

Article

Hosts, Again: From Conditional Inclusion and Liberal Censorship to Togetherness and Creative/Critical Refugee Epistemologies

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Abstract: In this experimental text that critically juxtaposes autoethnographic narration, reflection, and analysis with theoretical engagements, I suggest that the power dynamics that diminish and dispossess the lives of refugees and other displaced people also constrain and censor critical refugee epistemologies. Refugees are frequently impelled to speak, implored to speak, coached to speak, interrogated and ordered to speak, but on the condition that we consent to having our voices policed. Our narratives are welcomed if they affirm the humanitarian liberal order, but the knowledge we possess challenges it. Presented as benevolent and caring, the incessant demands for refugee stories and trauma erotics are also mechanisms of putting refugees in place: they assign the refugee a subject position of a conditionally accepted narrator who is refused authorship and self-possession. Our narratives fail to count as knowledge unless they are converted into writing by citizen ghost writers or coauthors. And when we refuse to recite trauma stories and instead disrupt the order of things by critically analyzing violent regimes of refuge and liberal complicity, we are censored. Refugees have things to say as ethnographers of their own lives, analysts of upside-down mobility, and critics of violent bureaucracies. This knowledge is needed and wanted. Rather than orienting our work to liberal publics, we are creating alternative, self-authorized structures that uphold displaced people as knowledgeable and world-building subjects, as people able to host others.

Keywords: displacement; authorship; disciplinary violence; knowledge production; critical refugee epistemology; autoethnography; Germany; former Yugoslavia; Bosnia and Herzegovina; United States



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Wars dispossess us, wound us

So do host states

Universities

Disciplines

1. A Refugee with Dinner?

I was giddy to meet the children's poet I had read growing up in what was once Yugoslavia. The four of us assembled in a parking lot in a German postindustrial city: the poet, a feminist writer who found refuge in the same town as my family, Stephan, the professor of German who arranged for an evening of Bosnian literature in a club of some kind, and me, a teenager tasked with translating the discussion for the writers. I was to help them navigate the language whose words were yet to become poetry on their tongues.

"And whom do I have the pleasure of meeting here," the poet asked, his eyes touching me in a way that disturbed my idea of him as a *children's* poet. *Frau* Hodžić, Stephan responded, introducing me with a gendered adult title and my last name. *Fräulein* Hodžić, the feminist swiftly corrected him, reminding everyone that I was not yet a woman.

What I was to be called was not up to me. Neither the adults in my company nor the state in which I found refuge allowed much self-definition.

This is the world in which I move uninvited, profane on a sacred land, neither me nor mine, but me nonetheless. (Trinh 1989, p. 1)

Imminently after my arrival, I had my name taken from me. I could not possibly be called Ida, I was told in my first interaction with a German woman—the wife of a Bosnian guest worker my father had befriended. Ida was a German name and could not be my real name, she said, could not properly belong to me. Since I was not German, I needed to be called a non-German name, a name that would reflect my non-Germaness. I acquiesced to her self-ascribed authority, confused and uncertain, like many refugees, about who gets to set the rules.

We had arrived in Germany alongside half a million refugees from Bosnia and elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia. The state offered us provisional refuge, keeping us in a state of incarcerated temporality. The legal status most of us were given, *Duldung* (sufferance, bare tolerance), which is a temporary deferral of deportation, came without work permits, language classes, or any meaningful, world-building activities. The future was uncertain, forestalled, and out of our hands. The days floated and stretched, even for those of us who passed the youth threshold and were allowed to go to school or who worked—under the table or with special work permits. Time itself became disembodied as we agonized over the war, slaughter, and genocide unfolding in Bosnia and displayed daily on our TV screens. We clung to the telephone, to each other, supported each other any way we could in refugee dormitories, gloomy apartments, and government offices for foreigners.¹

The club, Rotary perhaps, had dark paneled walls and U-shaped tables at which the German-German members were seated for dinner, facing us. The poet spoke of war and loss haltingly, his sweaty vowels bumping into the hard consonants. The writer's voice was quieter than usual. I sensed their fear and wanted to protect them, knew in my throat and my marrow what it took to speak in a place where being marked as having a foreign accent means being considered abject and not-quite-human.²

I had been a refugee in two countries at this point and had already learned that my speech and existence were heavily monitored and curtailed. Being allowed in does not mean being accepted. The limits to inclusion are violent and have many enforcers. In Croatia, I was admonished and reprimanded for speaking an "impure" language that betrayed my Bosnianness, for defying the nationalist imperative to annihilate language plurality. In Germany, my speech, as all refugee and guest worker speech, was devalued, policed, corrected.

If you speak, you know what will follow

A smirk

A laughter

An objection

An interjection

An apology on your behalf

A sly wink

A correction

Correction

Correction

So many corrections

A dismissal

The corrections did not end even when I was effusively praised for "speaking so well." Not having a clearly determined accent but somehow being suspect as a potential Other meant that I was intensely scrutinized, patronized, and disciplined. My language

and being—our language and being—were uncanny, out of place, uncouth. Refugees are seen as threatening to the nation-state and the imaginary wholeness of the body politic no matter what: whether we are visibly different and audibly marked, or whether we bear only a few traces of our difference. My proximity to the unmarked citizen subjectivity has a queer edge that continues to provoke hunting for the source of my difference as well as ceaseless reminders of my place. In my senior yearbook, one of my teachers described me as a *Geistesblitz vom Balkan*—a flash of genius from the Balkans. Blitz: a flash, lightning. I cannot think of *Blitz* without thinking about *Blitzkrieg*, the lightning warfare named by the German military propaganda in World War II. There was a threat of lightning about me, a teenager holding onto books and ideas for survival.

