Special issue: Practising refusal as relating otherwise: engagements with knowledge production, 'activist' praxis, and borders

The unruly arts of ethnographic refusal: power, politics, performativity

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Refusal remains a core concern in processes of research across the sciences. Drawing on previous anthropological theorisations, this paper contemplates on the manifold 'arts' of refusal during ethnographic research praxis, drawing on diverse thematic experiences and contexts across coastal India, Malaysia, and Uganda. We argue for a concerted engagement with refusal as more than an act of withholding co-operation and as an expression of resistance. While recognizing refusal as a locally situated and historically contingent sensibility, we ask in what other ways might the more generative qualities of refusal be explored, paying particular attention to the performative nature of refusal itself that may entrench as much as reverse power differentials in the 'field'. Drawing on decolonial and post-development epistemologies and diverse experiences as scholars situated and working across different geographies and disciplines, we explore the many entanglements, articulations, and enactments that remain ubiquitous in everyday ethnographic research praxis through several thematic angles. These include the negotiation of uneven (and often violent) forms of research collaboration and co-optation, the enactment of benevolent sexism as an 'ethics of care', and embodied practices such as silence(-ing), together with play and humour in participants' critiques of scientific truth-telling. While illustrating subtler manifestations of refusal across ethnographic research-based encounters, we also contemplate pedagogical practices of un/learning (to 'read') and to teach the arts of identifying and productively working with the many appearances of refusal – both manifest and less visible.

Keywords: ethnographic fieldwork, decolonial epistemologies, research collaborations, performativity, research methods, critical pedagogy

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Introduction

> I abandoned the pitch because I don't think I'm the right person to write this story – I have no idea what it's like to be Black... I can send you the Google doc with my notes, too? (Ọlúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, 2020, from "Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference")

Conventional training on fostering research collaborations rests on an underlying premise: that people in open, democratically plural contexts are often willing to engage with and participate in the research process. Yet when such debates unfold, refusal as a singular act, as opposed to an iterative process, tends to be more often than not cloaked in the language of non-cooperation and resistance. In this paper, we set out to question the notion of 'field'–based refusal and its concomitant sensibilities as a mere anomaly or rupture appearing in the social lives and afterlives of any research encounter implicating participants, ethnographers, gatekeepers, and funding agencies among others. Moreover, our collective reflections prompt a more conscious unthinking of learned institutional practices inherent in 'reading' expressions of refusal in all its lively, vibrant unruliness. For example, this framing also encompasses the manufacture of (dis)consent through mainstreamed ethics forms. For being necessary interventions, such practices inadvertently harden or complicate distinctions between resistance, complicity and silence.

In this paper, we draw metaphoric inspiration from 'unruliness' (of knowing/being) as a deeply embodied and phenomenological notion, which is irreducible as much as it is unteachable (Rosa 2022). Scholarly critiques have often engaged with institutional processes around circumventing or eliciting forms of refusal. Such processes are put in place to safeguard the interests and security of the most marginalised and vulnerable. Yet, there has been little engagement with the kinds of sensory and tacit knowledge that foreground meanings and enactments of refusal, in all its plurality. Arguably, this lacuna also extends to the kind of pedagogical practices warranted in understanding and reflexively engaging with the complexities and nuanced interplay of refusal during ethnographic research, and as a facet of micro-politics in the 'field'. It is therefore a concerted call for a radical rethinking and unlearning that we wish to collectively contemplate through our various case-studies.

The paper reflects on and draws inspiration from our own varied pasts and intensely personal experiences across East Africa, South and Southeast Asia – as scholars, activists, educators, and development practitioners. To guide our thinking, we pose the following questions: How can 'refusal' in both ethnographic research contexts and in research partnerships be understood beyond its meaning as a singular act? How inadequate a reading might 'western-centric' dualistic presumptions of refusal (as entirely negative expression or outcome) appear to be? In what ways could the manifold material and sensory appearances and recognition of refusal be broadened, also in ways they could be critically discussed? For indeed, while resituating moments and enactments of refusal firmly within entrenched relations of power and privilege (Mwambari 2019), the emancipatory promises of refusal are but one, among many.

The aim of this paper is two-fold. First, we seek to illustrate the need to rethink or complicate the refusal-complicity-participation triad/continuum in the social life of ethnographic research and research participation. The second objective, starting with ourselves, is to better facilitate a more nuanced identification of refusal, its discernment and appreciation, calling for a more engaged teaching in classroom and field-school settings, lessons and debates which we ourselves indubitably missed during our formative years in training.

We begin, first, by exploring nascent concepts around refusal in varied ethnographic contexts – as withholding, resistance, and silencing in the conventional sense, and as method and pedagogical tool in decolonial and post-development thinking/praxis. Second, we explore diverse enactments of refusal by means of four case-studies crafted in first-person voice as vignettes. Our stories crosscut multiple geographies of transnational digital space between India and the United Kingdom, the rural Sunderbans, island Malaysia, and finally Uganda. These examples offer underexplored expressions, everyday rituals and enactments of refusal, while remaining cognizant of the ways in which these modes may further dis/empower self and others. As such, these fields of practice encompass: 1) refusal as an art of un-complicity in hierarchical research contexts; 2) refusal as an instrumentalised 'ethics of care' in contexts of sexist paternalism; 3) refusal as a playful corrective and antidote to scientific objectivity. A brief and final section contemplates the kinds of pedagogical tools and practices inherent in un/learning to 'read' refusal with respect to its integration within classroom methodological debates and beyond.

