

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

Reflections

Radical understanding: reflections on knowledge production, power, positionality, and practices of refusal within academic research

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By looking at scholarly research as well as my own experience of practicing refusal in my research and documentary work, this article focuses on how refusal practices can challenge dominant methods of knowledge production and lead to what I want to conceptualize in this paper as *radical understanding*; a way of practicing and relating to research otherwise. I propose radical understanding as methodological and epistemological tool to contest the imperialist and capitalist -dominant machinery of knowledge production.

Keywords: radical understanding, positionality, knowledge production, objectivity, refusal, dominance

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Dominant knowledge production and the making of the 'Other'

Conceptions of knowledge and *science* that are accepted and articulated today have been shaped throughout history by androcentric-Eurocentric culture. Drawing from their own perspectives and visions, White colonialist and capitalist men have constructed the prevailing theories, written the history, and set the values that have become the guiding principles of the dominant ways of knowledge production (Belenky *et al.* 1986). The control of the means of production and redistribution of knowledge – from universities, editorials, publishing houses, research centers, institutes, media, think tanks – lies within the same hands, as White capitalist and imperialist men still economically and politically dominate 'experts' communities and apparatuses of social organization (Rodriguez 2012 in Grande 2018). However, not only are the academic processes of production and validation of knowledge mainly under their authority (Collins 1989), the underlying interests of domination,

exploitation, and power respond solely to white supremacist, imperialist, and patriarchal capitalism needs and visions (Mignolo 2009).

Even though there are other registers or voices within these social and academic apparatuses, as long as said apparatuses remain intact in their entirety, those registers cannot radically transform the system of knowledge production and validation (Kelly 2016 in Grande 2018). The objective here is neither to disparage nor to neglect the importance of radical approaches that run counter to the dominant social and epistemological frameworks, but to explicate how the machinery of Otherizing has been and is operating.

Knowledge production is essential for the maintaining of authority, dominance, and power. "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor of knowledge which does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations," (Foucault 1975, 36). The maintaining of power through knowledge happens, firstly, through the production of 'knowledge' of *Others* in order to rule them or, in other words, to dominate them theoretically in order to 'subalternize' (Gramsci; Spivak) them in practice; and, secondly, through defining and *designing* knowledge and the ways of knowing of the White-androcentric capitalist and colonialist 'ideological hegemony' as science, 'terms of conversation', 'intellectual property' and scientific/academic codes in order to theorize and legitimate this domination (Gramsci 1971; Mignolo 2009; Tuck & Yung 2014a). At the same time, all other cultures, knowledge, ways of knowing and relating to the world are placed *outside* of these *borders* and consequently become the *objects* to be discovered, conquered, or even vanquished.

According to Said (1978/2003), colonial conception and methods of *making* knowledge *about/of* Other(s) are built on processes of objectification, generalization, and subalternization. Said (1978/2003, 97) quotes Abdel-Malek (1963, 107-108), who in his writing characterized the processes of objectification and generalization to theorize the making of orientalism and Orientals: "On the level of the position of the problem, and the problematic," it is about considering the 'field' and concerned people "as an 'object' of study, stamped with an otherness - as all that is different, whether it be 'subject' or 'object' - but of a constitutive otherness, of an essentialist character." "On the level of the thematic," it goes through "adapting an essentialist conception" and a typological generalization, whether it is by ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexuality, or by a social position such as working class, migrants, homeless or unemployed. These processes of objectification and generalization lead to the final level of subalternization, which means that people become objects and are denied agency, historicity, specificity, and concreteness. Consequently, a general abstract image of alien Others is shaped, and brought to the fore to be interpreted for the terms of conversation of the dominating framework and to be depicted in relation to its interests in order to theorize the dominations and maintain them (Said 1978/2003; Scott 2008; Mignolo 2009; Tuck & Yung 2014a).

By studying 'undiscovered' field(s), the researchers take the position of the mediator in the dominant framework. They are supposed to study and represent the object in order to bring it into the learning, the consciousness, and then into the domination of the androcentric White capitalist and imperialist system of production (Said 1978/2003). A White researcher is considered by default adept and legitimate to go and discover (conquer) any and every 'field' they want because they are a *transcendent subject* (Said 1978/2003) from *inside* of the dominant structure and they are able to fulfill this mediator role, or in Spivak's (1999, 6) terms, they are considered to be "the human norm and offer us descriptions and/or prescriptions."

