge production as slow and "out of sync" compared to the ever-changing migration regimes (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021, 15). Thus, one way to centre humanity in academic work is to prioritise in time those practices that support the political claims of people navigating migration regimes in the times and spaces that matter to them—rather than writing academic papers that may be detached from their goals and everyday lives.

## Autoethnography as a Method

Autoethnography owes much to Black feminist autoethnography, which "offers a narrative means for Black women to highlight struggles common to Black womanhood without erasing the diversity among Black women," while allowing them to talk back against oppressive systems (Griffin 2012, 143). Using this method, I examine my positionality and, by striving to *reach and deliver empathy* (Alatrash 2018, 134), I hope to orientate myself and others towards the creation of alternative futures for asylum in Finland and for academic research concerning people in marginalised positions. "We learn by living" (Mountz et al. 2015, 1247). As a critical analysis of one's life and emotions in connection with power relations, ideas, and practices (Alatrash 2018, 134), autoethnography helps researchers grapple with intimacies, proximity, and dis/comforts (Gökarıksel et al. 2021, 9). Autoethnography allows to reflect on "personal and inherited stories" with a view to politicising lived experiences and comparing them to those of others (Boylorn 2013, 74). Thus, this method places lived experience in a dialogue with theoretical concepts.

Coupled with political reflexivity (Abdelnour and Abu Moghli 2021), autoethnography helps us unravel why we research, how we come to know the world, what we see as knowledge, and the subjectivities and temporalities that these questions involve (Maxey 1999). As researchers, we are challenged to practise critical reflexivity, aiming to reveal and

dismantle power asymmetries—rather than "direct[ing] our decolonizing energies towards reflexive pronouncements of privilege and complicity that perpetuate white fragility" (Vasudevan 2021, 44).

Autoethnography centres the voice of the author, which can engender ethical and epistemological issues. My accounts feature elements of a power performance: I have defined the temporal framework represented here, what I tell and what I do not tell (Wall 2008, 42). My reliance on memories when recounting the encounters may be a limitation (Alatrash 2018, 134). However, I have documented and analysed these encounters, my agenda, and positionality constantly over the years. These reflections continue in this paper. While activism is collective praxis, in this autoethnography, I often use "I" because I can only speak for myself and be accountable for the interpretations that I deliver here and for my own path into activism and activist research. Wherever possible, I use "we" to refer to our activism as people navigating asylum in different positions.

## "We Are Together in This"

In summer 2015, Finland received more asylum applications than it usually received in one year. In response, the government restricted the immigration legislation. Concurrently, the Finnish immigration office (hence Migri) tightened its interpretations of vulnerability. The government also curtailed the legal aid and appeal times for people seeking asylum and permits. These changes further complicated obtaining asylum or other residence permits in Finland. Many people seeking asylum, organisations, researchers, activists, and others warned of the risk that people in need of international protection would not receive it. Back then, the Finnish police used to deport people to e.g. Iraq and Afghanistan, sometimes during their asylum processes and having lacked proper legal aid.

In 2015, I started my PhD exploring lived citizenship among Finnish Somalis using ethnographic methods (interviews and participant observation). Until mid-2016, I knew little about asylum in Finland. My knowledge came from the news and some social media posts, while the research participants rarely mentioned asylum. Things changed when I started encountering people who were mostly my age, identifying as men, and seeking asylum in Finland. With many, I shared the times and spaces of the increasingly frequent demonstrations for fairer asylum policies. With some, we became close friends. I started educating myself through research and social media, listening to people navigating asylum as asylum seekers, NGO workers, researchers, and others—some people embodied many of these subjectivities.

These encounters showed me the reality of asylum processes. Some people shared their asylum decisions with me. With all of them, I discussed their experiences of migration and asylum. I understood our interactions as aiming to restate their "fundamental humanity" (Gökarıksel et al. 2021, 17). Striving to be an ally, I reflected on my racial and legal privilege. We performed everyday acts of care—chatting, listening, cooking, and eating together. I was deeply affected by the violence of deportability infiltrating the lives of people seeking asylum and their loved ones, and by the realisation that, as a white immigrant with EU citizenship, I was supposedly spared from that violence.

