

ESRC Collaborative PhD Studentship

Reporting Violence at the Border: Investigative journalism, activism and epistemic injustice in narratives on migration

Supervised by Dr Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik, Aston University and Dr Thom Davies, University of Nottingham

Collaborating Organisation: No Name Kitchen

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Project details

Violence against refugees and migrants at EU borders, especially in the Balkans, is an increasingly well-documented practice within critical scholarship (Isakjee et al 2020; Davies et al 2022; Augustova et al 2023). Despite violent 'pushbacks' at EU borders being described as a 'routine element of border governance' (OHCHR 2021), EU states deny that such illegal practices are taking place (Glouftsiou 2023). In opposition to this 'epistemic borderwork' (Davies et al 2022), however, are an assortment of investigative journalists, activists, and humanitarian lawyers who are collecting data, recording testimony, and troubling the EU's narrative that it is a liberal and humanitarian actor (e.g Forensic Architecture 2022; Lighthouse Reports 2022; Border Violence Monitoring Network 2023), whilst working together to fight for 'epistemic justice' (Fricker 2007).

This project —in partnership with the charity No Name Kitchen (NNK), a key actor in reporting border violence — examines how violence against refugees is investigated and reported by journalists, activists and lawyers and what kinds of official responses and challenges they elicit from EU organisations (c.f Glouftsiou 2023). This project goes beyond 'just' analysing media discourses on migration, and asks critical questions about what 'counts' as data within narratives about irregular migration. This significantly pushes forward existing knowledge on border violence and human rights reporting: it situates current investigative journalism practices, activism, and legal challenges

to border violence in a broader political context, and considers how the production of these narratives is circumscribed by the neoliberalisation of the media, access to data, witnesses and whistleblowers.

The project is grounded in literature on epistemic (in)justice (Fricker 2007; Davies et al 2022), which engages with questions over the production of knowledge and its politicisation: whose evidence 'counts', and who is believed? Whilst borders are constructed by barbed wire, border guards, and the bureaucracy of biometric surveillance (Amoore 2006), they are also shielded by epistemic violence: guarding truth claims, silencing unwanted voices, and shutting out perspectives that expose the injustice of the border itself (Davies et al 2022). Such "epistemic borderwork," (Davies et al 2022) where insurgent knowledge claims are denied access to credibility, acts as scaffolding around the EU's border regime, and is precisely what those bearing witness to this violence are attempting to undermine.

Although scholarship on migration relies heavily on reporting work by groups such as NNK, legal cases and investigative journalism, academic engagement with these fields and how they produce knowledge is scarce. Despite notable examples analysing investigative journalism and forced migration (Palau-Sampio 2018), storytelling in the public sphere (Sommer 2023) and the role of reporting in social change and human rights abuses (Downman and Uyabasiri 2017); scholarship in geography and IR generally focuses on media discourse and representation. Further, the work of lawyers and the legacies of court cases as contributions to epistemic justice, are rarely a consideration in IR and geography, even with the nascent subfield of 'legal geographies' (Delaney

2015). However, given the growing data set of border violence compiled through cases at the European Court of Human Rights (e.g. *M.H. & others v. Hungary*), we see this work as a crucial complement to the narratives examined by the project.

This project thus fills this crucial knowledge gap showing *how* actors engaged in reporting and narrating border violence and crime against refugees *create* knowledge; whilst also considering the practical context in which these narratives are produced and resisted across a range of scales and geographies.

Research questions:

RQ1: a) How do different stakeholders—investigative journalists; activists; and the EU—shape the narrative of border violence, or resist and reproduce the “epistemic injustice” of the border? **b)** What are the epistemic challenges facing stakeholders who are attempting to resist border violence: lawyers; activists; journalists?

RQ2: How does the context in which different stakeholders operate shape their reporting and knowledge producing, including but not limited to: financialisation of the media, editorial

pressures, racism, geographic context, and political pressures exercised against individual actors and organisations?

RQ3: What *counts* as ‘data’ within the struggle over EU border violence, and how is this data received and responded to by organisations such as the EU Commission and its border agency Frontex?

Methodology:

This project is both *about* the methods used by different stakeholders (primarily investigative journalists and activists); and also employs a range of qualitative methods itself. As detailed in the ‘Overseas fieldwork’ section below, the methods include: i) **ethnography** [24 weeks] with border violence monitors in Bosnia and Serbia (RQ1-2); ii) **semi-structured interviews** [n=40] with investigative journalists, activists, and lawyers involved in reporting on violence against refugees, as well as key local, national or EU officials; (RQ1-3) and iii) **secondary data analysis** of court cases and border violence reports [n=100] (RQ1-2).

Supervisors will support access to key respondents, having extensive links with key stakeholders in the Balkans through their own research and investigative journalism.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork is expected to take place in Serbia (Belgrade and Subotica, on the Hungarian border), Bosnia (Sarajevo and Velika Kladusa, on the Croatian border), and Brussels (a ten day visit, to gather data for RQ3). Serbia and Bosnia form a part of the ‘Balkan Route’ through the EU, with many refugees stopping at both places, and are circumscribed with similar dynamics (they share a border with EU countries, at which significant harm has been recorded against refugees, BVMN, n.d.). NNK and key respondents such as journalists often operate in both countries.