The experience and positionality of People of Color (POC) academics in social sciences in the global North is completely different. POC incarnate the figure of the 'native informant' (Fanon 1961/2011; Spivak 1999) who should "provide data to be interpreted by knowing subjects (colonialist/imperialist academics) for reading ... for the production of definitive descriptions" (Spivak 1999, 64). They are typically pushed to work on their own country or community, not only as Tuck and Yang (2014b, 234) mention, because "researchers in doctoral and master's programs are often encouraged to do research on what or who is most available to them," but also and more importantly, because they are from the *Other* side of the border. They inhabit the position of the object to be studied rather than the subject who studies (Said 1978/2003).

In order for POC researcher to cross the borders and to be authorized and accepted *inside* the process of the production of knowledge by academic authorities (Collins 1989; Khosravi 2007) the

person has to adhere to several *rules* and hegemonic norms: firstly, they should assume their “possibility of native informant [which] is inscribed as evidence in the production of the scientific or disciplinary European knowledge of the culture of Others: from field-work through [theorizing]” (Spivak 1999, 66–67); secondly, they should prove their assimilation (Fanon 1961/2011), *id est* that they have sheerly integrated the *right* methods of knowledge production and that they consistently adhere to them; and lastly, and consequentially, they should obey the rule that it is always the dominants who produce knowledge *about* the dominated, that the South provides the ‘field’ and the North the theory (Khosravi 2019). From a political perspective, this means to remain faithful and to maintain the rhetoric and the ideological and practical hegemony (Gramsci 1971), or as Spivak (1999, 342) indicates “mouthing for us [the dominants] the answers that we want to hear as confirmation of our view of the world.”

This configuration is in keeping with the geopolitics of knowledge production and distribution, as well as the border ontologies, and “how imperial/colonial power is written in space and time while also through relations between land and people” (Naylor *et al.* 2017, 3). Territorializing of knowledge production (Lefebvre 1970) inside geopolitical borders and in accordance with their rules and power relationships, including the center-periphery model (Amin 1974) and politics of ‘migration management’ (Gilmartin in Naylor *et al.* 2017), perpetuate the otherness of non-white researchers and their dispossession from their own culture and knowledge.

Reflections on biased knowledge production and the holding of multifold positions as a POC researcher within White academia

When I wanted to start my PhD thesis in social geography in 2016, as an Iranian, and as someone who has been involved in immigration issues, I was immediately ‘encouraged’ to choose a subject related to Iran and questions of immigration so that my proposal would be accepted. I had to assume the role of the native informant providing material for the production of knowledge about an attractive exotic ‘unexplored territory’ (Tuck & Yang 2014a) from which I came and to which I had ample connections and accessibility.

Until then, I had always refused to work *on* Iran as an Iranian student in Europe. Although at that time I had not acquired enough *knowledge* to theorize why I did not *like* to work on Iran, I simply was exhausted by being identified and recognized merely by my Iranian nationality. But I had no choice; to renew my student visa in order to be able to stay in France ‘legally’, I had to start my PhD on the ‘suggested’ subject of Iran.

Interested by the concept of the intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) of different forms of oppression and domination, at the start of my PhD journey, I decided to do research on the activist Iranian women’s presence, place, and social struggles in the urban and virtual spaces during the ‘Iranian Green movement’ (2009–2010), followed by their migratory journey to Europe. The idea was to focus on the intersectionality of the forms of oppression suffered by activist women in the urban and virtual space during their social struggles in the country as well as on their migration experiences and the spatial and social relationships that they developed in the ‘host society’ and from there back to their society of origin. The PhD was comprised of the writing of a doctoral thesis and a documentary film.

