


Refusal – opening otherwise forms of research

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 An increasing interest towards researching other forms of knowledges is taking place, expanding the boundaries of knowledge to include forms that have been historically marginalised, negated, and neglected by the Western academy. Parallel to this, we have identified a rising critique of how voices marginalized by colonial modes of academic knowledge production are included, through a single-sided focus on pain and suffering (Tuck & Yang 2014). Yet there are less discussions around the process of research itself and what it entails. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to challenge the concept of ‘discovery’ and the unproblematic and inherent right of knowing granted to the Western academy, to argue for a kind of research that refuses. Interrogating instances of refusal in different contexts of Indigenous sovereignty and migration studies, this collective work creates a dialogue across different disciplines and reveals that refusal turns the gaze at colonial modalities of knowing. The empirical analysis of our work also demonstrates that refusal is a generative process that redirects the attention to ideas otherwise unacknowledged, thus making space for relationality, reciprocity, solidarity, community, and care.

Keywords: coloniality, migration, Indigenous, re-existence, borders

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Introduction

An increasing interest towards researching other forms of knowledges is taking place, expanding the boundaries of knowledge to include forms that have been historically marginalised, negated, and neglected by the Western academy. Parallel to this, we have identified a rising critique of how voices marginalized by colonial modes of academic knowledge production are included, through a single-

sided focus on pain and suffering (Tuck & Yang 2014)². Yet there are less discussions around the process of research itself and what it entails. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to challenge the concept of 'discovery' and the unproblematic and inherent right of knowing granted to the Western academy, to argue for a kind of research that refuses.

As a collective of authors, we have worked across different research projects that have revolved around the concept of social justice and/or decolonial work, with populations historically marginalised by Western paradigms. The writing of this article came about as a realisation that in the processes of our research, all three of us, in one way or another, had made the decision *not* to write about or publicly discuss certain findings. Considering our social justice framework, and in relation to our (co) participants, we also sensed that our refusal to write was not merely a passive action, but instead, an active stand that came out of an ambition to situate ourselves in solidarity with our (co)participants. In the contexts where we have worked, this by no means erases the complex existing power asymmetries. However, our ambition to situate ourselves in solidarity had methodological consequences, which we analyse in this article through Simpson's (2007) concept of refusal.

The refusal to disseminate and/or engage theoretically with our findings may be further understood as direct disobedience of the principles of academic research, which grants to the academy the inherent right of knowing. Yet researchers have argued that, rather than a limiting or defensive practice refusal to/in research attempts to make visible the colonial undertones of 'discovery' and place limits on the conquest and colonisation of knowledge (Simpson 2014; Tuck & Yang 2014). Discussing refusal, Tuck and Yang (2014, 223) ask: "How do we develop an ethic of research that differentiates between power – which deserves a denuding, indeed petrifying scrutiny – and people?". In this paper, we further explore this question by analysing empirical examples of refusals that challenge the unproblematic right of knowing granted to the academy.

The analysis of instances of our refusal in/to research also demonstrates that refusal is an active and generating praxis that redirects the attention to ideas otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned (Simpson 2007, 2014, 2017). We argue that our refusal is an attempt to question the coloniality of knowledge, which puts forward a different kind of engagement with research that unsettles our own authority to know (see de Leeuw & Hunt 2018): An engagement that acknowledges "[t]hat there are some stories the academy has not proved itself to be worthy of knowing" (Tuck & Guishard 2013, 20). In situating our work, we recognise that our physical geographies, histories, and social positions are interconnected with our practices of knowledge generation (also Zaragocin 2021). We accept the tension inherent in the different positions we occupy regarding racialised, classed, and gendered structures, both amongst ourselves and in relation to our (co)participants. Accepting this tension ensures that we continuously struggle against it in the ways we think, act, and write (Mignolo & Walsh 2018; Stein *et al.* 2020).

Anthropologist Ntapanta (2022, 162) argues that the decolonisation debate – at least in anthropology – does "not address the formulation and foundations of systematic Western knowledge paradigms", and that its focus is still merely on "cosmetic changes" rather than on systemic upheaval. Our aspiration in decolonial work goes deeper than cosmetics including both theories and practices, however, we are painfully aware of our limitations and shortcomings. For us, doing decolonial work is therefore not something one can accomplish, but an ethical and moral standard that informs how we work and what we aim for. In what follows, we discuss refusal in the context of decolonial work and how refusal was enacted in our own projects, both by ourselves and by our (co)participants, and in the generative praxis that was advanced by it.

Colonialisation, knowledge production, and collecting pain narratives

Decolonial scholars have argued that modern foundations of knowledge have been formed, understood, and controlled by the macronarratives of European civilisation and modernity (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2009; Salinas 2020). Rather than viewing modernity as series of linear events and processes, decolonial scholars contend that modernity is an epistemic frame which is not separate from the European colonial project (Mignolo & Walsh 2018; Tlostanova *et al.* 2019). That is, coloniality is the violent systems of oppression upon which modernity is built and advanced.

Modernity/coloniality is not only expressed economically or politically but it is strongly connected to the control of knowledge systems and what they entail as well as to places of knowledge production (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Naylor *et al.* 2018).