Refusal as method vs. moment: beyond silence, non-cooperation, and non-complicity

Refusal, at first glance, implies a project at withholding, embodying purposive action in itself through undoing/non-action. Arguably, conventional methods related textbooks often stop at this, preferring to parse these varied contexts of refusal, from knowledge sharing to restrained social and spatial access. We begin by asking what visible and nascent concepts of refusal have been brought to the fore. We specifically draw attention to the arts (of *seeing*, *being*, and *doing*) refusal 'as practice´ as much as silencing is (see Kanngieser & Beuret 2017), and equally relevant within any power laden social encounter in everyday life.

Refusal is a concept that has been notoriously tricky to define. Indeed, one could say it has historically *refused* to be definitionally located and descriptively fastened. One way of lending some clarity might be to ask *what it is not*. McGranahan questions the conceptual purchase that refusal affords – as an ethnographic subject as a mode for understanding – as opposed to the notion of resistance? It is more than a mere "updated version of resistance" she argues, for not only do refusals (in the plurality) "illuminate limits and possibilities, especially but not only of the state and other institutions" for it "is social as much as it is political", while creatively reconfiguring social inclusions as much as exclusions (McGranahan 2016, 316).

Conventionally, refusal has also been associated with its communicative power through trajectories of silence/silencing, avoidance, evasion, and desertion. The very ubiquity of refusal makes it a nebulous social sensibility given its everydayness in terms of multiple refusals and their choices, over relationships, identity and belonging, and the imaginative. Such moments remain all too visible in spaces where hierarchical relations are barely upended, and across gendered, racialised and classed contexts where some are compelled to take the 'backseat', including instances in which power elites themselves may purposefully refrain from being present or use absence to their advantage. Yet, these conceptualisations engage with refusal as a subject of study and as an empirical 'fact'.

One of the more conceptually exciting debates around refusal is rooted in its generative power. Ortner (1995) was arguably among the first to squarely focus on what she termed as 'ethnographic refusal' although the term itself was never clearly defined. Her critique of the problematic Geertzian 'thickness' (of ethnographic description) was later taken up by Simpson (2017, 73), arguing that she refused to "be that thick description prosemaster", for to her refusal was a deeply personal and political act of withholding particular kinds of knowledge-making in her writing[1]. This argument bears echoes of Glissant´s (1997) phenomenological call for the 'right to opacity' (of knowing and being-in-the-world). Here, opacity is both anti-reductionist and generative, carrying with it its own poetics of transparency.

Arguably, it was Simpson's seminal work that laid the ground for appreciating and tracing the *revelatory* nature of refusal – both as an everyday societal phenomenon, and as method for research and activist inquiry. At the heart of these theorisations lay the question of consent, that is to say a radical de-consenting – to comply with state ascribed categories and realities of reservation life that were not of their choosing nor making. Refusal then, to the Mohawk, was more than just a "stance but

also a theory of the political system that was being pronounced over and over again" (Simpson 2016, 328). Refusals then imply not simply a *nay*, but a type of exploration into "what you need to know and what I refuse to write in" (Simpson 2016, 72).

Thus, the context of articulation, through writing and conscious blotting, matters as much as asking what was left to be reframed as refusal, as method as opposed to moment. Their debates have garnered further salience after 'reflexive turn' in the social sciences and humanities. It is therefore worth asking how far refusal itself, as a subject of inquiry, evaded moments of its own reflexive scrutiny in and for *itself*, despite rich explorations as a 'generative stance' in critical understandings of power, history and place (Tuck & Yang 2014a). In part, research on refusal as a critical method came to the fore, as opposed exploring the nuances of refusal for and in terms of its contents for theory-making. Nascent work within Discard Studies for example, explores the unthinking of refusal-in-research as 'method' in itself (see Zahara 2016), while dismantling binaries between action and complicity, disclosure and concealment, the visible and hidden.

Yet drawing on decolonial critique, Tuck and Yang (2014b, 223) tease apart the ironies of social science as it "often works to collect stories of pain and humiliation in the lives of those being researched for commodification" while constituting the very corpus of "collective wisdom that often informs the writings of researchers who attempt to position their intellectual work as decolonization." Theirs points to a steadfast 'refusal to do research' while thinking through interrelated axioms; the selective inclusion of subaltern voices, knowledge that is best not shared (with the academy and beyond), and the false primacy of 'research' as the preferred intervention for knowledge-making and legitimation. But what if refusal could be normalised and recast as part-and-parcel of the research encounter itself? Acknowledging the pervasiveness of refusal serves "as a way of thinking about humanizing researchers" (Tuck & Yang 2014b, 223) as opposed to reducing refusal in terms of negative outcome and failure. Such a reframing also opens dialogic spaces for the re-examining of peculiar rituals, performances and highly situated practices of ´doing´ research that participants may often find strange and mystifying.

As a way forward, we draw inspiration from Tuck and Yang's (2014a, 244) assertion in seeing refusal as a way of understanding "the wisdom of a story, as well as the wisdom in not passing that story on." Refusal serves as a vantage point that not only informs what can be known, and what must be kept out of reach within diverse research contexts, but also in exploring the agency of people themselves in processual practices of refusal, bearing in mind that "there are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn´t deserve" and that "research may not be the intervention that is needed" (*ibid*.). Such a perspective may also in part reveal the dynamics of 'becoming' non-complicit subjects in these varied experiences. Thus, we enliven understandings of refusal as an 'art' that may be both consciously and unwittingly enacted, and at times instrumentalised as a means to an end. Our starting premise is that where there is agency, and not entirely scripted participation, *refusals* persist.