Not long after starting my research, I observed that all the women, to whom I explained my research and asked to participate in it, were rising as the very first question: “Why do you (as a man) want to do research about women?” That question and its recurrence made me reflect more deeply on my own position vis-à-vis my ‘subject(s)’ of research: here my thinking was guided by questions such as ‘who comes to know whom’ (Tuck & Yang 2014a) and *for what purpose?*

The purpose was to open a space – especially with the documentary movie – for the speech of migrant women and turn a spotlight on their day-to-day struggles and oppressions that they are subjected to. However, I, as a cis man, by means of my social position and privileges, might be *de facto* part of that dominance and power relations. My objective to make their voices heard and call attention to their struggles could, even though unwanted, lead to the maintenance of existing oppressions and hegemony that I wanted to challenge with and through my work. As one of the participants put it: “Still a man who wants to talk about women”. The problem was not explicitly because of my gender identity; it was tacitly an accumulation of several positions of power including, next to being a man, being in

Europe as a student in higher education compared to as a refugee¹, and holding the position of researcher and filmmaker, which overall, would allow me to accumulate more social, cultural, and symbolic capital by exploiting their situation and struggles (Bourdieu 1980).

These reflections also made me reconsider what it means to hold the position of 'objective knower' stemming from the White colonialist mindset of being the center of the world, the one who produces knowledge from his own point of view in order to master and objectify every single subject. My intention 'to open a space for the speech of migrant women and turn a spotlight on their day-to-day struggles and oppressions' was implicitly a colonial approach with the supposition that oppressed people cannot understand their problems and are not capable of talking about them (Fanon 1961/2011). Yet, as articulated by Collins (1989, 747) "they have been neither passive victims nor willing accomplices to their own domination." This position and rhetoric contribute to the construction of an ideological justification that the researcher's power is exercised at least in part for the benefit of their subjects (Scott 2008). As cited by Ortner (1995, 175), "in a relationship of power, the dominant often has something to offer, and sometimes a great deal (though always of course at the price of continuing in power)."

In such a position the researcher also benefits from and gains social credits out of the pain and coercive labor of oppressed people (Tuck & Yang 2014b; Buire et al. 2019). In the field of research or artistic work *about* marginalized and oppressed groups (e.g. migrants, homeless or impoverished people), the convention is often that the artist or researcher offers to make the voice (read the pain) of people heard by those in power and authority; and in return, as hooks (1990) states, they can just speak about their pain, *id est* they should remain in the position of passive victims. From my own experience and observations of others I noticed that when marginalized and oppressed people feel that they are faced with this kind of work, they are commonly playing a game, exaggerating and underlining that pain so as to be taken more seriously, and saying what the researcher/artist and those in power like to hear. This dialectic perpetuates the existing power relations and, as demanded by the dominants' hegemony, separates and isolates the problem from its causes and origins, as well as hiding its links to the dominant system. Hence, this approach only reaffirms the superiority of the dominants (Scott 2008).

After one year of research work, I became convinced that my project was somehow leading to the further collection of stories of oppression and fetishizing pain narratives, even though it aspired to be collective and to involve the participants in its design and development (Tuck & Yang 2014b). That was not the idea. The idea was to understand those oppressions, power dynamics and relationships as a starting point to change them (Smith in Hull et al. 1982).

In the end and after all of these reflections, I refused to continue my PhD project as such, and decided to 'turn the gaze' upon myself and those power relationships (Spathopoulou & Meier 2020). I made the choice to work instead on how the power relationships and the domination apparatus define the social-geographical structure of the radical militant and activist spaces in France and Greece, which I was involved in as an activist, as well as the domination structures and power relations within these spaces themselves². In the terms of Tuck and Yang (2014a, 814), I wanted to refuse "the god-gaze of the objective knower, refusing to draw conclusions about communities – choosing to write instead about power in the form of institutions, policy, and research itself."

It is important to recall that I am not defending the idea that only concerned people are eligible to generate knowledge about themselves, but placing the emphasis on the essentiality of the positionality and the praxis of the researcher as well of the research process. According to Ortner (1995) these positionalities and praxes lie on the understanding of historical, sociopolitical, and cultural particularities of each different 'subject'. My objective is to highlight the indispensability of 'seeing things from the point of view of the concerned people' (Greetz 1986 in Kaufmann 2011) and taking an approach 'from within' instead of one 'from above' (Ferro 1993).