The European imagery that has emerged from the Enlightenment, has constructed a dominant knowing subject against a multiplicity of inferior and racialised subjectivities. In line with Cartesian thought, an individual self-actualises through knowing about something else, yet the object of the knower is deemed unchanged and remains a mechanism for the becoming of the subject, I think therefore, I am (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Tuck & Yang 2012; Demuro 2015). This supposedly inherent right to discover is grounded in a philosophy that assumes “what you are coming to, belongs to you somehow” (Neel *et al.* 2007, 29). This philosophy justifies the acquisition of bodies and territories to know about, and to rule over them. Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues that under such philosophy, ‘I conquer, therefore I am’ is the constant backdrop to the Cartesian formulation of knowledge. In this way the conqueror’s sense of self is a prerequisite to his knowledge of others. The right to know, therefore, is directly linked to the right to conquer. In this way, modern/colonial knowledge system is built upon frontiers and a self-entitlement to transgress them. Thus, generating knowledge is not an innately moral and ethical action, rather “it is a set of very human activities that reproduce particular social relations of power” (Smith 2005, 88).

Thus, the history of research from the perspectives of those who lay outside of the Western paradigms is intertwined with colonisation, exotification, and othering, a trend that continues today (Spivak 2010; Smith 2012; Tuck & Yang 2014). In the last two decades, much of the social sciences scholarship has been preoccupied with ‘giving voice’ to the voiceless through stories of pain, struggle, and trauma. Pain and/or struggle against pain are the currency through which the subaltern is allowed to gain partial subjectivity (hooks 1990). These narratives of pain and struggle also constitute and legitimise the work of the social sciences and the academy.

Critical scholars have sought to challenge this by, for example through participatory action research, negotiating issues of ownership, representation, and voice. Nonetheless, an overall framing within narratives of pain often persists (Tuck & Yang 2014). Yet, despite this complicity, academy also remains a place where those very same issues can be questioned, theorised, and perhaps transformed (see Naylor *et al.* 2018). How can we, as members of the academy, engage with the pain, violence, and injustices we encounter in our work without creating yet another narrative of pain about a suffering subject? Aligning our work with Simpson (2007) and Tuck and Yang (2014), we put forward refusal to/in research as way of thinking/doing that can open up the space for an otherwise engagement with research as an academic endeavour.

Refusal

In 2007 Mohawk anthropologist Simpson revived the concept of ethnographic/interpretative refusal, not least as a response to the complicity of academy in producing the suffering subjects. This concept had been criticised around the late 1990s by Ortner (1995, 180), one of the grand feminist anthropologists, who argued that ethnographic refusal would lead to “cultural thinning”. Ortner referred to the praxis of avoidance she had observed resistance-oriented scholars engaging with. According to her, it had become common to avoid types of interactions that could produce intimate knowledge about unfavourable aspects of their research subjects’ communities, like for example systemic patterns of gender oppression (Unger 2017). In Simpson’s scholarship refusal is, however, used and theorised as a generative act that has methodological, ethical, political, and theoretical implications. It, therefore, ‘thickens’ rather than ‘thins’ research and engages rather than avoids.

For Simpson (2014, 105), ethical research in anthropology is a constant act of balance, a “calculus ethnography of what you need to know and what I refuse to write in”. The ethnographic limit is reached not only when research causes harm or extreme discomfort, but also when it compromises representational territory, especially Indigenous sovereignty. In short, following Simpson, refusal tells when to stop, and, therefore, unsettles the coloniality of academic knowledge production. However, refusal goes beyond stopping, it redirects research into areas that are often overseen,

and questions established knowledges and relationships. It opens up dialogues and (re)creates spaces otherwise ignored.

Refusal is both method and subject and thus multidimensional. Tuck and Yang (2014) discuss Simpson's three dimensions of refusal, namely 1) interlocutor refuses to disclose further details or engage in certain topics, 2) researcher refuses to write about certain topics, and 3) the refusal to engage with the logic of settler colonialism. The two first dimensions together reflect and constitute the third by refusing to fulfil the ethnographic want for a speaking subaltern. Refusal has the possibility to be an ethnographic subject/object, a historical possibility, and a methodological form, sometimes blurring into each other rather than to be distinct conceptual grounds (McGranahan 2016).

Social science is already full of refusal, however, this type of refusal is hidden; and rather than opening, it limits research while appearing limitless. Hidden refusals in social sciences include, among others, the acknowledgement, representation, and equal treatment of the agency, personhood, and theories of the researched as well as limited views or complete negation of the epistemologies of the colonised (Tuck & Yang 2014). Simpson turns the direction of refusal around to illuminate these implicit refusals in social sciences. Decolonial refusal to/in research therefore becomes a critical intervention into research and its circular self-defining logic. While settler knowledge is based on conquest and has no consent as its premise, instances of decolonial refusal mark "what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what cannot be known" and through this resist conquest and the colonisation of knowledge (Tuck & Yang 2014, 225).

However, such refusal does not equal resistance, its direction is forward rather than a stoppage, and it is dialogical and social in its essence, as much as political (McGranahan 2016). Refusal is a "redirection to ideas otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned" (Tuck & Yang 2014, 239) and has the power to create community (McGranahan 2016). This makes it more than merely a response to authority and a rejection of settler colonialism and its related knowledge creation. Such refusal is hopeful, as it insists "on the possible over the probable" (McGranahan 2016, 323). Simpson (2017) argues that striving for refusal, rather than recognition, in a settler colonial context opens for both creating and maintaining alternative structures of thought, politics and traditions, both away from and in a critical relationship to states. Refusal becomes not only its own mode of analysis, but also a political alternative, it is directed by the desire for an alternative future rather than being defined as a stoppage, an end point.

