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Decolonizing Research on Palestinians: Towards Critical Epistemologies and Research Practices

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Abstract

This article builds on Indigenous and decolonial theorists' and activists' contention that European imperialism and colonialism are inseparable from modern knowledge production, and that the power/knowledge nexus continues to be implicated in the contemporary coloniality of the world. It examines the power relations inherent in imperialism and colonialism as they unfolded in the "before," "during," and "after" of a research project on Palestinian refugees that was conceptualized and initiated in the Anglo-Irish academy. It asks what kind of research can researchers, who are structurally positioned within the academies of the former/current imperialist powers and their allies, engage in while carrying out research in communities that are on the other end of the imperial and colonial equation. It concludes by discussing what the possibility of a decolonizing research practice in Palestinian refugee communities may begin to look like during the Palestinians' settler-colonized and stateless present.

Keywords

decolonial methodologies, coloniality of power/knowledge, Palestinian refugees, Nakba

The relationship between modern knowledge production and the colonization, extermination, and enslavement of peoples, the horrific markers of the period beginning with the Spanish Inquisition and the conquest of the Americas, forms the basis of a major epistemological critique and challenge posed by Indigenous and decolonial theorists and activists (Decoloniality Europe, 2013; Grosfoguel, 2011, 2012; Smith, 2012). René Descartes's *ego cogito*, Enrique Dussel (2000) has argued, "was anticipated by more than a century by the practical Spanish-Portuguese *ego conguira* (I conquer) that imposed its will (the first 'will-to-power') on the indigenous populations of the Americas" (p. 472). For those against whom *ego cogito* was constructed, or the "primitives" whose worlds, lands, societies, and bodies would become the resources and objects of this will-to-power and its accompanying will-to-knowledge—the basis of the modern disciplines—"the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism . . . 'research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (Smith, 2012, p. 1).

Within the context of the "Orient"—"the only category with the honor of being recognized as the other of Europe and the West" (Quijano, 2000, p. 542)—the late Edward Said named the historical and material relationship arising out of this European will to conquer and the conquerors' will to knowledge as Orientalism. Limiting the scope of his study to the Arab East, Said defined Orientalism as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient . . . a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 2003, p. 3). Ultimately, for Said, Orientalism has been an accomplice to Empire, and is ongoing through the American Empire's colonial and neo-colonial ventures in this part of the world.

The pillage, death, and destruction that accompanied European imperialism and colonialism, first in the Americas and later in all corners of the globe, has therefore been intimately tied to modern knowledge production. Establishing the roots of the modern disciplines in this way, which "are much implicated in each other as they in imperialism" (Smith, 2012, p. 11), and arguing for the ongoing "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2000) in the world, underscores the ongoing coloniality of the power/knowledge nexus. The question that this raises is what kind of research can researchers who are structurally positioned within the academies of the former/current imperialist powers and their allies engage in when carrying out research in communities that are on the other end of the imperialist and colonial equation? How do researchers' "geo-political and body-political" (Grosfoguel,

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2011), or epistemic, locations impact the knowledge that they come to produce, given the coloniality of both locations?

In this article, I examine the intersection between the ongoing coloniality of the disciplines and the ongoing coloniality of power in the world as they impact research on the colonized and stateless from within academies of imperial states and their allies. I do this by drawing on my own research in the first half of 2008 on memories of the 1948 Nakba (Catastrophe) in the Palestinian refugee camps and communities of Damascus (Al-Hardan, 2011), today sites of an ongoing civil war in Syria (Al-Hardan, 2012). As a research project that was conceptualized and initiated in the Anglo-Irish academy, an examination of the conceptualization and defense of the project in the constitutive "before" stage of the research is also an examination of the way in which this academy operates as part and parcel of the historical and contemporary colonizing power/knowledge nexus. At the same time, this research unfolded between this academy and the Palestinians' statelessness in Syria, where research participants took part in a research project on the Nakba that was formulated from within states that continue to sanction the Palestinians' colonized status quo and block the refugees' right of return to their homes and lands in the state of Israel (Chomsky, 1999; Cronin,4 2010; United Nations General Assembly, 1948). These overarching colonial relations of power therefore also unfolded within the research process itself, and in the plethora of English language research production on Palestinians, continue in the "after" of the research. This is the site where if research ethics are not suspended altogether, they are based on the protection of "the white political field under the guise of a 'humanistic' social concern" (Decoloniality Europe, 2013).

What follows is therefore an engagement with the power relations inherent in imperialism and colonialism as they unfolded in the "before," "during," and "after" of the research process itself. Aware that the decolonization of Palestine and the setting up of national research institutions, guidelines and protocols is the much larger task at hand, this article is a limited attempt to "research back," in the same tradition of "writing back" or "talking back" (Smith, 2012, p. 8), and an attempt to imagine what a decolonizing research practice in Palestinian refugee communities may begin to look like.