Towards radical understanding and a refusal of researcher 'objectivity'

In my research, the process toward what I want to conceptualize in this paper as *radical understanding* as a form of refusal started when I shifted my focus from doing research on activism and activists to

doing research as activist (Mignolo 2009; Nicolas-Le Strat 2018). That shift occurred by refusing the position of objective academic researcher and thereby the procedure of *theorizing about* oppressions that activist women may be subjected to, and to choose instead the stance of the subjective actor involved in the 'field' and therefore try to theorize as such and *with* other actors (Tuck & Yang 2014b). According to Belenky and colleagues (1986, 100–101), understanding refers to "something implying personal acquaintance with an object (usually but not always a person). Understanding involves intimacy and equality between self and object, while knowledge implies separation from the object and mastery about it." This separation and alleged superiority, which is euphemistically called *objectivity* (Scott 2008), marks the power relationship between the researcher and the research subjects, in which the former produces knowledge about the latter in order to master them (in both senses of the term) (Said 1978/2003). Radical understanding implies that the researcher refuses this posture of objectivity, and requires empathy, intimacy, engagement, and equality instead. Thus, it needs a subjective stance on the side of those concerned, and raises aspirations of learning, participating, and engaging.

To put radical understanding in practice, the main thing was to center experiences and perceptions rather than knowledge production and data collection (Belenky et al. 1986; Simpson 2007), which would lead my work to what Belenky and others (1986, 118) have termed "connected methods of knowing" in which "authority rests not on power or status or certification but on commonality of experience". The objective is to seek to *understand* others' ideas and points of view, emphasising the relevance of context in the development of knowledge and the fundamental value of experience (Collins 1989).

Based on this methodical and theoretical focus, during the rest of my PhD I endeavoured to 'integrate individual experiences into collective experience' (Khosravi 2019), to challenge and change the terms of conversation (Mignolo 2009), and to think and analyse collectively with the participants about our communities, our struggles, and the power relationships we are exercising within our own spaces. Guided through radical understanding as a transgressive approach, I, also, became part of the 'research subject', and the participants, at the same time, was partly conducting the research. The knower-known relationship (Mignolo 2009) was subjected to an act of 'deidentification' (Khosravi 2019), which means the subversion of the rules of the game, *id est* the researcher is also being researched.

By replacing pain narratives with collective reflection on different forms of domination, their roots and processes of representation and reproduction, including within the research work and also by focusing the research on the spaces and groups which I was directly involved and engaged in, beyond my position as researcher, we could initiate the "processes by which knowledge is produced during research as the outcome of the relationship and negotiations *between* the researcher and informants, rather than of the former's objective observation of the latter" (Pink 2006, 25). At that point we could imagine a partial achievement of radical understanding. Radical understanding, as I want to conceptualize in this paper, passes through radical forms of learning by the 'field' and on the 'field' (Said 1978/2003), and "allows for a radical re-framing of the original formal apparatus of enunciation" (Mignolo 2009, 4). That provides an apparatus of enunciation that is at the same time addressing our own people (Fanon 1961/2011) and making a 'transcultural communication' of the experiences of one group of people to others (MacDougall 1998 in Pink 2006).

The documentary film that I produced as part of my PhD is based on a series of interactive and intercut interviews which capture those processes and proposes to "empower those who participate in it, through self-awareness gained in the reflexive process of documentary production; it creates a social intervention by 'revealing the hidden' and making explicit the voices and concerns of people who are usually 'invisible' in public forums" (Pink 2006, 97). It also opens a space of collective reflection and discussion to our own people by bringing systemic problems and failures to the fore, where these systemic problems and their causes can be analyzed by the actors in the 'field' themselves.

To use Said's (1978/2003) metaphor, radical understanding transgresses the colonialist rule of 'writing about fierce lions until the lions can talk back', and recognizes instead the lions' agency, and listens to them and learns from them when they expound upon their experiences, visions, and reflexivity. It also withdraws the authority and the control of so-called 'experts' on processes of production and the use of knowledge by making it more accessible to so-called 'non-experts', and by promoting a knowing achieved through life experience and collective narratives prevailing scholars' abstract theories (Belenky et al. 1986; Khosravi 2019). Radical understanding bears a close resemblance

to auto-ethnography (Van Maanen; Khosravi) but can be distinguished by two main differences: firstly, it is not specifically a matter of concerned people, groups or communities, nor merely a methodology in various types of research, but is constituted by epistemologically different and often transgressive ways of knowing; and secondly, it goes beyond the theoretical analysis and interpretation of power relationships, and aims to change them instead (Marx 1888/1969).