'Unruly' arts of refusal: articulations, enactments, and agency

Among other identities, the four of us are researchers of colour at diverse stages of our careers, and work across East Africa, South and Southeast Asia. Some of us continue being affiliated to and based at universities across Western Europe (Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands), and one of us leads a development-centred thinktank in New Delhi, India. Bringing our diverse spaces and experiences together was no easy task but as a point of departure, we maintain that a simplistic binary reading of North-South research partnerships and allyships remains ontologically limiting. Such a framing also remains intrinsically dangerous to any kind of work in decentring the epistemic privilege of modernist, post-Enlightenment positivist forms of empirical inquiry (as opposed to the 'western-centric'). While this debate goes beyond the scope of our paper, we position our collective examples within the multiverse of many 'Norths' and 'Souths' that crisscross, mesh and overlap. The augmenting of our shared and divergent experiences across transcontinental and oceanic spaces between East Africa, Southern- and Southeast Asia point to its own poetics of organising and trying to render fallible something as unruly as 'refusal'. Put differently, these constitute moments of refusal that might be missed at the blink of an eye.

Negotiating uneven partnerships: refusing lackeyship in research collaborations

Despite being its co-principal investigator, Simi recounts the trauma that she underwent due to explicitly toxic verbal behaviour among research project members (academics) – which, in the name of democratic decision-making led to financial losses, together with innumerous sleepless nights for her. While Simi's account offers an anatomy of refusal in the face of unethical practice, her collaborators' refusal to maintain mutual respect and co-operative professional spaces not only highlights the violence of institutional hierarchy, but also the immense gaps that persist within codified research ethics in the life cycle of a transregional project.

Simi:

While international collaborative research projects have increased across all disciplines over time (Wuchty *et al*. 2007; Wagner 2008), there has been a simultaneous show in gender disparities in such international collaborations (Kweik & Rozska 2020). This evidence validates my own experience. Being a relatively junior female scholar and research entrepreneur have both enabled me and acted as a barrier to equitable participation in a transregional research collaboratory.

At first, the belittling was not restricted to me as an individual, but directed towards discrediting and humiliating an institution I had established with blood, sweat and tears. These transgressions did not emerge as simple sexist impositions from men, but were expressed by women as well, exposing deep-seated relations of internalised patriarchy and hierarchical mindsets in academic knowledge-making. It also showed the simmering competition (read 'envy'), when a relatively junior and less experienced female researcher (like myself) demonstrated potential that might potentially challenge an established order, replete with cushy, non-precarious job profiles.

The bureaucratic style of functioning among senior colleagues produced a veritable steeplechase as some financial decisions required urgent resolution. What could be resolved over a quick email, phone call or a one-to-one meeting with principal investigators (PIs) led to lost time. And when such meetings were called, it was as if I was in a courtroom, and I was being 'ordered' to perform a set of actions: "here[!] ... immediately transfer the funds to everyone's bank accounts". For these actions to be completed the basic prerequisites from the team members (e.g., furnishing account details, signed contracts) were left unfinished, and it seemed as if I were refusing to disburse these research funds. At one point their spite and collective bullying reached a climax when words like 'dog' and 'servant' were hurled upon me with continuous bickering on the non-receipt of funds, while having emails being copied to the highest authorities of a university, in one case.

Meanwhile, there was barely any consensus-making with regard to common meeting dates. I was asked to take things 'easy' by some seemingly sensitive members, and some others advised me to 'bear with it' and to 'not report it to the donors', as this could impact their research careers.

While I continued to ask for the completion of due process (i.e. the furnishing of requisite paperwork) to enable financial transfers, the matter further escalated as external tax experts under the pretext that the local tax consultant with whom I was working with was suspect. This fact was subsequently proven untrue. The toxicity further deepened as members who finally received their funds refused to acknowledge email proofs of transfers, despite several reminders and the copying in of numerous external persons including university authorities and tax consultants. The final straw came when I was compelled to take on the management of the project website for a year, a role I had never agreed upon. These tasks were thrown around as 'orders' on things that needed to be done. I was finally instructed to transfer the servers and data to a professional. It has been over half a year since the hand-over to the 'professional', and at the point of writing, not a single change was made on the project website. Neither has there been any active social media activity regarding the so-called research partnership.

The trauma experienced reveals the very hypocrisy of research and collaboration. It boils down to the point that whatever we write as airy avant-garde objectives in our proposals, are barely internalised. I have often had to prove how hard I work, just so that team members lend me a listening ear. My efforts at co-writing research articles have barely been reflected upon, rather, the final drafts have not even been shared with me despite reminders. At every step I have had to negotiate and prove my

credentials, while others are not asked for it. Might one reason be the proficiency with which they speak English? Or in other words, the more 'elite' sounding the scientist, the more likely they would be integrated as an active member of the 'global invisible college' (Wagner 2008, 15).

Furthermore, open confrontation (e.g. whistle-blowing) against structures of discrimination, exploitation and abuse often culminates in the end of academic careers – however clear the evidence appears (Shinbrot 1999). In addition to ensuring fairness and equity, redressing gendered imbalances in the academic workforce, and putting an end to academic abuse, creates not only equitable spaces for women's access to partner, but also enriches the translational talent pool (Holman & Morandin 2019).