The Nakba, a Denied/Ongoing History

The establishment of the state of Israel on Palestine in 1948 is referred as a *nakba*, or catastrophe, in Arabic. That the establishment of the state of Israel on Palestine is a Nakba, as it is also widely known in English today (Abu-Lughod & Sa'di, 2007), is based on the events the preceded, unfolded during and superseded the establishment of the state of Israel. In what is probably the most meticulous construction of the Zionist onslaught against the unarmed civilian population of Palestine during 1948, Ilan Pappe (2006) uses declassified Israeli government archives to argue that what transpired in Palestine after March 1948—in other words, while Palestine was still under British colonial rule and responsibility—amounted to a concerted policy and campaign of the "ethnic cleansing" of the country.

More recently, the genocide scholar Martin Shaw (2010) problematized the notion of "ethnic cleansing" in terms of its ambiguous relationship to the legal notion of genocide, and the way in which this ambiguity can serve to narrow genocide to only one of its possible outcomes of total human extermination. He argues for an international historical perspective on genocide that focuses on genocide's aims rather than means, and that distinguishes genocidal violence from other types of violence through this violence's civilian target and pervasive destructiveness. Within this broadened scope, he argues that "the widespread destruction of Arab society [in 1948] should be considered partly genocidal" (Shaw, 2010, p. 19, 2013; Shaw & Bartov 2010).

The definition and debate over the nature of the war crimes that took place in 1948 and afterwards are still ongoing because the mass forcible dispossession that "set the Palestinian experience apart from virtually any other in the post-colonial era" (Sayigh, 2004, p. 10) is yet to be morally or politically confronted and resolved. In English, the catastrophe of an entire people after 1948 was disappeared underneath a "death-rebirth dialectic . . . Israel's creation was represented, and sometimes conceived, as an act of restitution that resolved this dialectic, bringing good out of evil [after the European Jewish Holocaust]" (Abu-Lughod & Sa'di, 2007: 4). Moreover, the use of the legacy of the Holocaust and an Israeli monopoly on victimhood still plays a central role in the silencing of the Nakba of 1948 and the multiple and ongoing catastrophes of Israeli settler-colonialism in Palestine today (Massad, 2000). This is despite the fact that Zionism's late 20th century inception predated and did not respond "simply to the genocide of Europe's Jews or was determined by the need for a sanctuary" (Lloyd, 2012, p. 65), but to the era of European nationalism, imperialism, and settler-colonialism (Piterberg, 2008).

What is no longer debatable, at least on an English language scholarly level, largely as the result of the declassification of Israeli government archives in the 1980s and the visiting of these archives by the so-called Israeli "new" historians and one Palestinian citizen of Israel (Shlaim, 1995), although it once may have been (Masalha, 2011), is that the establishment of the state of Israel unfolded with the forcible uprooting of more than half of historic Palestine's population, some 800,000 people, or over three quarters of the population in the conquered territories. This took place alongside the destruction of the Palestinians' cultural, social, and political institutions in these territories, and the obliteration of 11 urban quarters and 531 villages (Pappe, 2006).

That it was the Israeli "new" historians that finally made the Nakba more "plausible" in the English language academic sphere, rather than the voices and experiences of the colonized, occupied and dispossessed, even though Palestinians' documented the atrocities of the establishment of the state of Israel in the immediate aftermath of 1948 (e.g., Al-Khatib, 1951), merely underscores that "who can remember, and who can be made to forget, is, fundamentally, an expression of power" (Bisharat, 2007). Thus, the "newness" of this "new" history, and with it, the final plausibility of the Nakba in English, is better understood as being indicative of what and when history comes to be defined as history, and the power inherent in who is allowed to deem historical events as finally historical, and the routes that the history of the vanquished must traverse in order to be finally considered nonetheless only partly plausible.

This brief outline of the centrality of the Nakba to the ongoing Palestinian colonized reality, and its fierce denial and contestation—even the criminalization of its commemoration in the state of Israel (Lentin, 2010)—within the imperialist centers of global power and their knowledge-producing apparatuses, is also an outline of the political terrain that I entered when intending to carry out my research. As an Anglo-Irish educated, Palestinian woman, whose family was violently dispossessed from a village outside of Haifa that was subsequently erased off of the face of the earth in 1948, and with it, our collective existence in an Arab Palestine that was itself destroyed by the establishment of the state of Israel and the ongoing denial of our right to return, carrying out research on memories of the Nakba was underpinned by several motivations.

Politically, "reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonization in many ways" (Smith, 2012, p. 30). It is not uncommon to hear Palestinians—whether refugees unable to exercise their right of return, noncitizens under the longest military occupation in modern history, or second-class Israeli citizens—speak of the "ongoing Nakba" in their communities. The 1948 Nakba is ongoing today because the crimes that accompanied the establishment of the state of Israel are yet to be accounted for and because the Nakba is the marker of the beginning of Israeli settler-colonial control of Palestine that today subjects all Palestinians to different systems of settler-colonial rule (or exclusion, in the case of the refugees expelled beyond Palestine) depending on when their communities were conquered (Pappe, 2004). It is this past/present Nakba, as told by Palestinians expelled beyond the borders of historic Palestine to Syria in 1948 and their descendents, that I set out to explore, within the broader goal of reclaiming and decolonizing a Palestinian past and a present that continues to be violently subjugated, uprooted and erased with the complicity of the United States and European Union states in particular. This exploration, however, first passed through the epistemic coloniality of the academies of these same states.

