

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

## Reflections

### Pedagogy of 'Refusing' – commentary to Siriwardane-de Zoysa, Sreekanta, Mwambari, Mehta and Majumder

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This commentary is a critical response to the dialogic essay “The unruly arts of ethnographic refusal: power, politics, performativity” that unpacks the complex performances of hierarchies and violence as performed during ethnographic research works in anthropology. During ethnographic research works, the encounter between the researchers and the research participants are often underlaid with tensions that either compel the participants to speak in definite patterns to satisfy the demands of the researchers or force the researchers to conduct field works according to the advisable guidelines of the academic institutions, funding agencies and contact persons. On the basis of my personal experiences and the ethnographic experiences of the authors of the essay, this commentary argues how the performance and acknowledgment of ‘refusal’ can be adopted as a research methodology in anthropology and other academic disciplines to counter the colonial/Eurocentric parameters of knowledge production.

Keywords: refusing, pedagogy, methodology, tensions, colonial/Eurocentric

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## Introduction

The dialogic essay by Rapti, Vani, David, Simi and Madhurima bring forth their respective ethnographic research experiences in East Africa and South and Southeast Asia as activists, scholars, educators and development practitioners. While discussing about the research experiences, the authors share about the diverse hierarchical and violent field work practices that are prominent in ethnographic researches and how, both individually and collectively, they have navigated through the challenges. The commentary specifically focuses on the argument about the necessity of acknowledging the values of silences and refusals while interacting with communities. The commentary also discusses why it is necessary to realize the performance of refusals and silences as a pedagogical and methodological practice in daily research works.

## Disrupting the colonial pedagogy of 'being forced' to speak

The violence of the Eurocentric methods of knowledge production was unleashed by the colonizers through different pedagogical and methodological initiatives and one of them was to extract and expropriated the ancestral knowledge systems of the indigenous communities of the Global South. The planetary project of extraction and expropriation began with identifying and mapping the indigenous communities, and then using them for various social, cultural, political, economic, biological and racial experiments. In order to conduct the experiments successfully, the colonizers forced the native indigenous communities to reveal their ancestral knowledge values so that their cultural and geopolitical systems can be hijacked, distorted and misappropriated. Those who resisted the epistemological and the ontological violence of the colonizers were subjected to physical and psychological abuse.

In the contemporary era, especially during research field works, the colonially structured processes of extractions, expropriations and abuses, through forcing individuals to speak, take place in a systemic manner, by demonizing and marginalizing those research participants who show reluctance to speak (Siriwardane-de Zoysa *et al.* 2023). In this regard, I would like to share a personal anecdote (which is also collective at the same time) here. While co-designing a research project with an Anglo-Indian community in Kolkata (a city in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal) in 2018, I and my co-researchers were consistently struggling to shape research questions in a way so that the research participants are not treated as objects of data collection. We consistently tried to make sure that the research participants are acknowledged as co-researchers and their respective positionalities and ways of thinking are duly respected. But, in the process of respecting and acknowledging their positionalities and diverse ways of expressions, it is crucial to confess that a lot of times we struggled to accept a situation where the research participants refused to respond to some of our questions. Especially at the beginning of the project, we interpreted the refusals as our failure to collect 'necessary' information. But, with the passage of time, as the project started building up and we started critically engaging with the refusals, we realized that the performance of refusals and silences does not portray incapability and failure of a research project. On the contrary, the performance of refusal can be understood as a methodology that has the potential to dismantle the "binaries between action and complicity, disclosure and concealment [and] the visible and hidden" (Siriwardane-de Zoysa *et al.* 2023, 172). A critical intervention of the refusals also allowed us to categorically question the colonial "regimes of representation" (Tuck & Yang 2014, 227) that have been regulating every paradigm of knowledge production for generations.