The people seeking asylum that I met resisted by living in communities, making homes, nurturing each other's bodies, and keeping each other's minds busy, i.e. enacting "day-to-day

practices of love, connection, and healing" (Spathopoulou and Meier 2023, 149). They would tell their own stories and use humour to subvert the victimising dynamics of the asylum regime and, sometimes, of their supporters. Such "small, embodied, and everyday political practices" often go unnoticed but are part of broader struggles for justice (Meier 2023, 1863). Through these practices, people seeking asylum theorised and reconfigured the asylum regime, the global migration system, and what humanity means. Not everyone seeking asylum that I have met would identify as an activist or belong to a more structured community. Nonetheless, their vital "practices, feelings, and engagements" constituted "often invisibilised, embodied, and emotional activist praxis" (Spathopoulou and Meier 2023, 147–148). Their experiences influenced my perspective, pushing me to understand and redefine my research and activism.

"We are together in this," I told them. With these words, I intended to resist how the asylum regime differentiated and segregated us. I also wanted to express my commitment to fighting these injustices together (see also Lafazani 2015, 191). However, I had to ask myself: "Are we really together in this?" We strove to dismantle the borders between us, but deportability remained like a wall, inscribing some bodies as alien. In contrast, undeportability and more privileged mobilities were inscribed on my body, whether I accepted this or not. "Can I unmake or share my privilege?" I struggled to understand.

Sometimes, people tirelessly denouncing the flawed asylum processes and deportations managed to get in the news. Otherwise, silence mostly prevailed around these issues in my circles. Having moved to Finland in 2011, I thought I had good networks, which then consisted mostly of majority-Finns that I had met through leisure and work. Did they know about deportations? Those navigating asylum across difference seemed to live in a separate reality compared to my other friends and most Finns.

Whenever possible, I talked about asylum and deportations with my acquaintances. However, I felt frustrated and anxious when many of them—who were not involved in asylum activism and included some critical and empathetic colleagues—ended up reproducing mainstream stances on the ongoing humanitarian crisis: "If Migri rejected them, they have no right to stay," "The police must have a good reason to deport them." I believed everybody is able and responsible to act for justice in any way they can (Maxey 2004). However, many of my interlocutors refused to take a stance.

At that time, the temporalities of my personal life and research work were mostly separate. I was still bonding with people navigating asylum. The few times I was present when someone had their asylum application rejected, I did not know how to help legally. With my friends waiting for asylum decisions, we spent apparently ordinary time together and tended to prioritise their life and humanity over the asylum processes, to heal, enjoy, and live "normally," as they would say. This intimate dimension of our lives would become critical in leading me to taking a political and methodological stance in my life and research (Wood, Swanson, and Colley III 2020, 436).

## Whose Knowledge Matters

Like many colleagues, since starting my PhD, I had to apply for research funding nearly constantly. As a European citizen, I could study at a Finnish university for free. Therefore, I was privileged compared to many doctoral candidates who needed additional jobs to pay for doctoral studies. Furthermore, nobody depended on my income except me. However, during

my PhD, I had also prolonged periods without research funding. Eventually, in 2019, I had to apply for jobs outside academia.

In autumn 2016, seeking funding, I was accepted into a project which planned to research questions regarding newly arrived asylum seekers in Finland. My topic was the everyday lives of Iraqi men seeking asylum, which I would explore using ethnographic methods, as in my PhD on lived citizenship, but also using survey data, as the project planned. For the first time, I was working in a team rather than alone. I was in the second year of my PhD, in the middle of my own fieldwork on lived citizenship, and I had spent weeks doing anti-racist activism with local Finnish Somalis.

Due to the funding structure of the project, the research had to be done quickly. Just a few months later, we were preparing to publish the results. However, I struggled with the issues that emerged from the fieldwork. I wanted to centre the participants' voices but wondered how to write ethically about the fact that some research participants seemed to "compete" with each other for asylum. I feared reproducing hierarchisations of migrants. Simultaneously, I interrogated how my embodied experience informed my interpretations: *what kind of knowledge* could I *make for the future*? (Gökarıksel et al. 2021, 13) I strove to put the data in perspective, asking why asylum was produced as a limited resource instead of being based on people's protection needs.