Before: Colonizing Epistemologies

In underscoring the historical and contemporary relationship between the coloniality of global power and knowledge, Indigenous and decolonial theorists and activists have long debunked the myth of "a Truthful universal knowledge that covers up . . . who is speaking as well as the geo-political and body-political epistemic location in the structures of colonial power/knowledge from which the subject speaks" (Grosfoguel, 2011). However, far from being accepted in universities today, researchers who reject these colonizing epistemological starting points encounter resistance whose goal is to ultimately uphold these epistemologies. From the formulation of a research question, to the choice of research epistemologies and methodologies, and all the way to our theoretical frameworks, the resistance we encounter in the academy underscores the way in which the academy continues to be implicated in "normative" research epistemologies that are designed for an alleged "universal" researcher embarking on researching an "other." The "universality" of this researcher, his epistemologies and "others" are historically and politically constituted through the European colonizers' will to power/knowledge and this will's "others" (Moreton-Robinson, 2004).

Once translated into research methodologies, this epistemological grounding brings to bear on the researched "a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power" (Smith, 2012, p. 44). Thus, research is far from an apolitical and ahistorical activity; it occurs within a set of historical, political, and social relations of power. However, these power relations are encountered differently by those of us who are historically and politically positioned, and crucially, resist our construction as well as the construction of the subjects (rather than objects) of our research as the "other" of these epistemologies. The researchers in questions are therefore those who are structurally positioned as Patricia Hill Collins' (1986, 2009) "outsiders within,"[1] or to take it in another, albeit related, direction, the "colonized within."

The sphere of the academy itself, rather than the communities that we set out to research, is therefore the first place where our research becomes entangled in the coloniality of power/knowledge, impacting its conceptualization, formulation, and eventually, the kinds of knowledges we come to produce. During the early formulation of a research proposal as a graduate student who intended to embark on her doctoral research, I grounded this proposal in an ontological insistence on the importance of the Nakba for the Palestinian past and colonized present, guided by the assumption that the researcher is part and parcel, rather than mythically separate, from her research. I was met by, *inter alia*, questions of the lack of "sources" which could prove

this. There is an irony, grounded in a colonizing epistemological premise, in my inability to write of Palestinian third-generation embodied understandings of the Nakba without the academic practice of "sourcing" on my behalf. The overriding of my ability to speak of the Nakba through "sourcing" is therefore part and parcel of an epistemology devised to research "others," an epistemology that I would also presumably be expected to partake in as I treated Palestinian refugees in Syria as objects, rather than subjects, of history and memory. The subjects remain in the university, in Europe and in those who could speak on behalf of Palestinians.

Upholding colonizing research epistemologies designed for researching "others" through various informal, material, and discursive practices of power in the academy is possible because the academy is implicated in the historical and contemporary coloniality of power/knowledge. The entanglement of the academy in the political status quo of the states from within which it operates also means that the overarching coloniality of power/knowledge unfolds within the academy itself. This takes place through various practices that reinforce these power relations and that are advanced by academics eager to maintain the epistemological status quo of their institutions via knowledge claims on the colonized. These practices at times also manifest in these self-proclaimed spokespersons for the colonized others whose spokespersonship is itself discursively colonizing and objectifying, as demonstrated by asking those "others" to "source" their own lived histories and experiences. It can also be seen in informal material practices of power, like when those spokespersons keep those "others" capable of disrupting their knowledge claims through their conscious body-political positioning that inverts the subject-object relationship at bay, ensuring that they have no point of entry into the academy, and only allowing for the entry of those who engage in sanctioned epistemologies and research practices (Mihesuah & Wilson, 2002).

Ultimately, when asked to "source" and thus "prove" my own lived experience, a category of a "universal" researcher (with the authority to know, and speak on behalf of, an other) as the normative unmarked position of knowledge production on Palestinians was not only assumed, but also, reinforced. It is from within these epistemological locations—of both the assumed researcher, and the researched as objects rather than subjects of knowledge—that knowledge production on colonized and stateless Palestinians takes place, and consequently as we shall see, truth claims about people's lives are made. Whether powerful academic gate-keepers who uphold these colonizing epistemologies, and through upholding them reinforce colonial relationships of power both within and without the academy, occupy the "universal" category of the presumed researcher is irrelevant as this category and its related epistemologies are historically and politically constructed.

