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'Intimacy as method': Ethnographic reflections on equitable knowledge production in migration research

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Abstract

Despite the ongoing 'reflexive turn' in migration studies, intimacy continues to be cropped out of methodologies. This article explores how intimacy can enable us to produce knowledge in a way that is grounded in and sensitive to our participants' lives. We reflect on our experiences of building intimacy during our two respective ethnographic projects. While one project analyses the solidarity practices of citizens and migrants at the Franco–Italian border, the other explores the experiences of a Romanian family in London. Although researching seemingly divergent topics, we find methodological convergences and come together to propose the concept of 'intimacy as method'. Positionality is central to intimacy, as who we are as early-career female researchers shaped how we built intimate and caring relationships with our participants. Cultivating intimacy, however, also presented challenges, including ethical considerations in how we conduct research, and how we represent our interlocutors and engage them in knowledge production. In sitting with the discomfort which is central to intimacy, we found its analytical potential as it granted us novel insights into our participants' lives. By reflecting on both the potential and challenges of intimacy, we argue that migration researchers can use 'intimacy as method' to conduct more equitable research in migration studies.

Keywords: ethnography; intimacy; positionality; reflexivity

1. Introduction

While the ongoing 'reflexive turn' calls for more equitable studies of migration, intimacy continues to be cropped out of methodologies in order to maintain an image of objectivity and rigour. In this article, we attest to the importance of intimacy for building more equitable research practices in the field of migration studies. Over the past ten years, the 'reflexive turn' in migration studies has pioneered a critical approach to the epistemological, political, and historical forces that shape scholarship about migration (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Amelina 2017, 2021). Scholars of migration and mobility have interrogated how their work may inadvertently pathologize migrants as 'the political figure of our time' (Nail 2015), building on earlier critiques about how methodologies may reproduce state-centred paradigms and categories (Malkki 1995; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003; Sayad 2004 [1996]). Numerous scholars have launched calls to 'de-ethnicise' (Wimmer 2007), 'de-naturalise' (Amelina and Faist 2012), 'de-migranticize' (Dahinden 2016), and

'de-nationalise' (Anderson 2019) conventional epistemologies and methodologies in an attempt to foster more equitable knowledge production. These interventions questioned the categories used to study migration and proposed new methodologies to de-exceptionalize migrants' lives. This article contributes to this expanding literature by focusing on a less-explored topic—intimacy. Although many researchers build long-lasting and caring relationships with their participants, the role of intimacy in methodology remains underexplored in migration studies. We argue that focusing on intimacy can help build more equitable research practices by prioritizing ongoing, reflexive, and caring consideration of our relationships with participants. While equitable research takes many guises, in this article, we explore the methodological, epistemological, analytical, and political repercussions of centring intimacy and connect them to the pursuit of more equitable practices in migration studies.

Shying away from intersubjectivity in research is of course not a novel debate, despite it being a longstanding methodological concern for social scientists more broadly (Burawoy 1998). From a practical standpoint, failing to account for intimacy may be partly rooted in the increasing neoliberalization of migration research where funding is allocated to policy-focused research with generalizable and easily translatable results (Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz, and Crawley 2019; Stierl 2020; see also Singleton, and Dodevska in this Special Issue). With these limitations in mind, this article makes a case for the importance of intimacy as part of a methodological and epistemological approach aiming to reflexively understand migrants' lives. It draws attention to intimacy as one of the reflexive tools that have been delegitimized by positivist orthodoxies and extractive research practices but remain crucial to knowledge production. Our discussion goes hand in hand with the papers by Sereke and Mengistu in this Special Issue, which explore the dilemmas of doing research as the intimate and migranticized, racialized, or minoritized 'insider'. Also in this Special Issue, Fiorito and Gutiérrez Torres both consider how to go 'beyond research as a dirty word' (Fiorito 2023) by engaging in more ethical modes of co-production of knowledge with migrant communities, and we are in dialogue with them by suggesting that intimacy is a contributing practice.

We nevertheless make no claims of originality about signalling the importance of intimacy in qualitative research more broadly (Smith 2016). A recent intervention from Moss and Donovan (2017) in feminist geography highlights how accounting for intimacy in research sheds light on power imbalances and their ethical and political implications throughout the research process. Moss and Donovan propose a contextual understanding of intimacy reliant on 'a range of characteristics that are fluid, porous, adaptable and in flux—with no inherent predilection towards any one feeling for the specificity of emotion and sensation arises out of the context within which it emerges' (2017: 11). They propose the concept of 'muddling' intimacy in research (2017: 12), which refers to attending to embodied sensations, feelings, and connections weaved among human and non-human entities. Other scholars have argued for a similar approach using concepts such as 'radical vulnerability' (Chennault 2021) or relationality (Vasudevan 2021). Rather than seeking a strict definition of intimacy, we follow Moss and Donovan's (2017) contextual approach to make sense of the many representations of intimacy in our ethnographic reflections, which make the substance of this article.