The expected duration (12 weeks in each Serbia and Bosnia) reflects the ethnographic nature of the fieldwork, and the time that needs to be taken to establish links and trust networks with key respondents. Fieldwork is crucial as ethnographic research cannot be carried out online for this study since respondents operate in physical spaces such as border zones and informal refugee camps.

Fieldwork will consist of:

➤ **Ethnographic shadowing** of the key stakeholders in their day to day work, for instance,

joining No Name Kitchen as a participant observer while they take testimonies and prepare reports. **[RQ1-3]**

➤ **Interviews:**

- 30 interviews with: investigative journalists, activists, and lawyers involved in reporting on violence against refugees, working in and on Serbia and Bosnia, about the type of work they do, conditions they work under, and key challenges. **[RQ1-2]**
- 10 interviews with local, national or EU authority officials tasked with responding to reports and data on violence against refugees (e.g National Ombudsmans; EU Commision; Frontex staff). **[RQ3]**

Secondary data analysis

- **Desk-based background and contextual research:**
 - Analysis of all statements made by the EU Commission, and its border agency, Frontex on violence against refugees at EU borders (approximately ten statements) and local or national government statements made on border violence (approximately five and available in English). This will be analysed for the language and epistemic claims made (e.g. denial of violence). **[RQ 3]**
- Analysis of the database of No Name Kitchen reports on border violence (1000+ reports but a selection of 100 will be made), analysing the reports for language, and epistemic claims made. **[RQ1-3]**

Language training

The project does not *require* the knowledge of any other language; the stakeholders to be interviewed (activists, lawyers, journalists) based in Serbia and Bosnia, almost always speak and work/publish in English due to the nature of their work. The interviews with officials in Brussels and national governments, also speak English. Nonetheless, the student will undergo language training ahead of fieldwork as this may prove useful in other, everyday contexts experienced during such types of research.

During the first and second years of study, the student will undergo language training in BCS (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian) in alignment with the area focus of the PhD (the Balkans). The language training will most likely take place online, with the possibility of intensive language training in Belgrade or Sarajevo during Y1 or Y2 of the PhD.

Types of activities the student is likely to be engaged in during the placement at the collaborative organisation.

During the placement with No Name Kitchen, the doctoral researcher will undergo training and experience doing a variety of advocacy and human rights roles that will significantly develop their skill set in a number of key areas. This training will have direct benefit to the student beyond the lifespan of the PhD. This will involve:

- Collect on-site reports of human rights violations against people-on-the-move by conducting interviews with victims and witnesses;
- Maintain No Name Kitchen's database and edit case reports;

- Communicate with local organisations and potential partners;
- Write inquiries, summary reports and statements;
- Communicate with the press;
- Manage and contribute to social media channels;
- Illustrate reports and releases;
- Organize public events.

It is anticipated that the student will spend around three months on placement. It is anticipated that this will take place mostly in year 2 of the PhD, following the completion of fieldwork. However, the timing of the collaboration and location will also depend on contextual factors which will determine when the best time for the collaboration will be (for instance, NNK operations are scaled back during the winter when fewer people cross borders). The timing of the collaboration will be decided together with NNK, closer to the time (after the student completes the Year 1 Qualifying Report).

The placement is expected to be split between Serbia and Bosnia NNK Field Missions depending on the needs of No Name Kitchen. Due to the dynamic and shifting nature of the 'Balkan route', the location of ethnographic research may be adapted depending on the situation on the ground. NNK currently has a base in Subotica, Serbia, but adapt their operations according to route changes and where the highest numbers of displaced people in need tend to be located. This will be decided in close collaboration with No Name Kitchen, its team of volunteers, as well as the student's mentor (Leandro Navarro Cabanas), and submitted to the ESRC DTP board for approval (together with Aston institutional ethics, risk and travel approval procedures)

Supervisors

Dr Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Aston University. Her most recent research focuses on the key themes of the project, including racialised violence against refugees at EU's external borders (paper in *Antipode*), contestations between EU border management and voluntary aid (*Global Policy*) and everyday and routine restrictions to refugee movement and volunteer-led support (*Cooperation and Conflict*) amongst others. She has also published on post-conflict justice in the Balkans and has looked at different aspects of post-conflict governance, all of which converge with her ongoing research on the management of migration in the Balkans. Geographically, her research focuses on Serbia and Bosnia and falls within Area Studies. Jelena is currently completing a book on urban refugee settlements in Greece and Serbia (under contract, Routledge).

Having carried out empirical and fieldwork-based research in the Balkans since 2005, Jelena also has a wealth of methodological and 'local' expertise to supervise this project. This also includes local contacts specifically with non-governmental organisations, activists and other social movement participants, as well as EU and government officials, which could offer the student a starting point for the student's fieldwork in this region.

The two supervisors have worked collaboratively extensively, producing publications in *Antipode* and *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, and working together on fieldwork in the Balkans as well as on their recent investigative journalism project.

