Refugees as questioning subjects:
A critical reflection of PhD fieldwork involving refugees

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Migration scholarship and media representation 'construct a narrative of refugees that centres trauma and deficit, that creates a hyper-visible stereotype of an assumed collective experience while leaving individual refugees largely voiceless and invisible' (Jarratt 2020, pp. 368–369). This leads naturally to asking how refugees can reclaim their stories, find their voices and assert their knowledge in a research culture that renders them invisible, inaudible and unviable. The focus of this reflection is to articulate the missing links between the real bearers of knowledge and the processes of knowledge production in PhD studies such as mine, which focus on the realities of refugees in a carceral age. The primary objective here is to openly recognise that fieldwork is a shared enterprise, at the centre of which are the research participants such as refugees.

Keywords: coloniality; knowing; knowledge; PhD; power; refugees.

Introduction

This article is based on my personal and fieldwork reflections. I am an Eritrean national and a United Kingdom (UK) citizen. To put it differently, I was born and raised in Eritrea, and after almost a decade of being identified either as an asylum seeker or refugee, I became a naturalised UK citizen in 2021. As an Eritrean, I am accustomed to rejoicing in cultural attire, foods and gifts; dancing to Eritrean songs, tunes and rhythms; and playing *Sisiit* with *Kelembura*. I have followed the marriage rites of the Blin people of Eritrea, from *Simdo* to *Shingale* to *Mirtate* (Blin Language Forum, 2011). As a UK citizen, I have the right to reside in the country and participate in its political processes and socio-cultural life. These hybrid identities and multiple opportunities represent human encounters beyond the state-sanctioned integration (*qua* assimilation).

Over the last ten years, I have worked with forced migrants who had survived intolerable persecution in their home countries and continue to suffer the ordeals of human trafficking, torture and marginalisation elsewhere. My work involves working and researching with these disenfranchised and incarcerated people to tell their stories grounded in their lived experience. As a researcher, I am also curious to understand the status of the figure of refugee in political life. This is why I did my PhD in 'The Realities of Eritrean Refugees in a Carceral Age' (Yohannes 2021b). My PhD study investigates: 1) structural issues that cause Eritrean people to flee; 2) the processes of becoming a refugee, including actions people take to flee their country and their encounters with state and non-state actors in the process; 3) the condition of being a refugee by examining the mechanisms by which refugees are processed and governed; and 4) policies of (b)ordering and asylum. My PhD thesis found that Eritrean refugees have been: a) born into, and live in, conditions of lawlessness and rightlessness – the rule of 'no-laws nor rights' – in their home country, which explains why they flee their country; b) met with exclusive biopolitical entanglements and necropolitical experimentations once they have left their home country; c) treated as disposable corporealities that are always available for exploitation, violence and removal without accountability; and d) stranded in violent time-space sequestration causing a total negation of their humanity (Yohannes 2021b).

I completed my PhD in September 2021 and graduated in December of the same year. I am happy to have completed my three-year PhD work and to have found a job at the university from which I graduated. However, amid the celebrations of completing the taxing PhD work and subsequent research lie epistemological and philosophical questions about the claims of knowledge generated by the PhD program, which this short reflection hopes to highlight. This reflection asks who the bearers and producers of knowledge in PhD fieldwork are, and who designs the knowing and owns the knowledge. The reflection is far from producing a comprehensive account of the complexities associated with knowledge, power and institutional practices. Although it does not establish a full treatise on power-knowledge-subject relations, however, the reflection offers insights into how the Western-dominated forms of knowing create relations of domination, subordination and epistemic erasure in forced migration studies.

The people, stories and voices that make PhDs

Without a doubt, the PhD program and subsequent research experience allowed me to grow from a vulnerable idealist, tirelessly opposing oppressive systems, to a critical thinker, committed to what Catherine Walsh calls 'decolonial praxis' or 'praxis of radically "other" thinking, feeling, sensing, being, knowing, doing and living' (2021, p. 11). However, I must stress that being awarded a PhD degree has not clouded my memories of the emotional stories, unmarked graves and emaciated bodies of the Eritrean refugees that my PhD project examined. My PhD work documented the accounts of a young girl who witnessed her friend being buried alive, a young mother who was cut by traffickers with a hot knife through the middle of her breasts because she fought back against being raped along with her cousin, and a disabled woman who lived in the streets of Cairo for almost 20 years. In my fieldwork, I bore witness to young girls being deported after several weeks of starvation in a prison complex. I interviewed a grandmother who told me she felt like an 'abandoned creature' after her entire family had died in successive wars and her only daughter drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, trying to reach safety. I came across a story of a young man whose father disappeared within Eritrea's prison system when he was only two years old.

