

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

Reflections

An article that refuses to write itself

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The essay discusses the failure of the author to theorise refusal in relation to the politics of migration. As I try to understand why theorising refusal failed, I am reminded of the all-too-familiar trope of ethnography: the romanticisation of the resistant subject. Taking Tina Campt’s definition of refusal as a starting point, I proceed with autoethnographic critique. I emphasise the stakes of the refusal to accept the terms of the system that “renders you illegible”, (Campt 2019, 83) while arguing against the instrumentalisation of detention experiences.

Keywords: politics of refusal, migration, knowledge production, ethnography

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Muddy writing

In this piece, I would like to think through the refusals that emerged from two attempts to write an article for this Special Issue. Both attempts failed, as the article refused to write itself. The essay is dedicated to this refusal as it questions existing modes of academic knowledge production on migration. While this essay formally falls under the category of refusing research, what it rather does is discloses the refusal that is integral to knowledge production about migrants and refugees (Tuck & Yang 2014). The reasons why I want to include this refusal into the Special Issue are twofold: firstly, what we leave out of our knowledge production reveals how we think about refusal; secondly, the refusal of this article to write itself shows the tracks of ethnographic thinking that not only belong to my practice but have wider currency in the rhetoric of knowledge production on migration.

It is unclear how the refusals that we encounter in our ethnographic fieldwork can be included into academic knowledge production on migration without losing their meaning as refusals. Mayblin and Turner (2021, 124) argue that academic knowledge production on migration often supports other institutional and governmental status quo. I first started thinking about the year during which I have been writing this article when I was asked to revise and resubmit my essay, after the initial draft was not accepted for publication by the editors, and when I myself refused to submit the revised version of the text. I started working on the first version of the article at the beginning of 2022, around the time when the Russian full-scale invasion into Ukraine started. Although the subject is not precisely related to the topic of the article, it kept popping up as a non-transparent background of the white electronic paper which is not white anymore. It is rather a muddy bush, in which you are trying to find some sense. The issues of romanticising and instrumentalising resistance became closer to my skin. This contributed to my constant rethinking of how I see the subject of refusal in this paper, making my doubts about the reproduction of stories of resistance even stronger.

The 'resistant subject'

The symbolic exploitation of the survival stories of migrants and refugees is omnipresent. With my own example of the refused article, I see how the framework of refusal could possibly contribute to this vision. One of the drafts I wrote for this Special Issue was an essay on someone else's refusal to accept the power dynamics at the pre-removal detention centre. I decided to withdraw that draft as I realised that in trying to understand the refusal described in it, I was falling into the all-too-familiar pattern in ethnography, the one that is permanently recreating the 'resistant subject' (Taussig 1987 and Quashie 2012 are two among many who speak against this reproduction).

I would like to quote a part of this story here so that the reader could trace how it could slip into the construction of a resistant subject. Ethnography's supposed usefulness and participation in emancipation vanishes in singling out the cases of resistance as in this example, even if the purpose of the text was to document and better understand the refusals.

In this section, I will share some thoughts on an instance of refusal by a woman from Qazaqstan detained inside the Amygdaleza detention centre in Athens who used humour and laughter as practice of refusal. In 2021, there was a boycott in the 'female section' of the Amygdaleza pre-removal detention centre. Detainees stopped eating the food that was given to them. One of the women who were active in the strike went to the person responsible for food in Amygdaleza and asked when it would be changed. The response she received was that the food had been prescribed by the doctors as the right nutrition formula for the female detainees and that therefore it would be impossible to change the meals. The woman had to laugh very hard; she said she would like to send the bowl of untouched meals gathered in the kitchen as *κεράσματα* ('treats' from Greek) to those who prescribed the diet: 'This is for the doctors, on me!' Her laughter and humour expressed in her offering 'treats' to those people who prescribed the 'diet' I want to read as practice of refusal.

Thinking about how to approach the case of refusal in question, I draw inspiration from Black feminist theorizations of the politics and practice of refusal, taking Camp't's capacious definition as my point of departure:

a rejection of the status quo as liveable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise [Camp't 2019, 83].