Contexts of our works

Refusal is particular and springs out of historical analysis and present conditions (Tuck & Yang 2014). The context of Simpson and Tuck and Yang's work is settler colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty. While Lena stays in this sphere in their work, Sepand and Emma's research is in the field of migration. In this way our collective work attempts to create a dialogue across these two different fields, exploring the possibilities of refusal, and work within our differences to address structures of powers.

Sepand's empirical reflections stem from her PhD project, a participatory action research with a group of young Afghanistani youth in south of Sweden. This work, which was grounded in Indigenous, Borderland and Black feminist thought, focused on exploring the experiences of physical activity and sport of the youth from a decolonial perspective. Sepand is from Khorasan, the eastern most provinces of the current nation-state of Iran. However, as it will be discussed below, this region has gone through multiple partitioning of land which has created the current modern borders. At the time of partitioning, Sepand's ancestors happened to be located on the Iranian side of the borders and therefore, despite having direct links to Afghanistan, were given Iranian citizenship. This, in turn, granted Sepand the privileges of a middle-class family, the very same privileges that the Afghanistani youth she worked with were denied. The work with the Afghanistani youth lasted about four years and entailed co-researching with 10 students between the ages of 17–20, who at the time of their arrival in Sweden were unaccompanied minors. In this participatory research, grounding their work in their shared Khorasani heritage, Sepand and the youth utilised art to explore and analyse the youth's experiences of physical activity and sports. The process of co-researching meant that the youth actively engaged in the collection of material (self-generated artefacts), analysis, and the dissemination of the generated

knowledge (see Mashreghi 2021, 2022). Even though refusal, as theoretical concept was not used, Sepand took note of the different acts of refusal throughout the research and reflected on this briefly in her dissertation (see Mashreghi 2021).

Lena, a social anthropologist, has been doing their doctoral and post-doctoral research, on conflicts surrounding resource extraction on Indigenous lands since 2012. Their work has been taking place in both Turtle Island (Canada) and Sápmi (the northern part of Fennoscandinavia). Their doctoral research focused on oil sands extraction in north-eastern Alberta and their ongoing postdoctoral fellow project looks at impact assessments and decision-making processes for a proposed quartz mine at Násávárre mountain, in the border of Norway and Sweden. Lena is a white, queer scholar, and all their research is done in settler colonial contexts. Early on, they encountered the necessity of and right to refusal by their collaborators, co-researchers, interlocutors and by themselves. By connecting this refusal to Simpson's theory, Lena understood that refusal was "a posteriori method and mode of writing" (Simpson 2014, 113). Lena's on-going postdoctoral research, which is part of a bigger community-based collaborative research project³, is based on a mix of qualitative interviews, email and phone conversations, document analysis, and short fieldtrips. The use of such methods was mostly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and correlated ethical issues. However, it occurred also partly to ongoing reflections on how research can be done collaboratively without burdening research interlocutors with additional tasks, interfering too much with their private lives, or feeding into research fatigue many minority groups may already experience.

Emma's contribution stems from her doctoral research, situated in Malmö, Sweden, in a context of the migration rights movement. Setting out from a theatrical production, No Border Musical, involving actors from the migration rights movement, where some also resided as undocumented when they performed on stage, Emma's work is situated in the crossings between activism, aesthetics, and academic work. The process of creating and performing with the No Border Musical took about two years, and the ensemble was constituted by people linked to the migrant rights movement in Malmö; about half of the 25–30 participants resided as undocumented while working together in the ensemble. Those residing as undocumented had sought asylum in Sweden as unaccompanied minors but had received a decision of expulsion due to the Dublin II Regulation. Emma participated in the musical as a researcher, activist, and actor but had no personal experience of the issues at the centre of the musical's work; borders, asylum processes, migration control. Participating in the musical with the different roles (researcher, activist and actor) and as a white woman from a middle class background, demanded a lot of reflections in terms of privileges and power asymmetries (see Söderman 2019, chapter 4).

One important motivation for the No Border Musical was to illustrate the consequences of restrictive asylum policies and violent migration control, whilst also to make visible other possible ways to live together, without borders. Immersed in the context of the local migrant rights movement, while critically addressing inequalities, the creation of the musical performance shares characteristics with theatre practices commonly described as 'community theatre' (van Erven 2001). The overarching narrative of the musical performance was situated in the future, where the characters met to celebrate the anniversary of the abolition of nation-state borders. Through the different characters, the audience was then shown how things used to look when borders sorted, differentiated, and separated people. Although not using the concept of refusal at the time, refusal provided a new perspective on the actual practices during the research process.

Refusal to write/ask

What are the stories that the academy does not deserve to know? When are researchers overstepping the sovereignty of their interlocutors and when does academic transparency create harm? We all encountered these questions in our work, and refusal became our tool to explore these issues.

Sepand's refusal to write/ask

Positioning my work as decolonial has meant that I have been, from the start, uncomfortable with the concept of discovery. Reading the works of Indigenous scholars, I understood that the quest for

discovery of new knowledge, underlined in the process of research and in the work of the academy, is a modern/colonial legacy (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Tlostanova & Mignolo 2009). This is evident in establishment of the Doctrine of Discovery as one of the first principles of international law enforced by the European states at the end of the fifteenth century. Under this law, investigating, mapping, claiming, and colonising of non-European lands and bodies were legitimised and justified (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). The colonial undertones of discovery are also evident in the work of the academy where discovery of knowledge has been deemed as inherently an unproblematic and noble endeavour entrusted onto the academy (Smith 2012). Therefore, it was important for me to position my work in ways that would 'delink' (Mignolo 2009) from this notion. It would be arrogant to say that I managed to this from the start. In fact, at the start of my doctoral studies, I had formulated research questions and contribution notes that the academy deemed appropriate.