On a personal level, I have relatives, friends and colleagues who perished in apocalyptic conditions in the Mediterranean Sea. I still harbour the memory of a childhood friend sending me the text message 'born rightless, die rightless' before he died off the island of Lampedusa (Yohannes, 2018, p. np). On the same migrant boat as my childhood friend was Yohanna, who died with her newborn baby still connected to her by the umbilical cord (Mainwaring 2019, p. 155). In fact, it was only a few months prior to this tragedy that I survived my own ordeal of being trafficked. At times, it is beyond the power of words to describe the realities of the research participants, haunted by flashbacks that leave them constantly reliving the multiple horrors they had undergone.

These are just a few examples of the countless poignant stories recounted to me by over 40 Eritrean refugees during my PhD fieldwork, each of which was nearly unbearable to hear. The participants' tragic stories of Sinai trafficking still reverberate in my mind. Sinai trafficking is an organised crime in which thousands of Eritrean refugees are either tortured to death or raped, burned with melted plastic and even robbed of their organs for ransom (Yohannes 2021a). During my PhD fieldwork, the question the research participants who survived Sinai trafficking kept asking me was this: 'Does the world know we exist?' Faced with being consigned to damnation, these refugees appealed for their human dignity to be restored. The visceral pain, acute trauma, systemic marginalisation and sense of emptiness they experienced forced them to endure the unendurable as they sought to build new lives from scratch. They explained how they used their lived experiences and knowledge to develop strategies for coping with their realities. It is in this context that fieldwork studies such as my PhD project, which involves refugees and people seeking asylum, are conducted. Such fieldwork experiences require a great deal of reckoning with questions of ethics, positionality and integrity.

Questioning the knower, knowing and knowledge

During my PhD fieldwork, not only were the participants aware of their positionality in relation to the researcher and the knowledge produced but, in the process of knowledge production, they also actively engaged in articulating their positionality and questioning their status. Andom (not his real name), a research participant in my PhD study and a PhD researcher himself, described the processes by which refugees' stories and knowledge are acquired and appropriated as follows:

> Organisations, researchers, and journalists interview us to learn about our stories. They tell us that our identities won't be shared with anyone else and that nobody will identify us in their reports and research. We tell our stories in the hope that a solution would be found to our suffering.

After a moment of silence, Andom added,

> The truth is that, often, nothing happens. We tell them our stories, and they hide our identities, process our stories, and then claim to have produced reports or papers. Eh, what does that mean? Do they think refugees don't know and can't know anything? At least, we have interesting stories to tell, but we also have other knowledges to share with the world.

As Andom suggested, the stories we extract as part of our fieldwork form the pillars of the knowledge we claim to generate. Our narration of these stories is tantamount to our research methodology. What bring the poignant stories to our inquisitive minds and form the essence of PhD studies such as mine are the primaeval pain and gaunt sadness emanating from these wounded bodies, disremembered stories and unmarked graves. During the fieldwork, stories such as 'a friend being buried alive' generated among participants cry and anger. The utterances of cry and rage were crucial in my PhD work for they come before thought and theory. 'The cry is', Maldonado-Torres (2008, p. 137) reminds us, 'a sound uttered as a call for attention, as a demand for immediate action or remedy, or as an expression of pain that points to an injustice committed or to something that is lacking'. Doing fieldwork with the racialised refugees entails capturing the cry and rage, as well as joy, as primary epistemic utterances. In short, doing research with refugees must not subordinate the refugees' sensibilities and feelings (for example, pain, anger, joy, sorrow, etc.) to metrics, thoughts and colonial philosophy. These utterances of sensibilities and feelings appeal for an inter-subjective ethical responsibility but also usher 'the birth of theory and critical thought' (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 256). This is not, however, to say the participants did not enunciate their feelings but to recognise that the sensibilities and feelings were part of the enunciation. In fact, the participants put these utterances into words in poetic and appealing language, as I have maintained in the style of writing of this reflection.

In fact, if a PhD is a formal recognition of one's contribution to knowledge, then no one is more knowledgeable of the realities faced in becoming and being refugees than the refugees themselves. Yet their pained bodies and poignant stories only feature as sites of knowledge production and units of analysis, respectively. PhD studies like mine are not sacred writing; they are the outcomes of the accounts of research participants whose identities are anonymised, which are analysed to meet the so-called standard fieldwork practice. Would we have any knowledge at all of forced migration if the people who lived the experiences refused to collaborate with researchers? Most

importantly, how can we ground our research in embodied, intercultural, inter-subjective and inter-epistemic approaches? These are the questions that I have been wrestling with ever since I completed my PhD program. At least in my mind, the award remains incomplete as long as these questions remain unanswered and the precarious conditions of refugees unchanged.