Yet, at the same time I felt I had to rise above, and avoid being caught up in narratives of 'victimhood' while continuing to perform tasks, demonstrate my educational qualifications, prove my worth and experience in ways that validate these intersectional identities of age, gender and geographic positioning. Indeed, these debates are not new and women (particularly women of colour) in academia continue to remain othered, hindered by socio-cultural biases and structural inequities, while being 'silently' excluded from formal and informal opportunities for research collaboration.

'House rules apply': paternalism and benevolent sexism as an ethics of 'care'

This vignette recounts a series of incidents that Vani and Madhurima encountered while undertaking ethnographic research in the Sunderbans. These reflections made us rethink the place of paternalism and care in the so-called 'field'. In particular, we contemplate refusal as a means to complicate questions on positionality, benevolent sexism, and the performance of kinship.

Vani and Madhurima:

The incidents we share took place towards the end of 2020 and early 2021, during ethnographic research in the Indian Sunderbans. Our local contacts were a family of three: a woman named Putul[2], her husband Tapan, and their son Partha. We made plans with Putul to set up base at her house and travel to meet our other interlocutors. As we were making plans to head out of Kolkata, one of us called Tapan and asked for the address to get there. He offered to meet us in the village where a cycle rickshaw would drop us off. We felt it might inconvenience Tapan, yet he insisted. We agreed. It was dark by the time we reached their home, and we were invited to spend time with the family. They were curious about us (and our work), as we were about them. The next day the couple insisted that Tapan escort us to our meetings. He wished to ensure we were safe and comfortable during ethnographic research. We toured the village, while being introduced to people. Tapan refused to leave our side. There were certain parts of the village that were deemed inappropriate for us, he insisted, as we might not find anything of interest there.

Refusal rears its head in a multitude of non-verbal forms. Consider the ways in which our route and interactions in the village played out. For example, Tapan offered us a ride and ended up taking us to places of his choosing rather than ours. When we were talking to people he deemed as inappropriate, he would linger close by. He would refuse to engage in conversations he didn't like by pretending to not have heard us. In the end, at sunset he guided us back to their family home. Without words we were not allowed to leave, for it was too dangerous. As two unmarried women of 'reproductive age' we are used to being the 'responsibility' of others. We were concerned that the limited time we had might prove unproductive, should this pattern continue. We had to figure out a way to leave.

We first took Putul into our confidence and told her our dilemma. We convinced her that we had to leave and with her we hatched a plan. We said we would spend the afternoon interviewing her and so we would remain house-bound. Tapan ran his errands. Following our interview with Putul we left the village before Tapan returned. We, two women in their thirties, ran away like naughty teenagers. We did keep in touch with Tapan and his family, while pretending to have forgotten to tell him that we were leaving.

A few weeks later, we found ourselves returning to the same village. Our approach this time was different. We rented a room. We arrived in the village and headed to Tapan's place for tea and a chat. They knew we had booked our own place. Tapan was dissatisfied, yet had Putul convinced him that all was well, and that we knew what we were doing having done such work before. Even while Tapan

pulled back, he still refused to let us go to the hotel by ourselves. He escorted us and made sure to have a chat with the manager of the place before he left. While these interactions remained typically paternalistic, reality proved far more complicated.

A few months prior to our arrival a young researcher had been gang-raped in the area. Putul later told us that they were concerned not because they thought that we could not handle ourselves but because the perpetrators whose identities were known had still not been arrested. Our position then became similar to that of the survivor as young female researchers. The area, Putul mentioned, also had a high incidence of human trafficking. Yet she did not suggest that she thought we could be abducted. The area in general had become more unsafe over the years.

The 'care' imposed on us was indeed a form of benevolent sexism (Glick *et al*. 1997). But that was just one side of the story. Our behaviour also mattered. When we arrived the first time, we were intent on building relationships with people, and with Tapan, Putul, and their son. We called Putul 'didi' and Tapan 'dada' – sister and brother. We discussed academic matters with their son who in turn called us didi. One of us spoke their language, sharing on family and pointing to similarities. We made efforts at blending into their lifeworlds and routines, into roles that helped us bond with the family. In retrospect, consciously or not, we were performing kinship to gain trust, access information and places. However, we tried to reject Tapan as the patriarch when it did not suit our purpose. If it had all gone completely according to plan, we would probably have not thought about it at all. Tapan's paternalism only became apparent through the act of refusal. Once he accepted the role as dada, he had to offer us care. He had to ensure that we were safe as his context defined it.

More interestingly, paternalism – as an ethic of care – works both ways. We too had refused and were paternalistic in the name of care. When we failed to draw boundaries, clarify our role as 'researchers', we did it because we did not want to be disrespectful of the care that was being offered. That too can be interpreted as a certain form of paternalism. Why did we believe that Putul and Tapan might not understand? When we were considering how to deal with Tapan's many acts/arts of refusing (e.g. to share some information, allow us to travel, talk to people), we adopted different approaches. One of us was of the opinion that we should simply have an honest, respectful chat with him. The other refused believing that Tapan and Putul would feel offended. Our responses could be read as internalized patriarchy. Unsurprisingly, one of us was 'culturally' closer to the family, speaking their language, bearing similar family dynamics.