It was, however, the process of co-researching with the Afghanistani youth and our dialogical enquiry that taught me what refusal meant. It was learning from the youth and their refusal that taught me how to delink from the notion of discovery. I learned that co-researching with the youth meant preserving their dignity by honouring their private spaces and personal stories (Tuck & Guishard 2013). It meant being part of a collective, where they spoke about what was otherwise muted and made "meaningful that which [was] otherwise forgotten or devalued" (Tuck & Guishard 2013, 20). An example of this is when rather than answering my pre-conceived research questions, the youth insisted on telling their stories of physical activity and sports on their own terms. The research questions that I had formulated revolved around exploring the youth's encounters with Swedish physical education and health classes (PEH). The youth, however, were not interested in discussing what the Swedish school had done for them. Rather, they were interested in exploring and discussing what they had done to learn and to live. They wanted to recentre and make meaningful their own actions in their survival and thrive. As a result, I learned to cast away my research questions and instead walk with them in our collaborative enquiry, listening to what they wanted to speak about.

Another instance is when one of the coresearchers refused to discuss her past. She unapologetically announced that she will not disclose anything related to her life in Afghanistan without justifying her decision. Her refusal to recount her experiences of physical activity prior to entering Sweden taught me to differentiate between what was public and what was sacred (ibid.). Aligning myself with her refusal, I refused to ask, speak, or write about traumatic details of the youth's journeys to Sweden or their survival strategies before and after. In this way rather than working to gather a collection of trauma stories that revolved around discovery of and/or romanticising experiences of subalternity (Spivak 2010), the youth and I disengaged ourselves from the logic of discovery and the tenets of the modern/colonial social sciences. In enacting this disengagement, we performed what Mignolo (2009) calls epistemic disobedience. Epistemic disobedience requires a delinking from modernity/coloniality which works to change the terms, assumptions, and contents of what constitutes modern/colonial knowledge system. Such delinking also succeeds in illuminating and reimagining otherwise engagements with knowledge and knowledge generation (Walsh 2015). In this way, our disengagement from the concept of discovery, and refusal to write/ask what the youth did not deem relevant to our participatory work, was not just a simple 'no' or a closure; rather it operated as an opening and a shift to what was relevant for the youth. In line with Simpson's (2014), our refusal acted as a redirection to what was otherwise unacknowledged.

Lena's refusal to write/ask

In the very start of my doctoral research, in spring 2013, two Nêhiyawok (Cree) activists from Beaver Lake Cree Nation (BLCN) were sued for several million dollars after having spoken out against oil sands extraction on their traditional territory (Gross 2019). Even though the complaint was eventually dropped, it achieved part of its goal: reminding everyone, and especially Indigenous activists, of the risks of engaging with questions surrounding Indigenous rights and oil extraction on Indigenous lands. Earlier, the activists' nation, BLCN, had sued the federal and Alberta governments in 2008 for breaking Treaty rights. BLCN argued that the government had allowed so much development on their traditional lands that it was impossible to exercise treaty rights like hunting, fishing, and

gathering safely and endangered the continuity of Cree cultural activities. My original plan was to research the proceedings of the BLCN court case and how it impacted interactions between oil companies, public authorities, and BLCN.

In conversation with BLCN members prior to starting my ethnographic research, I learned about the many concerns members had connected to this situation, such as growing court costs that would lead to BLCN's insolvency; picturing a future where ancestral lands were so polluted and destructed that land-based activities were impossible; losing many workplaces in the area if the industry would leave and so on. Simpson (2017, 5) argues that the "messy" part of internal struggles over issues that are caused and structured by dispossession are an internal affair rather than one to be discussed academically. I, therefore, decided to neither ask nor write about them. However, these issues were constantly present in conversations and affected the life quality and community well-being. Additionally, I became hyperaware of how easily my research could potentially get used against BLCN, and how even the process of asking certain questions or speaking with certain people could deepen the distrust and/or heighten the already existing conflict potentials. As an outsider to both BLCN and Canada and as a new doctoral student, I lacked both oversight and cultural and juridical knowledge to foresee the consequences my work could unintentionally cause. Simpson (2017, 6) discusses how certain research concerning people marginalised by (settler)colonial structures (in her case access to membership to the Mohawk nation) will not be read fairly as there is no "even playing field of interpretation". Implicit biases, colonial thinking, and uneven power structures form the ways research is both done and understood. After careful consideration, I concluded that it felt unethical for me to proceed with my originally planned project. How does one address destruction without turning it into 'suffering porn', how does one not give in to threats at the same time responsibly use the voice one has without being patronising, harmful, or fuelling internal conflicts? This refusal opened the space for a different kind of research and many different narratives. So I redirected my research to show what I saw, namely what it meant to live in a region marked by excessive resource extraction and how old structures and new industries together wove a fabrique that caught people in an ever-increasing net of inequalities; and I wanted to show how people refused to give in and accept the premisses of neoliberal capitalism in a settler state that had defined their home as a resource region.