This dialogic essay allowed me to revisit the tensions of refusals that me and my co-researchers once encountered on the one side and reminded me of the necessity of celebrating the performance of refusals and silences as a habitual pedagogical practice on the other. In this essay, through various personal field work experiences, the authors have also argued how analyzing the performances of refusals from a critical methodological lens made them realize the hidden social dynamics and power structures that exist around us. The bureaucratic experiences of Simi with funding agencies, the gendered experiences of Vani and Madhurima in the Sundarbans, the racial and emotional experiences of David in Uganda, and the geopolitical experiences of Rapti in Malaysia show that the phenomena of refusals and silences in several pedagogical forms generate "liminal moments which temporarily suspend presumed hierarchies, make visible that which is explicitly or otherwise hidden, and allows for the subversion of power" (Siriwardane-de Zoysa *et al.* 2023, 179).

## Practicing pedagogy of 'refusing': possible challenges

Prior to sharing the possible challenges, I would like to clarify that I am not speaking on behalf of the authors of this essay and I am speaking only from my personal experiences.

Some possible challenges are:

- a. Lack of understanding of silences and refusals: With respect to my field work experiences in India, South Africa and Bhutan to date, I have realized that developing a critical understanding

of silences and refusals alone won't help. It is important to locate the lack of understanding of silences and refusals within a broader framework of our respective social, cultural and intellectual upbringing. As a child, I have always been taught that it is important to speak vocally and make effort to respond to every question. In case I failed or showed reluctance to speak and respond, I was immediately denounced as intellectually incapable and culturally arrogant (Dey 2022). Later on, as a tutor and researcher, I have realized that the situation has not transformed much in the contemporary era where the "psychological nuances and contexts of silence" (Corbin 2018, 26) are systemically ignored and vocal expressions are regarded as the most authentic mode of expression. As a result, it is crucial to address the necessity of performing refusals and silences not only during research field works, but also in schools, higher educational institutions, homes, and neighborhoods.

- b. Ignorance towards Critical Diversity Literacy (CDL): CDL is a transdisciplinary research framework that generates de-hierarchical and collaborative spaces of knowledge dissemination, where "differences of many varieties increasingly co-exist" (Steyn 2015, 380). CDL also enables individuals to "'read' prevailing social relations as one would a text, recognizing the ways in which possibilities are being opened up or close for those differently positioned within the unfolding dynamics of specific social contexts" (Steyn 2015, 381). The lack of understanding of silences and refusals as critical and ethical patterns of knowledge production is also associated with our habitual failure to understand the role of power in constructing differences; recognize unequal symbolic and material values; unpack how systems of oppression intersects, co-constructs and constitute each other; and possess diverse vocabularies and grammars to critically engage with narratives of privileges and oppressions. Hence, it is important to explore the possibilities of developing CDL as a research framework on the one side and as a way of celebrating every existential difference and diversity on the other.
- c. Tensions between the individuals and the institutions: The aspect of tension between the individual and the institution is another possible challenge that may emerge while methodologically and pedagogically performing silences and refusals during research. To elaborate further, the desire to celebrate silences and refusals as critical methods of knowledge production poses a threat to the capitalistic, self-profiting and neoliberal functional patterns of the universities across the world. So, there is a high possibility that in the process of acknowledging silences and refusals and interrogating the hierarchical, disrespectful and abusive research approaches of an institution, a research project may get dismissed. So, in the context of acknowledging silences and refusals as a critical research method in the higher educational institutions, it is necessary to explore the possible ways of navigating the tensions between the individuals and the institutions.

### Continuity: ways forward

The purpose of outlining the possible challenges in the previous section and writing this commentary is to open up further spaces of discussions on "refusal as recognition in collaboration, teaching and praxis" (Siriwardane-de Zoysa *et al.* 2023, 178) across different formal and informal trajectories of knowledge production. As a researcher, who works in the interface of humanities and social sciences, I firmly believe that the arguments in the essay will not only be beneficial for scholars in the discipline of anthropology, but also for the scholars, who are working in various other academic disciplines that require regular interaction with communities.

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