Somewhere in between the formulation of a research proposal and my actual final defense of one, I also met resistance to my lack of use of "theory." This resistance was largely based on an understanding of theory as "Theory." By this, I mean the practice of referring to and paying homage to what is usually dead European men, the only "Philosophers" that count as such, the backbone of the colonial idea of "the history of human civilization as a trajectory that departed from a state of nature and culminated in Europe" (Quijano, 2000, p. 542). In this trajectory, the colonized are, by virtue of nature rather than domination, at the other end of this onward march of history. Theory used in this gate-keeping way is not an apolitical or distant intellectual exercise, but a way in which to reinforce an intellectual class hierarchy in the academy (hooks, 1991), and with it, a colonial and Eurocentric "ego-politics of knowledge" (Grosfoguel, 2011).

My lack of use of Theory was justified through an understanding of theory as emanating from everyday lived experiences and lives (Stanley & Wise, 1993), the foregrounding of the researcher as part of, and not separate to, her research and knowledge claims that would lead to theorizing, and the research communities as therefore a place of conversation rather than discovery (Haraway, 1988, 1991). These different understandings of theory, and the resistance to theorizing that does not make the necessary theoretical "nods" is telling of the way in which the mainstreaming of critical—let alone decolonial—epistemologies and research practices is far from an accomplished goal. The advancement of epistemologies and research methodologies with roots in European imperialism and colonialism, are practices that are still alive and well in "our" universities. They are advanced through a web of power relations that are part of the coloniality of power/knowledge with a long and ongoing history of "research through imperial eyes" (Smith, 2012, p. 58).

This specific understanding of "theory," which continues to form an important part of graduate students' academic rites of passage, is yet another gate-keeping academic practice through which exclusionary and hierarchal colonizing epistemologies are guarded, punishing those that do not confirm by assessing how "thick" or "thin" our theory is (hooks, 1991). Those of us who intend to research the colonized or stateless others from within imperialist states' academies while upholding decolonizing commitments have a decided disadvantage. This disadvantage sheds light on the colonial power relations within the academy insofar as the academy privileges colonizing epistemologies that embody assumptions about the "universal" researcher for whom these epistemologies are designed, and the relationship of this presumed universal researcher to the researched other as an object of knowledge.

Another important point to linking the coloniality of power/knowledge in the world to the academy is related to

the colonizing knowledge that comes to be eventually produced (Grosfoguel, 2012). Given the topic of my research, the relationship between the question of the kinds of knowledges that come to be produced manifested itself most clearly through the resistance to my formulation of the history of the Nakba as lived and therefore denied rather than contested. Those of us whose families were dispossessed in 1948 do not, and cannot, claim that our violent dispossession is a point of contention. For us, what is contentious is the ongoing contestation of 1948, especially when compared with atrocities that are circulated as "sacrosanct" in the academy. The Nakba is only contentious when one aligns herself with the Israeli state that continues to contest what it wrought upon Palestinians in 1948, and its Western backers, who continue to sanction Israeli settler-colonialism in Palestine today.

The academy is therefore implicated, insofar as Palestine and the ongoing Nakba in particular are concerned, in the colonial-sanctioning status quo of imperialist states and their allies from within which it operates. This colonial-sanctioning status quo, as I have been arguing, also translates within the academy through an internal economy of power that silences colonized voices and histories, Palestinian or otherwise (Abu-Saad, 2008). Finally, it is most forcefully encountered by researchers who consciously set out on a counterknowledge endeavor grounded in decolonial commitments and epistemologies.

These encounters with different kinds of power-enforcing and policing mechanisms in the academy shed light on one facet of the research process, the one that unfolds "before" the research itself, although clearly, the research does unfold to all intents and purposes in this "before." Thus, the site of the formulation of the research implicates our research with certain epistemological, political, and ideological assumptions about who is carrying out the research, how the research is to be carried out, the historical and political referents and conceptual frameworks of the research, for what purpose the research is intended for, and the relationship of the researcher to the researched.

A commitment to decolonizing research means paying attention to what happens "before" the research as an inherent part of the research process, taking into account the structural mechanisms embedded in the academy that guard and reinforce colonizing epistemologies that presume an unmarked universal position that masks its own colonial economy of power through disavowing it, and is anything but anti-oppressive for the colonized and stateless that we set out to research. The encounters with the academy's web of power relations and the implications that these encounters have on our research are further compounded by our encounters in the communities we set out to research, whether ours or not, and thus of the very conditions that make knowledge production itself possible.

During: Searching for the Nakba

Before my arrival in Syria, I spent much time considering the insider/outsider relationship of the researcher to those she researches (Altorki & El-Solh, 1988), wondering on which side of the divide I would fall given that, although I identified as a Palestinian woman, I was not of the community in Syria. This early attempt to foresee my positionality, and the way it would impact my encounters and the conversations that I would have in the community, proved to be short-sighted. Thinking in terms of insiders/outsiders, regardless where one sits, as I would come to learn, overlooks the coloniality of power in the world and the impact that this has on the structural relationships of power in the "field." These relationships are part and parcel of any researcher's arrival, indeed the very ability to arrive in "a field" from imperialist centers of power and their allies. All the more so when this arrival is to communities that continue to be colonized or stateless as a direct or result of these powers, as is the case with the Palestinian refugee community in Syria.