Which stories to tell and where to stop was not always an obvious decision. When I looked at social impacts of the oil sands industry, the topic of addiction came up constantly. It was a widespread problem and concerned people of all genders and races. However, prejudices against Indigenous men and stereotypes of 'the drunken Indian' ran deep across Canadian society, and I had no plan playing into them. I never asked about trauma or addiction during my research, however, these topics were often taken up by my conversation partners. While I struggled with how to proceed with stories of suffering that were told to me, one of my Indigenous interlocutors and collaborators insisted that I should write about his problems with violent behaviour and his struggles with addictions, topics that I had originally considered too personal. His argument was, however, that he wanted his story to be told, as it would be familiar and important to many other Indigenous men. Men like him often disappeared in statistics that depicted them as violent, criminal, or abusers, but never gave a full picture that also showed their joy, their love, their stories, and their hopes. He refused to be ashamed of his existence as he felt he was expected to (this did not mean that he was not ashamed about having hurt people) and pushed me to write about his experiences with suffering and violence through the lens of (Indigenous) sovereignty. While I have not found the one answer to the questions of what we can write, he and others gave me a partial answer on how to write: in a constant conversation with the ones that let us write about their lives and by taking their framing of their life serious.

Emma's refusal to write/ask

I started my PhD in social work in 2012, while simultaneously I was part of the local migrant rights network in Malmö, Sweden. I had participated in this network since 2005, and in 2012, I was also working in a small research project involving how undocumented young people experienced and navigated through their everyday life in Malmö⁴. It was a project with ambitions to contribute to a change of the situation for undocumented and young people in Malmö, and we had collaborative

activities with the young people involved, two different reference groups of volunteers and activists within migrant rights groups, and professionals and politicians working locally with issues of youth and migration. Hence, the project had an ambition of co-producing knowledge, to focus on stories beyond suffering (Tuck & Yang 2014), and through action research oriented methodological entry point, also insisting on “the possible over the probable” (McGranahan 2016, 323).

When I interviewed the undocumented youth in this project and later on, for my PhD which initially had a similar focus, I did not ask them about why and how they had left their previous countries of residence. I mainly focused on the everyday living in Malmö and how they went about with access to school, housing, economic resources, health care, and also about friends and what they thought were important to their daily lives. Despite the fact that I did not ask, in several interviews they talked at length about the hardships they had experienced in the past, both reasons for escaping in the first place, and life-threatening journeys towards and through Europe.

I initially felt uncomfortable, since I felt that some things they told me would not be reflected good on them, and would further promote their categorisation as a group of highly stigmatised, racialised and criminalised, undocumented and/or asylum seeker. Combining the interviews with activism and other forms of activities with the young people, I also thought that the interviews centring on suffering did not do justice to the everyday of these young persons. Although they did suffer and struggle in their everyday due to not having residence permits, there was more to it. In this vein, one of the activities they and I took part in was the creation of a musical performance. Through this we met and formed relationships that were not based on them telling me about their suffering, but which (also) included rehearsing, singing, and writing texts together. I decided to redirect the focus of my PhD study to the process of creating the musical. Although at that moment, I did not formulate it as a refusal to write about certain issues that came up during the interviews, but as a choice to focus on the musical instead. Looking back, I read it now as a refusal to reduce the lives of the young undocumented people to suffering and hardships. They were also actors on stage, artists.

Our collective stories of refusals to write/ask, makes visible how refusal is both an ethical and political choice in our respective work. Refusal for us is a choice that does not ‘thin’ analysis, but that enriches and creates openings for other stories and other forms of research. A common thread in our work is also a strive for engagement and collaborative work with our interlocutors, a collaboration that takes different forms and intensity depending on contexts. Refusals to ask/write are closely related to respect, as they mean taking our responsibilities as researchers seriously and seeing consent to participate as a process rather than a single act (see Smyth 2019 on re-confirming consent). Through our experience with research, we also acknowledge that there are stories that the academy does not deserve to know, but that identifying these stories and knowing when to ‘stop’ is a continuous balancing and negotiating act.

Refusal as a continuous redirection

Refusals are not just subtractive, but they work as a continuous redirection to issues otherwise unquestioned (Tuck & Yang 2014). Refusal in our work not only talked back to the structures of power, but also it shed light on themes otherwise unacknowledged.

Sepand's refusal as a continuous redirection

Our mutual refusal to ask and recount the youth's stories of trauma and deficit, shifted the gaze from violated bodies to the violating instruments. In this case, this instrument was the Swedish public and political debates that continue to portray and treat the youth as deviant Others. Preoccupied with deviancy and victimhood, the Swedish media has often presented the youth as either vulnerable victims who deserve refuge or cunning strategists who abuse the asylum system (Stretmo 2011; Wernesjö 2011; Djampour 2018; Chase et al. 2020). These practices of everyday bordering are also present in Swedish asylum and border management policies that have become increasingly more convoluted and restrictive (Djampour 2018; Collison & De Martini Ugolotti 2022). Within the asylum

system, for example, performing invasive bodily examinations on the youth, for the assessment of their age, has been normalised (Djampour 2018).

Another example, that is directly linked to the lives of the youth in my study, is the establishment of a legislation that allows only short-term temporary residence permits for young people in the asylum system which expire a mere six months after the completion of their high school education (Swedish Code of Statutes 2018:756). This means that unless the youth have secured employment within six months after their education, they will be deported. During my study most of the youth were preoccupied with completing their education requirements in order to secure suitable employment against the looming possibility of their deportation. They were vocal in pointing out how this policy not only affected their availability and access to leisure activities, but also limited their present and future options since it did not allow for them to pursue higher education. Higher education is not considered an employment and therefore, even if they were granted a place at a higher education institute, they had to forgo that option and keep to vocational schooling that could lead to faster job security.