The next time we arrived, we had established clearer boundaries by arranging our own paid accommodation. This enabled Tapan's sense of agency too. He could refuse to participate in our work and at times he did, we respected that. He still offered us care (sans the paternalism). He checked in on us and gave us advice. He shared his thoughts but stopped himself from forbidding us or thwarting our work. We were no longer his responsibility. It was a mantel he was able to refuse. We in turn refused to put him in that difficult place.

Complexities develop because ethnographic research is itself an embodied field of social relations. We bring so much of our own person into encounters, inviting people to bring themselves into a relationship with us and our work. This relational work is in itself impossible, without the sharing of lifeworld experience. Clear role distinctions are hard to articulate and difficult to enforce. Between paternalism and care you often find an ocean of negotiations, and refusal can help us untangle such complexities.

Of embodied practices and 'take-away stories'

This is a story David wrote in his diary in 2018, during ethnographic research in a community in Uganda that had experienced conflicts over decades[3]. The piece was crafted as reflexive prose, and due to ethical reasons and with some minor editing, the story has been retained in its original form and style.

David:

From afar, we could see that something was wrong. The old lady Lydia was chasing her grandson Joe with a long walking stick. They circled each other, yelling in their mother tongue. From afar, one could have mistaken it for a friendly scene, but as we got closer, my colleague Paul put his hand out to stop

me. All I could hear was their beautiful language, but Paul said this wasn't a good time and suggested coming back later. However, I wanted to know what was going on, so we moved closer. Paul translated the quarrel. It was about money; someone had paid them, but Joe told his grandmother that the person left nothing. The old lady's eyesight was not good, but she heard a car, which meant someone had come to settle their debt. Lydia scolded her grandson, "now you want to go and spend all the money at the shopping centre with girls and return drunk." When she asked for money to buy food, Joe refused and walked off.

Paul asked if we should announce our arrival. He had called (or at least he should have) to inform them we would be visiting. At first, Lydia refused, but he called again and the old lady approved the visit. Nevertheless, we arrived at a bad time. As we approached, I noticed signs of the many cars that had come before us. The grass had been flattened by mighty tires and the walls were black with diesel soot.

The old lady quickly reached for a piece of cloth to cover her breasts, which had let loose in the scramble. The skin on her forehead creased as she gathered the strength to force a smile. She squeezed out a welcome in English. Clearly, this was not the right time. She greeted us, placing one arm over the other and lowering her walking cane like a gun. Culturally, we should have crossed our arms for this elder. But in capitalism, respect is reserved for the one who buys food. Paul went first, explaining that we had called earlier as I mumbled a few words in her language.

Lydia was one of the village's oldest women. She was well-connected and had survived the war. She witnessed everything, at least before a grenade hit her home and damaged her eyesight. Then there was Joe, her grandson who returned from the bush. Nobody was sure about his story, but they suspected he carried a cemetery in his heart, a graveyard of blood sucked from young and old. He had tried to open up once, but his grandmother refused. She did not want to know in case the government came knocking.

Lydia softly asked what we wanted. Paul struggled, explaining that we had just come for a visit. She asked if I was white. No. From Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), missionaries, the government? No. The United Nations (UN)? No. A university researcher? Yes. She smiled and asked in broken English, "consent form?" Paul reached into his bag, but I stopped him, "tell her we don't have any." It just felt wrong to go through the routine and ask for an interview, especially after being 'listed' alongside all her other visitors. She reminded me that I was part of a system that continuously sucks information from people to satisfy a lust for knowledge on post-conflict societies, journal articles, books to further our careers. But what did Lydia have to gain, especially since Joe spent her money in bars and on 'young girls'?

"So, what do you want?" With confusion and a heavy heart, I opted for silence. Paul, an efficient translator and fixer who always wanted to deliver quality interviews for his clients, looked at me intensely. We were quiet for a long minute before I said, "a visit." Paul repeated in English, "you want a visit?" I instructed him to translate and he obeyed. I added that we would leave now or whenever she wanted, and apologized for walking in at an awkward time. The old lady relaxed and brushed it off. She told us that her grandson had gone through a lot, so he suppressed the memories with alcohol and girls. It was hard, but if she made a fuss, he might not drink all the money. Otherwise, she insisted, he was a good boy.

Over the past ten years, she had received so-called visitors at least twice every week. After the war ended, people arrived without notice (she did not have a phone). Two, sometimes three cars would line up in front of her house, waiting for their interview at this fast-food restaurant serving up take-away war stories. Her stories included being raped multiple times, sometimes by young boys. She also told of the unmarked graves in her backyard, and her constant efforts to appease the dead. She had recounted so many stories that her house was now a 'must-see stop' on the post-conflict highway.

Part of her was excited to receive so many guests from the world over. She became a professional storyteller, even spicing up the stories since they would all end up in writing somewhere. Even so, a deep sadness lingered in her eyes when she described how researchers offered vain promises to use her story to her benefit. No one ever came back, and the government never gave any support. Broken promises everywhere. Lydia was visibly angry again, expressing her resentment for our industry. She had to stop offering tea, as some would take it and not leave anything for sugar. Once, a research

assistant split the payment from a white researcher right in front of her blurry eyes. And then, once the big cars left, there were the neighbours and Joe to contend with. Her stories of heartbreak had been sold to the highest bidder. The breaking point came when one of the visitors requested to live with them for a few months. He would unwittingly pee on her husband's grave, which was marked by a few stones and a small cross behind the house. When she saw this, she cried and worried that her husband's spirit would attack them for welcoming people who peed on graveyards and left dark smoke on the house he painted for his young bride.