At the club, our words did not register as speech. I recall a rectangular face of a woman who chewed large bites of her food and appeared perturbed. She looked down on her plate and then up, glancing at us impassively, solemnly. It did not take long before we heard a murmur rising in the room: club members talked to each other, over dinner. We were not a part of the conversation. Nor were we offered food as guests might be. We were the accompaniment, served with dinner, the entertainment that could be disregarded or consumed.

You *can eat* someone because you love them. I have a baby niece whom I nuzzle and kiss and to whom I say *ma, poješću te*—I'll eat you up. Because she is adorable and because I love her. This intensely engaged, playful, and loving kind of eating is different from being served with dinner as an accompaniment. There is nothing nourishing in the latter, certainly no love. Instead of an interaction, there is empty, vast space. The poet recited his lines into the void, the writer read hers. I translated here and there. The audience chewed and talked. And then, as quickly as we got in, we were out. Dismissed.

Back in the parking lot, Stephan handed out the entertainment money we had earned. Taking it felt wrong, so I tried to refuse it, but to no avail. It was only fair that I too received my share, everyone agreed. I did not want to validate the transaction that we were made to participate in. The money filled that vast space between us and the German audience and stood in for the lack of hospitality, lack of welcoming connection. By taking it, we consented to a transaction without ever having had an opportunity to refuse its terms.

It was disorienting to be invited to speak from the heart, but refused the decency of being heard. We did not have words for what had happened, none of us did. I now know that this is what it means to be conditionally invited: it is all too easy to summon but then negate and devalue refugee voices. All I knew then was that we felt diminished, humiliated. From lessons learned since, I know that diminishment is an unspoken part of the refugee–host contract. We were paid for being diminished. Watching my parents being eaten away by abuse at many of their workplaces, it became clear that it is not enough to keep refugees structurally dependent on their jobs—they must feel the subservience, must be made to feel small and afraid. Being coerced into consenting to one's diminishment chips away at a sense of self.³

On the drive back, the feminist admonished Stephan for his jerky, staccato driving. Snap! In the absence of grieving comes a snap. Refugees turn on those closest to them. For Sara Ahmed, a snap constitutes a feminist political move of severing violent bonds that diminish us (Ahmed 2017). You snap when you are unwilling to tolerate the everyday violence of racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia. So you shout “no,” you scream against the violence, you remove yourself, you leave, you reassemble, you move on. The snap of which I tell here follows a less liberatory trajectory.

I have witnessed and lived how refugees do not, *cannot* sever the bonds with hostile hosts. A hostile environment is built into the structure that keeps us in “our place,” even when accompanied by welcoming gestures and relations. Rather than disidentifying with the hostile host society, the displaced sever more proximate, intimate bonds. We/they⁴ are compelled to disidentify with other refugees and immigrants, are wounded and shattered to the point of breaking bonds of family and friendship, as well as our inward bonds with ourselves. There is no simple pathway to eschew this dynamic, to redirect what and whom

we break with and how we find a way to ourselves, a way home in the absence of home. Yet, one thing is clear: to sever bonds with hostile states and refuse conditional inclusion we need alternative collectivities and infrastructures that support them. We must be our own hosts.

I want to remake history thus: Rather than presenting at the Rotary Club, the poet and the feminist convene literature readings with Bosnian and other refugees, other immigrants, other displaced and accented people. Stephan helps them get funding for writing workshops for children and adults. We get access to a small gathering place, a room of our own, that brings together refugees, migrants, and everyone interested in supporting us, sharing skills, showing up for each other. We make music and art, tell stories. We get access to a plot of land to grow non-plastic fruits and vegetables. From there, we weave other kinds of futures and make up our own languages.

I have started the Refugee Know Things Initiative as a theoretical counterpart to this gathering place, a space where the displaced can be hosts. We are building intermittent spaces for gatherings of scholars, thinkers, cultural workers, and activists for whom displacement is not an abstraction. These spaces are mobile, impermanent: we do not lay claims on the land, set no borders.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let us return, first, to the moment when Bosnian refugees' bonds with Germany were severed. It was not the refugees who snapped; they did not willingly sever the violent bonds. Rather, the host state did, deporting Bosnians—or more precisely, demanding that refugees deport themselves. Most did just as asked, without having homes to return to. Some were able to come to the US, being resettled on stolen land, an ocean and a continent away from home. Many longed for the idea of Europe, albeit cognizant of the fact that Europe is a mirage, that anything that may have been real about its promise of a good life and dignity for all was never meant for us.

In my case, I deliberately severed my bonds. Neither deported nor forcibly resettled, I found a way out: out of refuge and monoculturalist supremacy, and toward a place that held out a promise of something different and beautiful that sometimes looked and tasted like home.

2. Trauma Erotics: Liberal Pedagogies of Extraction

2.1. Just Ask: The Academic Mandate of Dispossession as Care

I sat in the back of a large auditorium at the University of California, San Francisco medical campus to listen to a lecture on torture, health, and trauma. I was on an assignment. In my first year of PhD training in medical anthropology, we were asked to attend and ethnographically observe grand rounds of our choice. Grand rounds, a feature of medical education in the US, are teaching lectures in which presenters showcase special topics. I felt a bit out of place in the auditorium, uncertain of what was to happen but certain of my unbelonging.