Jelena, Thom and colleagues Arshad Isakjee and Pat Rubio Bertran have just completed a project in collaboration with investigative journalists at Lighthouse Reports, on the deaths and disappearances of refugees in Serbia, Bosnia and Bulgaria. The project will be published as an investigative journalism piece in *Der Spiegel*, *Guardian* and broadcast on the Swiss National Television, in December 2023, and will form a series of subsequent academic articles. Through this

project, the supervisors have formed an extensive network of contacts in media organisations, both in the Balkans and internationally, which the student can access as they begin fieldwork.

Centre for Migration and Forced Displacement

Jelena is the founding co-director of the Aston Centre for Migration and Forced Displacement which acts as a regional hub drawing together research on ethics, policies and practices of migration across Europe and globally. The student will be based at the Centre (as well as the Aston Politics, History and IR department), with a growing cohort of PhD candidates and a recent ESRC Postdoc fellow working on migration. The Centre has a lively culture with seminars, public events (such as our event at the Birmingham Literature Festival), a range of writing and research development workshops, creative writing workshops with notable authors working on migration, and collaborations with external scholars, NGO practitioners, and journalists. Supporting PhD students is a core mission of the Centre, and in addition to the existing Aston-wide career and skills development programme, PhD students at the Centre benefit from weekly writing sessions, inclusion into Centre projects and opportunities created through our networks.

Dr Thom Davies

Thom has extensive expertise about EU border violence, political geographies, refugees, and geographies of violence. Along with Supervisor 1, Thom has been researching and publishing about the 'Balkan Route' since 2017 (*Annals of the Association of American Geographers; Antipode*), and prior to this has published internationally recognised research about the Calais refugee camp in northern France (*Critical Public Health; Antipode*). Thom has published work about the activism of the partner organization (No Name Kitchen) (see Davies et al 2022) and has collaborated with No Name Kitchen in border violence training events in BiH, as well as co-creating an animation about their work ([available here](#)). He has extensive field experience in Serbia and BiH, the same locations that the PhD student will focus on. Each year he conducts research in the Balkans, which presents the opportunity to conduct some supervision meetings with the student while they are both in the field.

Existing Projects:

Since 2015, Thom has secured in excess of £750,000 from the ESRC on various projects, and is currently Co-I on an ESRC-funded project about refugee [Channel Crossings](#). Jelena and Thom have a proven track record of working closely together (researching, publishing, and managing projects) making them ideally suited to co-supervise this PhD. Of direct relevance to this studentship, they have both previously worked on a research project with No Name Kitchen, which was funded through an Antipode Foundation Scholar-Activist Grant (£10,000). This included co-creating an animation about the work of No Name Kitchen ([available here](#)). Right now, Thom is working

Thom and Jelena have recently collaborated on another project about Unidentified and Missing bodies in the Balkans, which is a joint collaboration with the investigative journalist collective *Lighthouse Reports*. Contacts from this organization will be very relevant for the proposed PhD project. Thom, Jelena and their colleagues Arshad Isakjee and Karolina Augustova have co-published their work in the media ([The Independent](#); [Open Democracy](#)) and in academic journals (Isakjee et al 2020; Davies et al 2022) which is relevant to the research topic, and Thom has further experience of combining journalism with research through interviews and publications in the Guardian and BBC Futures.

Collaborating Organisation - No Name Kitchen

No Name Kitchen provides support to people on the move at European borders. Their actions include medical care, distribution of food and clothes, legal support and the denunciation of abuses at the borders, where thousands of people on the move have suffered violence.

The student will have a placement at NNK, typically in second year of the PhD, following fieldwork. The student will have an NNK mentor. The student will be in regular contact with NNK at all stages of the project, and particularly during periods of fieldwork. Being mentored by a colleague from NNK will not only ensure the student has access to key resources within No Name Kitchen and media contacts, it will also ensure the project aligns closely with the priorities of the organisation. In the third year of the studentship during the write-up stage, a close working relationship with No Name Kitchen will directly benefit the dissemination of the research findings, including any suggested actions, providing a clear pathway to impact and maximising the potential of knowledge exchange.

Supervisors' recent publications

Davies, T., Isakjee, A. and Obradovic-Wochnik, J., 2023. Epistemic Borderwork: Violent Pushbacks, Refugees, and the Politics of Knowledge at the EU Border. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 113(1), pp.169-188

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Glouftsiou, G., 2023. Making pushbacks public: Secrecy, material witnesses and devices of disappearance. *Security Dialogue*.

Lighthouse Reports, 2022, Frontex, the EU Pushback Agency Frontex's internal data shows EU border agency involved in mass pushbacks, Accessed via: <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/frontex-the-eu-pushback-agency/>

OHCHR, 2021. Report on means to address the human rights impact of pushbacks of migrants on land and at sea. United Nations, Accessed via: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/106/33/PDF/G2110633.pdf?OpenElement>

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Sommer, R., 2023. Migration and Narrative Dynamics, in Dawson, P. and Mäkelä, M. [eds] *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge. p. 598-511