Barred from intellectual pursuits, the youth are only seen as worthy of manual labour. This form of racialisation of labour is traced back to the colonisation of the Americas and exploitation of Black and Indigenous peoples (Quijano 2000). As Quijano (2000) argued, control of specific forms of labour is at the same time control of specific groups of exploited people. This has led to the articulation of a domination/exploitation technology that naturalises the association of certain bodies with specific forms of labour. The youth's refusal to accept this racial naturalisation redirected the gaze back to the Swedish public and policy discourse. This talking back to power moved our thinking of forced migration as an event towards interrogating migration regimes and borders, as well as political and public debate on sport and leisure, as 'colonial' structures that permeates everyday lives of the youth, who are racialised and criminalised as migrants (Agergaard & Lenné 2021).

Emma's refusal as a continuous redirection

Refusal works as an expanded perspective, in this case, from everyday struggles and suffering as undocumented, to the process of creating a collective art project. Whilst a focus on the process of creating the musical did provide a new focus for my PhD, suffering due to being denied residency still ran as a red thread, both in the practical work of organising the musical, as well as in the performance performed on stage. In my thesis, I analysed this as the condition of deportability (De Genova 2002) permeating everyday life, including the work of the musical. As Tuck and Yang (2014) put forward, to refuse a focus on narratives of suffering is not to ignore that people indeed do suffer. It is to not commodify these stories by 'collecting' them for research, but to acknowledge them as knowledge and wisdom. In my experience, even though I made an active choice of redirecting my focus to the field of arts, of creativity, of creativity as resistance, the overarching societal focus on suffering and pain is not so easy to just 'ignore'. As for the musical, there was an ambition to contest and work beyond the categorisations of legal statuses, at the same time as these permeated the working process as well as the everyday life of the participants residing as undocumented people. Regarding my thesis-work, the difficulties of 'stepping' out of a framework of suffering and hardships became evident as I carried out interviews with participants of the musical, both who had experienced undocumentedness and those who had not. I still, mistakenly, set the experiences of undocumentedness as the main frame of reference. In a particular interview, quoted below, I also erroneously indicated the category of undocumented as being the most important for Nima's experiences of being on stage – asking about how he had felt on stage as undocumented instead of asking about his experience of performing on stage as an actor. He answered:

When I was on stage, I did not even think of the police or that I'm undocumented. I just felt that I'm part of a musical and I'm on stage and I'm going to perform well. (Nima, interview 15.04.2014)

Contrary to my understanding that performing would be intertwined with fear, due to risks of being detected by the police, for Nima it was a moment of, in a sense, being beyond the condition of deportability. Art and theatre can be concrete ways to move beyond a mere collection of narratives

of suffering and pain. At the same time, to think that a person can easily just ‘forget’ their prevailing ways of going about in the world may simplify this process. I understand refusal not as an ‘event’ or a one-time shift of perspective, but as a continuous process of reflection, reflexivity, of doing ‘wrong’ and trying again.

Lena's refusal as a continuous redirection

As discussed above, since there is no “even playing field” (Simpson 2017, 6), researching internal conflicts of groups marginalised by (settler)colonial and imperial structures is, to say the least, problematic. When I started my postdoctoral research on a proposed mine at a mountain that is a crucial grazing ground for the reindeer herds of five different Sámi reindeer herding districts, I was prepared to avoid asking questions about possible conflicts caused by the proposed mine amongst these districts. However, I quickly learned that refusal to look into the social conflict potential of the mine was not in line with my interlocutors’ wishes. Refusing my refusal, Sámi reindeer herder representants brought up the topic in every interview and conversation.

Their refusal was of another type: they refused to let possible internal conflicts be something that could be used against them. They rather employed them as an argument against the quartz mine and insisted that this had to be named in the impact assessment as a negative social impact. They refused the silencing of the historical colonial violence that had occurred to them, where forced displacement and resettlement had led to intergenerational conflicts over grazing grounds. The wounds resulting from this have been barely healed and their collaboration for both using the region collectively and opposing the mine was on a vulnerable basis. The consulting company that was responsible for writing the impact assessments, on which the decision about a mining licence would be made, had excluded the colonial history of the region in their analyses. The Sámi reindeer herding districts refused to accept this and pointed out the colonial violence through both their lawyers and in consultation meetings again and again. They redirected my research in a way I did not expect and opened a room for enquiry that I had otherwise not entered.

In conclusion, whilst suffering and violence are much present in all our work, we have aimed to make visible the structures of violence that cause the pain. In Lena’s case, this meant a process where interlocutors questioned their initial refusal to write about internal conflicts and instead argued for using those to make visible colonial ‘divide and conquer’ strategies and histories of colonial violence. In Emma’s case this meant to acknowledge the depth of the dominant forms of ‘trauma-telling’ and to try again; and for Sepand, it was recognising the violent policies of the neoliberal state that worked to exploit and dominate the youth, she worked with.

Refusal as regeneration (re-existence)

Tuck and Yang (2014) argue that refusal to engage, and to be defined, by the structures of violence and coloniality, makes spaces for other ways of being and existing to be theorised and practiced. That is despite the ever-present violence of colonial structures, life-affirming practices are imagined and advanced in ways that extend beyond a mere resistance but enact a re-existence⁵ (Mignolo & Walsh 2018). In this way, rather than a mere reactive response, re-existence is a generative and (re)creative praxis that redefines and signifies life in conditions of dignity despite the presence of violence, trauma, and death (Walsh 2015; Mignolo & Walsh 2018).