The lecturer giving the presentation talked about refugees he had treated and whose bodies bore the signs of torture. He explained how he read the bodies, how he knew what kinds of bodily marks evidenced what kinds of torture. He also wanted to inspire the medical students and residents in the room to take up this kind of work, and to ease them into it. They should not be scared of approaching a tortured person.

Just ask, he said. Have you been tortured?

Victims of torture are everywhere, he told us. Earlier that week, he had a ride with a taxi driver who had been tortured because of his involvement with the Khalistan movement for Sikh independence; during the ride, the lecturer asked the driver about his experience of torture. Did the lecturer see a free Khalistan sign or was it enough that the man was wearing a turban for him to start asking questions? I do not know. What I do know is that even though torture is ubiquitous in US prisons and beyond⁵, the physician lecturer located the experiences of torture elsewhere—on the bodies of refugees who were tortured before they came to the US and who could be recognized as refugees by stereotypical ethno-racial markers. I also know that the lecturer coaxed a bit of a story out of the taxi driver, and was

now encouraging the physicians in training to do the same. *The odds are, if you take a taxi, the driver will be a refugee who may have been tortured. Just ask.*

To be sure, *just ask* was meant to de-exceptionalize torture and compel students to engage with it. Medical education pays so little attention to torture that any awareness might seem beneficial. Yet, in the name of training future caring physicians, the lecturer was removing institutional and social barriers to treating refugee pain as an extractable resource.⁶ Freely available for taking, refugee pain did not belong to them alone, but needed to be extracted. The stories belonged to anyone who asked to hear them. The medical students and residents were entitled to casually, non-committally, request refugee stories of torture at their leisure. There was a moral, humanitarian imperative for them to do so: they were to convert refugee pain into a public good, and to contribute to their own edification. The lecturer did not mention reciprocity, offering something in return, or showing tangible care and support. The tortured refugee was assumed to be pleased about the interest and concern they received despite the known fact that renarration of torture and information extraction triggers trauma. The students' intrusion was invited and sanctified as a moral and professional imperative.

Just ask.

To tell physicians in training that they are entitled to accounts of refugee pain is to deny the basic tenets of self-possession to refugees. The demands for refugee stories are predicated on the assumption that refugee history, biography, and cartographies of the violence and pain do not belong to refugees. The citizen public has—no, *owns*—a right to them. The demand to remember and articulate painful memories is a dispossession mandate. It catalyzes the process of converting refugee pain into a public good whereby educating the public and producing caring liberal subjects is more valuable than the refugee's self, stability, interiority, or self-possession. It is also deemed more valuable than the moral and human rights principle that holds the dignity and self-possession of every person equally inviolable.

To be clear, we are not dealing with a cross-cultural misunderstanding about what counts as public or private, personal and intimate, and under what conditions and contexts it is available for telling. There is no *misunderstanding* here. Rather, it is tacitly but clearly understood that the pedagogy of extraction works one way only: it rests on a hierarchy of humanity that dispossesses only the displaced. Refugees are made available for hunting—sussing us/them out by ethno-racial profiling of names, clothes, looks, and accents, and then coaxing a bit of a torture or other hardship story. The cab is a perfect place to do it because the duration is limited and the relationship remains casual. If the story went on for too long, a refugee might tell sprawling stories of unbearable and enduring agony, and that might get uncomfortable.

Nobody likes to listen to all that ([Arendt 2017](#)).⁷ Nobody wants to face hell on earth.

Refugee stories and affects that are in demand do not speak of hell or agony. Nothing too gory, sensational, grotesque. Instead, just a brush with pain, a proximity to sensation, an inkling of trauma. Titillation, perhaps a trickle of tears, catharsis. It is all very civilized. The question is, for whose benefit? Trauma erotics involve a traffic in feeling and sensation whose primary beneficiary is not the displaced person but the liberal citizen/host society. The refugee's feelings are not shared, but consumed. Sherene Razack ([2007](#)) refers to this economy of feelings as "stealing the pain of others".

The grand round's pedagogy of extraction stayed with me because it shocked me; I was new to the United States and unaccustomed to the intensity of the casually expressed demand for refugee stories. The doctor's injunction, *just ask*, charts my understanding of what it means to be a refugee in the US. To have one's interiority requested as fodder for small talk and public knowledge alike is to be denied opacity and self-possession by people who are most supportive and, in theory, most understanding of refugees. Refugees are already multiply dispossessed: the loss/theft of home, family, and land is followed in the host country by the loss of one's sense of self of capacious, socially competent persons with agency. Dispossession takes the form of glaring exploitation of refugee labor

and spectacular refugee deaths⁸ as well as liberal violence. My work questions both the material dispossession and physical violence under global apartheid ([Besteman 2020](#)) as well as the institutional and epistemic frameworks that sanction it. My writing often looks back at the epistemologies and public cultures in which I live, alerting us to their alignment with governing regimes in order to break away from them. Rather than critique, liberation—however tentative or uncertain—is the goal.

Liberal public culture that sees itself as welcoming to refugees figures them/us as people who have stories to tell and are expected to recite them for the educational and emotional benefits of citizen/settler publics. The excessive narrative desire for refugee stories thinks itself benevolent and caring but assigns the refugee a subject position of a conditionally invited narrator who is allowed neither authorship nor self-possession. Benevolent liberalism includes refugees on the condition that they/we consent to our dispossession and demotion. I came to understand this simultaneously as an ethnographer of human rights organizations and as a person subjected to this regime.⁹

2.2. *The Questions: The Public Mandate of Breezy Extraction*

I stand in a friend's kitchen at a child's birthday party in Ithaca, NY. I feel a hand on my shoulder and assume it's my partner's, so I let it linger there until I turn my gaze and realize the hand belongs to someone else, an often stoned, benevolent neighbor whom I have seen looking up to our bedroom window far too often. I step away.

