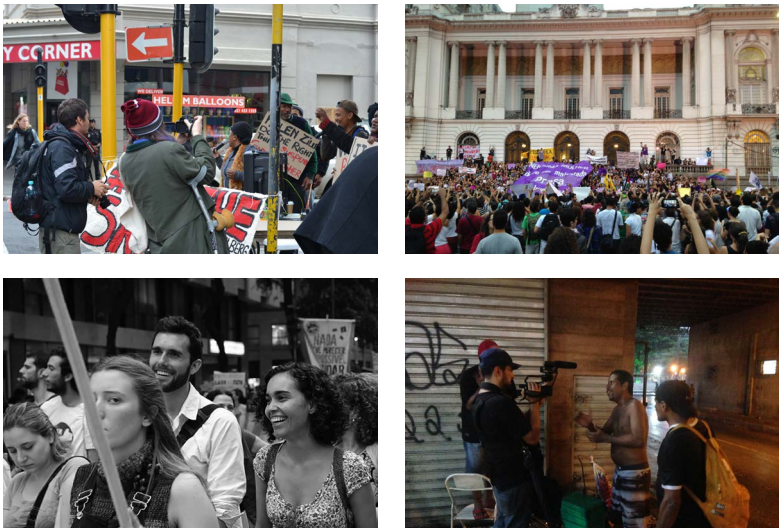

*Fig. 6 Doing Ethnography*

# 3. Research Design and Methodology

## 3.1 Research Design and Field Access

To »think with Lefebvre« presents three challenges that Christian Schmid signposted: first, Lefebvre's »theory must be taken seriously«; second, to appropriate Lefebvre means to further develop his ideas to match these to the contemporary; third, »confronting theory with concrete experience« is at the core of a meaningful application of his theories.[1] Chapter Two aimed to lay the groundwork for meeting the first of these challenges, while the analytical section (Chapter Four to Eight) tackles the second. The third challenge – how to produce a working toolkit for empirical investigation – is the subject of this chapter. My goal will be to clarify how I managed to apply theory to concrete experiences and how my perception of the latter was in turn shaped by the theory that I brought to the field. As such, I aim to make my methodological steps as transparent as possible in order to enable the critical assessment of the results that my research yielded. This chapter begins with an overview of the research design of my study and then moves on to questions of field access, data collection and data analysis. The final

1 Schmid, »The Trouble with Henri,« 43.

section offers a general reflection on the strengths and limitations of my empirical approach.

## 3.2 Conducting a Critical, Multi-Sited Ethnography

> »[…] ethnography is an art of the possible, and then it may be better to have some of it than none at all.«[2]

This study adopts a critical, multi-sited ethnographic approach to investigating video-activist practices. It is therefore essential to reflect on the implications of this methodological choice. Choosing a qualitative social sciences framework led to a prioritization of exploring relationships, describing processes, and interpreting discourse, with an emphasis on *understanding* practices. This approach aligns with the exploratory nature of a newly emerging research field focused on digital practices and stands in contrast to quantitative methodologies that *test* predefined hypotheses using statistical data.[3]

However, the field of qualitative social science research is vast and encompasses a range of both contradictory and complementary approaches. Creswell identifies five major qualitative research traditions, each of which could have helped to more precisely position my study: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study research.[4] While all of these approaches are suitable for studying video activism, each would yield different insights. For instance, had my focus been exclusively on the videos themselves – without considering the practices surrounding their production – a narrative approach in the form of discourse analysis would have been most appropriate. However, because my aim from the outset was to understand the process of video production holistically – rather than focusing solely on the final audiovisual product – my research questions and interests naturally guided me toward an ethnographic approach.

My decision to adopt an ethnographic research approach is grounded in three defining features of ethnographic inquiry. First, it enabled me to understand the practices of video activism *from within*. This meant taking the perspectives of video activists seriously and placing their

2 Hannerz, »Being There… and There… and There! Reflections on Multi-Site Ethnography,« 213.

3 Creswell identifies a key difference between qualitative and quantitative social science research, with the former privileging »understanding« and the latter »testing« (Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design. Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 201–3.

4 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*.

understandings of their values, goals, and actions at the center of the analysis. This aligns with the theoretical framing of exploring the emancipatory potential of video activism.

Second, a key strength of ethnographic research lies in its ability to account for non-verbal dimensions of practice, such as artifacts, spatial embeddedness, and affect. It recognizes that video activism is not solely driven by intentional decisions that can be articulated in interviews; rather, practices are more complex and are best understood through observation, which enriched the depth of insight in this study.

Third, ethnography allows for a nuanced description of the ›cultures‹ of video activism, making visible the diverse values and situational considerations that shape actors' agency.

My decision to undertake a qualitative study through an ethnographic approach narrowed the range of methodological tools available to me, though a variety of options still remained. For instance, Jim Thomas distinguishes between »conventional ethnography« and »critical ethnography«. While this may appear to be a simple distinction, it highlights crucial differences in how empirical research is approached. According to Thomas, »[c]onventional ethnography describes what is; critical ethnography asks what could be«.[5] Critical ethnographers assume »that all cultural members experience unnecessary repression to some extent«.[6] As a result, by »digging below the mundane surface experience of the cultural basis of violence,«[7] they confront forms of »[u]nnecessary social domination«.[8] In doing so, they not only recognize but »celebrate their normative and political positions.«[9] As Madison elaborates, the critical ethnographer,

> »…[t]he critical ethnographer also takes us beneath the surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken for granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control.«[10]

For Thomas, critical ethnographers must thus apprehend a »profound, but not complicated« lesson: »We let data speak to us, we do not privilege or impose our own preferred meanings, and we make sure that we do not say *is* when we mean *ought*.«[11] The objective of critical ethnography – to produce »emancipatory knowledge« – does not diminish the need for empirical rigor. On the contrary, adopting a critical approach

5 Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, 4.
6 Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, 4.
7 Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, 4.
8 Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, 5.
9 Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, 4.
10 Madison, *Critical Ethnography. Methods, Ethics, and Performance*, 5.
11 Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, 22.

proved to be a necessary precondition for studying video activist practices *from within* with methodological precision.

This was particularly important in a highly politicized field such as activism, where the distinction between what *is* taking place and how activists frame what *ought* to be is often blurred. For example, while the claim to emancipatory politics assumed that everyone – regardless of race, class, or gender – could participate in video activist practices, the reality was often marked by a strong overrepresentation of white, upper-middle-class men at the core of activist groups. Uncovering such divergences between expressed ideals and lived realities is precisely what critical ethnography, when practiced with the necessary rigor, is equipped to do.