Sepand's refusal as regeneration (re-existence)

Azaldúa (2012, 60) argues that living in the presence of such structural violence, intersecting oppressions and trauma makes one hypersensitive and “excruciatingly alive to the world”. Arising at this focal point of contradictions and collisions, this form of consciousness necessitates an assemblage of all that is separate. Rather than a process of gluing separate pieces together or balancing opposing powers, this assemblage comes to be through continuous synthesising of mestiza consciousness. Mestiza consciousness is “a source of intense pain but its energy comes from

continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (Anzaldúa 2012, 102). This conscious journeying enables the transformation of pain into a voice of hope and becoming (Motta 2015). The refusal of the youth to recount their stories of trauma, made space for them to reclaim life and future in their acts of friendships, joy, wonder, leisure, love, and hope. This was evident in the youth's account of their physical activity:

I love bicycling, it reminds me of my life. I fell so many times when my brother was teaching me, but I finally found my balance. The moment I found my balance on that bike, I felt in control of my life as well.

When I was crossing the Mediterranean, I was really scared. I was praying the whole time. It was the first I had seen so much water. It was so blue, so beautiful and endless. It represented life to me and the unknown. There is something symbolic in being in this little boat in the middle of this great body of water.

Through these reflective accounts, the youth revealed that despite the trauma and violence in their lives, they constantly returned to life-affirming practices where they redefined life in conditions of dignity and self-determination, and enacted re-existence (Mashreghi 2021).

Our collaborative work and our refusal to engage with state borders and bordering policies also enacted a re-existence and recreated an otherwise way of being together as Iranian and Afghanistani peoples. As noted previously, the relationship between what is currently the nation-state of Iran and Afghanistan is ancient and has become more complicated in the modern era. In the mid-nineteen century and under the supervision of Great Britain and Russia, parts of this historical region were partitioned and divided, creating separate nation-states (Mojtahed-Zadeh 2004; Crews 2015). Despite sharing linguist and cultural ties since antiquity, the two nation-estates of Iran and Afghanistan have had an uneven relationship ever since. In the 1980s for example, during Sepand's childhood, Iranian media and public discourse depicted people from Afghanistan in a negative light, portraying them as criminals or, at best, illiterate and uncultured victims of war (Adelkhah & Olszewska 2007; Hakimi 2020). Moreover, state policies have often been harsh, restrictive and persecutive towards this group (Adelkhah & Olszewska 2007). The response of Iranian intelligentsia and social commentators have also been problematic, often viewing people from Afghanistan as an extension of being Iranian; and therefor, worthy of fair treatment (Hakimi 2020). This view undermines people of Afghanistan as sovereign and self-determined humans who deserve justice regardless. In talking back to the bordering policies while refusing to engage with their essentialist discourse, our collaborative work made way for other ways of being and becoming Iranian and Afghanistani together and separately; ways that exceeded essentialist narrations and instead enacted our collective re-existence. Researching, relating, and working together within our differences, while speaking our mother tongue and forming friendships, rendered a time and place that exceeded coloniality, conquest and modern borders. This bringing into being and re-existence made way for other r-words in our work (Tuck & Yang 2014). It made space for reclaiming, recovery, reciprocity, and regeneration in ways that foregrounded dignity, care, humility and relationality in our research and lives (Tuck & Guishard 2013).

Emma's refusal as regeneration (re-existence)

As Sepand writes, refusal redirects our focus to joy, desire, leisure, and play (see McGranahan 2016). The context of the musical, as I mentioned above, was conditioned by deportability, but still the creative process of making a theatre piece made room for play and laughter. Whilst creating the manuscript, learning lines, and rehearsing the same scenes over and over again, was hard work at times, theatre exercises, regular rehearsing, performances also created a space for relationships-building and sharing of resources.

Upon being asked to perform in connection to a No Border Camp in Stockholm, in spring of 2012, the musical group travelled to the Swedish capital over a long weekend. In the interviews I conducted later, this trip was emphasised as a key event for the performers. Asad, for example, talked about the importance of being together in the musical, referring to this trip to Stockholm where we had performed

the whole first part of the musical for the first time. He recounted how the games we had played together in Stockholm had made him think back to his childhood. The evening after the performance, a warm summer evening with beautiful lights and reflections in waters of the outflow of lake Mälaren in Stockholm, there was a sense of collective relief following the tension and nervousness of performing. Below I share a part of my ethnographic research notes from that night as an illustration:

Ramin continues to joke and there is a lot of laughter. It is idyllic. Almost there, I suggest playing Guerrilla 1 2 3 4 5. The game involves one person taking the lead with the other participants lining up behind. The lead person calls out 'Guerrilla 1 2 3 4 5' during which time everyone else has to run away and hide before the lead person turns around. Lena says, 'OK, but let's not play in the street' but suddenly, everyone is playing, and Lena and I find ourselves hiding behind a parked car (so much for not playing in the street!). We laugh and laugh, especially when Ramin, who cannot run away quickly enough, decides to adopt a different approach along the lines of 'if I can't see you, you can't see me' by lying flat on the ground with his hood pulled over his head. Malin sits on a bicycle, desperately trying to blend in with the urban environment so as not to be found. Oh, how we laugh! Whenever Asad manages not to be found, he jumps out from his hiding place roaring with happiness. We continue to play all the way back. (research notes 17.06.2012)

Our shared experience that night, being in the streets and playing guerrilla together, right after our public performance, somehow exceeded conditions of deportability. It was not a celebration that someone had made it over the wall or crossed a border, but instead it was about being past the wall that is produced by surveillance, citizenship, borders and so on. It was a moment of re-existence: a refusal to adjust to the categories produced by the state (deportability), which also opened towards something else. In this case, a performance of theatre, but also of play and laughter and of making the public space one's own. The musical group was out in the public, not only performing, but laughing, playing, and thus together refusing the fear produced by constant surveillance and the threat of deportation. Simultaneously, the risks participants exposed themselves to, by carrying out these public activities, were ever present. Refusal does not seek to overshadow the inequalities existing in moments of re-existing, but it encourages us to look towards what is possible, in contrast to what is probable (McGranahan 2016). In a sense this view of possible instead of probable permeated the whole process of creating the musical, as a theatre production: including undocumented actors in a context of increased surveillance for finding and deporting undocumented people, seemed outrageous. However, little by little, by sharing both sorrows and joys along the way, the musical ensemble created a performance, a story of No Borders, beyond the probable.