In what follows, we bring together insights from our respective fieldwork in the seemingly distinct disciplines of anthropology and politics, highlighting our experiences as female early-career researchers. Despite working in different disciplines, we found methodological convergences in our experiences of living with and conducting ethnographic research with our participants for a year. Ana-Maria shared a house with other Romanians in London for a year during the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, analysing her host family's and other Romanians' experiences of work, kinship, and belonging. Janina spent a year in the small Alpine town of Briançon, where French volunteers run a

solidarity Refuge to help migrants who have crossed the border. Because of how we were both embedded with our research participants, we grew intimate with them. Living with fellow volunteers and working day in and day out at the Refuge, Janina's intimacy with the field changed how she understood the social and political stakes of everyday practices of solidarity at the border. Ana-Maria similarly cultivated deep intimacy with her host family which allowed her to play an active part in the networks of care and support sustaining livelihoods amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Rooted in these ethnographic experiences, we propose the concept of 'intimacy as method' to highlight the importance of intimacy for building a more equitable understanding of migrant lives. Intimacy in the field is relational, and building such relationships is a contingent and organic process, rather than a strategic objective. Therefore, we propose 'intimacy as method' as a concept in its own right to draw attention to the methodological and analytical potential of centring intimacy in studies of migration. In proposing 'friendship as method', sociologist Lisa Tillman-Healy argues it amounts to 'a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project' (2003: 735) where radical reciprocity, trust, and care become key methodological elements and daily practices for the ethnographer. Inspired by this formulation, we propose that 'intimacy as method' goes a step further as a concept fraught with tension and vulnerability, for researchers and participants alike. As Moss and Donovan (2017) remind us, reducing intimacy to a singular (often positive) emotion undermines it as a practice of relationality, denying the often contradictory and tense experiences it contains. Unpacking these contradictory experiences becomes a significant step in building more equitable research practices, reliant on reflexive and caring consideration of the relationships we build on the ground.

We start by introducing the key concepts used in our theorization of 'intimacy as method'—positionality and reflexivity. We then turn to ethnographic reflections on the intimate relationships we built in our respective field sites, analysing both the benefits of intimacy and the challenges it presents. As Sara Smith aptly puts it, we unpack how intimate fieldwork is 'full of both promise and peril for female researchers' (2016: 134). Our positionality was central to cultivating intimate and trusting relationships with our participants, pushing them beyond the hierarchy of researcher and participant. Employing reflexivity in turn allowed us to critically interrogate these intimate relationships, uncovering the tension and vulnerabilities underpinning them. We conclude by emphasizing the value that 'intimacy as method' holds for migration studies. By building and maintaining intimate relationships with participants, we argue that migration scholars can produce more equitable knowledge that is grounded in and sensitive to the lives of our interlocutors.

2. Key concepts underpinning 'intimacy as method'

Our theoretical efforts to conceptualize 'intimacy as method' are rooted in our shared ethnographic approach, both in terms of methodology and epistemology. Long associated with the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, ethnography is increasingly used beyond these disciplinary boundaries in studies of migration and mobility. Participant observation, as the central method of ethnography, has been welcomed by migration scholars who seek to observe power dynamics by becoming deeply immersed in the everyday lives of their participants (Elliot, Norum, and Salazar 2017; Boccagni and Schrooten 2018). Such immersion, however, relies significantly on the relational character of ethnography. As anthropologist Alpa Shah explains, participant observation is premised on befriending strangers, on establishing a 'dialectical relationship between intimacy and estrangement' (2017: 51). This dialectical relationship impacts the entire research process since ethnography represents both an observational and analytical activity (de Sardan 2015). At its core,

ethnography relies on the researcher's 'thick description' of events observed as a participant, followed by the further interpretation of these events within a theoretical frame (Geertz 1973, 1988). As such, the intimacy established when befriending participants continues to play a role throughout the research process, turning ethnography from only a method into a broader epistemological approach encompassing both a writing style and a theoretical sensibility (de Sardan 2015). The twin concepts of positionality and reflexivity are key to fostering and navigating these epistemological and methodological components.

2.1 Positionality and reflexivity

While they sit at the centre of any ethnographic approach, the concepts of positionality and reflexivity appear difficult to detangle both analytically and practically. On the one hand, positionality pushes researchers to consider their place in the intricate matrix of power relations inherent to knowledge production and wider social life. Rooted in the 'postmodern turn' in social anthropology (Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rosaldo 1989; Abu-Lughod 1991), positionality has also been taken up by other disciplines, including critical feminist methodologies, as we discuss below. Concerns of positionality however differ from those of subjectivity alone, instead asking 'how our subjectivity *in relation to others* informs and is informed by our engagement and representation of others' (Madison 2005: 10, emphasis in original). Rather than a fixed set of norms, positionality may be best understood as researchers occupying 'positional spaces' (Mullings 1999) that fluctuate according to interactions with participants and fieldwork experiences. However, concerns of positionality are not a one-sided process relegated to the researcher, as vocal critics have interpreted attempts at discussing positionality as no more than postmodern navel-gazing (Patai 1994; Salzman 2002; Geschiere 2010). Positionality instead represents a process in which participants can actively engage. As anthropologist Bob Simpson memorably phrased it: 'you don't do fieldwork, fieldwork does you' (2014: no pg). Comparing his experiences of research in Sri Lanka twenty years apart, Simpson attests to how the power relations in which the ethnographer becomes implicated in the field, as well as their identity and personal circumstances, impact their research and writing. As a result, he proposes an oscillation between subjectivation (how participants construct and impact the researcher as a person) and objectivation (exploring the conditions of fieldwork and the researcher's personal circumstances) to account for positionality in ethnographic fieldwork (see also Bourdieu 2003: 282–283).