The second qualifier is that this study is not only a critical ethnography, but also a multi-sited ethnography. In the 1980s and 1990s, George Marcus coined the term *multi-sited ethnography* to describe a new trend in interdisciplinary research that combined anthropology with other fields[12] and involved conducting fieldwork across multiple locations.[13] The growing number of such studies reflects a broader shift toward what Marcus describes as the »theoretically rethinking of space and place in ethnographic research« – an approach influenced by developments in geography and the social sciences.[14]

The mix of practical limitations and opportunities in conducting multi-sited ethnographies is what Hannerz refers to as the »art of the possible«[15] – a recognition that ethnographic research is shaped not only by intellectual considerations but also by practical constraints. Drawing on his own research on foreign correspondents in Jerusalem, Johannesburg, and Tokyo – conducted while he was more or less permanently based in Stockholm – Hannerz identifies four challenges associated with multi-sited ethnography.

First, he argues that researchers should not attempt to study an »entire culture and social life,«[16] as classical social anthropology once aspired

12 As examples, Marcus cites »media studies, feminist studies, science and technology studies, various strands of cultural studies and the theory, culture and society group« as well as more traditional approaches with Marxist and political economy underpinnings (Marcus, »Ethnography in/of the World System. The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,« 97).

13 For a classical reflection on doing ethnography in multiple locations see the classical account »Ethnography in/of the World System. The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography« by George E. Marcus and »Being There… and There… and There! Reflections on Multi-Site Ethnography« by Ulf Hannerz for a more recent example.

14 Marcus, »Ethnography in/of the World System,« 104.

15 Hannerz, »Being There… and There… and There!,« 213.

16 Hannerz, »Being There… and There… and There!,« 202.

to do. Instead, they must define focused research questions, which in turn requires more selective and strategic approaches across multiple sites. In my case, this meant focusing on the work of video-activists supporting emancipatory urban movements. Second, multi-sited ethnographies are often conducted in a lingua franca by researchers who may lack fluency in local vernaculars. In my case, I conducted all interviews and fieldwork in Brazilian Portuguese in Rio de Janeiro and in English in Cape Town.[17] This approach worked well with my video activist informants and imposed few limitations on the research process. Third, Hannerz notes that »pure observation, or participant observation, has a more limited part« in multi-sited research, with interviews becoming a more central source of data.[18] This closely reflects my experience in Cape Town, where I was only able to attend a few protest marches and spent limited time with video activists. In contrast, in Rio de Janeiro, I participated in over a dozen marches and spent extended periods with activists in various settings – at protests, in their homes, and at events such as discussion rounds and public screenings. Finally, Hannerz highlights the challenge of »fitting fieldwork into lives.«[19] Without a permanent doctoral scholarship, I worked as an academic assistant at the University of Basel, while conducting my research. This meant teaching every semester and conducting administrative tasks such as organizing international conferences and student administration. My position allowed me to carry out fieldwork during university holidays, but it limited my ability to organize extended research stays from 2016 to 2018 – particularly in Cape Town, where this constraint most significantly affected the depth of my fieldwork.

While Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro are the primary sites examined in this study, my experiences in other locations also significantly shaped my understanding of the events I describe and influenced my research practices.[20] For example, the anti-austerity protests in Lisbon in 2012, during an extended stay, and the mobilizations for the right to the city in Basel – organized by local activist groups in which I was involved – contributed to my broader learning about urban social movements and

17 Not speaking any other South African language other than English did not appear to limit my research, given that informants are multi-lingual or speak English as mother tongue. The level of my Brazilian Portuguese skills improved significantly over the cause of research and imposing negligible limitations to conducting research.

18 Hannerz, »Being There… and There… and There!,« 211.

19 Hannerz, »Being There… and There… and There!,« 212.

20 Experiences in Basel certainly exerted most influence since I lived there during the research. However, additional travels to Barcelona, Berlin, Paris, Bangkok, Toronto, New York and Shanghai further underscored in anecdotal evidence the relevance of video activism as a global phenomenon.

their repertoires. As George Marcus argues, rather than taking »refuge in being a detached anthropological scholar,« contemporary researchers should embrace the challenges of being drawn into the field and become »ethnographer-activists.«[21] Hence, activities outside the formal scope of my PhD research nonetheless informed my perspective.

Fortunately, I was able to establish contact with key informants in Brazil and South Africa early in the research process, in 2015 and 2016. These initial connections, combined with the availability of online communication tools, enabled me to remain in regular contact with my informants and stay informed about developments in both cities, even when I was physically absent. This potential for continuous exchange blurred the boundaries between absence and presence and, as anthropologist Mirjam DeBruijn argues, facilitated the »real co-production« of knowledge.[22] Cunliffe and Karunanayake describe the process of how researchers »wrestle with choices about positionality, identity, and the nature of these relationships«[23] as building »hyphen-spaces« in which »relatedness rather than distinctive boundaries« becomes central.[24] In a world in which the online and offline spheres are inextricably linked – a world in which the absent is permanently present – such hyphen-spaces become increasingly relevant. The tensions between »insiderness-outsiderness, sameness-difference, engaged-distant, active-neutral«[25] positionings repeatedly posed challenges for conducting research in a field that was both geographically dispersed across three continents and highly politicized. For me, the experience of »[b]eing there… and there… and there…« became a constant condition as I worked on my ethnographies of Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro while living in Basel.[26]

The following section aims to capture key experiences from the field and illustrate how I gained access to video activists.

21 Marcus, »Ethnography in/of the World System,« 113.
22 DeBruijn, »Digitalization and the Field of African Studies,« 3.
23 Cunliffe and Karunanayake, »Working within Hyphen-Spaces in Ethnographic Research: Implications for Research Identities and Practices,« 365.
24 Cunliffe and Karunanayake, »Working within Hyphen-Spaces in Ethnographic Research,« 368.
25 Cunliffe and Karunanayake, »Working within Hyphen-Spaces in Ethnographic Research,« 386.
26 Hannerz, »Being There… and There… and There!«.