Her culture obliged her to welcome visitors, even those who arrived at awkward moments. But she was tired of talking, of vain promises. We could feel the fatigue in her voice and see it on her face. Paul did not ask any follow-up questions. He closed the notebook and I pocketed the recorder I never got to use. Paul apologized for our awkward entry and announced that we would be leaving, but then Lydia asked where I was from.

I briefly told her my story of surviving wars at a young age. She reached out with her shaking, soft arm and touched me. Then, a river started to flow from her eyes as if it was Joe finally telling his story. Her silent tears were a shared language – the trauma of war and the sexiness of our stories to CSOs, NGOs, missionaries, academics, and governments. I sat there in silence, fighting tears, remembering how my grandmother died of a broken heart after hiding in the bush for weeks and learning of her son and husband's deaths. Lydia had immortalized her memory with a touch. We hugged, said goodbye, and promised nothing. We left no money for her, or Joe, or the neighbours. We certainly did not accept tea.

I walked away thinking this was a perfect F in research methods class. This is how one gets fired in academia. Was everyone I interviewed in this community abused by the deluge of researchers and charities? Did we have a reputation of forcing out stories? Did they hate me for not leaving any money? Had I ever peed on unmarked graves or massacre sites when out in the bush? What is knowledge, a journal article or book worth in my eyes, to the people I interview, or to the ungrateful competitive world of academia? Nevertheless, as I walked away, I was also mulling over Joe's story – what was behind the booze, the girls?

Refusal as reclamation: enlisting spirits as conservation agents

This story recounts a series of events that unfolded during Rapti's ethnographic research on the urbanised island of Penang (west Malaysia) in May 2017. This research constituted a part of a small-grant postdoctoral project – BAKAU (the Malay-language vernacular for mangrove trees). The research group comprised three German-based researchers – two mangrove ecologists and herself (as the 'universal' social scientist) – together with local university-based collaboration partners from the biological sciences. Against the backdrop of rapidly urbanising shorelines, the multidisciplinary team set out to explore socio-cultural meanings of mangroves, and what it meant for Penang's diverse coastal residents to co-live with mangroves. At first glance, this vignette encompasses what might be called 'refusal in plain sight'.

Rapti:
Mangrove forests are fascinating places. For some, they appear vast and forbidding. The forests themselves require space to grow and propagate amid expansive brackish water channels, further requiring watery flows and muddy substrates in which to thrive. Oftentimes mangrove spaces do not lend themselves as pretty sites for urban developers looking to reproduce the tropical idyllic beachscape, or to planners that intend on terraforming urban spaces for high-density living. The urbanites of Penang – a historic island in western Malaysia with a complex postcolonial history – at times refer to their mangrove forests as 'swamps' and breeding grounds for mosquitos, sand flies, and other critters. Yet, to peri-urban Malay and Malaysian-Chinese coastal fisher communities that dwelt on the margins and fringes of these shorelines, mangroves were an indispensable part of everyday life and livelihoods, offering to be taken as fish nurseries and fertile grounds for crabbing, worming, and timber gathering. Penang's naturalist circles alluded to their romantic-sublime allure, as spaces for respite, far distanced from the frenzied mechanics of city life.

For me personally, the project and its subsequent ethnographic research marked a somewhat uncanny 'return' to an island in which I had briefly lived and worked in my late 20s. It meant revisiting sites along the western and eastern coastlines, and in somewhat nostalgic terms to see how they had transformed – from fishing villages and kampungs to satellite towns, shrimp farms, and industrial clusters. This was a time when property developers were still scourging tracts of coastline to be converted into high-value real estate, often buying out and/or coercing fisher communities to relocate at ridiculously low compensation rates. Such trajectories of dispossession are markedly similar. Local researchers were looked upon by disenfranchised fisher communities with derision, as they were often said to aid in the process of forced relocation through insidious ´scientific´ surveys commissioned by developers.

Interspersed with narratives of property developers were overlapping tales of forest-dwelling deities and penunggu, referring to spirits that guard or protect particular spaces[4]. Malaysian scientists were often quick to dismiss this as 'native' folklore, peppered with a bit of healthy animism. Such magico-religious sensibilities had seemingly no place in contested negotiations around belonging and placemaking, yet researchers often bemoaned how these spectral sightings and hearings had become more pronounced over the years. Fewer fishers wished to lend boats that ventured into marshier thick-rooted labyrinths of 'possessed' mangrove spaces.

Possession as a category itself bears different meanings across the Indo-Malay Archipelago, as popular understandings of diverse kinds of spirits comprising 'hantu' do. At first glance, there were two distinct kinds of kampung narratives that were often relayed. The first encompassed varied trajectories of land acquisition by property developers – whether for industrial, housing, or tourism development. The second entailed 'cerita hantu' (ghostly tales) comprising recollections of sensory sounds and sightings of spirits. Together, these retellings reinforce reviled imaginaries of mangroves, while reviving older tales of unwanted trespassing[5].