Thus, the insider/outsider dichotomy as a dichotomy proved to be fictive because it ignores the political agency of actors in the communities in which we carry out our research—who are actors, in more than one sense of the word, rather than the more passive and highly problematic designation of "informants." It also overlooks the ways in which they position the researcher as an insider and as an outsider, and how this positioning takes place within the context of the coloniality of the overarching historical and political parameters of the numerous encounters that come to constitute our research.[2] This directly impacts the kind of conversation that the researcher is enabled to have in the communities in which we literally search and re-search, and this conversation's subsequent repackaging as a finished product for academic consumption back in the academy.

During my research, various community actors and research participants at times positioned and qualified me as an insider, and at other times, positioned and qualified me as an outsider, strategies which served to address the unequal power relations that were inherent in my arrival from Ireland, and thus the different "audiences" which I was seen to encapsulate (also intersected by other cleavages such as place of origin in Palestine, my family name and relations, class, gender, age and so forth). For example, a week into my arrival in Syria, I was at a dinner in an upmarket suburb of the capital where I was received as an "insider" and mixed with the geographically dispersed Palestinian literati class. At the same time, while I was received as an insider during that dinner, during a follow up conversation with a dinner attendee, the importance of my research project was affirmed by associating it with the importance of getting the Palestinian message "out there" (Europe, the "West"). Here, not only was my outsiderness vis-à-vis the

presumed audience of my research emphasized, but follow-up contacts were given to me on this basis, ultimately impacting the conversation that I was enabled to carry out in the community and the knowledge claims that I could eventually make as a result.

The researcher who arrived from Europe was therefore seen as able to convey the Palestinian Nakba to a Europe that continues to deny the catastrophic outcome of the establishment of the state of Israel for Palestinians, and a Europe that sanctions our ongoing statelessness and colonial reality. The perceived need to convey the message is itself telling of the power relations from where I had come—the imperialist centers of power and upholders of the colonial and neocolonial status quo in the (Arab) world—and to where I had come—the Palestinian six-decade old stateless reality with which these powers are complicit. Moreover, I was given "access" underwritten by these historically and politically grounded realities, which subsequently allowed me to meet and interview people under circumstances conditioned by them.

Thus, I was not discovering a "truth," whatever that means, but rather, I was engaged in the co-production of a truth implicated in the overarching relations of power between where I had come from and to where I had come to, and between my own negotiation as a simultaneous insider and as an outsider within a particular historical and political moment. The resultant encounters and conversations that I had in the community cannot be "reflected" away even by the most "reflexive" researcher of all to arrive at some "truth" when making subsequent knowledge claims on Palestinian lives. Reflexivity, as Donna Haraway (1997) has noted, "has been much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, simply displaces the same elsewhere, setting up the worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and the really real" (p. 16). She suggests switching the optical metaphor altogether to "diffraction," knowledge as diffraction patterns which result from, and "record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference" (p. 273). Our "truth" claims can therefore be thought of as a diffraction pattern of the coloniality of power/knowledge, in other words, as a diffracted through the conditions in which our research unfolds. These conditions are a central part of these claims and these claims are partial and always located in historical and political realities.

My simultaneous dis/identification with the Palestinian "here" and its problematic relationship to the colonial- and stateless-sanctioning "there," where the justness of the Palestinian struggle was to be conveyed, raises another set of questions for those of us who carry out research with the stateless and colonized with whom we identify within the context of the coloniality of the power relations that we are structurally positioned in. Although we may be the "colonized within" in the academy, and encounter resistance along the way, we still operate within its context, and are dis/identified with it in our communities. In addition, our knowledge claims do eventually circulate within this institutional context, and community actors and research participants are acutely aware of this. In my case, this translated into multiple and at times contradictory dis/identifications with the Palestinian stateless "here" and this stateless-sanctioning "there."

For example, during the early days of the search and the re-search for memories of the Nakba, I was given the contact details of a factory owner who employed Palestinian refugees from some of the remoter camps in relation to the city. These contacts were not only given to me in view of the message that I would presumably carry through my research vis-à-vis my coming from, or access to, the colonial-sanctioning outside. They were also given to me so as to enable me to meet and interview a cross-section of Palestinian refugees "who have lived through hardship." Given the perceived primacy of the Palestinian struggle for liberation, and the assigning to my research the status of a conduit that could convey the ways in which Palestinian refugees' lives have been affected by Israel's denial of the right of return to usurped homes and lands, a "suffering" voyeurism was superimposed on my researcher role. This has very important implications for my "truth" claims and any truth claims on Palestinians, especially pertinent as the realities of colonialism and statelessness impact what is often prioritized by members of various Palestinian communities, directly impacting the kinds of knowledge that are then circulated as truths for consumption in Anglophone academic circles.