As the second half of our methodological toolkit, reflexivity has been more widely used in social science, having recently obtained a strong foothold in migration studies (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Amelina 2017, 2021). Although difficult to disentangle from positionality, reflexivity can be described as a process of 'conscious self-examination of the ethnographer's interpretive presuppositions' (Robben 2007: 443). In other words, reflexivity allows the researcher to place herself within the research process and to put this under analysis—whether in (re)considering her chosen research topic, her disciplinary background or the politics of representation during the writing process (Erickson 2018). Rather than a lone exercise, the power of reflexivity emerges when researchers consider how differences in their identities and those of their participants show up during fieldwork and representation. Dahinden, Fischer, and Menet recently proposed a useful definition for reflexivity in migration studies as 'a process of "decentring" by distancing one's research from well-established ideas while developing alternative ones', a process operating on multiple levels and at different stages of research (2021: 536). As such, reflexivity can both create space for the often ignored voices of participants and help overcome the pitfalls of representation and the power imbalances inherent to knowledge production. It is this relational component of reflexivity and its illustration in the power imbalances at the heart of research that contribute to our conceptualization of intimacy.

By employing reflexivity, migration scholars can attempt to unpack the assumptions and ideologies underwriting their research and become alert to how their work can be used to support restrictive migration policy and to reproduce racist, neocolonial structures (Boswell 2009; Schinkel 2018; Mayblin and Turner 2020; Favell 2022). When deployed carefully, positionality and reflexivity can help migration researchers question our roles in knowledge production and how our work may in turn contribute to processes and systems which inadvertently reproduce exploitative power dynamics. These twin concepts are key to building methodologies and epistemologies that render researchers more than mere providers of an evidence basis for policymakers as part of the wider migration industry (Castles 2004). Yet even as positionality and reflexivity ask migration researchers to engage critically with our role in the power dynamics of knowledge production, the idea of intimacy remains absent.

2.2 Intimacy in critical feminist methodologies

Although it is not explicitly discussed in the migration studies literature, we find that intimacy, both as a topic of study and as a methodological concept, appears clearly within feminist methodologies. Occurring at a similar time to the discussions of positionality in social anthropology, classic feminist texts point to how acknowledging one's position—whether able-bodied, gendered, classed, aged, racialized, or ethnicitized—remains key to equitably depicting the lives of others while acknowledging the asymmetric power relations between the observer and the observed (Smith 1974; Harding 1991, 2004; Lather 1991). The researcher's intersubjective perspective is therefore marked by the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects (Crenshaw 1995: 358), bringing in other facets of identity including sexuality, disability or class. As such, feminist theorists proposed that concerns of reflexivity and positionality represent the hallmark of 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1988, 1991), rendering knowledge production inherently limited, partial, and specific. In the words of Donna Haraway, positioning ourselves remains 'the key practice grounding knowledge' (Haraway 1991: 193).

While intimacy remains tightly woven into these classic feminist texts, the more recent feminist literature provides theoretical inspiration for our focus on 'intimacy as method'. The emergence of affect theory, and its methodological and epistemological application in social sciences (Wetherell 2012; Kahl 2019), has pushed researchers to pay closer attention to the embodied and emotive forms of knowledge occurring in the everyday (Das 2020; see also Sereke, this issue). By acknowledging the importance of emotions and embodied experiences, researchers can detach intimate concepts from conventional constructs and spaces, and latch them onto unexpected entities to create new ways of thinking and acting (Ahmed 2014, 2017). In this vein, our understanding of intimacy moves beyond its positive, optimist connotations to instead include the very 'threats to the image of the world it seeks to sustain' (Berlant 1998: 288), such as the discomfort and tension that come with intimacy. The same applies to the spaces where intimacy is assumed to unfold, like the home, which is often contested in moments of crisis when they become the locales of crime or catastrophe (Stewart 2007). Lauren Berlant pushes us to pay attention to what she calls 'cruel optimism' (2011) to account for what happens when we attach ourselves to things or normative ideas that might leave us worse off. This can help us push intimacy beyond its conventional understandings (those of domesticity, proximity, or reciprocity) to instead think more about what it holds for encounters of collectivity or solidarity. Inspired by this literature and grounded in our ethnographic reflections, we rethink and learn from what intimacy looked like during our field encounters.

3. Conceptualizing 'intimacy as method'

Our complex intimate encounters in the field form the basis of the following analysis in which we consider various aspects of 'intimacy as method'. First, we consider how intimacy develops in relationships built during fieldwork, often through mundane and gendered acts of care that take place when living and working in closing proximity. Therefore, positionality is central to how researchers engage in these relationships. This also blurs the boundaries between researcher and participant (although we question whether these distinctions ever operate in practice), and in doing so enables us to rethink extractive research practices. Yet, employing 'intimacy as method' also involves negotiating vulnerability and tension, challenging power dynamics on the ground, and complicating how we represent our participants. We then consider the role of intimacy in the writing process by recognizing what happens when we pay attention to how we build and nurture trusting relationships with our participants after fieldwork. Finally, we argue that intimacy is a collective practice making a political claim that challenges the hierarchies and disciplinary boundaries of knowledge production.