I was to finalise my manuscript face-to-face with a senior male commentator. During our short, hectic meeting, I had to work hard to include the participants' priorities, which lay beyond the research questions defined by the project, into the text. Following what I had witnessed, my text raised questions about the quality of the Finnish asylum system. The commentator responded with methodological arguments and opinions: "Your claims are too big for such a small sample," "Yes, but this government is doing some good things too."

As a foreign junior female researcher then trained to accept professional hierarchies, I hesitated to realise that he was silencing the participants with his politics, making people seeking asylum "irrelevant to knowledge production" (Abdelnour and Moghli 2021, 9; see also Mountz 2002, 188). The encounters I had with people navigating asylum encouraged me to refuse any unsustainable edits and to take responsibility for my text. The injustices that I had witnessed with people navigating asylum urged me to contain the risk of epistemological and ethical harm; they helped me ensure that my commitment to my reference group would continue from data collection into writing and beyond (Wood, Swanson, and Colley III 2020, 437).

This experience led me to critically assess the purpose and impacts of my research. Probably, I was to benefit from this research much more than people seeking asylum. Could I conduct this study in ways that would be relevant to them and contribute to their resistance? If not, I would have to consider whether continuing my research would be ethical (Leinonen et al. 2020; Lyytinen 2022). These questions urged me to seek different, humane ways to reflect and act on the immediate struggles of people navigating asylum. At that time, I found academic practices distant and complicated. Subsequently, I found my way through the practices of our emerging activist communities.

## Placing Life Before the Paper

In 2017, I returned to doing my PhD independently with intermittent funding. I encountered and joined We See You (n.d.), an association for fairer asylum policies, and Every Woman's Centre (n.d.), which supports people living in Finland without residence permit or at risk of undocumentedness. The Centre trained us to assist in asylum and residence permit processes. Accessing legal knowledge transformed the temporalities of my life and work dramatically (see also Jacobsen 2023, 1309): with knowledge came more awareness about incumbent deportations, which took the form of emergencies. Some asylum processes started in 2015 had ended with negative decisions. Many people seeking protection found no peace.

My evolving subjectivity, the ethics, and the compelling temporalities of deportability often led me to "doing activism before research," including (free) volunteering with We See You and the Centre before (sometimes paid) academic work. Binaries between academia and activism should be deconstructed (Staeheli and Lawson 1995, 335). However, back then, there was a gap between the research, which I had planned before learning about asylum, and my activism, the latter being driven by the priorities of the people my research had come to concern. Moreover, I perceived a dichotomy between theory and activism because what some geographers praised as "theory" was often detached, ambiguous, or obscure to me. Sometimes, these abstract, disembodied theorisations made me question my ability to theorise. Thus, for some time, I wrongly thought that theory was unnecessary and that connecting theory and activism was a luxury or out of my scope. As bell hooks writes, "it is indeed the purpose of such theory to divide, separate, exclude, keep at a distance" (1991, 5). Across time and space, such disembodied theories have been "used to silence, censor, and devalue various feminist theoretical voices" (ibid.)—and, I would add, the theoretical voices of activists and people navigating injustice. Nonetheless, I insisted on staying grounded in the languages, experiences, and knowledges of the people whose voices I wanted to amplify, striving to keep my theorising efforts close to their spatio-temporalities.

Striving to bridge the academic and activist dimensions of my life, I mobilised my relatively privileged position as a white, European, Finnish-speaking woman researcher to influence decision-makers and authorities with fellow We See You activists. Simultaneously, I endeavoured to blur the racial and legal divide between me and people navigating deportability. In We See You, at the Centre, and in my private life, we, the people navigating asylum across our different legal and racial positions, spent time together cultivating our shared humanity. I started citing We See You, other activist groups, and the knowledge they produced in my academic funding applications and research plans, thus "counting what others don't" (Mountz et al. 2015, 1250).

Partly, my ability to partake in activism, as well as the ability of others, can be seen as a privilege: what "comforts," "discomforts," and "costs" for others characterised my position? (Gökarıksel et al. 2021) The fact that some people were produced as needing help and that I was able to help engendered asymmetric relations. Why did I, or we, want to help? Could we dismantle this power asymmetry and build futures where volunteers like us would not be needed? What did deportable people think of this? Did my way to care risk infantilising and victimising them? These questions require constant reflection.