My experience of wrestling with these questions 'involved iterative processes of learning, reflection, and unlearning' over a traditional Eritrean coffee ceremony (Yohannes 2021b, p. 98). Grounded in these iterative processes, the research participants and I engaged in critical discussions about the voice, site, purpose and impact of knowledge production through the conduct of fieldwork. The participants, for example, made a distinction between 'voices' and 'echoes', as the below verbatim translation of fieldnotes highlights:

> Do you want to listen to the echoes of our voices or our true voices? Your institution produces echoes of our voices to a wider audience while we produce our true voices to the researchers like yourself. These echoes will never represent our true voices; they're de-identified, distorted, truncated and misrepresented. I mean your interpretation of our voices is just a reflection of our stories. (fieldnotes)

The essence of the discussions was that researchers should not speak for refugees, and yet they continue to translate stories into echoes. The participants defined speaking and storytelling as generating discourses, narratives, knowledge and concrete changes acceptable to body politics. For them, refugees' appeals for dignified existence have long been made impossible through violent technologies of (b)ordering – bordering and ordering – of societies. The participants' critical questioning and awareness of their positionalities 'problematise the notion of the voice; something that cannot be given (to anyone) since it must firmly belong to everyone from the beginning' (Qasmiyeh 2019, p. np). Conducting fieldwork, as the fieldnotes demonstrated, was viewed by the participants as analysing the echoes of their voices and reflections of their stories. The participants stressed that researchers are not in a position to fully interpret refugees' lived experiences in the same way the bearers could articulate their stories. From this perspective, the participants called upon researchers to be humble to the presence of refugees; honest about and considerate of their knowledge, language and culture; and reflective of their intentions and actions when encountering them. As Qasmiyeh (2020) eloquently insisted, the participants invited me to 'embroider' the refugees' voices and be reflective of what had been 'embroidered'. According to Qasmiyeh (2020, p. 254), 'embroidering the voice is writing the intimate, the lived, and the left overs in life into newer times as imagined by the writer herself; it is writing without a helping hand from anyone but rather through continuously returning to the embroidered (and what is being embroidered) and its tools, notwithstanding how incomplete and fragmentary they are'.

Another critical theme that emerged during my fieldwork was the 'site', not as a place but as a space of knowledge production. I was aware that encountering the refugees as a refugee researcher would require me to evoke the hybrid self I embodied and enter into a new relationship of intersubjectivity. Each encounter was not simply the contact of bodies but also of colliding knowledges and power relations. In fact, the inter-subjective encounters with the participants evoked inter-epistemic relationality at the limit of my Eastern subjectivity and Western education. In this sense, inter-subjectivity was posited as a site of knowledge production between two colliding worlds – the world of the researcher and the worlds of the researched. Throughout the

fieldwork, I found myself stuck in a liminal zone of indiscernibility and unknowability between these worlds. This liminal site of indiscernibility and unknowability allowed me to question my intentions and actions of doing the fieldwork on the one hand and to recognise that the self I embodied, the voices I embroidered and the participants I engaged with were in a constant relationship with one another through language, culture and being together in place and time, on the other. However, this is not to say that the liminal zone was a site from where the totality of the realities of the refugees could be viewed; rather, it was merely a relation in which knowledges, various positionalities and power relations converged. In Mignolo's (2007, p. 451) terms, the liminal zone signifies a decolonial space in which 'the re-construction and the restitution of silenced histories, repressed subjectivities, subalternized knowledges and languages [are] performed by the Totality depicted under the names of modernity and rationality'.

Thus, research participants such as refugees and people seeking asylum may not be messengers of 'absolute truths', but they are the authors of their stories and bearers of wretched realities. Despite this, their stories are systematically appropriated by distinct fieldwork practices and integrated into pre-existing schemas, while their visceral pain, as Andom highlighted, remains unattended. As argued, their lived experiences are subjected to 'violent negations', or relegated to 'concealed histories, repressed subjectivities, subalternised knowledge systems and silenced languages' (Aman 2017, p. 62). They are suspended in institutionalised operations of power and knowledge production systems in which they are subjected to domination, subordination and erasure, as I highlight below.