## 3.3 Field Access and Ethnographic Practice on the Ground

»It was the night of Tuesday, 15 September 2015 when my airplane slowly descended towards Rio de Janeiro, which appeared as a sea of flickering lights dissected by highways of travelling cars and shaped by the shores of the Atlantic Ocean and the slopes of the hills. I remember that moment vividly, aware that the structure and clarity afforded by my bird's-eye perspective would vanish the moment I arrived – marking the beginning of my immersion into a myriad of unfamiliar lifeworlds. To inhabit, experience, and move through everyday urban spaces is fundamentally different from observing them from afar. To gain a perspective on video activism ›from within‹, I had to descend to street level. As I did so, my detached view quickly faded.

One night later, I sat upright in bed – my descent into the city had turned into a plunge into the unexpected. In my room was nothing to see apart from the darkness of the walls, but I could hear something clearly: gun shots echoing. Volleys of shots rang out from a conflict between rival factions in the neighboring favelas of Corõa and Fallete. I went to the entrance of the shared apartment in which I had rented a room, but there was no door to lock because there was no door.

The next morning, I asked my housemate about the missing door. She replied, »This is not a problem,« and explained that the apartment was safe: ›It takes more than a hundred steps to climb the stairs to reach it […] for example, I don't pay electricity, because the service personnel never come up here to read out the voltmeter.‹

Being woken by gunfire prompted reflection on three issues that shaped my access to the field. First, I was immediately confronted with my own privilege; hearing gunshots was not part of my everyday experience prior to arriving in Rio de Janeiro. Second, I was now palpably aware of the subjective luggage that I brought with me into the field which would shape my perceptions and actions.[27] Third, my expectations were quickly unsettled. I searched the news for reports of the shooting, expecting to find coverage, but there was none. It appeared that the event was not considered sufficiently abnormal or newsworthy to merit reporting.«[28]

27 The gunshots transported me back to my research stay in Mali in March 2012. I had been in the capital, Bamako, when a military-led coup toppled the government and sent the country into an enduring period of political turmoil. An experience which likely left a traumatic memory, triggered again by the sound of gunshots in Rio.

28 That description draws on the observation notes annotated in German in my research diary and has been slightly adapted in the process of translation (Observation note 17. September 2015, Rio de Janeiro).

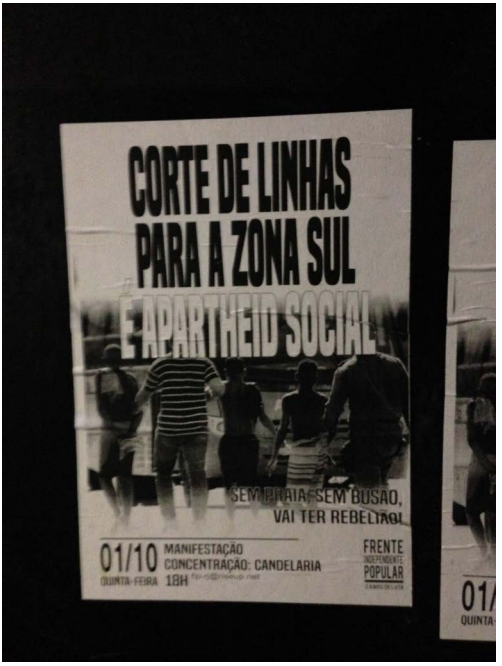


*Fig. 7 Poster Corte de Linhas e Apartheid Social*

Above all, field access is shaped by where a researcher stays and spends most of their time. during my periods of fieldwork, I was accommodated in private homes, youth hostels, guesthouses, occupied houses, or friends' apartments in various parts of Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town. These living arrangements significantly influenced the aspects of urban life I was able to observe and engage with. A common feature of all the areas in which I stayed was their relatively central location. They were also typically middle-class neighborhoods; I never resided in informal settlements such as those on the Cape Flats or in Rio de Janeiro's favelas. This shaped my perspective and reinforced my earlier decision to focus on what I refer to as ›central video activism.‹[29]

The following section explores the challenges faced by researchers studying this fluid and evolving field of video activism – one that lacks

29 In Rio de Janeiro, there is a clear division between ›central‹ and ›local‹ video activist collectives in the favelas. The former call themselves media activist collectives, whereas the latter are known as comunicação comunitária. In Cape Town, I did not find a similar distinction. Chapter Five provides a more detailed overview of the different video activist groups on which I focused.

clear boundaries of membership, formal registries, or standardized procedures. Hence, it was a poster glued to a wall, which facilitated my first encounter with video activists.[30]

A poster by Frente Independente Popular (FIP)[31] had announced a march for the evening of Thursday, 1 October 2015 to resist urban transport reforms.[32] Under the slogan »cutting the lines to the South Zone is social apartheid«,[33] a group of approximately fifty activists gathered at the Candelária Church in the center of Rio de Janeiro. A few of the protesters were drumming on metal canisters, a sound which would later lead the chanting during the march. Besides the protesters, there was a considerable crowd of activists equipped with cameras and audio-recording devices, two or three *camelôs* (street vendors) selling drinks and chips from their pushcarts. Most participants appeared to know one another, which led to a degree of suspicion toward me – particularly when I began approaching individuals with cameras and asking questions. My naïve attempt to establish contacts led to four short conversations and the exchange of a few phone numbers.

It was when I was approached, however, that I made my most valuable contact. A man in his fifties had come up to me and asked who I was and what I was doing. By initiating the interaction himself – rather than me approaching him – he subtly subverted the typical power dynamics

30 When I decided to attend the protest, I reached out to fellow researchers from the social movement research cluster at UERJ. However, they were unavailable – they needed to study social movement theory. A statement not without a certain irony. Nevertheless, my placement at the Institute of Social and Political Studies at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) proved highly productive, and the institute's research on urban social movements stands out for its analytical depth and intellectual rigor.

31 Frente Independente Popular (Popular Independent Front) is an informal group of activists that played a substantive role in mobilizing urban struggles during the Jornadas de Junho 2013 in Rio.

32 I had heard about this march through a colleague from the Institute of Social and Political Studies at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), where I was based as a guest researcher. I am grateful to Breno Bringel for inviting me to be a part of the institute's inspiring atmosphere and the invitation to join its study group on social movements. The study group became an important source for understanding the dynamics of political mobilization in Brazil and beyond throughout my research.