Thus, our qualification as researchers by community actors and research participants has a direct impact on the truths that we are to make and establish in the centers of power that sanction our research participants' ongoing colonized and stateless realities, and are therefore truths which are in many ways the result of the relationship between Palestinian communities to these very powers. In this particular instance, the truth that was prioritized, in view of the ongoing Palestinian national struggle for liberation and the refugees' inability to exercise their right of return, was one of suffering and hardship. The qualification of the conversation that I was to have was ultimately made with the presumed intention of converting those who only see Palestinians as filtered through the dominant Zionist prism in the "there" from where I had come. The point is that to acknowledge the way in which this truth is conditioned by ongoing colonial realities is to begin imagining what a decolonizing research practice may begin to look like; to take this truth outside its historical and political context is to do the exact opposite.

Given the nature of the series of encounters that come to constitute our research, some researchers do have more room to maneuver than others. While in Syria, I was not

chaperoned from one interview to another or from one remote refugee camp to the another, as researchers who are visibly identified as "Western" are, although our belonging raises another set of issues. The point is that those of us who do belong to the communities we research under such unequal power relationships have more room to maneuver within the boundaries that these qualifications allow us, impacting the knowledge claims that we are able to make.

With that said, even the room to maneuver is fraught with all kinds of difficulties, as I would come to learn through several encounters. The most forceful of these was when my association with the "out there," and this out there's complicity in the Palestinians' ongoing colonized reality, intersected and further compounded by the cleavages of class, gender, age, and so forth, took place. This happened, for example, when I met and interviewed a man who had survived the Tantura village massacre at the age of 14 in 1948.[3] The more I tried to move beyond the message he was tailoring to where I had come from by coating his memory of the past and the Nakba in contemporary Palestinian national language and rhetoric, the more irritated and stubborn he grew in his message. After the interview, he told me that while "they" sent me to ask about the Nakba, I should be asking "why they sent me" in the first place. After protesting that no one had sent me, and that the whole research idea was my own initiative, he used the opportunity to turn my qualified insiderness on its head in order to relate a specific message which was tailored to the "outside" by asking me to tell them that we didn't leave out of our own accord (something that was repeatedly emphasized in the interview). The "we" in this message included me; the intended audience, however, was where I had come from. This statement captured the spirit in which he had earlier related his memories of 1948 in our interview, and many interviews like it, that I would later return to in order to write about memories of the Nakba.

Thus, the qualification of the researcher is contingent on many factors, including the extent to which community actors and research participants utilize, converse, or enable our research through their dis/identification with the overarching coloniality of the historically and politically located encounters that we have with them. These dis/identifications are partly, but not only, ontological; they are also historical and political, as when research participants give any researcher information and access, but on their own terms, and in view of the power relations that are part and parcel of our arrival in various communities. These realities implicate researchers that identify with the groups that they research, even though we may have more room to maneuver within constraints which are set out by those we encounter in different communities. These power relations can neither be reflected nor written away during the production of a text; they must be recognized as a fundamental component of our very knowledge claims. Thus, the "truths" that we consequently come to write are diffracted through these relations, grounded in the coloniality of power "during" research, and in the coloniality of knowledge in the "before" of research as well. As such, they are entangled in many other things that constitute them as truths.

To begin the task of imagining what a decolonizing research practice during the colonial and stateless Palestinian present may look like, it is imperative to begin by acknowledging the way in which researchers who arrive from the colonial-sanctioning centers of powers to Palestinians' colonized and stateless present are qualified and positioned by community actors and research participants alike in ways conditioned by these colonial and stateless realities. Once community members' political and historical agency is recognized, it is not enough to "reflect" on the way in which this agency is exercised, and to then go on with research as normal, with researchers leaving the communities they research with historically and politically located conversations that they later repackage and polish as the truth from a universal and unmarked position of authority, power, and privilege. Rather, the point is that the truth we produce is entangled in many other "truths" as well as things other than the "truth," conditioned by ongoing violent realities of colonialism and statelessness, the agency of community actors and research participants, and the embodiedness of all knowledge claims. When our truths are situated as such, a decolonizing research practice can be imagined through asking the question of what truths do we come to produce given the encounters in the field and the formulation, and sometimes successful or unsuccessful defense of our research, in the academies of states that sanction the Palestinians' ongoing colonized reality. This also includes the moment of the production of academic truths, the making of texts, and the representation of Palestinian lives.

After: Representing Palestinian Lives

How does the "before" and "during" of the research come to bear on the "after," or the production of a text, the final inscription of the truth produced as part of, as argued, epistemologies and research methodologies with roots in European imperialism and colonialism? How do the encounters with stateless and colonized communities from within the academies of imperialist states that sanction the ongoing colonized realities of these communities realize themselves in these texts? Furthermore, given the various levels of "selection and reduction" (Riessman, 2002, p. 249) that the production of a text involves, how does the representation of Palestinian lives take place, especially considering that the subaltern object of knowledge, when constructed as such, is made to speak by the researcher (Spivak, 1988)?