Narratives on possession were not those of arrival and invasion implicating corporeal-energetic merging. Possession implicated a haunting of place and its boundaries. There were different kinds of possession, crosscutting rules of morality and everyday ethics (in ordinary life), together with other kinds of 'possession' such as land prospecting, valuation and speculation. For my kampung-based residents and storytellers, these spectral encounters took on a very real material essence. Their (sensed) presence was often implicated during moments of transgressive behaviour that would otherwise remain communally invisible in densely thicketed labyrinthine waterways. However, in a contemporary setting, these minor deities, spirits and other kinds of hantu now performed the crucial work of saving mangroves and livelihoods from property development-conquistadors (and their perceived researcher-lackeys). These knowledge forms and sensory epistemologies existed well outside and within the domains of scientific 'rationality', empirical frames, and the metrics of accountability. For haunted spaces spelt financial devaluation and other forms of sensory and material dispossession, particularly if those sites were to be privatised, refashioned and sold as real estate.

Yet, the question of ontological difference remains: Were these narratives being intentionally accentuated for the purpose of excluding outsiders? Have these narratives seemingly 'proliferated', in which the same story gets fed to developers and scientists alike? For anthropologists, phantoms and the like possess the potential to passively illuminate. Yet these mangrove spirits promise to be of more socio-ethical value. At the very least, it appears that they are wittingly or unwittingly enlisted as conservation agents. Penunggu continue performing roles as boundary-keepers and as threshold workers, while meting retributive justice for transgressive behaviour, thus muddying ontological distinctions between corporeal and socio-spatial (land-based) dis/possession.

Bearing witness: refusal as recognition in collaboration, teaching and praxis

Taken together, our vignettes create a mosaic that refuses to be tamed into ontological categories for easy academic consumption. At first glance these stories may appear unrelated and thematically disparate. In Simi's vignette, fellow researchers actively refuse to live up to their stated ethics in everyday practice, while her very agency is enlivened through enactments of counter-refusal. For David, Madhurima and Vani, refusal is experienced as failure of their role as researchers, albeit in

different forms. Such potential "failures and dead-ends fall outside the process" while the richness of such anecdotal material is often weeded out in writing and theorisation, as they barely perform the silent work of unravelling misconceptions and offering correctives that visibly lead to deeper levels of understanding (Jemielniak & Kostera 2010, 335). In a moment of profound empathy, David's experience encountering refusal ends in its compression of time – his present existence as a researcher, bearing future repercussions on his career, against his past lived experiences of surviving war. On the other hand, Vani and Madhurima are left to clarify their roles, both to themselves and to their hosts.

Some of our discordance is also created by what lies hidden, often in sharp contrast to what *things appear to seem*. Does the co-creation of the 'field' through such processes and praxes merely re-enforce the coloniality of science? We call upon reading refusal(s) against the grain, replete with its own subtext. In Simi's story, it is the plain sighted enactment of refusal that makes such forms of institutional violence visible. The hidden graves in David's narrative are not visible to those who do not recognise refusal, while extending a type of violence on those who suffered during conflict, thus transforming survivors into storytellers. In Rapti's piece, the erasure of lifeworlds – both literal and figurative – can be partially glimpsed through the conspiratorial narratives of urban development and scientific scepticism which fail to see other articulations of contestation.

The 'unruly' enactments of refusal in David's story also reframes hauntings as possible social connections. In Rapti's case, haunting takes on a spectral form, in which worldviews collide and haunting allows for contestation and further reclamation. Through these contexts, refusal in its many forms also emerge as liminal moments which temporarily suspend presumed hierarchies, make visible that which is explicitly or otherwise hidden, and allows for the subversion of power. Such encounters may also reveal, at the very least, brief and fleeting moments of possible transformation, or its mere promise.

Yet, the very *recognition* of refusal remains one of the trickier aspects of critically discussing the arts of refusal as evidenced in academic environments. How might we as educators and co-learners facilitate that recognition within and beyond both ethnographic research and classroom? Discounting the reflexivity of (colonial) disciplines such as anthropology and cultural geography, ethnographic research-based training whether in academic contexts or across practitioner-spaces rests on an implicit assumption: that participants and collaborators are seen as voluntary networked actors and as freely circulating bodies willing to either respond to or resist questions that are posed during research encounters[6]. Take for example David's narrative. Following this encounter, he had become emotionally wrought imagining he was failing as a young postdoctoral researcher who had secured a grant to travel to this community and 'bring back' findings for academic analysis. Yet, what was never clear at the time and revealed itself after dialoguing many years with the co-authors of this paper, was that this encounter stood as an example of refusal. In all his under- and postgraduate training in research methods, he had barely encountered ideas nor purposive literature on refusal, and how to *creatively work* with refusal (as encounter, metaphor and method), to draw on insights from 'respondents' who for many reasons refused – in a multiplicity of ways – to provide interviews.

In part our trouble lies in the recognition of refusal as a singular act, often than not cloaked in the language of 'non-cooperation' in the context of research practice and partnership-making. Such gridlocks, it is presumed, might invariably be worked around or negotiated fairly process, tends to be more and equitably on the one hand, or unsuccessfully on the other. Tellingly, much praxis-related writing and training have occupied two distinct tracks, which at times have overlapped: first, the more practical, outcome-related aspects of nurturing and maintaining research and activist-related allyships; second, the older well-rehearsed radical, neo-Marxian and decolonial calls to rip asunder vagaries of epistemic violence, and the fallacy and hubris of representation in speaking for the (often oppressed) 'other' or other worlds (see Spivak 1988; Colombo 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Neilson 2021).