The womens' humour and laughter in the observation above challenged the power dynamics of the interaction. People detained within detention centres are stripped of subjecthood and rendered as not fully agential subjects who have no influence on their living conditions. It expresses a refusal to be subjected to the rules of detention, a refusal to accept the order of things and ridiculing of the inedible meals described as 'nutrition formula'. Importantly, too, the momentarily overturning of power dynamics is happening through laughter – and thus the incarceration becomes laughable. The refusal temporarily deprives those who make decisions about the conditions of incarceration of their hold of the situation. This resistance is by necessity jolly, anti-victimising, life-assuming.

The women asserts that she knows what the situation with food is through sending treats (κεράσματα): the supervisor (προϊσταμένη) knows of course that she is lying about the 'nutrition formula', but she is playing the game of ignorance (Tazziolli 2022) that comfortably supports the racist exclusionary intracamp food politics. Φιλοξενία – a notion of what is seen as Greek traditional welcoming culture is often used to describe the hosting of refugees. It has been criticised as hierarchical (Rozakou 2018, 29), while the value of φιλοξενία is 'at the centre of self-representation of the Greek government' (Rozakou 2018, 28). Refugees and migrants are those who are welcomed as guests in the necessarily hierarchical, paternalistic, and restrictive manner. The κέρασματα are usually used to treat guests, so there is another level of interpretation of this anecdote through treats. By sending the treats to the doctor's office the very hierarchy of this welcome culture is overturned: I φιλοξενώ you that is why here is my treat to you, welcome to my world the one that I own and rule, but I am generous enough to accept you here.

The refusal takes place where there is supposedly none, claiming the recognition of the fully agential subject that controls the situation, against the idea of the φιλοξενία that the Greek government provides for migrants and refugees. The analysis of this singled-out story would celebrate the refusal, from which I, as a researcher, profit, while supporting the image of the othered resistant subject. "I found it, the story of resistance to praise while critiquing the system of migrant and refugee reception," the ethnographer within me would say, so-called 'good data'. I see value in telling this story, mostly the value of the story itself, because it is funny and powerful, but I cannot get rid of the feeling that it does not belong to me, that I am reproducing a romanticised resistant migrant through it. I remember the moment when I was told this anecdote. We were talking about the conditions in the detention centre, the communication between the women 'inside', and lack of the proper food. And then it was 'wait, wait, I want to tell you something else'. This story, as a side story of the barely liveable conditions inside the Greek detention centres was an attempt to take a break from that discussion. In a way she was empowering herself back after losing control while talking about the oppressive conditions. Thus, the story was used for the empowerment in the framework of our conversation. This turn of the dialogue could be understood as a refusal, too – refusal to surrender to the oppression of the detention centre conditions even in a conversation. Also, this turn of the conversation can be understood as a refusal of a conversation proposed by me as focusing on the inadequate conditions.

'Stepping aside'

The second way of how this article refused to write itself is through the risk of reproducing the division between those who are considered 'locals' and 'migrants'. In this second version of the text, I was trying to theorise the idea of 'stepping aside' in activist practices as a practice of refusal to speak for the people with the experience of migration. The attempt felt somehow strenuous, as if I was tying together the ideas that should not be theorised together. With the help of the editors, I understood that maybe things were not adding up because there is no 'stepping aside' when the practices of knowledge production are seen as common and do not reproduce the separation between the 'local' and 'the migrants'.

I would like to quote that second version of my article here so that my words have solid ground:

While cooking a meal for me, S. from a feminist initiative that makes monthly visits to pre-removal detention centres, asks me about my research. We immediately agree on our queer-feminist and anti-state positions with respect to the topic of migration. We discuss (in a manner of a pleasant rumour as it is always done) some assemblies we have been to. Since my plan was to examine how Greek activists without migration background understand the politics around migration in Greece, I ask the following question: 'How do you understand the migration issue in Greece?' The response, 'I know nothing,' was something that I did not expect. Not only was this a refusal to speak; in addition, there was a claim of not knowing anything. Instead of a response, I received an invitation to read zines with diaries of people who were held in Amygdaleza pre-removal detention centre as a knowledgeable source.