These ideas build on the long-standing traditions of Black Feminism, radical geography, Marxist theory, post-colonial and de-colonial thinking of scholars such as bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Walter D. Mignolo, Fredric Jameson, Samir Amin, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, generating and practicing radical and revolutionary frameworks and approaches based on rigorous analyses of power dynamics of the dominant system, and emphasizing the importance of personal and collective experiences, geopolitical and social situatedness of knower and knowledge, as well as the pertinence of self-reflection and knowledge production by subaltern people.

The epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009; Grande 2018) practiced through radical understanding as a practice of refusal of dominant ways of knowing, helped me to find an answer to a question that almost all the participants would contemplate during my PhD journey: "Why are you doing that for the university?" The question was fair. Communities of people I was involved in, who are fighting against all kinds of institutions and political authorities, did not wish to become a new subject/object and contributing of *expanding the territory* of knowledge of White capitalist and colonialist academia (Tuck & Yang 2014a). I also wanted to avoid objectifying and alienating their experiences by placing them in academic research, nor to produce knowledge *on* an 'unexplored field' (Grande 2018). The subtlety laid on the epistemic choice of considering 'field' actors as knowing subjects who map the situation and dominant system (Mignolo 2009), rather than making objects of them in order to produce knowledge for the dominant apparatuses. Therefore, the classic (read colonial) knower-known relationship is reversed: in lieu of objectifying a group of people and their pain and struggles, that group of people turns the focus back on the social and political structures that produce, reproduce, and perpetuate those pains and struggles to understand them in order to find solutions to change them.

I promised to my participants that I will not fuel the machinery of knowledge production by this research. After we all watched a first version of my documentary film (once with participants in France and once with those in Greece), the general feeling was that this is an important documentation of our spaces, our struggles, and our collective history; that it is neither "a way of communicating knowledge about the *unknown* by creating resemblances to the familiar" (Pink 2006, 24) nor a *scientific* presentation of how they can be known from *outside*, but rather an embodiment of what and how they actually are from *inside*. As Gramsci (1971, 324) indicates that "the starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is knowing thyself as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory, therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory," my project aims to compile that inventory for our spaces and struggles.

This text attempts to share how I endeavoured to implement a practice of radical understanding in my research, thinking, filmmaking and writing process. The first step was mentioned before, is to create an epistemic framework cohesive with the research methods. Following Mignolo (2009), this means to 'locate' the epistemology of the research and 'de-link' it from the regular (read dominant) epistemic framework. As this article showed, it is indispensable to transform the position of objective academic knower, who uses objects to produce knowledge for the dominant machinery, into subjective actor of the 'field' who uses university to propose what Mignolo (2009) calls 'de-colonial thinking' and 'knowledge-making.'

Radical understanding is a holistic, embodied and transformative practice emphasizing common experiences, life stories, and collective analyzes, instead of stagnating in sheer theoretical, 'textual attitude' (Said 1978/2003). It is a proposition of crossing borders and transgressing the rules and norms of White capitalist colonialist Eurocentric processes of knowledge production in order to create avant-garde frameworks of the definition and generation of knowledge (Mignolo 2009) based on oppressed and marginalized people's ways of knowing.

Notes

¹ Students from global south in Europe hold a very precarious and disadvantaged administrative and legal position. However, the fact that they were able to enter Europe legally without confronting horrible ordeals on the borders and in camps, and that they come often from upper classes, and are comparatively less targeted by systemic racism puts them in a relative privileged appearance compare to other 'migrants'. However, it is important to avoid turning misery into a competition.

² "The social geography of alternative spaces through personal stories: The intersectionality of forms of oppression and its role in the processes of attribution and appropriation of spaces" Project of PhD thesis by Esfandyar Torkaman Rad.

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