Arguably, classroom-based unlearning on what one takes to *sense* as refusal, is as important as learning to read cues that signal moments and spaces of refusal, as fleeting as they may seem. These may span very embodied practices of refusal, encompassing verbal and non-verbal cues that are rather felt and sensed, than articulated or enacted. These include translational gaps in dialogues, silences and what remains muted. Yet, what arises from weaving refusal as a theme and method in the teaching praxis is the question of unwittingly rendering the prevalence of refusal as 'ruly'. What

would then be the role of the facilitator in exploring meanings around refusal, and the researchers being trained in debating this paradox? Moreover, in focusing on everyday enactments of refusal that are contextually bound, not all non-verbal cues are amenable to being read and interpreted across participants. What then naturally follows is the acknowledgement and teaching of radical humility in complex contexts and their methods (Mwambari *et al*. 2021). What then naturally follows is the question of what a 'pedagogy of refusal' might then look like, if a pedagogy of silence too could be performed "along with vocal practices… as a habitual pedagogical practice?" (Dey 2022, 1). Igniting conversations around teaching refusal and its purposive integration into curricula, and in tandem with decolonial approaches to critiquing 'research' as politics and praxis (Tuhiwai Smith 2013), offer to be taken as fertile grounds for departure. Yet, the question of what methods and ethics courses are best equipped for integrating these kinds of radical humility remains a moot point, particularly when it calls for the un/learning of cues, in 'stranging' familiar conversations, and in creatively using performative aspects of refusal to inform more nuanced insights around ethnographic research praxis and collaboration.

Conclusion

Through collective storytelling, we set out to explore the seeming 'unruliness' of refusal and some of its less visible enactments as witnessed in ethnographic research praxis. Written in part as a dialogic conversation, we ourselves categorically refuse requests of typologizing these themes (pun intended), for the active un/making of refusal as art and social/communicative practice is never work that is 'complete'. Ours is an engagement with the everyday social lives of research collaboration and ethnographic research. For indeed, the agentive vagaries of refusal are plenty – refusal in the revealing of self and others, refusal as a basic right in safeguarding lifeworlds, the refusal of scientific 'objectivity' or refusal as a means of countering as well as reinforcing 'truth-telling'.

Framing refusal as an enactment, analytical lens, and method allows us to examine the micropolitics inherent in the social lives of research by observing the ways in which it is both deployed as a tool, and arises as a consequence of discursive practice. In Madhurima's and Vani's case, while Tapan's refusal becomes a vehicle through which boundaries become visible, the researchers' initial refusal to clarify positionality results in complicated relations. In Simi's case, the actions and choices of senior researchers result in the refusal of equity and just relations while Simi's insistence on ethical action and fair treatment is a refusal of unspoken, intersectional hierarchy-making. In David's case, while his initial refusal to read the situation and turn back results in taking up space (without consent), he encounters another type of refusal – to let his position as a researcher conflict with his own sense of humanity and ethical relations resulting in a redefined relationship where people are transformed from being interviewees to facilitators. In Rapti's case, enactments of refusal emerge as a rendition of insistence in contesting the so-called objectivity of the scientific-industrial complex of land acquisition and enclosure.

The rich unruliness of refusal and our combined explorations leave bare the more fleeting and less visible moments of its creative appearance. This work serves as a rallying call to researchers and writers, educators, activists, artists, practitioners and more, in exploring the dynamics and paradoxes inherent across varied sites and trajectories of knowledge production. These include, among other aspects, the acknowledgement and enactment of refusal(s) in various forms, related to particular investigative modalities that are nevertheless power laden, irrespective of their participatory design along the spectrum.

Further explorations of refusal also constitute the ethical prerogative researchers have in transparently divulging research agendas in spaces of violence, militarisation and authoritarianism, often to their detriment and those of others. Reflexive writing on refusal may also well encompass everyday acts of resistance concerning the institutionalised and private publishing lives of researchers and their collaborators, bearing in mind rigid evaluation metrics and elitist channels of dissemination that are far distanced from real societal impact, for example. Moreover, the expansive unruliness of refusal as more-than-event draws attention to its many forms and renditions. For example, would blatant fabrication or exaggeration be considered a modality of refusal? Certainly, participants have

often cynically balked at their own scripting of interview answers, in ways that often entrenches social biases, stereotypes and blindspots. Yet to accept and to sit with this unruliness, calls for a blurring of boundaries taking into account the agency of limits of self-disclosure, for example of anonymity – a central theme in any ethics standardisation practice within the academic-industrial complex. For to go back to Táíwò´s (2020) opening quotation, the abandoned, the under/unwritten always remains a radical act of refusal.

Notes

[1] Simpson's formative work on Mohawk nationhood explores indigenous histories of being refused through diverse acts of violent boundary-making and exclusion while her people (of Kahnawake) continued to refuse "the authority of the state at almost every turn" (Simpson 2007, 73).
[2] Pseudonyms have been used to safeguard the anonymity of participants.
[3] Details of location and names have been changed to safeguard anonymity.
[4] Unsurprisingly of course, mangrove forests around the world are seen not just as haunted sites, but as lively habitats of the supernatural beings.
[5] Often, monitor lizards and cobras were woven into these narratives, sedimenting the reticence of scientists to venture into them unaccompanied by a local guide, often a resident fisherman.
[6] While debates around ethnographic refusal have been prevalent, manifold forms of refusal and for diverse purposes are often rarely discussed in contemporary scholarly writing and teaching, although the coloniality of the 'research' encounter itself is selectively taught across social science departments worldwide.

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