3.1 The potential of 'intimacy as method'

Intimacy in research arises out of building longstanding relationships with participants, through living and working with them over time in a way that builds trust. While intimacy relied on both physical and subjective proximity for our projects, we consider it to be defined by a relational commitment to one another, for both researcher and participant. Due to its relational nature, intimacy is grounded in positionality: who we are and how our participants saw us shaped both how we experienced intimacy in the field and how we employed 'intimacy as method' in our analysis. Furthermore, intimacy unsettles the hierarchical distinctions between researcher and participant, which leads to a series of important methodological and epistemological lessons which show the potential of using 'intimacy as method'. For Ana-Maria, conducting fieldwork among other Romanians in London left her wavering between insider and outsider, which became even blurrier when she built intimate and caring relationships with her host family who eventually became her participants:

> Intimacy was central to my doctoral research long before I set foot in London. As a Romanian migrant myself, I shared an understanding of both the challenges of being 'foreign' in the UK and of cultural norms in Romania. While my participants and I could joke about Romanians' cunningness or share our experiences of securing our immigration status, I had the career aspirations, mobility and leisure time typically unavailable to many of them. These blurred boundaries developed into one of the main dilemmas underpinning my fieldwork. Due to start in the spring of 2020, my research was severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and I eagerly moved to London once restrictions eased. One of my previous participants, Camelia,[1] offered to sublet me a room in the house she shared with her husband, her children, and her younger brother. Faced with successive lockdowns and social distancing, we grew closer than I expected. Camelia and her husband agreed to act as my main interlocutors, a decision we often revisited during the year I spent in their home.
>
> Camelia often confided in me about her marital squabbles or her musings as a mother, while I opened up about being away from family and my uncertain future plans. Many of these conversations however did not make it into my thesis, whether Camelia specified it or not. Alongside lengthy conversations, my 'slow days' of research were usually spent cleaning or rocking the baby to sleep, since helping with household chores was expected of me as a young, unmarried Romanian woman. Camelia also cared for me in return. She would call me if I failed to return home after dark. She cut my hair for free and gave me the first pick of second-hand clothes she received from other Romanian women. These

everyday practices of care amplified my relationship with Camelia and her family. As we turned from housemates to participants to friends, my role in their home became murkier than I could have ever anticipated.

In building intimate relationships with her participants, Ana-Maria participated in what anthropologist Michael Herzfeld called 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 2016 [1997]), which stems from sharing the most embarrassing facets of national identity—the stuff of jokes and stereotypes—and deriving belonging from them. Her role as a researcher however complicated this cultural intimacy since 'a spell in Academia will leave its middle-class imprint on anybody' (Löfgren 1987:91). Similar to Sereke's (2023) experiences featured in this Special Issue, Ana-Maria became an 'insider Other', marked by differences in class or education that corresponded to less contested experiences of migration compared to the Romanians she studied, while still retaining the oft stereotyped identity of Eastern European. When her host family agreed to act as her interlocutors, Ana-Maria's role shifted once more. Turning from 'migrant researcher' to 'housemate researcher', her positionality was further complicated by the intimacy and proximity characteristic of living with her participants.

Similar to Ana-Maria, Janina was herself a participant in the everyday solidarity activities she researched. This necessitated situating herself in her role as a migrant researcher whose privilege as a middle-class, educated woman from the global north complicated her positionality when relating to participants who sat much lower on the racialized hierarchy of migrant status. Grounded in these experiences, she developed intimate relationships with her participants:

As I carried out my doctoral fieldwork along the Franco-Italian border, I often had to negotiate the blurred line between being a researcher and being a trusted community member. I found my place in the community by volunteering at the Refuge where migrants stay after crossing the border, engaging in the daily tasks of preparing meals, making the beds, doing laundry, and cleaning. Seydou and I first began chatting while doing the laundry and cooking meals. He was a caretaker at the Refuge. While most migrants pass through for a few days, the caretakers stayed long-term while applying for a legal status. In exchange for helping with the day-to-day activities of the Refuge, these young men shared a room (rather than a large dormitory) and had support to begin their lives in France.

At first, Seydou enjoyed speaking with me simply because I spoke English, which many of the French volunteers at the Refuge did not. He laughed at my use of "inshallah". Our conversations outside the Refuge, drinking coffee together during the rare quiet moments during the day, broke up days full of mundane chores. We spoke about the countries we came from, our families, his dreams for his life in France. Despite the fact that he had been at the Refuge for nearly a year, he had few people with whom to have these conversations.

My own background as a migrant who benefits from structures of privilege made me conscious of the obstacles that those crossing the border face that I do not. This became evident when I had to renew my visa to do research in France. I mentioned it to a fellow volunteer, and she asked me if I could also help Seydou with his paperwork.