A woman with a large mane of wild strawberry hair and a loud voice approaches me and wants to know my name. Upon hearing it, she starts The Questions. "What kind of name is that? Oh, wow! Do you have family there? Were you there during the war? What was it like?" Because she is excited and we are in a small kitchen, people around us can hear her. The party host comes over and runs interference: "Wow, wow, big questions! Let's change the topic," he says, and whisks the woman away from me.

The interference is rare, but The Questions are not. My name, markers of accent, and histories of displacement make me a target. I never know when The Questions will come or from which direction. Fired at the speed of light, they present a seemingly innocuous demand: please satisfy my curiosity and concern, I just want to know/about/you. The declared innocence makes it that much more difficult to refuse the demand. You owe me an answer, and of course you will oblige. How could something so breezy be intrusive? To refuse makes you an alien killjoy.¹⁰ You are the problem because you do not allow extraction presented as care. The hierarchy becomes evident with another set of questions: those about where I am, now. The intense interest in the story of war trauma is often accompanied by "mobility envy": many liberals in my town deem my job at a prestigious university too/good for me.¹¹

The interference occurs only when a line is crossed, the line that others set to divide a legitimate desire from trauma porn or immigrant interrogation. Liberal publics now recognize that trauma porn is a problem, but they are also the ones who define what it means and where it begins and ends. On the permitted side are expressions of interest and concern: "Do you still have family there? Do you still go there?" Yet, "What was the war like" is where my friend drew the line and came to the rescue.

The only way to avert The Questions is through quasi-deception. For years, at events where I knew that I would never see the people again, when there was no common future in which my answers mattered, I said that I was from Germany. This answer elicited no Questions. Being a person from Germany meant that I was not figured as a person with a "story" that needed to be extracted. This strategy mostly worked but it came at a cost. It introduces labor and a self-protection calculus into daily interactions. Having one's guard up does not come naturally. And, by turning myself into a trickster who tells half-truths, I open myself up to other perils. Half-truths are only a split second removed from accusations of lying and refugee criminality. And then there are people who take it upon themselves to police the boundaries of belonging and do not allow us the latitude

of self-declaration and self-identification no matter how sincere. They stand ready with objections: "But that is not a German name!" What is a German name? I learned to ask.

2.3. We Want to Hear Your Story: The Stipulations

Speak about the war/persecution

but not for too long, too detailed, too morbid, too, too

Speak about the escape/border crossing

but not about your trespasses, compromises, betrayals

Speak about your welcome

welcome, welcome.

Remember, it's OK to cry, but not too much.

Do not, under any circumstances, get bitter, cynical, or critical.

We want to hear *your story*.

From courtrooms to lecture halls and kitchens, refugees are impelled to speak, implored to speak, coached to speak, interrogated and ordered to speak, demanded to speak. The questions, the terms, the language, the tunes and melodies are predetermined. Invited refugee narratives must affirm the humanitarian, imperial order. They must be addressed to citizen audiences to help educate, entertain, and move them. Not to unsettle them.

Refugee stories do not count as knowledge unless they are converted into writing by citizen ghost writers or at best co/authors. We are invited to speak about our experiences, and to leave it at that. Refugee experience becomes knowledge in the hands of another, when rearticulated by a citizen.

Nor are we invited to speak about our experiences in the host country, in the long aftermath of refuge, in the present tense. When we do so, our critiques of structural violence and ongoing dispossession are deemed offensive, and we are deemed ungrateful. To write critically about the here and now, or about the relationship between the past and the present, is to exceed the bounds of our assigned subject position. And that is precisely what refugees are not allowed, or rather, are not allowed without being punished. The incessant demands for refugee speech are also mechanisms of putting refugees in place. When we shift the gaze from refugee stories to violent regimes of refuge and liberal obfuscation of this violence, our speech is censored and our belonging questioned.

3. The Reviewer's Pain: Prioritize Citizen Feelings

The reviewer is offended

Made uncomfortable

Threatened

They press a button

Spikes shoot up

They interlock

Borders are mobile, readily mobilized

The peer reviewer's words are transmitted to me:

The near total dismissal as misguided (at best) of the helpers pains me since they are so crucial to the maintenance of refuge (inadequate as it may be). It may help to remember that the purpose of this volume . . . is to create a collective field of discussion among the different branches of the discipline, very much including the helpers.

The reviewer is unusually forthcoming about their feelings. Invited and enabled to act as border guards, reviewers have no obligation to lay bare the feelings that shape

their judgments. Typically, reviewers hide the feelings of offence or anger by translating them into objective-seeming academic assessments that devalue the writer's contribution. Surprisingly, this reviewer states directly and explicitly that my words hurt them, albeit not in order to critically examine their feelings or to question what role these feelings should play in peer review. No, the reviewer asks that I heed their feelings, spare them the pain of my analysis, and protect the helpers whom they imagine as being equally hurt by my words. The reviewer identifies with the helpers and their cause, feels criticized, and then collapses the distinction between themselves and the helpers entirely, presuming that they share the same pain.

To be clear, rather than saying my argument is wrong, the reviewer complains that it will hurt the helpers. I should therefore reconsider my words and make them less threatening. Tame them, soften them, let go of the critique. Let's listen closer.