My situation allowed me to endeavour legal and everyday activism. However, this had material and emotional costs for me and some people around me. As an activist, I enjoyed space, safety, and trust among some academic colleagues, and from people navigating deportability, activists, decision-makers, and authorities. Trying to put myself in the right place at the right time, I attempted "mutiny," refusing the position assigned to me in the racial and legal order (Vasudevan 2021, 43).

I should unpack the idea of the "more humane immigration policies" that our activism pursues. Our priorities resonate broadly with abolitionist politics (e.g. Burridge 2014), e.g. we would call for ending detention, containment, and border violence. Most of us would reject hierarchisations of people on the move and advocate for dignified, equal mobility and safety for all. However, some of us—including people seeking asylum themselves—might not fully subscribe to completely free mobility and the end of *all* deportations, while others would maybe see the state as the primary protector of migrants' rights (ibid., 466). Also, the fast-paced law changes and the urgency to mobilise more people towards justice might have partly discouraged our abolitionist tendencies, binding us to shorter-term and (apparently) less radical, but vital goals—mainly stopping deportations.

These dilemmas have a temporal dimension: to stop a deportation, one needs to obtain a residence permit, which ties the holder's life to one single issue, i.e. their vulnerability, marriage, employment, or studies. However, nobody lives a single-issue life (Lorde 1984, 138). Changing the legislation is imperative but difficult, and there are hardly any alternatives outside of its framework. Thus, when we resist and build alternatives to deportations through legal activism, however reluctantly, we inevitably envelop the futures we imagine in the time defined by the state (Drangsland 2021, 86). Therefore, the present and future are "irrevocably shaped by foundational and ontological violence" (Gökarıksel et al. 2021, 14). Narrowly defined asylum and residence permit categories do not reflect the realities of people's lives: striving to fulfil the requirements of asylum or permits can disrupt other futures that people navigating the migration regime would rather create for themselves. Therefore, as activists, we must stay focused on the priorities of people navigating asylum and permits (Marucco Al-Mimar 2024, 73). Also, we must make our analytical labour of disentanglement visible when engaging with the temporalities of the people we assist (Drangsland 2021, 85–86).

As I learned about asylum only in 2016, I may sometimes risk epistemic violence and "historical erasure" (Vasudevan 2021, 43) by unintentionally exceptionalising the constellations of asylum, deportability, and activism that I inhabit—although post-2015 activism is somewhat exceptional in the Finnish context. Thus, I endeavour to reconceptualise this context as part of a continuum of violence and solidarities extending beyond those years, beyond Finland, and concerning people in many other positions than that of asylum seekers (Jacobsen 2023, 1305).

Meanwhile, two years after arriving in Finland, many people I knew had sought asylum again and were rejected through a fast-track procedure. The appeal entailed frenetic meetings with the appellant, translations, calls and e-mails with lawyers and other activists, and negotiations to dissuade the police from detaining the appellant. Deportations were—and are—often scheduled over weekends and holidays. Sometimes, these temporalities crushed our bodies and spirits. Together, we, the people navigating asylum across difference, experienced anguish, anger, powerlessness, tachycardia, and increased sweating. However, we filled our time with care and hope, endlessly searching for alternatives and making jokes

even when everything seemed lost. Also, our shared time allowed me to address the power imbalances implied in activism.

## Ignoring Politics

From 2017 onward, I endeavoured to blur the borders between my research, activism, and everyday life. The separation between "the field" and "real life" may be artificial, but blurring it entails ethical and methodological dilemmas (Torres 2019, 165). Partly, my motivation was to sanction my activism as research in order to mobilise colleagues and create my space in academia. For me, everything I did around asylum was also research. However, I stress that the aim of my activism was to resist collectively, not to collect data. With people navigating asylum, we produced creative and "critical knowledge" and "praxis" (Blomley 2008, 287).