33 On the use of the social apartheid or carioca apartheid metaphor, see also a statement by a Walmyr Junior from Complexo Maré, who linked the cutting of bus lines to a wider critique: »choosing to stigmatize favela youth as criminals reaffirms the position of the white, heteronormative middle class in Rio's South Zone for the cutting of ties between the North and South Zones, which reveals the existence of a carioca apartheid« (Omari, »Democracy Through Technology: Digital Inclusion vs. Social Exclusion«).

of ethnographic research.[34] The man, whom I will refer to as Fernando,[35] knew everyone at the protest and introduced himself as the »father of the media activist movement«.[36] Having previously worked for major media conglomerates such as Globo and *Folha de São Paulo*, Fernando had grown increasingly disillusioned with corporate media in Brazil. This frustration ultimately led him to abandon his career as a journalist and become an independent media activist. Since then, he has worked exclusively on producing independent media content, despite the financial precarity this decision created for him. His personal story of turning away from corporate media is emblematic of similar decisions made by other media activists in Rio.

That same night, following the protest march, Fernando took me to the occupied house *Casa Nuvem* (House of Clouds), a gathering space for activists, the LGBTQIA+ community, and local residents. *Casa Nuvem* functioned as a venue for discussion rounds, film screenings, parties, and informal social gatherings. It was not the last evening I spent there; indeed, it became a key site where I met many of my interview partners.

Before conducting our first recorded interview, I had six informal meetings and conversations with Fernando. Throughout this process, it was important that I presented myself not merely as a researcher, but as a person with a personal and political history. By sharing my experiences of activism in Basel, engaging in political discussions, and even laughing together about my limited Portuguese skills, I gradually earned Fernando's trust. This relationship-building phase proved crucial: once trust was established, Fernando began introducing me to a diverse range of interviewees. He would say things like, »If you want to speak to a representative of the journalists' union, we can arrange that; […] You should meet this feminist video activist; […] Next week we'll set up a meeting with an activist from the favela neighborhood Maré, so you can understand video activism in marginalized communities.« These introductions ensured that interviewees were willing to speak openly with me, confident in Fernando's endorsement of my trustworthiness.

This key encounter in Rio de Janeiro stands in contrast to my experience of establishing field access in Cape Town. In Cape Town, I relied on contacts facilitated by colleagues at the University of Cape Town and

34 The relation to video activists in Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town has overall been one of mutual respect with little power asymmetries – for more details see the section on conducting interviews.

35 All names in this work are my own invention and bear no relation to the actual names of my informants. In light of the often-sensitive nature of the political circumstances in South Africa and, in particular, in Brazil as well as the impossibility of controlling information flows online, I granted anonymity to every informant from the outset of my research.

36 »Pai dos mídiativistas«.

the University of the Western Cape (UWC), as well as through acquaintances and extended social networks. However, unlike in Rio, I did not meet anyone comparable to Fernando – a gatekeeper who provided access to a broad and interconnected (video-)activist scene. While I interviewed several individuals who served as central nodes within distinct (video-)activist networks, the overall landscape in Cape Town appeared significantly more fragmented. It consisted of small, loosely connected groups with limited interaction, which made the field more challenging to navigate. This fragmentation, combined with the time constraints of my research stays, significantly complicated field access in South Africa.

In total, I conducted ten months of fieldwork – three in Cape Town and four in Rio de Janeiro. Preliminary visits to both cities in 2014 helped assess the project's feasibility. My first and longest stay, from September 2015 to January 2016 in Rio, had a lasting influence on the study's direction. I returned to both cities in July–August 2016, coinciding with the Rio Summer Olympics, to collect the core data for the book. A final round of fieldwork in early 2018 allowed me to share preliminary findings with video activists and establish a feedback loop.

After February 2016, my position at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel limited the duration of further fieldwork, resulting in a certain imbalance between the two sites. Rio emerged as the primary case, with Cape Town serving as a contrasting, secondary site. Accordingly, this multi-sited ethnography should not be read as a symmetrical comparison between two equally developed case studies, but rather as a complex, relational ethnographic inquiry – conducted in greater depth in Brazil and shaped by experiences that extended beyond both field sites.

A meaningful reflection on research is incomplete without acknowledging the positionalities into which one is born – particularly race, class, and gender. In cities like Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town, where inequalities are deeply structured along these lines,[37] my identity as a white, male, middle-class researcher inevitably shaped my fieldwork: from where I stayed and whom I met, to the spaces I could access and the questions I asked.

To counterbalance this hegemonic perspective, I collaborated with researchers such as Lívia Alcântara[38] and activist-journalists like Fernando, whose different positionalities enriched the research. For instance, during a focus group in Rio, despite Lívia's expertise, participants

37 Huchzermeyer provides a useful overview of these differences and how they have formed over time (Huchzermeyer, »Informal Settlements: Production and Intervention in Twentieth Century Brazil and South Africa«).

38 Our collaboration in researching media activism resulted in a publication, which we co-authored and that offered crucial moments of reflection (Alcântara and Geuder, »(Urban) Space, Media and Protests: Digitalizing the Right to the City?«).

consistently directed their responses to me and interrupted her more frequently – subtle but telling dynamics that unfairly privileged my presence as a white, male foreigner. Undoubtedly, my privileged position influenced what I could and could not learn. However, as Spivak argues,[39] silence is not an appropriate response to privilege – nor is ignorance. I have sought to remain critically aware of these dynamics throughout the research process.

Three elements proved crucial in my efforts to establish access to the (video-)activist fields and conducting research in both Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro: gaining trust, building networks, and remaining flexible. Conducting a critical, multi-sited ethnography within the fluid and dynamic spaces of political activism required extended periods of immersion. This included attending events such as a residents' meeting in an occupied former hospital in Cape Town, where strategies to resist eviction threats were discussed. Although my research focused on video activist practices, it became clear that a broader understanding of local activism was a necessary precondition for building trusted networks – networks willing to share sensitive insights into activism and its audio-visual representations. Gaining field access, therefore, depended on what could be described as »[b]eing there… and there… and there…« – a continuous presence across multiple sites that enabled the realization of a critical, multi-sited ethnography.

## 3.4 Data Collection

> »What does it mean for the critical ethnographer to ›resist domestication‹? It means that she will use the resources, skills, and privileges available to her to make accessible […] the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach. This means the critical ethnographer contributes to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice.«[40]

The goal of my data collection was to assemble a rich, multi-faceted body of empirical material to support a detailed analysis of video activist practices. Ultimately, I gathered a substantial dataset comprising 42 recorded semi-structured interviews (resulting in over 450 pages of transcripts)[41] and innumerous unrecorded conversations and interviews,

39 Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*.

40 Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 5.