At the time, I regretted asking the question. It seemed like an ethnographic misstep: too direct, too blatant, too broad. However, it became generative through the refusals it produced: the refusal to

respond, the refusal to speak for people who dealt with the Greek carceral migration system through bodily material experiences, and the refusal of the right to speak about/around the topic of migration when they don't have the experience. 'I know nothing about migration. They know,' she said as she brought me the diary of a woman who had been held in a detention centre – a seemingly simple gesture that nonetheless shifted the terms of engagement, bringing concrete individual experience into the conversation.

Although my question was more generally about the topic of migration and its political implications in Greece, it was taken as one that could be responded to only by someone who experienced the Greek immigration system. In that sense, S.'s refusal to respond posits that only people who have direct experience with migration are knowledgeable subjects. Going further still, it turns speaking into listening, creating a situation of unlearning. Her phrase 'I know nothing' conveyed a refusal, both literally in words and through the action. It creates the possibility for a different understanding of knowledge and migration. This is of particular significance as even the most sympathetic places of Greek anti-racist activism tend to reproduce heteronormative, paternalistic, and objectifying modes of engagement.

People who experienced being detained because of their status, in the perception of those 'stepping aside' from speaking for them, have better knowledge of the situation. What is considered 'knowledge' in this case is the experience of immigration. Through stepping aside as a refusal to speak for somebody who has this experiential knowledge, activists make claim against ghosting (Cabot 2016) of a refugee and migrant subject in knowledge-making on migration. This claim simultaneously, though, reproduces paternalistic treatment of those who have 'the experience', as through this gesture of being designated as knowledgeable subjects they are treated both as subjects and as instrumentalised objects of knowledge. Migrants and refugees are often expected, too, to convey knowledge in a certain way, that is most often the knowledge of suffering and struggles.

Whose refusal?

This initial draft of the article was not accepted for publication by the editors for several reasons. However, there is one comment from the editors that I want to explore in more detail in relation to practices of refusal. This comment was about the risk of reproducing state binary categories: 'the migrant' versus 'the citizen' or the 'local'. The issue with this text was, as I see it, in the subject of those who were practising refusal in my story: those who had no experience of living in Greece as a migrant. I paired it with the refusal of ghosting and the refusal of myself as an ethnographer to reproduce speaking for/about/around migrants and refugees. The subject of refusal were activists with Greek citizenship, who would often be called 'local' by the Greek activists as they still often reproduce the division calling the events for 'locals and migrants'. My writing, as the one of an engaged scholar, probably, reproduced that separation by habit even though it has always struck me as problematic. The refusals discussed in this version of the article support the refusals of migrants and refugees, and, thus, supposedly 'fit' the politics of refusal theory. The question of the subject of refusal and what we see as such, indeed, creates doubts about this vision.

What troubles me in writing on migration and politics of refusal as the result of these two attempts, is the transfer or translation of the theory that has been built on very concrete cases (like the texts of Hartman 1997, 2019). This transfer bears the risk of watering it down to the generalised figure of the resistant subject, which is very normative in the way knowledge about migration is often produced.

The quoted sections of the article drafts complement each other as they both re-create the all-too-old separation in ethnography between the self and the 'other', albeit in different ways. While the first one re-produces the romanticised figure of the resistant subject, the second one possibly contributes to the ghosting of migrants and refugees as it chooses the 'local' as the one who is making the refusal 'on behalf of'.

What refusal costs to those who are making it, is maybe my largest question here. What does it cost the ethnographer to make a refusal to produce knowledge in a certain way or to produce it at all? What would refusal cost to those making it in the pre-removal detention centre? What does refusal

cost to those stepping aside and refusing to speak for someone else being white, fully-bureaucratically-present-Greek citizens?

The refusal as stepping aside from speaking for someone with experience of living without papers is in this sense incomparable with the refusals to recognise one's own illegitimacy in threatening juridical and material circumstances.

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