I struggled with the bureaucracy of renewing a visa I had already been granted. But the stakes were higher for Seydou: his future depended on this. He and I often spoke of his dreams to take French classes, study for an electrician diploma, and get a job in France. We walked through town to the post office, first stopping in a shop for me to photocopy

my American passport. Seydou admired it: "Wow, America. Donald Trump is a great president, he is a strong leader." We laughed at our political disagreement and commiserated over French bureaucracy. But as we both mailed our envelopes, Seydou said "They will give you your visa, and I will get nothing."

I was struck by the importance of the understanding we had when both Seydou and I went to help at a workshop to build a hot water heater at the squat in town. Seydou joined because of his knowledge of electricity. At lunchtime, he confided in me that he probably would not come back for the second part of the workshop. Even though he liked the activity, he was uncomfortable with all the photos being taken. Seydou felt uncomfortable that no one had asked him and he didn't know what the photos would be used for. I raised this with the volunteers, and after lunch they explained that the photos were to promote their association and apply for funding, that they would not include people's faces, and that participants could ask not to be photographed.

While intimate relationships did not organically grow from our similarities with our participants, our positionality heavily impacted our practices of 'intimacy as method' on the ground. In contrast to Ana-Maria, whose intimacy with the family grew out of shared living arrangements as well as cultural proximity, Janina built intimacy with Seydou through shared work at the Refuge. Inspired by discussions of 'anthropology at home' (Jackson 1987; Hastrup 1996; Okely 1996), we argue that our positionality as perpetual insiders/outsiders was not a necessary prerequisite for using 'intimacy as method'. Michael Herzfeld explains that achieving 'social intimacy in the fullest sense' during long-term fieldwork allows ethnographers to partake in cultural intimacy, despite not sharing in these insights as part of their identity from the get-go (2016: 8).

Rather than the stuff of theory alone, we found that 'intimacy as method' is grounded in and reliant on mundane and often taxing practices of care and reciprocity. As Zadhy-Çepoğlu similarly explores in this Special Issue, reciprocity emerges as a key practice in building an ethical research framework to 'decentre knowledge production and instead centre the people we study' (2023: 9). In both of our experiences, these practices were highly gendered. For Ana-Maria, building intimacy was reliant on meeting her participants' expectations of her as a young unmarried Romanian woman. Whether helping with cleaning or childcare, her relationships with participants grew when she shifted between her roles as a friend, housemate, and researcher. Building intimacy also required lending an ear to her participants and opening up about her own difficulties, which created unclear boundaries of where research started and where it stopped. Janina took part in equally gendered practices as she built relationships while living and working together with her participants. Through the mundanity of cooking or doing laundry, she situated herself at the core of the practices of solidarity she sought to understand. In both of our experiences, the intimacy rendered by physical proximity and mundane daily practices complicated our relationships beyond the fixed roles of researcher and participants, calling into question whether such distinctions ever exist in practice when conducting long-term fieldwork.

In terms of methodological insights, centring intimacy can help us reframe some of our research practices, especially securing informed and continuous consent. Janina was confronted with the importance of intimacy to negotiate consent when Seydou confided in her that the photographs taken by the solidarity association made him uncomfortable, and she was able to support him. Ana-Maria similarly deployed a relational notion of consent, by building trusting relationships with Camelia and her family and returning to their decision to participate in the research throughout the year spent in their home. Building trusting relationships with participants where we became accustomed to their values and relationships with others helped us move beyond the legalistic notion of consent which continues to dominate ethical guidelines for many social sciences (du Toit 1980; Fujii 2012). Instead,

our intimate relationships and knowledge of our participants enabled us to approach consent in a way that existed outside the strict researcher/participant hierarchy. This intimate practice of ongoing consent enables migrants to share aspects of their experiences on their own terms. Often, migrants are made to tell and retell neat versions of their stories: to government authorities when they make an asylum claim, or even to well-meaning volunteers who ask where they are from and where they are going and why. Such a line of questioning flattens migrants' experiences by measuring them against a standard narrative, rather than allowing migrants themselves to choose what experiences they share, how, and when. For Ana-Maria and Janina, when this sharing did happen with their participants, it took place in a reciprocal way built on trust.

3.2 Sitting with the discomfort of 'intimacy as method'

Employing 'intimacy as method' involves negotiating vulnerability and tension, which challenges the power dynamics on the ground and complicates how we represent our participants. In building intimate relationships with our participants, both of us uncovered how intimacy and the practical conditions within which it unfolds can turn norms of vulnerability on their heads, complicating the imagination of research participants from marginalized groups as inherently vulnerable subjects, which has been widely discussed by migration scholars (see also Freedman 2017, Turner 2019). This conceptualization of migrants and refugees remains somewhat pervasive in migration studies, despite being the subject of significant critique of the 'categorical fetishism' in which migration scholars become entangled (Crawley and Skleparis 2017). Our experiences of uncovering the complex norms of vulnerability behind intimacy portrayed research participants outside of these victimized roles, instead showcasing how power relations can oscillate during ethnographic research.