For me, separating my work from everyday life was theoretically and ethically implausible. I saw it as my responsibility to value relationships and stay committed to the people whose lives I learned about through research also in spaces, times, and practices lying beyond academic research and ethical protocols (Cahill, Sultana, and Pain 2007, 306; Clark-Kazak 2021, 132). In violent contexts, academic practice alone can be insufficient to fulfil our mutual responsibilities and relationships as humans (Maxey 1999, 204). Consequently, I insisted that fellow academics could contribute to asylum justice through numerous relatively accessible and informal practices according to their abilities (see e.g. Wood, Swanson, and Colley III 2020, 430, 435, 436). These practices included writing or sharing petitions, organising discussions at universities, and amplifying social media campaigns.

With a few scholars from various disciplines, we repeatedly attempted to mobilise some colleagues studying asylum and other marginalising processes, inviting them to problematise asylum, embrace the politics of research, and act for fair immigration policies. Some kept silent, some responded that "research should not mix with politics," and others appealed to the complexities of impact when faced with the responsibilities embedded in writing about asylum and other violent phenomena. Some defined my work as "activism, not research," inviting me to check my "sympathies for asylum seekers."

These "[d]iscussions of difference and identity in the academy speak to geographies of inclusion and exclusion in the nation state" (Mountz 2002, 188), revealing how we place ourselves in relation to the temporalities of violence and to knowledge production (Gökarıksel et al. 2021, 14, 19). All researchers studying violent contexts should constantly interrogate the motives, purpose, and relevance of their work (Leinonen et al. 2020; Lyytinen 2022, 77). Further, relevance and impact should be assessed in the temporal and spatial terms that matter to people navigating violence (Schmidt 2007).

The temporalities of neoliberal academia tend to depoliticise our work and lives (Mountz et al. 2015, 1239). Yet, it is an illusion that, as researchers, we could avoid politics. By ignoring politics, we partake in maintaining the epistemological status quo of the institutions and societies we inhabit, thus causing harm (Abdelnour and Abu Moghli 2021, 9, 10). Researching without engaging with politics is misusing our power as researchers and wasting a vital occasion to join forces for justice—whether the topic is migration, genocide, militarism, or anything else. In this way, regarding asylum, we risk reiterating the violence that erases people who are racialised and criminalised as immigrants (Vasudevan 2021, 36; Meier 2023,

1861). Similarly, disembodied theories which claim to be apolitical "deny the power of liberatory education for critical consciousness thereby perpetuating conditions that reinforce our collective exploitation and repression" (hooks 1991, 7). If our papers do not challenge unjust power relations, they may constitute unethical encounters (Jacobsen and Gilmartin 2021, 71), overlooking how the racial and legal violence embedded in immigration and citizenship laws are "our collective legacy" (Vasudevan 2021, 43).

Therefore, we should refuse to conduct research on forced migration unless our research strives to resist unjust laws, policies, and practices. Many of us may need academic work to make a living, but if we are unwilling or unable to face the ethics and politics of our research topics, we should investigate less violent and politicised questions. Embracing a "politics of refusal" means acknowledging "the limits of research to bring about material change and considers when [research] is and is not an appropriate and desirable intervention" (Wood, Swanson, and Colley III 2020, 437), e.g. due to the ethical risks of certain projects. Similar interrogations apply to participatory approaches and activism as a method and praxis: from time to time, we should reflect whether participation in activism and activist research does more to advance our careers and agendas than to support people pursuing justice (Lawson and Staeheli 1995, 335).

This said, the activism I participated in was not free from ethical questions and uneven power relations either. I and many others practising activism broadly understood—e.g. helping in asylum cases, organising demonstrations, and so on—have been centring the agencies of people seeking asylum in our practices. Those of us with more access to power would strive to make space for those with less to make their own decisions while not leaving them alone with the burdens of such decisions. Rather than speaking for the people navigating asylum, we would listen, learn, use, and question our privilege to amplify their voices, support their priorities, and stir systemic change together.

For me, recurring questions regarding our activism include(d): What kind of allyships are possible when, volunteering with the best intentions, we may ignore cultural practices?; When care may be mistaken for romantic interest, or in turn when romance and love bloom in deeply asymmetric relations?; When resisting across differential positions we might perpetrate sexism, classism, and racism? Activism as unsettled, imperfect alliances urges us to be humble and stay open to constant questioning and negotiations.