41 The 42 recorded interviews generated approximately 36 hours of audio and resulted in 450 pages of transcripts. Over 80 percent of these interviews were fully transcribed, while a smaller portion – primarily those less

178 videos,[42] more than 300 pages of observation notes, over 2,000 photographs and video recordings, as well as protest materials such as flyers, pamphlets, and newspapers. Approximately two-thirds of the material stems from fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro, with the remaining third from Cape Town – reflecting the asymmetry in field access discussed earlier. The following section describes my sampling decisions and the ways in which I collected my data.

During data collection, I generated three primary sources of empirical material: interviews, a curated sample of videos, and observation notes. The following section outlines how each of these data sources was assembled and provides a brief characterization of their content and relevance to the study.

To plan the semi-structured interviews, I employed the method of *theoretical sampling* as outlined by Glaser and Strauss.[43] This approach involved identifying key actors shaping video activist practices and ensuring representation across different strands of activism. My interviewees included activists, filmmakers, journalists, artists, academics, union representatives, NGO workers, politicians, and unhoused individuals. These included, for example, individual students involved in major political mobilizations – such as the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement – as well as journalists working for Brazilian media outlets like *A Nova Democracia*. Despite their varied backgrounds, most shared a strong political engagement, often expressed through organizing, participating in, or documenting protests. While their political views differed on specific issues, a common thread was a critical stance toward capitalist, racist, and patriarchal structures.

Overall, I aimed to balance the sample in terms of race, class, and gender. Most interviewees were between 20 and 40 years old, many came from middle-class backgrounds, and the sample reflected a mixed racial composition – with white participants forming a slight majority – and an even gender distribution.

directly relevant to my research questions, such as accounts of living without a home in Cape Town – were transcribed only partially. This selective approach enabled me to focus transcription efforts on the most analytically significant material. The English-language interviews from Cape Town were transcribed by myself. I am especially grateful to Mariane Silva Reghim for her excellent transcription work on the Brazilian Portuguese interviews.

42 The videography in the annex does not include all of the 178 videos that I have downloaded and catalogued for this research, but only those videos discussed in the work. The videography is following the chronological order in which videos are mentioned throughout the text.

43 Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*.

Most of my interviews took place in informal settings such as cafés, bars, restaurants, or at the homes, studios, or offices of the interviewees. I intentionally left the choice of location to the interviewees to ensure their comfort and to foster open, candid conversations – particularly important given that many interviews touched on experiences of violence and other emotionally charged topics. A trade-off of these settings was the impact on audio quality, as background noise from construction, music, or street activity was often present in the recordings.[44]

In both Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, different informants frequently referred to the same individuals as potential interview partners. These repeated recommendations – often pointing to people I had already interviewed – served as confirmation that the sampling process was effective and that the research had reached a point of »theoretical saturation«.[45] The use of theoretical sampling was closely aligned with the methodological and conceptual foundations of my research design. Unlike approaches such as statistical or selective sampling, which aim for representativeness, theoretical sampling seeks to identify *types* of actors in order to construct a sample that reflects a range of complementary perspectives.[46] This approach was well-suited to the objectives of the study, which prioritized depth, diversity of viewpoints, and the mapping of relational dynamics within activist networks.

The qualitative interviews were semi-structured, guided by an interview protocol that recommended beginning with an introduction and covering three main areas of interest. Each interview began with me explaining the context and objectives of the research, as well as my personal role within it. From there, I followed the guidelines flexibly, allowing the conversation to flow naturally while ensuring that the core themes were addressed. The three overarching questions that structured the interviews were:

(1) »How is Cape Town's/Rio de Janeiro's urban space structured?«
(2) »What have been the major local protest events and movements in recent years?«
(3) »What role have social media and, in particular, videos played in mobilizing and documenting protest marches?«

44 All respondents were asked for their consent to record the interviews using my cellphone, a request that was never declined. As a discreet device placed on the table, the cellphone proved ideal for minimizing disruption to the conversational flow. Anonymity was granted to every participant, ensuring the protection of their identities throughout the research process.

45 Theoretical saturation is the point at which no additional cases can be found that would either alter the identified types or lead to the identification of new types (Rosenthal, *Interpretative Sozialforschung. Eine Einführung*, 89–92).

46 Rosenthal, *Interpretative Sozialforschung*, 86.

These three broad questions were supplemented in each interview by tailored sub-questions, which were prepared in advance based on the interviewee's biography, positionality, and role within the local video activist scene. I also improvised during interviews, adapting the abstract research questions into more concrete inquiries that responded to the specific examples and narratives that emerged.[47]

In the »inter-personal drama« of the interview, I positioned myself in the role of an active listener.[48] Open questions were asked to allow the interviewee to co-determine the direction of the interview.[49] By conducting interviews in this way, however, potential biases did arise from my position as an engaged researcher. For example, I did not question or ask for further explanation from interviewees who criticized capitalism as an unjust system, since this was a widely held position that reflected the ›culture‹ of most of my interview partners. On a few occasions, an interview would temporarily turn into a heated conversation in which I clearly expressed my own ideas and opinions. Statements made during such moments were excluded from the data used for quotation or analysis.

In contrast to the planned semi-structured interviews, spontaneous short interviews[50] were considerably briefer – ranging from two to twenty minutes – and more thematically focused. These interviews emerged organically from situations in which a person's expert knowledge or lived experience drew my attention and prompted direct questioning. Examples include conversations with individuals who had lived on the streets in Cape Town or with those who had experienced state censorship while filming protests in 1970s Brazil. These spontaneous encounters provided valuable, focused insights that complemented the broader narratives captured in the semi-structured interviews.

Overall, the combination of semi-structured interviews – selected through theoretical sampling – and spontaneous short interviews resulted in a qualitatively and quantitatively rich dataset. Together, these two types of interviews offered an in-depth, insider perspective on the communities engaged in video activism and became the most important

47 Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke, *Qualitative Forschung: Ein Handbuch*, 368.

48 Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke, *Qualitative Forschung,* 360.

49 By conducting more interviews in context comfortable to interviewees, I was usually able to avoid some typical interview challenges caused by interviewee anxiety (Flick, Kardorff, & Steinke, 2008, 359). However, in a few interviews, I observed some of downsides of my interview approach. For example, I sometimes did not listen patiently enough and interrupted my interviewee too quickly. On other occasions, I would push an interviewee in a particular direction by asking leading questions or offering too many comments in response to their answers.