Near total dismissal

Pains me

They are so crucial

Collective discussion including the helpers

Including the helpers

The helpers

Pains me

Me

The Helpers

But who exactly are the helpers that the reviewer wants to protect? My text does not portray the refugee assistance workers as a singular entity ([Hodžić 2017b](#)). Indeed, I analyze how citizen workers treat refugee workers and what that says about the power dynamics in the agency and in broader regimes that govern and dispossess refugee lives. More broadly, I illuminate that refugee regimes are not just inadequate, but violent, and show how power works through all people. I discuss the foreclosure of refuge in Germany and the resettlement of refugees in the US as incorporation into poverty and dispossession. Citizen workers who are otherwise critical of neoliberal scarcity ideas nonetheless embrace them by normalizing notions of "bad refugees" who are noncompliant, ungrateful, undeserving, and refusing to remain in their place. My point is not to blame a specific class of workers, but to invite everyone to refuse the place assigned to them by the imperial state and neoliberal doctrine.

Yet the reviewer is hurt. The reviewer neither considers nor expresses care for how my words will affect the many "helpers" who are themselves refugees. The feelings of the refugee subjects and communities do not matter, do not take precedence. Nor do mine, even though I was a kind of a "helper" too—the text is based on my reflections on refugee regimes as both a refugee and an intern in a refugee aid agency. Rather than being offended by my words, refugee workers are more likely to experience them as a breath of fresh air. They carry the weight of living in a world and occupying jobs that diminish them by a thousand cuts. Ethnographic analysis can bring clarity and recognition that is freeing.

The reviewer identifies with those helpers who they think matter: helpers who are positioned higher in the social hierarchy of refugee assistance, asking that I limit my analysis to a form and tenor of critique palatable to those in power. They are white citizen helpers, although the reviewer objects to the explicit naming of whiteness, declaring it essentialist—unlike other racial formations, whiteness should remain unmarked, cannot be treated sociologically.

Yet the reviewer positions citizen helpers as *subjects* of the conversation, thereby figuring refugees as *objects*: we should write about refugees, not imagine them as our audience. It is fine to exclude refugee workers and community members from the "collective field of discussion." We need not worry about how they may be impacted by our scholarship;

we are not accountable to them. We should be accountable to helpers who are like the reviewer, not like me: not refugee/helpers, but citizen helpers. Is it beyond the reviewer's imagination or beyond their political desire that I might think of refugees, including refugee agency workers, as people I am accountable to? That I imagine them as participating in the conversation? Yet, that precisely is my goal. That is the whole point.

The moral demand to prioritize reviewer feelings and respect social hierarchies is issued in the name of liberal values: after all, who could object to ideas of "inclusion" and a "collective field of discussion?" The hierarchical structures of feeling at play here indicate how power works to curtail and censor. One reviewer's feelings, and their desire to guard a particular class of people and the system they uphold, are held up as important enough to foreclose critique and transformation.

Yet, the reviewer did not try to shut the gates of this particular publication. I had invited two friends and colleagues to write and co-submit our texts together, and there was power in our numbers that amplified the moral stakes of shutting out refugee voices.¹² As a collective, we could not be denied entirely. But we could be, and all were, censored, and asked to contort our arguments to make them more palatable.

4. Looks Like What Drives Me Crazy Don't Have No Effect on You—¹³

In addition to having been a refugee and having researched humanitarianism and human rights activism, I have also served as an expert witness for asylum applications. As I was learning how to write expert testimonies and how to navigate the ethics and politics of my participation in the exclusionary, disempowering asylum adjudication predicated on "border imperialism" (Walia 2014), I turned to my discipline, anthropology, for lessons. Anthropologists have served as expert witnesses for decades and have had much to say. Some of it was very helpful, and all of it was illuminating: for instance, some anthropologists served as expert witnesses for the settler colonial government, helping it refute indigenous land claims.

In contemporary asylum cases, scholars work exclusively with lawyers representing asylum seekers. And yet, there is a tension: we must state our allegiance to the court and to the ideas of objectivity and truth. Many scholars reflecting on their practices resolved this tension by emphasizing how they sort refugees who deserve their expertise and assistance from migrants who do not. Contextualized within nods to post-structural theory and long-standing engagements with refugees, expert witnesses embraced the state imperative to distinguish true refugees from fake, lying migrants. Critical thought bumped up against a hard limit: we should be critical of border regimes and state categories except when we are implicated and our signature is on the line. Here again, it was the citizen helpers who upheld and reproduced the violent norms they otherwise strongly object to.

My own practice and my intimate, plural knowledge of regimes of refuge taught me that other strategies and framings are possible and needed. So, I wrote a text calling on scholars to fully reject their complicity with discourses of untruthful asylees; I argued that the state, rather than the refugee, is both criminal and untruthful and that it produces criminality and lies. I wrote critically and creatively, juxtaposing my past experiences as a refugee and my present practices as an expert witness to articulate an alternative ethical and political practice of 'minor' expert witnessing. I also wrote carefully, fully aware that my words may be read as threatening. Rather than attacking any specific author, I emphasized the issue's systemic character and the challenges we all face when we engage with an exclusionary legal regime. Yet, we can never soften our words enough.

In the end, I was cast out as a liar who did not deserve to belong to the disciplinary body politic. The "native" anthropologist—in my case, native not to a place, but to the experience of displacement—is never not suspect. My refugee/witness critique inverted the basic order of the discipline, reversing the subject-object, author-native dynamics foundational to it. As Larisa Kurtović (2018) writes, "our ethnographic authority and deep familiarity with the contexts we study places us in a strong position to provide critical insight, yet our ethnographic methods remain subject to enduring accusations of being

non-representative, partial and unscientific. Those of us who are deemed ‘native-born’ or who embrace ‘engaged anthropology’ are, of course, even more vulnerable to such forms of dismissal”.