## "Do What You Are Paid For"

In 2018, the pressure to publish and secure funding increased. Several people inside and outside of academia questioned my approach; people navigating asylum did not. Because the topic of my PhD (lived citizenship) and the focus of my activism (asylum) were somehow different, their embodiment required separate practices. Often, I decided to merge my daily schedules of activist and research work. The funding type I had then and the fact that I was doing my PhD independently, not in a research project, allowed for such flexibility.

Another restraining factor was academic papers, which can take a long time to write and publish, and the quantity of which is often the main criterion to measure and reward scholars' "performance," rather than engagement and community service. Once, someone close to me, an outsider to academia and activism, urged me to "do what I was paid for" and to "help refugees" during my free time. He thought I was paid to publish and had to publish

to (sometimes) get paid. For him and many academics, publishing has always priority over community engagement. For me, this view implied that care work would be for *private times and spaces* (Mountz et al. 2015, 1247). Such spatio-temporal segregation of practices suggests that attending to the everyday lives of research subjects would be optional or additional to academic work (Alderman and Inwood 2019, 147).

Simultaneously, for an independent PhD researcher with the right to reside in Finland like me, the temporalities of Finnish academia appeared relatively flexible, both enabling and constraining my research and activism. I could focus on research, and I was given freedom and responsibility for my work. However, I would pay for my moral and methodological choices, e.g. if I failed to secure an income or struggled with impostor syndrome. Fortunately, I had some supportive supervisors and colleagues, but the university lacked a broader structure of care.

Some established department staff warned me: "You will have to explain why your PhD is taking so long and you have no paper out yet." Back then, I had not published any academic articles, but I had used my research skills to write, collectively and alone, texts for We See You aimed at mobilising people for asylum justice. In these texts, we deployed critical knowledge about asylum originating from academia, NGOs, and activists. When seeking funding, I started including these texts among my publications to show what I had been doing, challenge the primacy of academic papers, and encourage the readers to follow We See You and other campaigns. "Is this a way to create a societal impact?" I wondered.

Sometimes, academic papers support the priorities of people pursuing justice. Publishing is an important way to partake in producing transformative knowledge. However, in the context I inhabit(ed), the emergency temporalities of asylum clash(ed) with the lengthy, detached processes of academic publishing and knowledge production. Further, it seemed that the decision-makers and publics that we aimed to influence would rather access knowledge otherwise than by reading scientific articles. Another question was whether they would value academic and other knowledges altogether. Thus, writing academic papers is not necessarily the best way to meet people pursuing justice in their here and now, in the times and spaces relevant to them (Lancione 2017, 997; Alderman and Inwood 2019, 148).

In violent contexts, researchers should combine academic publishing with more immediate actions within and outside academia (Mountz 2002), e.g. organising community discussions, engaging with various media, and issuing statements and op-eds. As researchers, we are increasingly asked to answer the question of how to contribute to academic literature and theory *and* to the everyday lives of the people whose practices we study and among whom we live (Jacobsen 2021, 596).

This said, *doing what we can from where we are* (Maxey 2004, 160) means also prioritising our own and others' well-being, inside and outside academia. While it is imperative to also act beyond academia, the ongoing and multisided forms of injustice that many of us engage with can deeply impact us; the time needed for healing is scarce and often in competition with the time for e.g. families, financial stability, and careers (Wood, Swanson, and Colley III 2020, 433–434). Ideally, a balance between activism, activist research, and *radical* mutual and self-care may be pursued by varying the spaces, intensities, and modalities of our engagement. However, this is a privilege that only some have.

During 2018, I started making academic sense of my approach thanks to, among others, activist scholars such as my supervisor Eveliina Lyytinen, my mentors Anitta Kynsilehto and Leonardo Custódio, and the Activist Research Network the latter founded in 2017. These support networks gave me confidence, skills, and opportunities to translate my efforts as a researcher, activist, and human being into academic practice. They taught me to defend my methodology in conferences and funding applications. Truthfully, I used theorising also to justify why my PhD was taking longer than planned. However, my purpose was to reflect and inspire unengaged people to support critical methodologies and activism. My academic analysis and writing skills developed as I drafted materials for asylum appeals in collaboration with applicants, activists, and lawyers, as well as posts for We See You's social media and reports for our political influencing. Through these texts, we examined and redressed power relations. Through human, activist, and academic encounters, I learned to practise feminist geography and to grapple with the ethics and politics of how we frame the world. Furthermore, I learned to privilege the everyday experiences of people navigating asylum and my own as relevant knowledge also for academic theorising (see e.g. Boylorn 2013, 74).