The research encounters where tension showed up in our relationships with participants helped us discover the analytical potential of intimacy in migration research. In sitting with the discomfort and continuing our commitment to intimacy at such times, we cemented our commitments to one another—both researcher and participant.[2] It was at those times that we gained novel analytical insight to a significant degree than we would have using other methods. Simply put, by reflecting on our tense and intimate relationships with participants, we gained new insight into the other intimate and contested relationships or topics present in migrants' lives. In Ana-Maria's experience, the proximity and care at the basis of her intimate relationships with her host family suddenly turned sour when she felt unsafe in their home, but this granted her an important insight into the contested nature of support and care in migrant networks:

> The intimacy I cultivated for months appeared to pale in comparison to the one instance when I felt unsafe in Camelia's home. One evening in January 2021, I angrily walked to the supermarket, the only non-domestic place available to me during the third national lockdown, and where I could vent on the phone without being overheard. It had all started a few days previously when Marcel, Camelia's husband, asked my opinion about welcoming more people into the house. At first, I struggled to see his question as more than a joke. The house was full, after all. A young couple had just moved into the room where Camelia's brother used to sleep after the lad decided not to return to London. Crammed in with their toys, the children slept in bunk beds in a box room. Camelia, Marcel, and the baby slept in the adjacent bedroom where wardrobes overflowed with clothes and knick-knacks. I replied that surely there was no room left. What I forgot was that Camelia had recently moved a single bed into the living room, arguing that it would make more space for the children to play safely. When Marcel quickly pointed to this bed, I rebutted his suggestion, arguing that bringing in new people would be unsafe during a

national lockdown. The three-bedroom house already had nine residents who went out to work, shops, and school, coming into contact with hundreds of people every day.

This conversation came back clearly during my angry walk to the supermarket. Shortly before I left the house, Camelia informed me that two men from their village in Romania would soon arrive and temporarily sleep in the living room. She explained that they were not charging the men rent but were doing it 'to help' (să ajutăm). When one of the men called Marcel to borrow money, he invited him to London instead to try out his luck in construction. While I initially believed this story, I was growing more sceptical. Camelia had let it slip that 'they already paid the money', making me doubt their charitable intentions to these new lodgers. She stressed that one of the men was their friend and that he was poor since he struggled to find work in Romania with a seeing impairment. When I introduced myself to the man later that night, he asked me if I was Marcel's wife, hinting he was not a family friend after all. The two men eventually left a few days later and thankfully did not bring Covid with them. Fortunately, I remained with my host family after that angry phone call between supermarket shelves. During the rest of my time in their household, I often dwelled on this episode in an effort to unpack our complicated relationship.

While it was key to building intimate relationships, Ana-Maria found her position as a sub-tenant in an overcrowded house during the Covid-19 pandemic became unsafe when her participants welcomed lodgers against her wishes. Conventional power dynamics between researcher and participants were suddenly upended when Camelia and Marcel used their roles as head tenants to override Ana-Maria's concerns for safety. Beyond these methodological reflections, the episode above also shows how 'intimacy as method' can provide analytical insights which may have been unavailable using other methods. It shows the importance of inter-household, transnational support networks for migrants, in this case, Romanians in London, and how these networks continued to operate during (and at times in spite of) Covid-19 pandemic restrictions.

Intimacy becomes indispensable for analysing these networks in two ways. First, intimacy took on new significance during the Covid-19 pandemic. Had Ana-Maria not lived with her participants, she would have been less likely to observe practices of support that went against pandemic restrictions, which participants may therefore avoid discussing. However, the importance of intimacy expands beyond the pandemic context, as intimate relationships in research provide more than a window into 'illicit' practices. Second, and more importantly, the intimacy at the heart of ethnographic fieldwork draws on very similar caring practices as the migrant networks in the episode above, thus making them more intelligible. Being an active member of these networks of support due to her multiple roles as researcher, lodger, and friend, Ana-Maria could observe and participate in the tensions involved in these practices of support.

As illustrated above, supporting other Romanians may involve significant conflicts (with housemates, e.g.) and combines a delicate weighing of economic, social, and moral obligations to a whole set of actors and communities. Taking in the two men irreversibly combined meagre economic gain (since 'they already paid the money') with significant moral and social obligations. As established migrants, Camelia and Marcel needed to honour their duty to help Romanians in their native village. They justified their choice to provide temporary lodgings for the two men by reflecting not only on shared nationality but also on the men's poor socio-economic status, limited work in Romania and health problems. In helping the two men, Camelia and Marcel repaid the 'gift of communality' (Hage 2002: 203) incurred in earlier life, not to the men in question, but to their native village and community of friends, family, and neighbours. Taking in these Romanians during the pandemic amounted to slowly 'repaying' this gift and acting on the family's improved social status

due to migration. Becoming part of these networks of support can allow researchers to experience these complexities first-hand and to observe how they play out as migrants must honour different obligations, including in their relationships with the researcher.

Similar testing of intimacy occurred in Janina's fieldwork when a trusted participant suddenly made romantic propositions in the midst of an ordinary working day:

> One day as I stood cooking with two other French volunteers Seydou came through the kitchen. "Hey! I didn't know you were here," he said. He came up to me and lowered my mask. "Why are you wearing this thing? I like to see your beautiful smile. Let's take a selfie!" I obliged, then put my mask back on and returned to cooking with the other volunteers.
>
> A few days later, Seydou came and found me after I had finished doing the laundry. "Come for a walk with me," he said. It was a beautiful day, the mountains cut striking silhouettes across the blue sky. We stopped and sat on a wooden bench near the train station. "You know," said Seydou, "I really like you. I would like to do some adult activities together." I wasn't prepared for this conversation, so I tried to tell Seydou as politely as I could that I appreciated being friends but did not want anything more. After a bit of back and forth, he did not push or bring it up again, proving the respect he had for our relationship.