From devising certain questions because they are acceptable to the political status quo from which research on

Palestinian lives takes place, to the employment of colonizing epistemologies and research practices that are devised to research a colonized other while retaining the authorial and discursive power as the "universal" omnipotent and omnipresent yet invisible researcher, to the real and problematic encounters in the "field" where ethnographic research is to unfold by turning Palestinians into objects of knowledge for later academic consumption that ignores the overarching coloniality of researchers' encounters, the conditions under which research on Palestinians takes place continues to unfold both interpretatively and materially during the production of a text.

On an interpretive level, "the scholar as interpretive authority for the culture groups he/she studies" (Borland, 1991, p. 64) has long been questioned as part of the so-called "crises of representation" (see, for example, Clifford & Marcus, 2010). Feminists have long explored ways to address this, including by bringing in research participants as part of the analysis process and acknowledging the coauthorship nature of the final text (Gluck & Patai, 1991). Indigenous scholars have taken this further by underscoring that the knowledge produced must belong to the community, and it is to the community that the researcher is firstly and fore mostly accountable. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has argued in her seminal *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, the crucial questions to be asked are as follows: "Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will results be disseminated?" (p. 10).

The questioning of the researcher's "expertise" during the analysis process, as well as the extent of the researcher's ownership of a text that is produced through the writing of other people's lives, are essentially interpretive issues which are yet to seep the language—let alone practices—of researchers engaged in research on Palestinians. Similarly, being positioned as an outsider as well as an insider in no way gives researchers expertise or authority, even though sanctioned epistemologies and research practices tend to encourage the role of an expert or "the role of an 'official insider voice'" (Smith, 2012, p. 140), all the more so when these voices do not challenge or resist these epistemologies.

More worryingly, Palestinians are interpretively extant in texts in a much more material, though, unacknowledged way. Some have referred to this as Palestinians serving a proletarian function in a scholarly multinationalism, whereby the objects of knowledge are brought into the research process beyond being mere objects of knowledge, but as cheap laborers that do the unacknowledged job of devising questionnaires, transcribing, translating, essentially coauthoring, or perhaps even authoring, the finished product (Tamari, 1995). This reality is yet to be acknowledged—beyond an anonymous and general acknowledgment to the many who made the research possible—bearing in mind the internal economy and politics of acknowledgements as acknowledgements, impacting who and what gets mentioned and who and what doesn't. While it is common "corridor talk" that researchers who work in Palestinian refugee communities can easily and do avail themselves of this cheap pool of proletarian research labor in refugee camps and different communities, even more worrying is the cynicism expressed by Palestinian colleagues engaged in research on their own communities. Some note, for example, that researchers working in certain refugee camps are all writing the same things because they are all using the same "key informants," and their varied proletarian services, which are implicitly all over the (duplicate) finished products. These comments were made within the context of underscoring how certain Palestinian camps, especially in Lebanon, have become the most "over researched" places on earth. As Smith (2012) has noted in relation to similar claims in indigenous communities, the truth of such a remark is unimportant, "what does need to be taken seriously is the sense of weight and unspoken cynicism about research that the message conveys" (p. 3). Another issue that needs to be taken seriously, as a recent study on the "over-researching" of one Lebanese Palestinian refugee camp has underscored, are the harmful material, social and even psychological consequences of research in Palestinian refugee communities (Nayel, 2013; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013).

Such hidden and unethical material and analytical research practices, I contend, are only possible because of the ways in which sanctioned epistemologies and research practices in "our" academies encourage research production on colonized and stateless as others for consumption as objects of knowledge. This is further compounded by, as I argued, the encounters in Palestinian communities that unfold within the coloniality of power in the world and the implications of this on the arrival of researchers from imperialist centers of powers to Palestinian refugee communities. On a material level, and in the "after" of the research, this reality manifests itself in the privileged place and position that these researchers' occupy in the colonial scholarly multinationalism when producing a text. The point is that such epistemological starting points, the overarching coloniality of the encounter in the field, and the material conditions that feed into the production of a text are bound to produce colonizing research on Palestinians during the analysis and the writing that go into the production of a text.

Beyond Palestinians' hidden proletarian labor, this can also translate in an ongoing Eurocentricism that deems it acceptable and possible to make claims on Palestinian lives without references to the Arabic literature of Palestinians or indeed having knowledge of Arabic. That this knowledge is still firmly based on the Western canon (JanMohamed &

Lloyd, 1990), where the universal God-like invisible researcher and the subject of Theory is situated, is one thing; that such an approach does not take seriously "the epistemic perspective/cosmologies/insights of critical thinkers from the Global South thinking from and with subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual/spaces and bodies" (Grosfoguel, 2011) while claiming to be in solidarity with these bodies is another.