50 I did not adhere to my interview guidelines in these interviews.

source for my data analysis. The sampling strategy and interview-based data collection reflect what Hannerz has observed about multi-sited ethnographies: first, that interviews tend to gain prominence in such research designs, particularly as opportunities for sustained participant observation become more limited; and second, that they require a clear focus on a well-defined research question.[51]

My second major source of audio-visual data was a curated collection of 178 online videos, assembled in two consecutive phases. The first phase involved conducting online searches from Switzerland prior to my initial field trip. Using keyword searches[52] and YouTube's recommendation algorithm, I compiled an initial sample of 42 videos. The results varied significantly depending on browser and IP settings: searches conducted via a Tor browser with simulated IP addresses from South Africa and Brazil produced markedly different outcomes compared to those using a standard Mozilla browser with Swiss IP settings and default cookies.[53] These discrepancies initially led me to explore YouTube as a *dispositive* – a structured system of power and knowledge. However, I ultimately abandoned this line of inquiry to maintain focus on the situated practices of *doing* video activism.[54]

The second sample comprised 136 videos and formed the core database for my analysis. This collection was assembled through various methods beginning in September 2016. These included retrieving videos from the websites and YouTube channels of video activist collectives, searching for footage of protests or police violence mentioned in interviews, viewing videos recommended by activists, and discovering content incidentally while browsing online. Unlike the first sample, this

51 Hannerz, »Being There… and There… and There!«

52 Keyword searches were conducted by using a mix of location and topical search items such as »Cape Town protests« or »manifestação no Rio«.

53 As Eli Pariser has explained, there is no single version of the internet due to the personalization mechanisms which ensure that each user has a different online experience (Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*). The dispositive that emerges from such forms of such opaque algorithmic governance mechanisms deserves further scrutinizing and has increasingly drawn attention in academic research and public debate.

54 My own extensive inquiry of YouTube as a dispositive was presented at academic conferences in Zagreb and Paris in 2015. To analyze YouTube as a dispositive that enables and limits certain discourses in a Foucauldian sense is promising. This would fall into the category of approaches to video activism that Tina Askanius identifies with research looking at video activism as technology (Askanius. »Video Activism as Technology, Text, Testimony – or Practices?«). However, given my research interest into the practices of video activism on the ground, I decided to drop this line of inquiry following my research stay in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

phase of collection was informed by my initial fieldwork, which had sharpened my understanding of the types of videos most relevant to my research.

In a research memo dated 12 June 2016 – written after compiling the first sample and during the early stages of the second – I outlined three key criteria guiding my selection process and documenting the evolving nature of criteria employed between the first and the second round of sampling. The three criteria identified were: (1) a video's popularity, (2) its origin, and (3) its content.

(1) Popularity: Initially, I prioritized videos with high view counts as an indicator of relevance. However, this criterion proved problematic and was eventually discarded. First, alternative forms of circulation – such as Bluetooth sharing – and the removal of view counts from blocked or deleted videos rendered this metric unreliable. Second, understanding *why* certain videos gain visibility required contrasting highly viewed content with videos that received little attention on platforms like YouTube or Facebook.[55]
(2) Origin: Videos had to originate from Cape Town or Rio de Janeiro. While I also viewed videos from protests in other cities – such as Istanbul, Barcelona, or Hong Kong – these were excluded from the sample to maintain a clear geographic focus.
(3) Content: Initially, I focused on videos depicting »right to the city« protests. However, this criterion evolved in two important ways. First, although many protest marches explicitly referenced the »right to the city,« others addressed broader themes of social justice and urban inequality. As a result, I expanded the thematic scope to include a wider range of emancipatory politics. Second, through the process of viewing and analyzing the material, it became clear that representations of violence – particularly police violence – were central to the work of video activists. Consequently, videos documenting such violence were also included in the sample.

As with the interviews, the selection process followed the principles of theoretical sampling, prioritizing analytical relevance over representativeness.[56]

55 For details see Chapter Seven ›Producing Visibility‹.
56 Constructing a representative sample was a challenge in itself and would have required a different more quantitative approach, inconsistent with my focus on finding idealtypes. Innovative approaches tailored to the challenge of dealing with visual data can be found for example with Lev Manovich and his team. They experimented with new digital methods to visualizeof big data retrieved from social media (Manovich Lev, »100 Billion Data Rows per Second: Media Analytics in the Early 21st Century«).

The practical handling of videos identified as relevant followed a systematic process. First, I downloaded each video in MP4 format and took screenshots to document key metadata, including the video's URL, title, upload date, number of views, and other relevant details. This information was stored locally and entered into an Excel spreadsheet to provide an overview of quantitative indicators. Next, I developed an analytical grid in the form of a »video code file,« specifically tailored to the needs of my research. Each entry in this file included a unique video code (e.g., CT150322), the video's title (as presented online), URL, upload date, location, publisher, duration, and view count. It also contained a brief content description, notes on production techniques (e.g., editing), notable features, user comments on social media platforms, the sample source (first or second), and the date of analysis. This extensive process of sampling, metadata collection, and memo writing through the video code file proved essential for developing a detailed understanding of the audio-visual language used to document protests and police violence.[57]

The third source of data in this study consists of observation notes. These notes encompassed a broad range of material, including personal experiences in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, conceptual reflections, emerging analytical ideas, transcripts of unrecorded conversations, and detailed descriptions of protest marches and interview settings. They also included reflections on the research process itself, relevant news items, and other contextual information encountered during fieldwork. This body of notes served not only as a record of events and interactions but also as a space for ongoing theoretical engagement and reflexive analysis.

The approximately 300 pages of observation notes were mostly handwritten in research diaries. I typically set aside time in the evenings to record daily reflections, though I also took notes immediately following noteworthy events or conversations. In addition to these daily entries, I wrote weekly *reflection memos* and more comprehensive *extended memos* toward the end of each research stay. These notes summarized my impressions, identified deficiencies and biases in my data collection, and defined steps for further research, thereby critically shaping the theoretical sampling process. I also made a small number of observation notes when I was not on a research stay, such as when news, posts or videos caught my attention online or after telephone conversations with video activists

57 The first sample, which was described in the 27-page video log, was not considered for the video code file but was a critical step in developing its methodology. For the second sample I transcribed 40 out 136 videos completely, and others partially. Theoretical saturation, on the one hand, and practical time constraints, on the other, guided me to a more fine-grained analysis of key sequences of videos reflected in the analysis.

provided important insights. Although my observation notes were not an attempt to provide systematic analysis, they played an important role in guarding the process of data collection and provided a valuable resource to ensure the accuracy of the accounts presented in this book.