It all started well enough. I received favorable reviews and productive editor feedback, but then had the bad but not uncommon fortune of an editorial change. The new editor decided to restart the review process from scratch, inviting an all-new line-up of reviewers. Yet, a paper that challenges liberal anthropology’s own story of itself as benevolent was never going to make all anthropologists happy. In each review cycle, someone objected not to my argument, but to my very right to have something to say.

In one cycle, a reviewer dismissed autoethnographic data as not being data at all. And then there was an expert witness who fully identified with the subjects of my critique and responded aggressively and patronizingly. The reviewer questioned my experience with testifying and persisted to wrongly assert that I did not belong to a community of expert witnesses, did not possess sufficient communal or personal knowledge, and therefore had no right to write without interviewing actual experts.

All told, the four cycles of revising, resubmitting, and responding to what appear to be seven different reviewers took much of my time, focus, and intellectual and emotional energy over four years. I wish I would have written a book in this time; every sentence in the manuscript has a condensed back story, history, and genealogy, every response to reviewers its own narratives, conversations, and arguments. This is what gate-keeping does: its cruel optimism offers the promise of getting in at the price of untold labor, submission, and self-contortion.

In the end, the expert witness/reviewer pulled out all the stops and accused me of dishonesty and lying—the very mechanism that is leveraged against refugees. The accusation stunned me and confused me, as did the editor’s decision to simply take the expert witness at their word. The reviewer wrote:

I found the four works above to be sensitive to the complexities of cultural identities and political experiences, as well as to what it means to work as an ‘expert.’

You have not accurately or fairly represented other scholars’ writings or arguments.

You would need to do either ethnographic research or interviews in order to accurately and fairly represent other scholars’ approaches to expert witnessing.

It took me a long time to parse these statements out, so I will address them carefully, from the bottom up. It should be needless to say that little critical theory would ever be published if interviewing the authors were a standard of fairness or accuracy. What authors “really” think is not a disciplinary standard, and holding me to it is not only unfair but so misguided that it alone should have raised red flags about the reviewer’s judgment. As importantly, interviews were not an appropriate method for my analysis: I was challenging norms posited in public, published works rather than the individual scholars’ unstated personal beliefs and practices.

At stake in the reviewer’s demand for interviews is not only a misguided sense of methodology but an assertion of supreme authority: they position themselves as an arbiter of the distribution of the right to speak. The reviewer grants themselves the status of an expert over the field while foreclosing mine. They did not interview other scholars either but presented themselves as authorities on the basis of experience and community membership.

But how do we account for the accusations of dishonesty, inaccuracy, and misrepresentation given that I neither misquoted anyone nor distorted their words nor took them out of context to mean something different? The scholars I quoted emphasized how and why it was necessary for them to draw the line between truthful, real refugees who are worthy of our support and lying migrants who are not. They clearly meant what they said and wrote about their bottom line at some length, some on multiple occasions: they were

critical of border regimes and state categories except when directly implicated and having to put their signature on the line in the court of law. What then made my critique “unfair” and dishonest? It took me a while to understand that the only way in which I was unfair is that for the reviewer, these scholars’ general “sensitivity” is morally and epistemologically sufficient. In their eyes, “sensitivity” makes up for this bottom line and its implications. But it does not.

What does sensitivity mean? What is one supposed to be sensitive to? In the reviewer’s words: identities and experiences. Not, notably, the dynamics of power, structural and systemic violence, or entanglements between disciplinary and state power. Sensitivity purports to do the work of acknowledging power dynamics, but falls far short of the task. Indeed, sensitivity offers bounded gestures in place of a structural analysis of power.

Being “sensitive” in contemporary United States is a coded measure of liberal subjectivity (Berlant 2001). Sensitivity is an attribute of moral liberal personhood and can be used as a yardstick for measuring good liberal subjects. Sensitivity is the name for the mode of relation to disadvantaged Others and the public expression and projection of this mode. Liberal citizen/subjects are supposed to embody and show sensitivity to situations and people who have suffered from discrimination or state or imperial violence. Sensitivity is a hegemonic structure of feeling marked by a display and performance of *appropriate* affects, considerations, values, and ideas.

To be clear, the reviewer’s emphasis of sensitivity mistakes the target of my critique and does not refute my argument but indeed clarifies it. I was not stating that these scholars or their texts were *generally* “insensitive.” On the contrary, people who are “sensitive” to and who oppose racism and border imperialism can and do simultaneously reinforce them. Indeed, this interplay between sensitivity and its limits is an integral feature of refugee regimes and liberal values. Rather than being mutually exclusive, sensitivity and “reasonable” limits to inclusion are co-constituted.

Sensitivity is not enough; yet, I may never be able to convince those who are well served by liberalism or content with the comforts it provides. *Looks like what drives me crazy don’t have no effect on you* (Hughes).

I do not know what felt more unjust: the reviewer’s gatekeeping, or the editor’s decision to affirm their accusations rather than examining them. By performing the conceit that the reviewer was impartially assessing my work, notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary, the editor chose the pretense of neutrality over procedural fairness, disciplinary and communal accountability, and the potential for epistemological reckoning and transformation.