Furthermore, this can translate into choosing anonymity to "protect informants," a strategy which is seldom explained, deeply embedded in understandings of confidentiality and "informed consent" that may have nothing to do with research participants but with protecting the researcher herself (Smith, 2012). Finally, this can also translate into employing a limited reflexivity as a strategy with which to reinforce the authorial position and power of the researcher, and crucially, the universality and unmarkedness of this position. This is the same position which is conveniently and benevolently "giving voice to the voiceless," a position that cannot reflect away the coloniality of power/knowledge in the "before," "during," and "after" of research and knowledge claims on Palestinians. In the final analysis, these knowledge claims continue to be presented as universal, a claim on and at times even a critique of any representation of Palestinian lives. In short, the project of imagining a decolonizing practice during the Palestinian colonized and stateless present is compounded, rather than made easier, through the production of texts on Palestinian lives.

Conclusion: Decolonizing Research on Palestinians?

Perhaps the easiest part of imagining what a decolonizing research practices on the colonized may look like is to begin in the "before" of research with discarding colonizing epistemologies for a critical epistemology that is committed to decolonization. It has been argued that there are three important components in moving toward a decolonial epistemology. These include, first "a broader canon of thought than simply the Western canon (including the Left Western canon)" (Grosfoguel, 2012); second, a rejection of the abstract universal colonizing ego-politics of knowledge for "a critical dialogue between diverse critical epistemic/ethical political projects towards a pluriversal as opposed to a universal world" (Grosfoguel, 2012); and, finally, the epistemological alliance with, as well as learning from, critical decolonial thinkers and activists from the Global South (Grosfoguel, 2012).

A critical epistemological starting point in alliance with decolonial theorists and activists, however, does not suffice to address the coloniality of power/knowledge as it impacts the "during" of research, or the arrival of researchers' from imperialist states to research colonized and stateless communities. This epistemology must therefore be accompanied by, in the first instance, a research agenda that "is not close to decolonial struggles located outside of the academic realm, nor in solidarity with them . . . [but] existentially and politically committed to decolonization" (Decoloniality Europe, 2013). Within the context of Palestine, this means an existential and political commitment to the Palestinians' anticolonial movements and aspirations, a central part of which is a commitment to the right of return, an end to the occupation and equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel (Barghouti, 2011).

While such an existential *raison d'être* of research will in no way diminish the realities of the coloniality of power/knowledge as they unfold during the researcher's encounters in colonized and stateless communities, it does, however, move toward a critical approach to the "belief in the ideal that benefiting 'mankind' is indeed a primary outcome of scientific research which is as much a reflection of ideology as it is of academic training" (Smith, 2012, p. 2). And within this context, it is instructive to refer to the recently adopted "Charter of Decolonial Research Ethics" (Decoloniality Europe, 2013), the outcome of a network of mostly Europe-based activists and academics. The charter describes itself as "principally a tool for decolonial social movements to use in their interaction with researchers interested in working with them, but can also be used by decolonial researchers" (2013). Thus, it is neither researchers nor research that will decolonize the coloniality of power/knowledge in the world; rather, the researcher "must align herself with these struggles, remembering that her principal site for struggle—the site where she can contribute—is the academic realm" (2013).

Rejecting colonizing epistemologies, and mitigating the coloniality of power/knowledge as it unfolds in the Palestinian refugee communities through the researcher's and her research's political commitment to Palestinian decolonization, is therefore a beginning, rather than an end, of the move toward decolonizing research on Palestinians. A critical awareness that the knowledge produced on Palestinian refugees is a diffraction of the coloniality of the world and the realties of the researchers' arrival from the imperialist centers of power needs to be realized beyond a mere awareness in the "during" of research in the colonized and stateless communities. It is in these communities, and it is in dialogue with the subjects of research, that researchers need to open up their research to questioning the motives and politics of the very research question, the relevance of the research and who claims this relevance, the benefits that the researched community will gain from the knowledge, the negative outcomes on the community and ways of their elimination, the accountability of the researcher, and above all, the researcher's inherent "right" to knowledge or ability to portray "truths" (Smith, 2012). These questions, which should begin in dialogue with the participants of research, who ultimately have the final word, need to continue in the

"after" of research. And in this "after," in which the researcher continues her dialogue with the subjects of research, the researcher must never lose sight of the fact that the decolonization of Palestine is the first and last priority of her research.

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2. The recently adopted "Charter of Decolonial Ethics" is unequivocal about "the false discussion about the researcher's nearness or distance to the people she studies. To discuss proximity (solidarity) or distance to research subjects is a privilege reserved to the researcher and covers over the real concern, which regards the researcher's own political positioning in relation to white identity and the white political field." See Decoloniality Europe (2013).
3. The Tantura village massacre is 1 of approximately 70 documented massacres perpetuated by Zionist militias and the incipient Israeli army during the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948. See Jawad (2007) and "The Tantura Massacre" (2001).

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