Other methods of data collection during my field research included making my own videos, taking photographs and collecting objects. Filming and photographing, on the one hand, generated additional material that has been referred to for illustrative purposes throughout this study.[58] The collected objects consisted of protest flyers, newspapers, maps, advertising leaflets and similar artifacts. A collection of 18 editions of the newspaper *Jornal A Nova Democracia* dating from June 2014 to October 2015 proved especially useful for contextual information in relation to particular protest marches and police violence. This additional material played a major role in enriching and exemplifying the discussions presented in this work, but it was not analyzed systematically.

## 3.5 Data Analysis

»[A]nalysis is likely to occur in a nonlinear fashion«[59]

Based on Robert Yin's approach to qualitative data analysis, I structured my data analysis into five distinct steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling and interpreting my data and then drawing conclusions from it.[60] Although these steps were carried out independently, the analytical process was inherently iterative, involving repeated returns to the material to re-order, re-interpret, and refine specific sections. This circularity – typical of qualitative research – enabled the development of an increasingly nuanced understanding of my object of study. The following section chronologically describes the respective steps of analysis as proposed by Yin.

I began my analysis by focusing on the material collected in Cape Town before turning to the data from Rio de Janeiro. This decision was informed by three main considerations. First, the Cape Town dataset was smaller and therefore more manageable while I was still developing my analytical framework. Second, I was emotionally less involved in the South African context, which allowed for greater analytical distance and reflexivity. Third, since my fieldwork in Cape Town followed my initial research trip to Rio, reversing the chronological order in the

58 In a few instances, I passed on photos and audio-visuals that I had produced to video activists.

59 Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 177.

60 Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*.

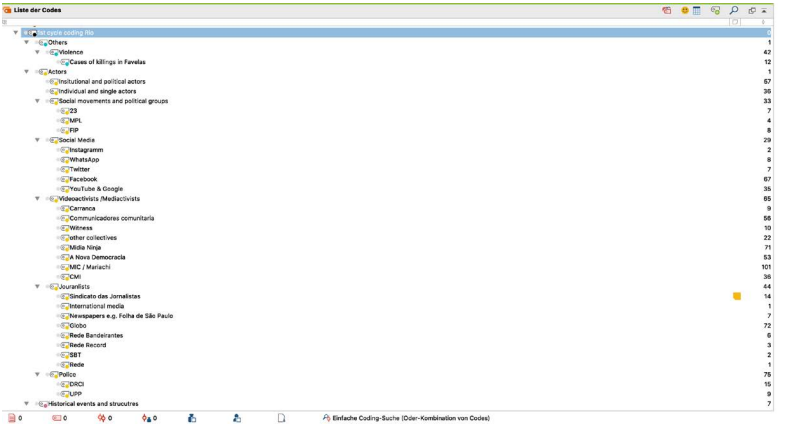


*Fig. 8 Interview Coding*

analysis helped ensure that both datasets could inform and enrich one another. This approach proved effective in generating inductive categorizations and contributed to a more nuanced comparative understanding of video activism across the two sites.

As Yin argues, the »objective [of compiling data] is to organize your qualitative data in a systematic fashion before formal analysis starts», since »[m]ore orderly data will lead to stronger analyses and ultimately to more rigorous qualitative research».[61] To structure the large amounts of data that I had gathered proved to be a challenge given the different formats in which my raw data came, ranging from audio recordings and video files to handwritten observation notes. However, the time-consuming endeavor of organizing this raw data into chunks of data that were of a more appropriate size for analysis turned out to be a crucial step, ultimately enabling a clearer understanding of its nature.

During the data compilation process, I developed a scale to weight the relevance of the sources for my analysis. Interviews came to be my richest source of first-hand information, followed by the video sample and my observation, reflecting the process of data collection. Moreover, triangulation of these different sources of data enriched my findings considerably.[62]

The second step in my analysis was to disassemble my material by breaking down »the compiled data into smaller fragments or pieces«.[63] To do so, I assigned initial codes to the transcribed interviews and observation notes with the help of MaxQDA software. At first, non-exclusive

61 Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 182.
62 Flick, »Triangulation in Der Qualitativen Forschung.«
63 Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 178.

»open« codes were assigned to the texts as an »exploratory problem-solving technique« and »heuristic« tool for engaging with the material.[64] Out of this process, a more precise system of codes evolved. Nine codes – appropriation, historical events and structures, actors, media coverage, urban space, producing and distributing videos, protest and resistance, positionality and my research, and video analysis – and multiple sub-codes helped to provisionally order the material. In addition to these »open codes«, I applied in-vivo codes to expressions which seemed to capture important tensions or which raised new questions.[65] As non-textual sources, the videos required a distinct analytical approach. To process them, I used video coding files to break down the hours of audiovisual material into concrete segments, which in turn helped me develop a structured grid for interpreting the content. This first round of labeling left me with an extensive code tree, allowing key themes to arise from the material in an inductive manner instead of being superimposed by me as the researcher.

Simultaneous to this first round of coding, I wrote extensive analytical memos, a tool which Saldaña describes as »a place to ›dump your brain‹ about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more about them«. These analytical memos generated new ideas, linked disparate statements and events, and illuminated emerging patterns. In total, I produced 250 pages of memos in an effort to make sense of my data.

After disassembling the material, I began the process of reassembling the data through a second round of analysis. This phase involved drawing on my memo writing, engaging with relevant literature, and interacting with the data over an extended period – often in an exploratory manner – in the hope that an abductive »flash« of insight would emerge.[66] This was indeed the case when I discovered three major analytical dimensions running through all of my data. I named them *access*, *visibility*, and *violence*, which eventually formed the basis of the three analytical chapters: Making Videos, Producing Visibility, and Exposing Violence.

After identifying these three analytical dimensions, I defined each one by providing a clear definition, a rule of application, and an anchor example. I then recoded all textual sources – interview transcripts and observation notes – according to these newly developed analytical categories. As Yin argues:

64 Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 8.

65 The in-vivo codes were named after summarized direct quotations.

66 The »guessing instinct«, which transcends the strict logic of reason, is compared to a detective story by one of the most important proponents of abduction, Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce, »Guessing.«).