Tracing power

Operation of power in the conduct of research often creates relations of domination, subordination, and subjugation. More often than not, refugees like my research participants (and myself) are reduced to sites of knowledge production that exceptionalises them in ways unbeknown to them. This is precisely the structure and work of 'coloniality [that] seeks to conceal its war-like character by not even allowing its status to be named or questioned by those who are in the receiving end of its constant violence' (Maldonado-Torres 2016, p. 9). 'Coloniality', Maldonado-Torres (2007) explains, 'refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations' (p. 243). Coloniality, Maldonado-Torres (2007) adds, 'is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience' (p. 243). From this viewpoint, the use of knowledge as power constitutes structures of coloniality in which refugees' subjectivities are rendered indistinguishable from the objects of knowledge they are reduced to. They find themselves in peculiar epistemic registers and power relations of inter-subjective alterity and violability. As Mignolo (2021, p. 9) put it in decolonial terms, '[c]olonial wounds are inflicted epistemically (based on knowing, knowledge), although their effects are ontological/aesthesic: they transform a person's sensing, believing, and emotioning'. Refugees, as the participants of my PhD study pointed out, suffer both physical and epistemic wounds.

The refugees' stories narrated in this paper are irrefutable evidence of bestiality orchestrated by the violent structures of power. Their alienated and emaciated bodies remain stuck in a permanent '*state of injury*' (Mbembé 2003, p. 21, emphasis in the original). They bear the pain as much as they bear the knowledge of their suffering in a precarious life. This is why knowledge production has become 'a new productive matrix … epistemic extractivism taken to new depths' (Walsh 2021, p. 9). The productive matrices of knowledge and power, as Maldonado-Torres (2016) conceptualises, draw 'the line between the human and non-human, between the world where perpetual peace is considered a possibility and the world that is defined as perpetual or endless war' (p. 20). Under the guise of migration management, this carceral line is increasingly being enacted to contain the mobility of people from the Global South to the Global North (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Barone & Alioua 2021).

Inhabiting this zone of ceaseless violence, the wounded body of the refugee has become a status in which agency, identity and humanity are at stake (Yohannes 2021a, 2021b). Healing wounded bodies and recovering negated subjectivities entail restorative and regenerative strategies of refocusing resources and knowledge to the 'negated locations of knowledge and understanding' (Mignolo 2007, p. 487). Most importantly, the work of decolonising forced migration requires a 'radical and deeper shift' that goes beyond state-centric arguments (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020, p. 9).

Ethical interventions to heal the wounds

As a refugee researcher, I have a vested interest in understanding not only how knowledge production and power relations operate but also the epistemic traditions and assumptions through which these operations are understood. Living in the field and conducting research at the same time (Yohannes 2021b), I felt the need to go beyond so-called standard fieldwork practices and make ethical interventions to mitigate the wounds – epistemic or otherwise. For example, I could not leave out my own story (that is, a subjective account) and claim to objectify other stories. I wrote my story, anonymised it in the same way I de-identified the participants' stories and analysed it with the rest of the primary data I gathered. The intention of doing so was to place my positionality in the liminal zone of indiscernibility and unknowability from which questioning and knowing emerge along with acting and resisting the structures of coloniality. In addition, I recruited five research participants as peer supervisors who 'provided me with continued guidance and advice on issues related to the limits of ethics and working with vulnerable refugees such as survivors of human trafficking' (Yohannes 2021b, p. 104). I also organised feedback, knowledge exchange, information sharing and peer support sessions with the participants. In fact, some of these sessions were organised by the research participants themselves. This sharing of knowledge, information, and support with people whose quest was for knowledge to practice and survive – not to publish – was empowering. These interventions allowed us, as Maldonado-Torres (2016, p. 7) affirmed, 'to approach ideas and change in a way that do not isolate knowledge from action'.

The refugees I worked with may have been alone, incarcerated and marginalised, but they also possessed resources to resist the violence waged against them. They did so by crying, moving and dying, and also by moving and questioning the b/ordering regimes they encountered (Yohannes 2021b). Sadly, neither their deaths nor their cries nor their mobility nor their inquisitiveness appears to be recognised. In fact, they are effectively rendered as 'speechless emissaries' defined by tractability, suffering and disposability (Malkki 1996). This is why healing the wounds necessitates imagining new possibilities of knowing and living outside the colonial formulations

of knowledge and coordinates of power. Imagining new possibilities requires what Mignolo calls 'border thinking' or 'an ethic and politics that emerge from the experiences of people taking their destiny in their own hands and not waiting for saviors' (2012, p. xxii). Without a doubt, refugee-led initiatives are enormously engaged in mobilising resources and communities not only to save lives but also to create a mutually supportive environment. Throughout my PhD fieldwork and beyond, I have been involved in collaborative refugee-led initiatives to create a 'social space that nurtures genuine sociality and communal relationality, which, in turn, serve[s] as a cohesive social glue that brings people together' (Yohannes & Yemane 2021). Nonetheless, most refugee-led initiatives are unfunded and informal.