Lena's refusal as regeneration (re-existence)

Throughout my doctoral research, I encountered how interlocutors refused to let environmental destruction and pollution define their home. They opposed narratives of resource richness with narratives of relations; narratives of industries with narratives of homes; and narratives of destruction with narratives of care. I instantly got corrected when I used the term 'oil sands region' (meaning Northern Alberta) in the beginning of my ethnographic research with the words "this is not an oil sands region; this is our home". Their refusal led me directly to the concept of care, a concept I might not have considered otherwise.

Many Indigenous community members continue caring for and showing their respect to berry patches, fish, game, and other non-human relations, amongst other things, by eating traditional food, knowing well that there was, at times, dangerously high amount of industrial pollution in the area. Caring in the context of destruction is a radical act of refusal and of sovereignty. Cree philosopher Lee puts the radical meaning of care in the context of colonial destruction eloquently into words:

To provide care in the wastelands is about gathering enough love to turn devastation into mourning, and then, maybe, turn that mourning into hope. [...] Joining the defence of the body and the defence of land is to dream of something beyond constant defence: Something like falling in love. [...] For those of us in the wastelands – for those of us who are the wastelands – caring for each other in this way is refusing a definition of worthiness that will never include us. [...] When we make a home in lands and bodies considered wastelands, we attest that these places are worthy of healing and that we are worthy of life beyond survival. (Lee 2016)

Lee's, as well as my interlocutors', refusal of letting colonial and extractive violence define their homes and themselves goes past resistance. It makes space for re-imagining and re-existing Indigenous sovereignty, relationality, and cosmology beyond the frame of the settler state. Their refusal made room for beauty and challenged me to rethink how to appropriately write about it.

In conclusion, in each of our accounts, refusal becomes an opening for enacting futurity and regeneration against the conditions of violence and trauma. Resisting the essentialist and nihilistic violence of the coloniality, we and our (co)participants engaged in acts of joy, hope, solidarity, friendship, love, home-making, and care. This continual re-affirmation of life in conditions of dignity rendered a future that exceeded coloniality and brought about re-existence.

Concluding remarks

By analysing our different research projects through the notion of refusal, we have revealed that refusal is a multidimensional, interconnected, continuous process that works to limit and redirect but also regenerate, and enact re-existence.

Setting out from a participatory action research with young Afghanistani students in the south of Sweden, Sepand highlights how the youth's refusal to focus on pain and trauma redirected her research and created a common ground of enquiry for the youth's and herself. Through their long-term involvement with research about conflicts in relation to resource extraction on Indigenous lands, Lena illustrates the different consequences of multiple forms of refusal in different contexts, and that it is of utmost importance as a researcher to be responsive to these unexpected forms of refusals. In line with Sepand's work, Emma also demonstrates how redirecting the focus from the suffering and hardships of living as young and undocumented people, created a space of possibilities and creativity that refused to be defined by permeating conditions of undocumentedness.

Analysing our different works and experiences through the lens of refusal, reveals that refusal includes a continuous negotiation of the actual content of a refusal. It is a generative perspective that allows us to question the unproblematic right of knowing granted to the academy. It turns the gaze instead at colonial modalities of knowing and our assumed authority as researchers. Refusal redirects the attention to ideas otherwise unacknowledged. Recognizing interconnectedness and discomfort in our work unsettles the colonial undertones of discovery and allow us to focus on relationality, reciprocity, and care, creating communities both with our (co)participants and amongst ourselves. As such, interweaving our works and thinking together deepens and expands the notion of refusal as we make visible how it is a productive point of entry that connects research on coloniality across various disciplines. Furthermore, by "staying with the troubles" (Haraway 2016) and enunciating the discomfort of politics and ethics of refusal, we contribute to increased complexity and 'thickening' of a scholarship that interrogates the violence of coloniality, and its bordering, across multiple loci.

Notes

¹ This article is a result of collaborative thinking, speaking, and writing. Therefore, the academic hierarchy of authorship does not apply.

² By marginalised and negated knowledges, we mean those ways of thinking and being that lay outside of the Eurocentric, 'Western', paradigm of scientific knowledge. Such knowledges and people who carry them have been othered and minoritised by structures and institutions of power (i.e. the Academy) based in Western imperialism and colonialism.

³ There are also many ethical dilemmas in community-based collaborative research projects, for a discussion see for example Clark and others 2010.

⁴ The project was called Irregular = Rightless? An Investigation of Unaccompanied Undocumented Refugee Children's Entitlements and Access to Health in Malmö together with Anna Lundberg, professor of Welfare Law.

⁵ Concept of re-existence discussed by Mignolo and Walsh (2018) is taken from Adolfo Albán Achinte's term re-existencia, who in turn credits Colombian Indigenous community leader Héctor Daniel Useche Berón with developing the concept.

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