I do know that there is nothing as damning in either publishing or in asylum courts as accusations of dishonesty and misrepresentation. Asylum courts also consider refugees as suspect but present themselves as impartial, objective, and compassionate. The courts do not say out loud: we are helping the state gut asylum protections and foreclose access to rights. Instead, they say: the refugee is not credible, is not really a refugee, is a threat, and does not deserve admittance into the national body politic.

When I wrote to the editor to contest the reviewer’s statements but accept the rejection, as advised by colleagues, she responded by inviting me to have a public dialogue on the journal’s blog. The blog would accompany the publication of the journal issue on asylum that she had earlier mentioned as a potential home for my article. My words of dissent would be suitable enough for a blog post, but would not receive admittance into the journal itself. In other words, I was offered an “in” but on the condition of accepting a demotion from an author to a blog contributor.¹⁴

Displacements are ongoing. This was not the first time that I wrongly thought I had made a home in anthropology only to be cast out. In the German academy, I wrote a Master’s thesis on German citizenship, naturalization laws, and the migration regime at a time when anthropologists lacked methods and frameworks for addressing this question. In the absence of readily available anti-national(ist) and anti-imperial epistemologies, I experimented with my own montage, challenging methodological nationalisms and

nativist ideas of citizenship. I was dismissed just as nonchalantly and cruelly as we were that evening in the club. The violence of my work's reception was more than I wanted to bear again, and I vowed to stay away from topics that were *that* close to my heart. It took me over a decade to begin to openly draw on my own experiences and formulate my own creative/critical refugee epistemology.¹⁵

Anthropology breaks my heart again and again, but very differently from how Ruth Behar (2022) meant it in her famous text "The Vulnerable Observer". I do not write moving texts that aim to touch the hearts of the non-displaced, but texts that unsettle, that discomfort. What breaks my heart is not the writing itself, however difficult it may be, but the ease with which I and people like me can be declared enemies. The persistent strands of disciplinary conservatism enact violence on many kinds of critical scholars, stymying what anthropology can be and do in the world.

Keeping refugees in place and treating us as forever suspect is an impediment not only to refugee epistemologies but to refugee lives: in the blink of an eye, we may get cast out as enemies of the discipline, enemies of the institution, enemies of the state. Our words and our beings are deemed threatening and expellable. As I write this, Germany's proposals to denaturalize immigrants critical of Israel bring this otherwise tacit, intimate knowledge to the surface.

5. Hosts, Again: Refugee Futures

Like Others Who Have Homes, They Started Receiving Visitors; They Became Hosts Again
Samera Esmeir

The best refugee futures would stop militarized and economic imperialisms that produce displacement. The second best would extend the displaced unconditional acceptance. Yet, conditional inclusions and liberal censorship will never make space for creative/critical refugee epistemologies. Whether refugees are rarely given a platform, as in Germany, or are subject to the excessive narrative desire for refugee stories, as in the US, we/they are not granted autonomy over the terms of our speech nor the status of knowing subjects or authors. Refugee stories are desired if they affirm the humanitarian order and liberal frameworks, but the knowledge we possess challenges them. For those of us in academic settings that purport to be spaces of alternative epistemologies and critical thought, there are tight perimeters: it is fine to disrupt some paradigms, but only to a point. We can never contort ourselves enough to squeeze our critical perspectives into frameworks that consider "sensitivity" sufficient. This is why I choose to redirect my voice and build new communities.

We need collective organizing and infrastructures of support. How knowledge production is organized and who controls its means matters. It feels momentous that the Critical Refugee Studies Collective now has a book series at the University of California Press. I now work, alongside many others—activists, artists, and scholars—to make spaces that uphold displaced people as knowledgeable and world-building subjects, as hosts. To host, once again, is to reclaim personhood and subjectivity that is denied to refugees.¹⁶ We gather and host each other in mobile, impermanent spaces that do not require any flags to be staked.

I have started a podcast and a collaborative initiative called *Refugees Know Things* that highlights narratives, insights, and epistemologies grounded in refugee experience but are not limited to it. To speak from experience in this way is not to give moving talks for citizen audiences taught to consume the pain of the Other. Rather, we reclaim experience and inappropriate affects at the nexus of creative storytelling, analytical insight, and critical reflection, with and for each other.

Refugees have things to say as ethnographers of their own lives, analysts of upside-down mobility, and critics of violent bureaucracies. Displaced epistemologies do not offer comforting, soothing stories to liberal publics—we tell stories of bureaucratic violence. In their sharing, however, refugees and others might find recognition and relief. Inviting people to speak at their/our own time and on our own terms, we address ourselves to

other displaced people: immigrants, indigenous peoples, formerly indentured or enslaved peoples, people whose lives are curtailed by ongoing dispossessions.

We make new spaces and temporary homes
For refugees and all those displaced
To speak to each other, to all un/citizens
To share stories on y(our) own terms, in y(our) languages, to y(our) tunes, at y(our) own time.
Stories with uncontrolled or hypercontrolled, stoic affects
Accented stories
Uncontained stories
Fearless stories
With anti-imperial cartographies and temporalities
Stories that hold space for ongoing losses and brokenness
Stories that make us laugh
Stories that crack open wounds, touch, and mobilize us
For the displaced to be hosts
To feel togetherness
For refugee knowledges to count
For displaced epistemologies to disrupt the world and recreate it anew
Please join us.