Because of the trust they had built, Seydou felt comfortable suggesting a level of physical intimacy with Janina. The very process of building intimacy, and the gendered processes and norms underpinning it, rendered Janina uncomfortable when faced with Seydou's romantic proposition. But because of the foundation of their relationship, she understood the intention was not unsafe and that this proposition gave an insight into the personal lives of migrant men. As with Ana-Maria, Janina's experience illustrates how the care and trust required to build intimate relationships with participants may open up new insights into chosen or new topics of study that are central to our interlocutors' lives.

Romantic and physical connection is often denied to men on the move, observing this firsthand led to insights that may not have been possible through interview data. Romantic feelings and physical intimacy are not considered of primary importance when responding to the humanitarian needs of migrants. In spaces like the Refuge, people lack any privacy because they share living spaces and bedrooms. Furthermore, negative stereotypes about aggressive and overly sexualized migrant men mean that some men are hesitant to voice any form of attraction or desire. The trusting relationship with Janina enabled Seydou to express something that would not be possible without intimate methods, drawing attention to a significant aspect of migrant lives that is often ignored in research.

In exploring these uncomfortable moments, we discovered the tension that follows when employing 'intimacy as method'. The discomfort resulting from this tension is something we need to acknowledge when talking about intimacy, rather than discard it as too personal. The tensions behind intimacy imply ethical complexities, as well as practical considerations that need to be put in place to safeguard both researcher and participant well-being. While we do not claim to have elucidated all these concerns, we hope that our experiences can serve as a reminder of the important discomfort and tension that come with centring intimacy in our methodologies, both during and after fieldwork.

3.3 Intimacy beyond the field

'Intimacy as method' extends beyond the confines of the field—as relationships are sustained across time and place and as a key principle guiding representation and writing. When considering how to translate the intimacy cultivated in the field into the writing process, researchers often choose to exclude it from their writing entirely or to romanticize it

in a way that erases its messy complexities and tensions. As Sara Smith reflects on her experiences of researching intimacy in India's Ladakh region, intimacy can grow distant when writing, filling the researcher with 'angst' in their efforts to use it to combat inequalities in the knowledge production process: 'It is not enough that I feel close to those I work with—I also have to find ways to draw on that intimacy to work against the structural factors that suddenly create distance when research is communicated' (2016: 142).

In writing intimately, we are reflexively engaging with the field as we experienced it, rather than censoring the uncomfortable details. Intimate acts of writing and self-disclosure can indeed be uncomfortable, unpleasant, and even violent (see Behar 1996). For Janina, the choice to include Seydou's suggestion of a personal relationship conveys not just the dilemma that she faced as a researcher and a friend in responding to his proposition, but it also makes visible how men who are on the move experience attraction and sexual desire, a form of agency often denied to them. Ana-Maria similarly struggled with how to react to her participants' decision which jeopardized her health during the Covid-19 pandemic, without negating the economic need and moral norms behind their choice to host temporary lodgers. These episodes reveal significant details about our participants' lives, yet were uncomfortable to analyse. In writing our reflections, we both struggled with self-censoring our intimate experiences. Given our powerful position as researchers, we did not want to perpetuate tropes about our participants—whether as poor, uneducated Covid deniers or as dangerous, predatory black men. It was by listening to our participants, then writing and thinking together, that we came to understand and reflect on these experiences as a way to challenge these tropes rather than ignore or erase them, as researchers often do for fear of being looked down on or excluded by their academic peers. This process also entails the vulnerability of opening ourselves up to critique: in retrospect, we may not agree with how we handled certain situations in the field, but reflecting on these situations helps us to understand how intimacy conditions our role in knowledge production.

Based on our experience of reflecting and writing together, we argue that such moments of tension, which are constitutive of building intimate relationships with participants, become part of doing 'intimacy as method' collectively, rather than yet another burden placed on the lone researcher. Intimacy cannot be done in isolation: not only is intimacy in the field relational, but ways of writing intimately are also a collective endeavour. In thinking and writing about 'intimacy as method', we seek to carve out a space for collective reflection, rather than the often solitary practice of academic writing. We have developed these insights on 'intimacy as method' by thinking together, discussing our experiences, and writing, in an iterative process.

Foregrounding how intimacy is part of the research process can also help researchers cross disciplinary boundaries. The politicization of different types of migration research means that our topics and we as researchers do not routinely come into conversation with each other, but by finding convergences we are writing against these disciplinary boundaries. Arguing against the arbitrary delimitation of fields of study, we suggest that these more grounded methodologies can capture and analyse our participants' lives critically and equitably. We echo calls for 'slow scholarship' (Mountz et al. 2015) that accounts for the time and resources required for building and maintaining intimacy, in a radical effort to distance knowledge production from an extractive model that reproduces power hierarchies.