By communicating the stories grounded in the lived experiences of their wounded bodies, refugees open up a new world of feeling, sensing, knowing, thinking and living at the margins. As unintelligible as their utterances may seem, these stories of nude bodies invite us to engage with the wretched realities of people who continue to hold on to their 'survival story' (Perl 2019, p. 13). Amid multiple layers of indifference, refugees continue to 'mobilize surviving as an existential notion, thereby acknowledging its political potential, namely, the possibility of regaining power over one's story' (Perl 2019, p. 13). As a coping strategy against violent (b)ordering regimes, refugees may be forced to engage in clandestine survival strategies in their movements, employment and communication. 'Invisibility', Haile (2020, p. 33) demonstrates, 'can act as a form of resistance, as it is a strategic decision to remain silent or invisible in circumstances that forcibly render individuals (and their voices) visible'. As invisible as these activities may be, they allow refugees to exercise and retain agency in ways that are less susceptible to 'necropolitical experimentation' or 'subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembé 2003, p. 39).

After all, decolonising these structures of knowledge production and power relations is only thinkable when 'subjects give themselves to each other and are receptive to each other in love, understanding, and their shared rage against modernity/coloniality' (Maldonado-Torres 2016, p. 31). Furthermore, academic institutions can choose to have a stake in 'decoloniality', namely, 'the affirmation of for forms of love and understanding that promote open and embodied human interrelationality' (Maldonado-Torres 2016, p. 22). If universities were to fully recognise the contributions to knowledge made by refugee research participants and the roles they play in the processes and methods of knowledge production, they would all be awarded honorary degrees – that is what it takes to decolonise our knowledge production. The UNESCO Chair at the University of Glasgow did in fact agree to provide certificates of recognition to my research participants for their contributions to knowledge. This gesture was truly empowering both for them and for me. As one research participant said on my graduation day, 'We [the research and researched] are celebrating together with humble souls and poignant stories'. This gesture appeals to the fact that academic institutions can go beyond the extractive practices of knowledge production and the tokenism of epistemic best practices in an effort to bridge the missing links between the real bearers of knowledge and the processes of knowledge production, recognition, dissemination and consumption.

Conclusion

As argued, doing research involving refugee participants constitutes a deeply rooted epistemic *a priori* with modes of knowing and knowledge that have structures of coloniality in which 'subjects' and 'objects', 'producers' and 'bearers', are all sharply bounded. These binary divisions of researcher and researched are entangled in asymmetrical power relations and positionalities in which the former acts as a knower and the latter as that which is to be known. When questioned at an epistemic level, as argued, the true authors of the stories and the bearers of the wretched realities they depict are denied epistemic voices and ontic significance. Such data collection methods and analyses of stories are not designed to co-produce knowledge through inter-subjective and inter-epistemic encounters. As Maldonado-Torres persuasively argued, academic institutions and knowledge production systems should admit that 'knowledge and understanding are fundamentally inter-subjective affairs' (2016, p. 25). This suggests an inextricable entwining of the researcher and the researched, knowledge and the processes of knowing. Fieldwork is a collective enterprise; neither the researcher, the researched nor a university can claim to hold a monopoly on knowledge and the process of knowing.

To break free from these epistemic assumptions of the refugee as an object of knowledge that is to be known, it is essential to reimagine epistemic and ontic registers in a way that views the figure of the refugee, with all of his/her precarity and wretched reality, as 'a questioning, speaking, writing, and creative subject' (Maldonado-Torres 2016, p. 29). Given that 'a questioning, speaking, writing, and creative' refugee is a concept uncommon in migration scholarship, we need different sets of questions and questioning subjects to unpack 'how much knowledge collapses into multiple forms of decadence in universities' (Maldonado-Torres 2016, p. 25) and how much knowledge is appropriated. Doing so requires going beyond the limits of Eurocentric research designs and university frameworks to create 'a condition of possibility for the emergence of non-decadent speaking, writing, and theorizing' (Maldonado-Torres 2016, p. 25). Epistemic and ontic registers should, without any limits, be able to register the knowing and the knowledge, the life and the living, of those humans whose humanity, culture and knowledge are at stake. Thus, research involving refugees must be oriented towards attending to 'radical questions of epistemic healing, political intelligibility and accountability' (Yohannes 2020, p. 216).

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