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Notes

- ¹ In his reflections on ghosts of memory from this time, Ervin Malakaj also centers the telephones and what they meant for him and his family ([Malakaj 2022](#)).
- ² Germans themselves have various accents, as do Western Europeans and others who live in Germany, but they are not understood as “having an accent.” Only guest workers and refugees have conspicuous accents that are deemed foreign. As Anita Starosta powerfully explains, “the binary of the native and the foreign, or the norm and the departure, that informs the familiar division of ‘accent’ is linked directly to the international division of labor” ([Starosta 2023](#)).
- ³ Humiliation, diminishment, and abuse of power are not limited to the refugee–host contract or specific peoples or places – they are structural features of gendered and racist supremacies that exploit the socially and politically dominated while commodifying their suffering. Jelena Savić illuminates these dynamics in Serbia and neighboring countries where Roma performers are coerced into subjection for white/non-Roma/Gadjo enjoyment, at times under threats of physical violence (2023). State neglect and violence channels the Roma into the entertainment industry, where they are made to sing about their suffering while being made to suffer. Performers are routinely made to climb on trees and perform from there. This humiliation through animalistic

- dehumanization is not incidental to the performing contract and the production of audience joy, but integral to them. By consuming Roma humiliation, non-Roma audiences get “drunk on whiteness,” reproducing their sense of superiority and privilege (Savić 2023).
- 4 The both/and organization of the pronouns refuses the separation of people into distinct identities as well as the collapse of persons into a clearly defined singularity. The interval/holds space for commonality and difference, instability and relationality. My use of pronouns is indebted to Trinh Minh-ha and her insistent experimentation with language as grounds for rearticulating subject positions and histories.
- 5 The US has long tortured those incarcerated, subjecting them to solitary confinement, sexual abuse, medical abuse, and more (Ralph 2020). Soon after this lecture took place, the US started the War on Terror and passed the Patriot Act, designed by Viet Dinh. Dinh, a former refugee turned Assistant Attorney General repaid his “gift of freedom” (Nguyen 2012) to the US by helping establish a legal framework for legitimizing the imperial, racial violence in which torture became a mundane, ordinary spectacle.
- 6 Medical attention to torture was not primarily oriented toward care, but to institutional recognition. Searching for and finding evidence of torture in the marks left on the body does not help the person heal, is not meant to help them heal. Rather, it is meant to fulfill a state requirement to proffer a proof of torture. Asylum bureaucracies enlist doctors and others to ascertain that torture really happened, and that therefore, the refugee is eligible for protection under international and national laws (Fassin and D’Halluin 2005). This requirement only exists because asylum seekers’ words are not trusted, and because states have drastically increased the evidentiary requirements for refugee recognition. Thus, while the medical proof of torture can help refugees obtain permanent legal status, the prioritization of institutional requirements also impedes care, support, and healing. To this day, refugees and other victims/survivors of torture often receive inadequate support.
- 7 Hannah Arendt writes: “Besides, how often have we been told that nobody likes to listen to all that; hell is no longer a religious belief or a fantasy, but something as real as houses and stones and trees. Apparently nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends” (Arendt 2017).
- 8 Every year, refugees are subject to shootings and arson attacks—by Neo-nazis in Germany (<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/53219/germany-increase-in-attacks-on-migrants-and-asylum-seekers>, accessed on 1 February 2024) and police officers in the United States (<https://ag.ny.gov/osf/footage/dhal-apet-lueth-mo>, accessed on 1 February 2024).
- 9 My research on human rights activism coincided with the onset and the unfolding of the War on Terror. My own disciplining in anthropology was both temporally and disciplinarily intertwined with and refracted the positions of refugees asked by human rights organizations to “tell their stories” (Hodžić 2023).
- 10 Popularized by Sara Ahmed (2010), the term killjoy was conceptualized by the writer Ama Atta Aidoo (1977). Ahmed homes in on the real and palpable violence meted onto the rebel figure of the killjoy.
- 11 Hage (2015) conceptualizes mobility envy; Starosta shows how it takes hold in liberal spaces (Starosta 2023).
- 12 Our texts comprise an entire section of the book titled “Refugees Write Back.” See (Kurtović 2017), (Hromadžić 2017), (Hodžić 2017a).
- 13 Langston Hughes, Evil. The poem continues: But I’m gonna keep on at it till it drives you crazy too.
- 14 I thank Nisrin Elamin for clarifying the mechanisms of demotion.
- 15 I use this term retrospectively, building on notions of feminist refugee epistemology (Espiritu and Duong 2018) and refugee epistemology (Vang 2020).
- 16 Palestinian refugees who return time and again to temporarily inhabit their villages, such as Ma’alul or Kafr Bir’im that is now a site of a national park, practice return and practice hosting. Samera Esmeir (2014) writes: “As you stand there, recognize the voices and the sights that are from the present time. Discern the dress code of the youth chatting, reading and walking between the trees. Spot the lights on the Christmas tree in the corner of the square; such decorations were uncommon prior to 1948. Look to the right: There is another group seated in the old school watching a movie—Omar, which in January 2014 was nominated for an Oscar. Take note of others gathered in the square: They are assessing the court rulings in their case from December 2013 and April 2014. Rest assured, you are in time-now. Prepare to experience the village before the great expulsion of 1948 coming to life again in time-now, either in the same characters who once inhabited the village, or in their children and grandchildren. Prepare to witness the return of the refugees—the undoing of their identity against the facts of 1948 and its aftermath. In August 2013 some of the refugees of Kafr Bir’im declared their return to their village. They resolved to transform return from a suspended horizon to a present practice. Announcing that they were no longer refugees, they moved to live in the church and in the two-room school structure of the village, holding gatherings, parties, events and concerts. Like others who have homes, they started receiving visitors; they became hosts again”.

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