Finally, including intimacy in our epistemologies and methodologies makes a radical political claim. Collectively thinking and writing in such an intimate, personal way is a feminist political act. It challenges the dominant paradigm of academia as objective and detached to recognize what alternative forms of writing can contribute. Intimacy in the field enables us to see the power dynamics and hierarchies that are often concealed. Intimate writing reveals the everyday details of migrant experiences, whether in a Romanian household in London or a migrant shelter in the Alps. Attending to such

mundane details with care and giving them prominence challenges the narratives that focus on the sensational, rather finding the political salience in everyday acts and relationships.

4. Conclusion

By reflecting on the role of intimacy in our respective ethnographic projects, we proposed the concept of 'intimacy as method' as an addition to the ongoing 'reflexive turn' in migration studies (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Amelina 2017, 2021). We demonstrated how intimacy emerged in various ways, out of gendered and caring practices in our everyday fieldwork experiences, as we lived with and worked alongside our participants and built long-lasting relationships. Positionality was central to building intimacy, as who we are and how our participants saw us invariably influenced our abilities to build and sustain intimate relationships. Placing intimacy at the centre of our methodologies allowed us to change some of our practices on the ground, such as moving beyond a rigid, infrastructural notion of consent to one grounded in trust. Instead of thinking about 'intimacy as method' as an abstract concept, we showed how it relies on rather mundane and gendered practices, such as cleaning, cooking, or lending an ear to our participants.

While care and trust were at the centre of our experiences, building intimate relationships with our participants also showed us what Lauren Berlant calls 'the secret epitaph of intimacy' (1998: 281)—the unpredictable moments of tension or disruption on which this concept relies. We purposefully chose to include moments when we felt uncomfortable or vulnerable in our ethnographic reflections on intimacy. By sitting with the discomfort of these instances, we discovered the analytical potential of 'intimacy as method' in our respective projects. For Ana-Maria, a moment of disagreement with her host family showed her the contested nature of support among Romanian migrants. When confronted with a romantic proposition from a participant, Janina gained insight into the negation of desire in experiences of migrant men.

Exploring tense, but intimate moments also showed how centring intimacy in our research complicates, rather than erases, the power imbalances inherent to knowledge production. The academy, including fieldwork, is not only gendered but also racialized and sexualized, and collectively thinking and writing about this is a feminist, intersectional, decolonial practice that resists power hierarchies, what some have called a 'fugitive anthropology' (Berry et al. 2017). These complex power dynamics stretched beyond our time in the field to impact how we represented our participants in our writing. Rooted in reflexivity, writing intimately meant accounting for the discomfort of intimacy and opening ourselves up to reflection and critique. As early career scholars, we propose that 'intimacy as method' is best understood as a collective project, one in which we can think together about how to best represent our interlocutors. Building intimacy with our participants and with our fellow scholars, however, requires time to be slow and intentionally come together in dialogue. It is such radical practices of coming together that can help us counter the extractive models of knowledge production focused on creating 'expert knowledge' as part of the migration industry (Castles 2004).

To conclude, we ask what happens when we apply these insights focused on intimacy to migration studies. Using 'intimacy as method' comes with three main outcomes for migration scholars—analytical, epistemological, and political. On the analytical front, centring intimacy may allow migration scholars to gain novel insights into meaningful areas of our participants' lives otherwise unavailable using other methods. Thinking about intimacy also helped us come together across disciplinary boundaries, foregoing the siloed thinking still prevalent in migration studies. Rather than fall into the 'categorical fetishism' (Crawley and Skleparis 2017) that differentiates between our studies as either 'migrant' or 'refugee' studies, we instead came together based on our methodological and epistemological approach. While interdisciplinarity has become a tokenized term in the eyes of funders

or higher education agencies, we instead argue it can be born out of methodological and epistemological convergences in a way that generates new insights.

Most significantly, we propose that 'intimacy as method' can be seen as an inherently political project for studies of migration. Rooted in feminist thought, a focus on intimacy can help us see the world otherwise, as it often occurs when one follows the unlikely affective connections and normative undoings forged in everyday life (Berlant 2011; Ahmed 2017). By building intimate relationships with participants, migration scholars can start to think with the categories that are relevant and meaningful to our interlocutors. It is by focusing on our participants' lifeworlds and by following the limited, yet significant tensions and intimate connections we forge within them, that we can build more equitable studies of migration. While building equitable research takes many guises, we propose that thinking about intimacy can allow us to reflexively consider our relationships with participants, with repercussions for building more equitable methodologies, for example in how we secure consent, as well as epistemologies, for instance through representation in our writing. Intimacy also provides analytical insights by choosing to see the friction and everyday reflections of power hierarchies rendered absent or insignificant in our normative understanding of migration. By proposing 'intimacy as method', we seek to open a space for like-minded scholars to engage in a collective practice of intimacy as a way of reframing our understanding of migrant lives.

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Data Access Statement

The participants of the two research projects on which this paper is based did not consent to their data being shared publicly. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

Notes

1. All of the names featured in the ethnographic reflections in this paper are pseudonyms. Some other details have also been changed to safeguard anonymity.
2. We express our gratitude to Reviewer 1 for making this critical observation about intimacy in their first round of comments on this article.

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