The support of more experienced engaged researchers and especially of people navigating asylum was vital for me. I started being invited to speak at panels about asylum activism and research, often with others from We See You and other collectives. These forms of recognition and the responsibility to minimise harm helped me resist the guilt, pressure, and anxiety that I experienced in academia: "Whom does it harm if my PhD takes longer than expected? Instead, whom would it harm if I researched marginalising processes unreflexively?" In the position I was in, I could not imagine how to use my time otherwise.

When I was not doing "what I was paid for," I used my researcher's subjectivity to sharpen my critical skills for our collective problematisations of deportations and to participate in influencing decision-makers and the public. In turn, while I refused to use activism to collect data, spending time with people navigating deportability and assisting in asylum cases gave me specialised knowledge about the asylum system, which made my research more accurate as background information. Legal and everyday activism strengthened my ethical skills. The law-based dimensions of my (and others') activism can be understood as "feminist legal collaboration," a praxis aiming at attaining new knowledge and at socio-legally advocating in non-hierarchical ways, creating alliances for justice (Jacobsen 2021, 600). In these ways, to some extent, I managed to gradually blend my research in with my everyday practices of asylum activism.

## Conclusions

Inspired by Black feminist thinkers, feminist geographers, and forced-migration researchers, for whom reflecting on the agenda, purposes, and politics of research is imperative (hooks 1991; Leinonen et al. 2020; Nayak 2013, 2019), this paper has expanded understandings of how ethics, epistemologies, and politics are entangled with temporalities—temporalities that researchers and activists alike need to address reflexively (Drangsland 2021). I have argued that separating research from activism and ignoring politics and reflexivity risk reproducing the status quo in academia and in society, reiterating the forms of violence that erase racialised migrants and people navigating vulnerability (Vasudevan, 2021). As researchers, we need to use our power to join resistance movements to work

together towards the transformation—and hopefully abolition—of dehumanising immigration policies and other forms of violence.

This paper bears witness to how I and other people navigating asylum across differential positions resist(ed) together against the asylum regime, engaging "in a critical process of theorising that enables and empowers" (hooks 1991, 8). I have illustrated how we can prioritise in time and purpose the lives and goals of people navigating injustice. Autoethnography has unveiled the power relations in my theorising and action, and in the intimate sites where state power is reproduced and contested (Jacobsen 2023, 1310). I have analysed some encounters which have shaped my knowledge and the inherent power relations, comforts, and discomforts at play in my experiences of research and activism (Gökarıksel et al. 2021).

This paper has enriched discussions on the relationship between theory and activism through a situated example of these two practices. My autoethnography shows the connections between ethics, politics, and ontology in migration research (Jacobsen and Gilmartin 2021): therefore, I have called for researchers, especially those studying violent contexts, to use our power to challenge injustice more effectively. Furthermore, I have argued for practising a politics of refusal by redirecting research to less politicised topics whenever our research agenda and impact may be irrelevant to the times and spaces of people navigating injustice. Refusing the "reproduction of border(s) within our own research" enables the methodological and epistemological shift necessary to relate otherwise to ourselves, others, and the world (Spathopoulou and Meier 2023, 141).

Lastly, my analysis has illustrated practices that could make activism more inclusive and inspire others to act however they can (Maxey 2004). This said, embracing activism requires a fundamental restructuring of academia (Torres 2019, 165). Meanwhile, there is something everybody can do and that can mean a great deal. Departments can organise teach-ins and support their researchers speaking publicly on critical issues (e.g. Alderman and Inwood 2019, 149). Supervisors can teach younger scholars how to design research addressing the questions that communities pursuing justice face and to support these communities' theorisations. More established staff could create and support alliances for *radical* care (Clark-Kazak 2023). Everybody can organise seminars and panels, inviting individuals and communities pursuing justice to speak at universities and citing their work when writing and teaching. Lastly, we can take the products of activist collectives (books, stickers, etc) to our academic spaces and *let them do their work* (Lancione 2017).

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