> »Unfortunately, some use the terms code and category interchangeably and even in combination when they are, in fact, two separate components of data analysis. I advocate that qualitative codes are essence-capturing and essential elements of the research story that, when clustered together according to similarity and regularity – a pattern – they actively facilitate the development of categories and thus analysis of their connections. Ultimately, I like one of Charmaz's (2006) metaphors for the process when she states that coding ›generates the bones of your analysis.… [I]ntegration will assemble those bones into a working skeleton‹.«[67]

To construct my ›bones‹ into a ›working skeleton‹, I employed Dey's approach of »splitting and splicing« the data.[68] As defined by him, »[s]plitting refers to the task of refining categories by subcategorizing data. Splicing refers to combining categories to provide a more integrated conceptualization.«[69] In other words, splitting allows for a more nuanced analysis, while splicing helps to link the sub-categories with the analytical dimensions. This process thus enabled me to integrate my empirical material into a functioning analytical framework.

In contrast to the disassembling phase, my next step was to make the analytical categories mutually exclusive, ensuring that no piece of text could be assigned to more than one category at a time. Throughout the reassembling phase, I aimed to reduce the number of assigned codes in order to focus on key aspects of my research. Unlike with inductive disassembling, the reassembling process was guided by my research question and interests and was performed in conversation with my conceptual considerations.

While the coding process helped me gain an overview of my written sources, the same procedure could not be directly applied to the audiovisual material. During the disassembling phase, video coding files had sharpened my interpretation and analysis of the footage. In the subsequent reassembling phase, I built on the expertise developed over several years and selected a few videos as anchor examples. These were subjected to closer scrutiny by experimenting with and comparing individual scenes, techniques, and narratives across different videos. Using the simple yet functional iMovie application to montage video sequences, I was able to disaggregate specific features – for instance, by comparing different depictions of violence.

This process led to a major breakthrough: the development of a heuristic for distinguishing between three ideal types of videos – *activist videos*, *witness videos*, and *journalist videos*. Additionally, this extensive

67 Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 8.
68 Dey, *Qualitative Data Analysis*.
69 Dey, *Qualitative Data Analysis,* 139.

engagement with the material helped me select the individual video cases presented in detail in the analytical chapters, each representing the themes, forms, and content revealed through my analysis.

By following a systematic approach to engage with the vast collection of data I had gathered, I laid the groundwork for the writing process, during which I combined Yin's final steps of »interpreting« and »concluding«.[70] Given my research design and methods of data collection and analysis, my goal was to produce what Clifford Geertz terms a »thick description«.[71] However, unlike Geertz's extrapolation of broader cultural interpretations from a single event – such as his analysis of the Indonesian cockfight – my intention was not to generalize from a single video, but rather from a multiplicity of video publications and the complex sequence of actions that lead from a concrete situation to its audiovisual recording, through editing, and ultimately to its online publication and dissemination.

## 3.6 Reflections on Position, Perspectives and Practices

> »How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research. All writing is ›positioned‹ and within a stance.«[72]

To operationalize my research design, I positioned the study as a critical and multi-sited ethnography. This approach led me to focus on the practices of *doing video activism*, thereby excluding other possible avenues such as discourse analysis of specific videos or an examination of YouTube as a dispositive. Adopting an ethnographic perspective enabled me to closely investigate the everyday practices of video activism and the mundane factors that shape what ultimately becomes visible in videos. For instance, an individual's ability to afford a bus ticket to attend a protest can determine whether they are able to document and share footage of the event.

My decision to focus exclusively on the perspective of video activism *from within* was driven by my interest in its emancipatory potential. This choice privileges the voices of video activists, based on the assumption that they are best positioned to define what emancipation means on their own terms. Actively participating in protest marches and political events, as well as broadly sharing their political views – despite occasional differences of opinion – proved essential for gaining access to

70 Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*.
71 Geertz, »Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture.«
72 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 179.

their networks. Given the highly politicized nature of my research sites, maintaining an outsider position would not have allowed me to achieve the same depth or quality of data.

Henri Lefebvre's concept of *dialectical transduction*, which emphasizes the confrontation between theory and practice, serves as a pathway in the construction of concrete utopias.[73] Motivated by a deep interest in the emancipatory potential of video activism, I designed a multi-sited ethnography that oscillated between close-up, intense engagement in the field and more distanced phases of reflection and conceptual deliberation. My focus on video activism as both a practice and a process situated in specific contexts – and best explored through ethnographic methods – reflects this approach. Although the limited time available for on-site data collection prevented me from conducting participatory action research or militant investigation, it fostered a productive oscillation between proximity and distance.[74] This physical separation, particularly given the emotionally charged nature of the topic, enabled a necessary analytical distance for critical reflection and temporal defamiliarization with the data.

Through the data collection process, I built up a rich body of material for the subsequent analysis. To account for the quality of my empirical research, I drew on Creswell's suggestion of eight measures that ensure the validity of a research project. These are »prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rich and thick descriptions, and external audits«.[75] Out of the eight proposals by Creswell, I employed six strategies to ensure quality:

(1) Repeat visits to my research sites and continued online communication ensured that I had *prolonged engagement* with my topic.
(2) *Triangulation* was practiced through the mix of methods that I employed during data collection and the different types of primary material that this process produced.
(3) Attending doctoral courses and conversing with colleagues and experts enabled a continuous process of *peer review*.

73 Cunningham, »Triangulating utopia: Benjamin, Lefebvre, Tafuri«.

74 ›Activism tourism‹, when practiced as a form of fleeting participation in multiple engaged communities, often seems to do more harm than good. Such forms of participation may seriously hamper the sustainability of activist efforts and can cause disillusionment among those who promise to engage seriously but struggle to sustain the effort across multiple locations. My project of archiving digital video activism in collaboration with Princeton University and Mídia Independente Coletiva aims to overcome such extractive practices and help preservation efforts within my role as researcher.

75 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 207–9.

(4) My practice of writing regular memos to ›defamiliarize‹ myself from my data and reflect on possible faults in my interpretation targeted potential *researcher biases*.
(5) Feedback loops in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro in early 2018 enabled me to fill in the remaining gaps in my research and check preliminary interpretations with video activists.
(6) Finally, my attempt to write a *thick description* of the research material and the practices of video activists was designed to guarantee the validity of the research.

After rendering my research process transparent, I hope that readers are equipped with sufficient information to independently judge the empirical rigor and quality of the data that is presented in my research. After the introduction into my methodological approach to studying the practices of video activism, the next chapter introduces into the contexts of Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro.