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**CO-PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN  
FORCED MIGRATION STUDIES  
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS  
OF CHALLENGES AND THE  
POSSIBILITIES FOR THE EMERGENCE  
OF BEST PRACTICES**

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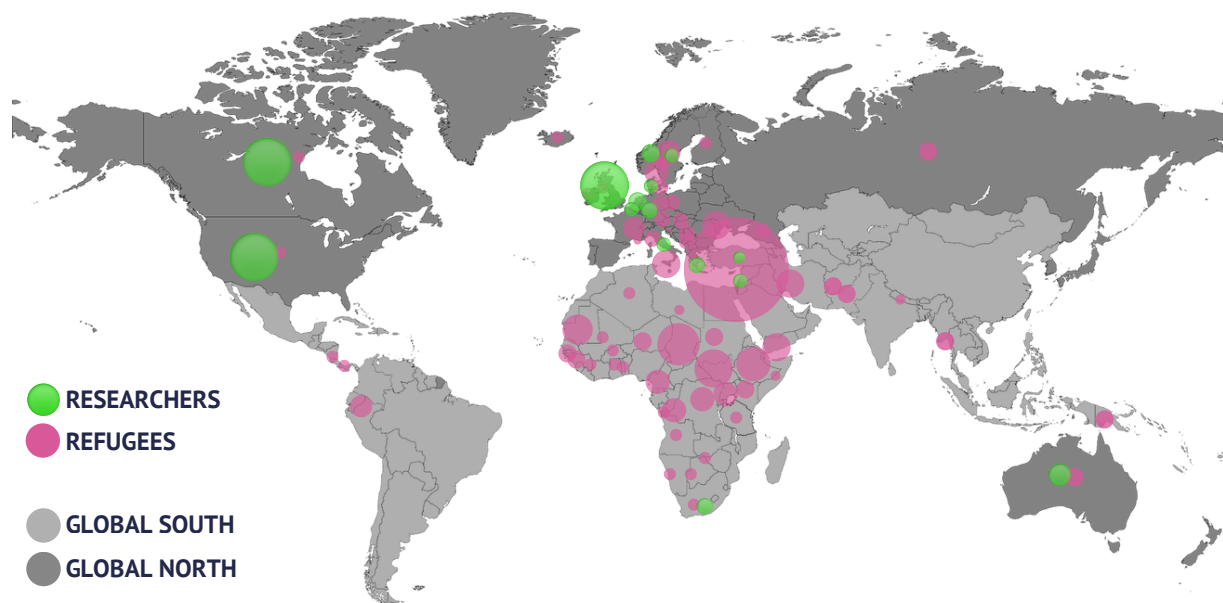
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although 80% of the world's refugees are hosted in the global South, the majority of research in forced migration studies is produced and disseminated by researchers and institutions in the global North. The asymmetry of power in knowledge production is not limited to the North-South divide, but it also occurs between researchers and their research subjects (refugees). This type of hegemonic scholarship plagues all aspects of the research process, from the choice of methodology and research questions to the publication and dissemination of findings, and reflects the privileged position of global North scholars. Given the geopolitical context within which refugees find themselves situated, addressing these challenges is especially urgent as refugees, impacted by both displacement and immobility, are the most impacted by the consequences of policy decisions, yet are furthest removed from the processes of policy creation.

This paper attempts to demonstrate how understandings of the temporal, spatial, and embodied aspects of displacement and forced migration may be enhanced through a renewed approach to research that excavates hidden agency and power hierarchies, as well as the challenges and limitations of pursuing such diverse methods to knowledge production. It conducts an interdisciplinary analysis of knowledge production, drawing on the theoretical insights of development studies, feminist studies, and Indigenous studies to make visible structures of power and oppressive practices within forced migration research. It examines what sorts of best practices are available and makes recommendations for how they can be wielded to navigate and dismantle the dominant structures of knowledge production in forced migration research.



# INTRODUCTION

Over 80% of the world's refugees are hosted within states in the global South, yet a majority of research in forced migration studies is produced and disseminated by researchers and institutions in the global North. Despite the sharp turn towards North-South research partnerships in the last few decades, scholars like Bradley (2007), Landau (2012), and Alexander et al. (2022) have thoroughly documented that these partnerships not only struggle to respond effectively to the perspectives and priorities of Southern actors, but the resulting scholarship often reproduces the policy paradigm of containment as favoured by global North states. These scholars suggest that the co-production of knowledge within forced migration studies is impaired by ongoing systemic issues related to the global division of wealth and labour, which creates geopolitical power asymmetries, not only between Northern and Southern partners, but also between researchers and their research subjects: refugees. These asymmetries plague all aspects of the research process, from the choice of methodology and research questions to the publication and dissemination of findings, reflecting the privileged position of global North scholars and the influence of donor funding policies (Bradley 2007; Banerjee 2012; Chimni 1998).

The inability of North-South research partnerships to overcome these asymmetries has led to a deep disconnect between the

actors setting the research agenda and the places where knowledge is extracted. Addressing these challenges is especially urgent given the geopolitical context within which refugees find themselves situated: intractable situations of protracted displacement, hosted by states in the global South with insufficient resources and funding, and constrained by global North policies of containment. Refugees, impacted by both displacement and immobility, are the most affected by the consequences of policy decisions on a daily basis, yet are furthest removed from the processes of policy creation.

Questions of who produces knowledge, for whom knowledge is produced, and what constitutes knowledge are not exclusive to forced migration studies. For instance, feminist studies critique knowledge production through the lens of power and positionality, arguing for a shift away from universalist state-centric analyses and towards an embodied approach to understanding the intersections of power and space (Hyndman 2011). By exploring how epistemology, boundaries, relationships and the researcher's own situatedness inform decisions about research questions, methodologies, methods for data collection, and the choice of data itself, feminist studies encourage critical self-reflexivity (Ackerly and True 2008). Likewise, Indigenous studies critiques notions of "legitimacy" and "hierarchy" that structure the relationship

between Western/colonial knowledge and Indigenous knowledge and offers an understanding of knowledge that is grounded within relationships to and with place, humans, and non-human species (Akena 2012). Indigenous studies also challenges the imperialist approach to knowledge production, whereby knowledge and data about Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized persons are extracted from their communities to advance hegemonic racist imperial and colonial interests (Ahmed 2022).

Accordingly, the paper asks: what can we learn from development studies, feminist studies, and Indigenous studies about the issue of knowledge production in forced migration studies? What best practices do these fields offer for scholars of forced migration and how can they be wielded to navigate the dominant structures of knowledge production in forced migration research?

Which processes and practices can best support the cultivation of knowledge that is highly inclusive, interdisciplinary, and integrated? In response, this paper conducts an interdisciplinary analysis of knowledge production, drawing on the theoretical insights of development studies, feminist studies, and Indigenous studies to make visible structures of power and oppressive practices and values within forced migration research. It offers an interdisciplinary set of best practices that can enable scholars of forced migration studies to confront power

symmetries and identify its abuse in knowledge claims, with a look towards transcending dominant structures and making space for refugee-led knowledge production. The paper also outlines some of the challenges and limitations of pursuing such diverse methods of knowledge production.

This paper demonstrates how understandings of forced migration may be enhanced through a renewed approach to research that excavates hidden agency and power hierarchies. For instance, critically engaging with privilege reveals how relations of domination and subordination are perpetuated through acts of speech. By applying this inquiry to forced migration research, it clarifies that an invitation for refugees to participate at the table is not enough to overcome asymmetrical power relations. Northern researchers, donors, and states still retain their privileged position in choosing whose voice is included, how it is used, and to what effect. As part of my inquiry, I will be drawing upon refugee knowledge in non-peered reviewed sources as an initial attempt to decolonize my own method of conducting research, and in recognition of persisting barriers to including such knowledge within academia, whereby emphasis is placed on “legitimate” research as peer-reviewed and published in journals. I also do not purport to speak for the refugees whose knowledge I include in my work. Rather, I hope to give space to their knowledge in whatever forms they are expressed, including their strategic silences.

# 1. DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN FORCED MIGRATION STUDIES

To begin, I will diagnose the problem of knowledge production within forced migration studies, using the framing questions of who produces knowledge, for whom knowledge is produced, and what constitutes knowledge, to make visible structures of power and oppressive practices. Three sets of issues emerge from this diagnosis:

- ✦ (1) ongoing institutional and structural barriers to the [7] equitable participation of Southern scholars;
- ✦ (2) the hierarchical nature of knowledge production that positions Northern scholars as “experts” and “knowers” of forced migration; and
- ✦ (3) extractive and imperialist approaches within the research process itself.

## 1.1. INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

North-South research partnerships are viewed by academics, research institutions, and funding bodies in the global North as the solution to increasing the legitimacy, efficacy, and responsiveness of the refugee regime. It is suggested that these partnerships would level the scholarly playing field by enabling marginalized partners to shape the global research agenda, improving research quality, and building Southern capacity (Landau 2012).

However, the literature suggests that these partnerships are unable to overcome Northern dominance due to a confluence of institutional and structural barriers that sustain power asymmetries and ensure knowledge is produced by and for global North interests. For instance, Landau (2012) writes that regimes of research funding expose asymmetries between the North and South, such that international donors are unwilling to fund Southern universities due to unjust fears of corruption or poor quality outputs.

**By requiring centralized financial control and accountability to be held by the Northern partner, donors implicitly establish a hierarchy of power that reinforces Southern dependency and Northern paternalism (Landau 2012). The impact of the funding regime has even more significant implications for the ability of Southern scholars to pursue independent research when considering that many global South states have limited resources to support research and research partnership funding does not generate enough revenue for institutional capacity-building (Bradley 2007; Banerjee 2012).**

What impact does this funding regime have on the knowledge being produced and disseminated? If Southern actors are beholden to donor policies that require partnering with [8] Northern organizations to access funding, how can we ensure that the knowledge is reflective of Southern priorities?

The literature suggests that global North scholars intellectually reinforce aid agencies and governments by structuring the research agenda according to their policy priorities. Not only do donors influence the research agenda by earmarking how funds are to be used and the goals of research programmes, but they also reinforce Southern insecurity in accessing long-term and stable funding by making their legitimacy and credibility dependent upon partnerships with Northern scholars and institutions (Bradley 2007). Landau's point that "knowledge is always the product of hierarchies and domination" encapsulates a core issue with North-South partnerships, which is that the underlying dominance of the global North distorts research agendas as knowledge is produced by the global North in response to the concerns and interests of these states (2012, 556). The relative absence of Southern voices in international policy circles and leading scholarly journals like the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, for example, speaks to the dominance of the global North in setting the global academic agenda on forced migration (Shivakoti and Milner 2022).

## 1.2. HIERARCHY OF KNOWLEDGE

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A related consequence of this dominance is that the global North is positioned as the "expert" and "knower" of forced migration, with the global South on the "receiving end" of migration management policies developed in the North, despite a majority of refugees originating from and remaining in the global South (Bradley 2007).

The structural and institutional barriers outlined above with respect to funding and institutional capacities sustain this dynamic, whereby Southern scholars are often limited to generating policy-relevant data on narrowly defined topics, while Northern scholars have greater capacity and autonomy to synthesize, analyze, and theorize (Landau 2012). As Banarjee notes, this does not mean that all research produced in the South is of lower quality. Rather, the "northern gaze" often ignores research done in the South, especially when it is considered to be too political or conflicts with the policy paradigms of global North states (Banerjee 2012). Chimni (1998) has expressed the concern that the UNHCR is steered by global North states to produce knowledge and norms of international behaviour that operationalize their vision of containment. **While North-South partnerships can help global South institutions overcome issues related to underfunding and understaffing, Northern partners nonetheless carry significant weight, value, and influence, especially though the funding regime. The influence of Northern partners and funders calls into question the relevance of the knowledge being produced.**

If research agendas on forced migration are dominated by funding agencies that underestimate Southern capabilities, the research questions will not necessarily reflect the priorities or needs of refugee communities in the global South.

**Moreover, what constitutes legitimate knowledge is also largely defined by the global North, which subsequently impacts how research is produced and disseminated, and the extent to which it is inclusive and reflective of local perspectives.** In their working paper on localized knowledge ecosystems, Alexander et al. argue that adopting a broad definition of “knowledge” is critical as refugee communities do not necessarily produce knowledge in traditional written forms, but through oral history, artwork, performances, and radio shows (2022). For instance, the Za’atari and Azraq refugee camps in Jordan are home to 80,000 Syrian refugees, some of whom partnered with Joel Bergner, a global street artist, to create murals that depict their current plight as refugees, their longing to return to Syria, and their dreams for the future (Bergner). Although these murals enhance understandings of displacement, they are not recognized as legitimate knowledge because of their lack of conformity with academic standards in the global North that privilege “objective” data that is peer-reviewed and published in scholarly journal articles. Integrating more diverse forms of knowledge, however, is critical to ensuring that the perspectives and voices of those affected by forced migration and

displacement are acknowledged and prioritized, and that the resulting solutions are both reflective of local knowledge and accessible to refugee populations.

Yet, the literature suggests that partnerships continue to uphold the dominance of knowledge produced according to Western concepts and standards. Not only is there a disproportionate emphasis on South-North migration, but the frames and concepts through which forced migration is researched and conceptualized are also conditioned by a Eurocentric bias (Shivakoti and Milner 2022). It is not surprising then that the history of migration is largely written from the perspective of global North states, surveys and statistics focus on the nationality of migrants and border crossings, and migration processes and immigration law are heavily shaped by racialized conceptions of citizenship and national identity (Magalhaes and Sumari 2022).

### **1.3. EXTRACTIVE AND IMPERIALIST RESEARCH PRACTICES**

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The inferior positioning of Southern scholars and their research brings to light another set of concerns about the imperialist tendencies still present within forced migration research. For instance, Banerjee (2012) reflects on how Southern researchers often become collaborators in the project of Northern hegemony in good faith by providing access to local populations and gathering data.

**Despite the ability of partnerships to improve professional standards and operational efficiency, they often treat the global South as a “laboratory of the North” for data extraction, while “legitimate” theorization and analysis are in the hands of the North (Zingerli 2010, p. 6). This results in the marginalization of Southern voices and local knowledge as the global South is viewed as empty space in the field of knowledge to be filled with global North thinking and concepts (Chimni 1998).**

Not only is this an imperialist approach to knowledge production, whereby the North is viewed as the validator of legitimate knowledge, but it undermines the agency of affected populations whilst perpetuating the erasure of localized knowledge.

Importantly, these harmful practices are not limited to North-South research partnerships. The literature on forced migration research has yet to fully contend with the role of refugees in knowledge production due to the emphasis on improving North-South research partnerships.

Is it enough to simply partner with Southern actors and conduct field research? Even if Southern priorities dominate the research agenda, what kinds of knowledge are distorted or lost in translation from localized knowledge to academic outputs and policy papers?

There needs to be greater attentiveness to how researchers, even those from the global South, can be both insiders and outsiders in forced migration research, and how the history of refugee research is characterized by exploitation through data mining from communities (Glanville 2022). This exploitation is not always intentional. For instance, Glanville reflects on the Woven Words project, a digital storytelling project that seeks to showcase how common keywords like “refugee”, “border”, “security”, and more, are overused to simplify and homogenize refugee experiences and resulting asylum policies (p. 362). It re-narrates refugee discourse through interviews with fourteen participants with experiential expertise who critique the depoliticization of refugee realities and challenge the spectacularized representations of refugees in media. During the editing process, however, Glanville realized that in trying to match parts of the participants’ narratives to each of the corresponding keywords, the interviewees’ critiques of the words lacked coherence because they were extracted from the complexity of the narratives in which the word had been embedded (Glanville 2022). Thus, forced migration research must be attentive to the ways in which refugee “voices” are (un)intentionally distorted by scholars in pursuit of academic critique.

Moreover, the drive to conduct research on experiences of forced migration and displacement can harm refugees by forcing them to perform certain identities and subjectivities. For instance, Arthere is a well-known artist collective run by displaced Syrian artists in Kadikoy, Istanbul.

As part of their broader research project on labour politics and Syrian refugees in Turkey, Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou (2021) reached out to Nabil, the founder of Arthere, to discuss possibly co-organizing an exhibition on “refugee” artwork. Nabil objected to the categorization and discursive construction of “refugee art” as essentializing loss and displacement, and forcing artists to produce art “on demand” in a way that devalues their labour. The drive to document displacement and loss through art can therefore reproduce hierarchies, rather than challenge them, as complex identities, subjectivities, histories, experiences, and stories become an essentialized and fetishized spectacle for consumption by the Western “gaze”. In fact, Arthere offers artists greater freedom to engage in creative practices that were restricted or suppressed in Syria, which makes it imperative for researchers to consider how their work can make these spaces unsafe or uncomfortable for artists, even when artists do produce work that speaks to sensitive themes like violence, conflict, loss, displacement, and trauma (Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy 2022).

Overall, structural and institutional barriers to equitable participation, the privilege accorded to global North knowledge and analytical frameworks, and imperialist research practices expose the complexity of knowledge production in forced migration studies. Despite the turn towards North-South research partnerships, global North actors and institutions retain great productive power as they are able to create and enforce particular realities through the use of knowledge, discourse, and claims to

legitimacy (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017). However, the ethical dilemmas outlined above demonstrate how analyses of knowledge production should not be limited to North-South dynamics only, as the relationship between researchers and research subjects show similar power asymmetries. In the next section, I will use the theoretical insights of development studies, feminist studies, and Indigenous studies, to unpack these issues in greater detail and build an interdisciplinary analysis of knowledge production.

## 2. CONCEPTUALIZING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

As mentioned above,

the issue of knowledge production is not exclusive to forced migration studies; it has also been interrogated within development studies, feminist studies, and Indigenous studies.

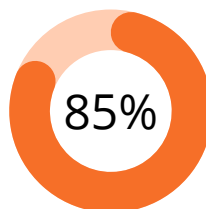
Of course, these disciplines are not analogous to one another nor to forced migration studies; they each arise from distinct historical, social, cultural, economic and political contexts, and work towards explaining particular phenomena that advance unique visions of justice. Despite these differences, issues within forced migration studies are cross-cutting. Transcending the boundaries of conventional approaches and working across disciplines to better understand the challenges with knowledge production is necessary for envisioning transformative change.

### 2.1. DEVELOPMENT STUDIES: GLOBAL SOUTH PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

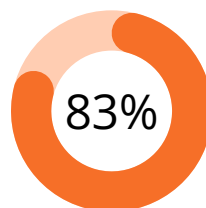
Development studies has increasingly become a multi-disciplinary field concerned with various aspects of social, political, cultural, and economic life. The field emerged in relation to Third World decolonization in the 1950s. Its shift towards North-South research partnerships can help deepen our understanding of knowledge production, particularly with respect to the equitable participation of Southern actors.

Akin to the global refugee regime, the international development regime is sustained by a network of international financial institutions (IFIs), national aid agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), within which development experts and scholars in the global North occupy a discursive space that reinforces their epistemological traditions, forms of knowledge, objectives, and strategies (Saffari 2016; Zingerli 2010). Despite the recent adoption of the language of “inclusion” and “participation” by major IFIs and national aid and development agencies, local knowledge and meaningful participation by Southern actors remain marginal (Saffari 2016).

For instance, Demeter’s (2022) critical empirical analysis of development studies literature finds a lack of diversity in topics, research approaches, and educational/cultural backgrounds. Specifically,



**Demeter (2022) finds that 85% of the leading development studies journals are published at global North locations,**



**and within these journals, approximately 83% of the articles are written by scholars in the global North.**

This imbalance does not mean a lack of diversity amongst scholars in the global North; rather, there is a bias towards academic capital accumulated through education in global North institutions, such that Southern-origin scholars are more likely to be employed by Northern universities on the condition of re-education in the North (Demeter 2022). This situation results in a loss of epistemic diversity as the priorities, perspectives, and academic traditions of the global South are delegitimized and marginalized in favour of the global North's epistemic traditions, methodologies, research questions, and interests. Likewise, the publishing industry tends to reinforce the superiority of Anglo-American academic culture by equating it with social scientific rigour (Demeter 2022). These findings can enhance analyses of equitable participation in the knowledge production of forced migration research by examining how scholars navigate structural and institutional barriers and their perceived trade-offs of crossing the North-South divide in pursuit of scholarly work. Scholars from the global South may experience these barriers differently due to gender, class, nationality, religion, and more, which means that solutions towards more equitable participation by the "global South" must be attentive to these intersectional specificities.

Moreover, analyses of productive power can be enhanced by looking at the problematization of the global North and how "experts" within the development industry proclaim that the "problem" of poverty may be alleviated through "development projects" (Zingerli 2010; Ferguson 1994). Knowledge production in development studies is

criticized for associating progress with modernization policies based on science, positivism, and empiricism, all of which reduce non-European cultures and traditions to a monolithic, static, and primitive status and degrade the importance and legitimacy of local and indigenous sources of knowledge, as well as social, historical, and cultural particularities (Saffari 2016; Ferguson 1994). It is important to note that these Eurocentric accounts of a universal path to development were created within the context of Third World decolonization and are upheld by the neoliberal world order, whereby economic development projects are pursued persistently as the sole solution to social inequities, despite their past failures across the global South (Ferguson 1994). Reviewing this history can help scholars better understand what sustains the productive power of the global North within the discipline, rather than assuming that global South communities have always been passive recipients of global North solutions. **It is also worth investigating international organizations' contributions in the emerging neoliberal world order, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as they played a substantial role in sustaining Eurocentric modernization discourses.** Thus, the global North is not simply a coalition of wealthy states. Rather, Northern productive power is partially sustained through their dominance within global institutions that largely excluded global South states in creating the rules of the international game. The persistence of structural and institutional barriers at the micro-level can be partially explained by these macro-level historical processes and the asymmetries of power that existed between the global North and global South when the refugee regime emerged.

## 2.2. FEMINIST STUDIES: POSITIONALITY AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL HEGEMONY

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Feminist studies critiques knowledge production through the lens of power and positionality, which can enhance analyses of what constitutes “legitimate” knowledge in forced migration studies.

**Historically, gender essentialism and women’s reproductive capacity have been taken as the basis for men’s presumed intellectual superiority, resulting in a hierarchy that excluded women and other marginalized persons from academia and policy circles (Naples 2020).**

A diverse range of feminist traditions have emerged, challenging the ways that knowledge has been constructed in the interests of those in power and knowledge’s claims to be universal and objective (Tickner 2006). For instance, Black feminist thought argues that intersectional epistemology should be central to critiques of social theory and action. Meanwhile, transnational feminism attends to local expressions of feminism and resistance, critiquing the assumption of common patriarchal oppression and analysing the uneven effects of neoliberal globalization, colonialism, and imperialism (Naples 2020). Common amongst these strands is their critique of state-centric analyses and universal and objective knowledge claims.

Similarly, in forced migration studies, knowledge produced in the global North on forced migration is situated in a hierarchy that assumes it to be more “legitimate” and “objective” than local sources. By challenging the epistemic hegemony of the global North in forced migration research, scholars can begin dismantling the myth of difference that dominates the discourse on international migration (Chimni 1998). **The “myth of difference” according to Chimni (1998) is the idea that migration and refugee situations in the global South are fundamentally different than migration and refugee situations in the global North.**

Furthermore, feminist studies view knowledge as situated. Situated knowledge means that what is known and how it is known reflects the situation and perspective of the knower, which is shaped by their lived experience and social location, emotions, attitudes, interests, relationships, beliefs, and worldview. Taha’s (2022) reflections on interviewing Syrian refugee women in Egypt who married Egyptian men as a coping strategy emphasize the importance of acknowledging one’s situatedness, which shapes one’s self-perception and biases as a researcher. Taha is an Egyptian Muslim woman and recognizes that her linguistic and cultural fluency offered her ease of access to Syrian refugee women. At the same time, however, participants were suspicious of her “insider” status and feared that she would judge them for being unable to uphold certain cultural and religious traditions due to her awareness of these matters.

Likewise, Taha's socioeconomic status and Western educational background raised questions about her authority to represent subaltern voices and her ability to communicate her participants' interpretations of their experiences without significant distortion. Through critical self-reflexivity, Taha recognized her Western biases when interviewing Nour, a widowed Syrian woman who engaged with a married Egyptian man under the religious practice of *zawaj al-sutra* (protection marriage). Specifically, Taha mistook Nour as lowering her standards by becoming a second wife and was astonished by her happiness with the situation, which reflects Eurocentric understandings of intimate relations. Upon recognizing that Nour is the expert on her own situation, Taha reoriented the interview to allow for a deeper narrative on why marriage was the safest or most decent option for Nour as a refugee (Taha 2022). Thus, the insider/outsider dilemma is not only about authority and positionality, but also about legitimacy, as it relates to the right to study and validate the experiences of a particular group. Critical self-reflexivity enables scholars to actively challenge their biases and recognize research subjects as experts, rather than mere witnesses or victims.

**Importantly, scholars like Hyndman (2011) argue for an embodied approach to understanding the intersections of power and space, which gives space to analyses of marginalization, minority status, and exclusion of particular social groups, especially at the macro level (p. 180).** In the research process, an embodied approach means exploring how epistemology, boundaries, relationships, and the

researcher's own situatedness inform decisions about research questions, methodologies, methods for data collection, and the choice of data itself (Ackerly and True 2008). This approach is especially important for forced migration studies, in which it has been shown that global North scholars often reproduce the policy paradigm of containment in service of the interests of global North states. That said, what constitutes knowledge has also been shaped by the dual role of many feminist scholars who are also activists with an imperative to push for social change, a challenge that many scholars of forced migration also experience. For instance, feminist scholar-activists may strategically downplay controversial aspects of a marginalized community's experiences, and instead, present demands for social change that are acceptable to the dominant audience.

**The pressure to present sanitized versions of research participants to make them intelligible and sympathetic to broader society perpetuates marginalization and exclusion, and denies their agency by upholding norms related to decency and morality (Yarbrough 2020).**

This issue raises the question as to whether certain perspectives are epistemically privileged and who has the authority to determine what constitutes knowledge. These insights can be applied to forced migration studies by looking at the way that refugee subjectivities are constructed within narrow

parameters, such that the “good” refugee is one who is fleeing for “legitimate” reasons, openly accepts the host state’s benevolence, and does not critique or act outside of the solutions presented by the international community.

### 2.3. INDIGENOUS STUDIES: EXTRACTION AND COLONIALISM

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Indigenous studies similarly call for an embodied approach to knowledge production, critiquing notions of “legitimacy” and “hierarchy” that have shaped the relationship between Western/colonial epistemology and Indigenous knowledge systems (Akena 2012). A key theme from the literature is the colonial approach to knowledge production, whereby knowledge and data about Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized people are extracted from their communities to advance hegemonic racist imperial and colonial interests (Ahmed 2022). Similar to feminist studies, Indigenous studies critique Western knowledge claims to objectivity, universality, and neutrality as representing a disembodied approach to knowledge production that disregards the researcher’s positionality.

**The imposition of an objective and detached gaze on Indigenous peoples denies any engagement with these communities as nations with sovereign power and agency, jurisdiction over research, the ability to consent, and expectations of reciprocity, accountability, and respect (Ahmed 2022).**

**In doing so, knowledge production enacts anti-Indigenous, genocidal “native-place-invisibilization”, whereby appropriated knowledges are disconnected from the onto-epistemic place-based traditions of the community to advance the interests of non-native people (Ahmed 2022, p. 9).**

These insights resonate with the issues of data extraction and decontextualization raised earlier, as exemplified by the reflection on the Woven Words project. Similarly, Grabska (2022) reflects on how digital technology and low-budget filmmaking allow for direct storytelling that subverts hierarchal relations of power, but notes how these narratives may be decontextualized from the individual, local, and global public and private spaces within which they are located. Collaborating with filmmakers to document refugee sex workers and garment workers in Ethiopia and Bangladesh, Grabska (2022) highlights the tensions caused by the disparity between the participants wanting to confront the marginalization they experienced through storytelling and the interests of the filmmakers to produce a “captivating” film that victimized the women (p. 209).

In addition, Indigenous studies view knowledge as relational and ontologically embedded within Indigenous communities, creating tension with mainstream “ways of knowing”, which rest on universalist, objective, and positivist knowledge claims.

For instance, Starblanket and Stark (2018) challenge the hierarchy and division between theories and stories, arguing that “theory” is a set of stories “generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community, and generation of people” (p. 179). It is not enough to simply “add” Indigenous knowledge to Western conceptualizations, but to challenge the very questions that provoke such knowledge. In doing so, we see how Western knowledge privileges state-centric narratives that reproduce oppressive relationships, thus limiting the transformative potential of Indigenous perspectives.

**Moreover, Indigenous knowledge is collectively held and shared by the community. It is embodied in ways of living reciprocally with human and non-human species, informs responsibilities with other humans and the Earth, and is passed down intergenerationally through various traditions, such as storytelling (Starblanket and Stark 2018).**

For instance, Simpson’s (2014) ethnographic study of the politics of refusal discusses how the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke enact their knowledge of their genealogical kinship relationships with other Indigenous peoples in North America through marriage practices, political engagements, and their ways of living. The Mohawk refuse to be defined by the settler state and articulate their own modalities as they live and move within a territorial space that is overlaid with settler colonial regimes. Most importantly, authority

over the knowledge of being Kahnawà:ke rests within the community and is drawn from genealogical and narrative relatedness, as opposed to being defined by settler colonial laws like the Indian Act (Simpson 2014).

This consideration is equally important for forced migration studies, especially as the category of “refugee” erases complex processes of personal and collective identity formation; obscures historical, political, social, and cultural specificities; and homogenizes experiences of displacement and trauma. As mentioned earlier, the refusal of some Syrian refugees in Turkey to create “refugee artwork” perpetuates the global aesthetics of the “Other” and exemplifies this navigation of space. Strategically choosing what to include or exclude in their artwork, refusing to accept the refugee label on their art, and holding to their identity as a Syrian artist rather than an abstract refugee, are all exercises of agency (Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy 2022). As such, scholars of forced migration can draw from Indigenous studies to understand that refugees’ production of knowledge, founded in their lived experience, is not to be an accessory to research produced by the global North, but rather serve as a valid “way of knowing”.

## 3. POSSIBILITIES FOR THE EMERGENCE OF BEST PRACTICES

It is evident that the issue of knowledge production is much deeper than initially conceptualized in forced migration studies. The final question that this paper seeks to interrogate is:

what sorts of best practices are available at our disposal and how do we use them to navigate the dominant structures of knowledge production in forced migration research?

Drawing from the insights of development studies, feminist studies, and Indigenous studies, this section will examine a non-exhaustive set of best practices that can enable scholars of forced migration studies to confront power asymmetries and identify its abuse in knowledge claims, with a look towards transcending dominant structures and making space for refugee-led knowledge production. It is difficult to envision what the outcome of structural and systemic transformations may look like on a practical level, especially when confronted with the embeddedness and institutionalized nature of the global refugee regime. Yet, it is not necessary to imagine a final point to which such transformations should arrive, nor is it helpful to do so. Rather, it is incumbent upon scholars to inquire about practices and processes that advance transformative change and the values that guide them.

### 3.1. “READINESS” TO LISTEN

The first practice is for privileged knowledge producers to disoccupy the discursive space when the conditions and experiences of forced migration are discussed by subaltern groups (Saffari 2016). This practice is underpinned by a reflection on how relations of domination and subordination are reproduced, and often concealed, by acts of speech. **Although the language of “inclusion” and “participation” has been adopted by international organizations, NGOs, donors, states, and academic institutions, simply adding subaltern groups will not transform the very structures that have produced and conditioned their subalternity.** Critically engaging with the asymmetrical power relations of discursive privilege is necessary for understanding global North hegemony in speech acts. Speaking for is distinct from speaking with and modes of knowledge production are shaped by the existing context of asymmetrical power relations, which make listening difficult (Saffari 2016).

**Asking “what does it mean for the hegemonic ear to hear the subaltern voice?” is to both critique the processes and structures through which subaltern voices are silenced and alternative frameworks are excluded, as well as to inquire about the “readiness” of the hegemonic ear to meaningfully “listen” (Saffari 2016, p. 41).**

Thus, disoccupying the discursive space is a transformative practice that calls into question and undermines the knowledge producer's position of privilege in relation to indigenous and local knowledge producers. Likewise, the question of "am I ready to listen?" reflects concern with the assumption of readiness, of having the capacity to listen, learn, and decolonize knowledge production (Paramaditha 2022). Of course, there remain complex challenges and questions with respect to the feasibility of disoccupation, but scholars must remain committed to acknowledging the prevailing relations of power and privilege, in which identity and social positions are constructed, so that the conversation may shift from being between "us" and the "Other", to between "us" and "us". This shift includes abandoning Eurocentrism, acknowledging the particularities of each narrative and experience, and recognizing the plurality of subjective perceptions that compose reality (Saffari 2016).

One example of disoccupation is the open mic night hosted by Samuel Hall as part of the 2023 Migration Summit in Nairobi. The purpose of the event was to construct a new narrative around refugees and migrants that moves beyond victimization and instead affirms their talent and dignity. It created an opportunity for these groups to speak for themselves in front of actors who have largely spoken on their behalf in public spaces, and exercise their right to choose under which labels they want to define themselves. For instance, K-two, a South Sudanese poet born and raised in Kakuma Refugee Camp, performed a piece about his migration

journey and how he yearns to be known by his name and not as a "refugee". Likewise, Maketh Edu, a comedian from South Sudan, stated that:

“

Refugees are more than just their labels, I moved from Kakuma to Kenya to identify who I am first. We are confined to one area, surrounded by one place, we need a space to identify who we are first and then use that to upskill the talent we have been given by God (Hall 2023).

”

By enabling the artists to share their stories in formats of their choice, this self-narration space reversed "the gaze" that is typically cast upon refugees and migrants by NGOs, government representatives, and scholars, and instead put these actors in a position of listening, rather than speaking.

### **3.2. REFUGEE AND MIGRANT KNOWLEDGE AS COUNTER-HEGEMONIC**

A related aspect of the speaking-listening dynamic concerns destabilizing concepts like the state- nation-community triad, which are naturalized as the hegemonic form of political community and made ahistorical through political practices and discourses (Rajaram 2022). Rajaram argues that forced migration scholars often deal with these concepts without the historical contexts that lead to their emergence, which reinforces state-centrism.

**Knowledge production about refugees has the capacity to challenge these deeply engrained structures of domination, but only if they begin from a perspective that positions refugees as contemporary manifestations of wider historical problems that concern constructions of community, belonging, identity, responsibility, and value.** These complex historical-social relations are often concealed by devaluing alternative histories and forms of knowledge, and a “coloniality of power” that acts against subaltern narratives to reinforce and decontextualize concepts like state-nation-community (Rajaram 2022). Thus, knowledge production by refugees can denaturalize these state-centric ways of seeing and thinking by pointing out the limits of the theoretical unity of dominant knowledge. This includes uncovering the historical experiences underpinning “refugeeness”, and reflecting on “refugee knowledge” as expressions of a condition of ongoing marginalization or subjugation, rather than a fixed subjectivity (Rajaram 2022).

It also requires challenging implicit assumptions about who conducts research and narrates the history that form “legitimate” knowledge. Reed and Schenck (2023) argue that marginalized groups have long been assumed incapable of being authorial voices of history, not only because of structural barriers – such as the lack of access to libraries and archives, unreliable internet access, and lack of training, social networks, resources, and funding – but also because the identities of “refugee” and “historian” have been defined as mutually exclusive.

How would research change if we were attentive to the conditions of knowledge production? What sorts of knowledge would become visible when ideas of what it means to be a “normal” researcher were upended? When we foreground the right to research, defined as the ability to systemically inquire into the unknown and to be taken seriously as a producer and bearer of knowledge, how might we empower refugees and other displaced persons (Reed and Schenck 2023)?

Realizing this right requires not only material accessibility, such as free access to libraries and databases, but also dialogical accessibility, whereby the wider scholarly community takes seriously the interventions that destabilize and challenge existing norms, practices, and assumptions. We must refute assumptions that refugees can only speak to the particular, the partial, and the embodied, while “objective” or disembodied knowledge and its claims to superior authority are the purview of the state, the agency, and the scholar (Reed and Schenck 2023). For instance, Gerawork Teferra has lived and worked as a teacher at the Kakuma Refugee Camp since 2011. In his work, Teferra (2023) explores the failure of the UNHCR to provide equitable access to education within the camp where refugees spend, on average, seventeen years. To do so, Teferra strategically juxtaposes publicly available information about strategies for refugee education with camp residents’ experiences of education in Kakuma, highlighting the gap that persists between a vision of education as

a means of social mobility, and the lived reality of education, which is largely to keep students occupied. Teferra does not have the “typical” qualifications of an academic researcher, but speaks authoritatively of the structural shortcomings of the UNHCR while providing concrete solutions based on lived experience. **This embodied approach to knowledge production on camp education is able to recognize not only the functional failures of the UNHCR and its implementing partners, but also the broader sociopolitical ramifications, whereby students at Kakuma feel as though their identity as refugees is reinforced by the educational system that discriminates against them based on their legal status:**

“

we are not like others and are offered substandard education so we are not worthy” (Teferra 2023, p. 64).

”

### 3.3. LEARNING FROM A FEMINIST RESEARCH ETHIC

A feminist research ethic, as set out by Ackerly and True (2008), can also support the cultivation of best practices for knowledge production as feminist theories “reveal the politics in every aspect of the research process” and commit researchers to exploring the power of epistemology (p. 694). **By critically acknowledging the power of epistemology, disciplinary boundaries,**

**power differentials in relationships, and the situatedness of researchers, forced migration scholars can begin to transform knowledge production within the discipline.** Since epistemology sets out what constitutes knowledge and evidence, it is essential for researchers to reflect on the epistemologies that inform their work, especially those epistemological traditions that are privileged (Ackerly and True 2008). Destabilizing one’s epistemological perspective expands the researcher’s scope to different understandings of what it means to know and how to express this knowledge, and implores them to recognize the epistemological standpoint of marginalized communities. It invites inquiry into why other epistemological traditions have been silenced and excluded from the dominant forms of knowledge production, while enabling the uptake of alternative futures imagined by these communities in their own right (Ackerly and True 2008). Likewise, attentiveness to disciplinary boundaries can ensure forced migration scholars are more aware of processes of marginalization, exclusion, and silencing that emerge within the research process. and

**Finally, critically examining the researcher’s own positionality not only reveals the potential negative implications in which a research project is conceived and conducted, but also the need to destabilize disciplinary power in order to practice responsible scholarship (Ackerly and True 2008).**

One way to put this research ethic into practice is to utilize cultural humility as a methodological approach, which redefines knowledge as a dialogical process, rather than a conclusion (Yarbrough 2020). By challenging the idea of research and knowledge as stable, fixed, and final, and acknowledging that there is much that we do not know, forced migration scholars can look towards, and learn from, “other resisters” (Paramaditha 2022). To return to the aforementioned example regarding Taha’s interviews with Syrian refugee women in Egypt, Taha (2022) reflects on how her engagement with these women raised questions with respect to whose narratives and reflections are more privileged; how the researcher’s own social location, ideological motivations, and theoretical convictions influence the research design; and how differences in cultural, social, and intellectual references between the researchers and participants can contribute to losses in meaning. While she initially found herself unconsciously upholding Western hegemonic conceptions about intimacy, gender roles, and empowerment through her research and interview questions, she embraced Other(ed) ways of knowing by reflecting on her shortcomings as a product of a Western-centric environment and in turn, reframed the questions to ensure that her interviewees were speaking as the “experts” of their lived reality (Taha 2022). Thus, learning from other resisters requires attentiveness to intersections of gender, class, race, religion, and sexuality, as well as the specific historical, political, economic, and cultural structures that shape the experiences of these identities.

Complex concepts like empowerment have various cultural interpretations beyond a liberal humanitarian framework, but their recognition requires researchers to reflect on how their own situatedness can lead to misinterpretation or loss of meaning, and to relinquish control over narratives in order for participants to freely contribute (Taha 2022).

### 3.4. CRISES OF REPRESENTATION AND OWNERSHIP

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Alongside a feminist research ethic, forced migration studies can integrate decolonial practices as it relates to the politics of representation and ownership of data. As mentioned earlier, there is a tendency within forced migration research to extract data from refugees and forced migrants and then privileged scholars frame their findings in accordance with the hegemonic concepts and interests of the global North. This hierarchical process of knowledge production not only delegitimizes alternative ways of knowing, but it perpetuates essentialized representations of “refugeeness” that are the subject of the Northern “gaze”, rather than the historical processes and conditions that produce refugees in the first place. **Thus, forced migration scholars must consider the distorted representation that emerges when knowledge about refugees and forced migrants are generated through extractive practices, and implement practices that recognize these communities as humans with sovereign research jurisdictions, a right to provide informed consent, and to have expectations of reciprocity, accountability, and respect.**

For instance, Godin and Donà (2022) reflected on their participatory photo-project *Displaces*, which was co-produced with individuals moving across the UK-France border at Calais during the 2015 refugee crisis. The goal of this project was to disrupt mainstream tropes of refugees as victims or threats and reveal the intricacies of everyday life in transit. They make clear that carrying out research with migrants and refugees requires recognition of their specific positionality, which is characterised by their precarious legal status and unequal power relations and situated within broader contemporary geopolitical frames that tend to criminalize migration (Godin and Donà 2022). Specifically, Godin and Donà (2022) note that their ethics of care approach was guided by respect and flexibility, whereby they engaged in co-production and co-dissemination in a manner that allowed refugees to move away from a “performed refugeeness” (p. 239). This was accomplished by giving migrants and refugees ownership of the camera lens and copyrights to the images they produced, thus challenging outsider-essentialized representations and enabling participants to employ frame their experiences as they saw fit. While it was important for many participants to share their stories through these photos, it was equally important for them to have agency over what they were not willing to share (Godin and Donà). Thus, the researchers enabled refugees and migrants to become narrating subjects who challenged the mainstream portrayals that saw them as passive, vulnerable victims, or as threats. Godin and Donà sought to foster knowledge co-production in support of the creative

agency of migrants and refugees and in doing so, reconfigured relations of power between them and the participants. Rather than extracting data from refugees and migrants and framing it according to their own concepts and epistemology, the researchers actively ensured that this community retained ownership of their knowledge and respected their agency, ability to consent, and expectations of reciprocity and accountability.

### 3.5. RESPECTING STRATEGIC SILENCES

Finally, forced migration scholars can also decolonize knowledge production by being attentive to, and having respect for, strategic displays of silence by refugees. As protections for refugees became more formalized in international law, the issue of who could claim refugee status became more contested and contentious (Reed and Schenck 2023).

**The legal definition of a refugee allows states to determine, often arbitrarily, whether an individual's story conforms to the definition and thus, whether that person is “deserving” of protection. As such, claimants must narrate themselves into a position of legitimacy. The question of “am I a real refugee” and the narrow emphasis on legitimate narratives of “refugeeness” can restrict, censor, and delegitimize other narratives about what it is to be a refugee that people may prefer to share (Reed and Schenck 2023, p. 15).**

While refugees may be silenced due to testimonial quieting or smothering, maintaining silence is an exercise of agency when confronting a system that demands refugee narratives as proof of “refugeeness” (Reed and Schenck 2023).

How should forced migration scholars respond to this self-silencing when there is a strong desire and responsibility to document displacement and draw attention to lived realities, policy failures, and the hopes and dreams of refugees? Moreover, how do scholars navigate the tension between the history of exclusion and silencing within forced migration research, and the recent shift towards giving space to the refugee “voice”?

**Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy (2022) maintain that a methodological overemphasis on storytelling and narrative can actually lead to the fetishization of the refugee voice and instead, propose “methodological dubiety” as a collaborative determination between researchers and research participants to craft representations in ways that speak openly to the need to maintain certain kinds of gaps, erasures, and absences (p. 83).** This requires both preparedness and acceptance that there is an ethical responsibility to ensure refugee participants do not feel compelled or coerced to share experiences that they do not want to disclose, and also to not articulate particular kinds of losses and suffering that victimizes their stories.

This respect for silences is illustrated by the film *Illégal*, directed by Belgian filmmaker Oliver Masset-Depasse, which discusses the story of Tania, a Russian woman whose

asylum application has been rejected (Rosello 2014). Throughout the film, the audience is never told what her story is, even when she is arrested and placed in the detention centre. Her persistent silence may be a manifestation of the trauma she endured, which interviewers of asylum applicants fail to recognize and instead penalize her for being unable to articulate “legitimate” claims. Tania refuses to play the role of a “good” refugee whose story corresponds to pre-existing criteria, but she also destabilizes the implicit binary that would put her in the position of the “bad” refugee. Instead, Tania points out the abusive nature of the asylum system because it requires her to narrate her suffering and horror to an unknown threshold, and that there is no longer a distinction between her country of origin and the host country that is supposed to provide protection from the very violence she fled (Rosello 2014). As such, the film’s refusal to narrate the original horror experienced by Tania respects her choice to remain silent and forecloses the ability of an audience to fetishize the kinds of trauma and suffering that one expects from “legitimate” refugees. The film probes a deeper inquiry into the structural conditions that deem the documenting of trauma and suffering as necessary, desirable, and valuable to refugee portrayals. It asks for researchers to reconsider how desires to invoke empathy can intrude into knowledge that research participants may not want researchers to know or share publicly. The exercise of refusal by refugees, which can exist in the form of silence and absence, in and of itself speaks to the plurality of what it means to be a refugee and challenges the very categorical productions of a “legitimate” refugee by academics, states, and international organizations.

# CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper conducted an interdisciplinary analysis of knowledge production, drawing from the theoretical insights of development studies, feminist studies, and Indigenous studies, to make visible structures of power and oppressive practices within forced migration research. Using the questions of who produces knowledge, for whom is knowledge produced, and what constitutes knowledge, I diagnosed three sets of issues with knowledge production in forced migration studies: (1) ongoing institutional and structural barriers to the equitable participation of Southern scholars; (2) the hierarchal nature of knowledge production that positions Northern scholars as “experts” and “knowers” of forced migration; and (3) extractive and imperialist approaches within the research process itself. This analysis highlighted the productive power of the global North to create and enforce particular realities through the use of knowledge, discourse, and claims to legitimacy. To further unpack these issues, I drew from development studies, feminist studies, and Indigenous studies, recognizing that although these disciplines are not analogous, they can still contribute to a deeper understanding of knowledge production and envision transformative change. For instance, development studies can enhance analyses of productive power through a reflection on macro-level historical processes and power asymmetries that reinforce the hegemony of the global North

and sustain structural and institutional barriers at the micro-level. Feminist studies, in contrast, emphasizes positionality and epistemological hegemony, which help challenge the dominance of state-centric knowledge and its claims to be “objective” and “legitimate”. Indigenous studies similarly critique the ways in which alternative ways of knowing and being have been subordinated to Western/colonial knowledge, and provides insight on how the research process itself can consist of extractive and imperial practices.

Overall, this paper has endeavoured to demonstrate that the issue of knowledge production is considerably complex, and requires scholars to rigorously engage with structures of power, their own biases in ways of knowing and understanding, and with the precarity of the lives of those whom they seek to bring attention to and improve. As the numerous examples in this paper have shown, refugees exercise great agency despite their precarious status. Refugees navigate the categorical assumptions of what it means to be a refugee by engaging with researchers on their own terms. Likewise, many scholars have already begun implementing the practices outlined above, practicing humility and exhibiting an ethics of care towards research participants. Future research should look more closely at these relationships, especially between global South scholars, host communities, and refugees.

Southern scholars are often traversing the insider/outsider line, which can result in a complicated relationship with refugees and host communities. They may share cultural, linguistic, and religious similarities, but it may be difficult to cultivate trust due to differences in socioeconomic status, legal status, and mobility. While this subject was not addressed in this paper, knowledge production is only one half of the equation and future pathways of inquiry should also examine processes and practices of knowledge dissemination, similarly drawing from other disciplines.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper set out a non-exhaustive list of best practices that can enable scholars of forced migration studies to confront power asymmetries and identify its abuse in knowledge claims, with a look towards transcending dominant structures and making space for refugee-led knowledge production. I do not purport to provide a step-by-step guide on how to enact transformative change, nor do I offer a vision of an endpoint to which these transformations will arrive. Rather, I argue that it is incumbent upon scholars to inquire about and implement practices and processes that advance transformative change, including the values that guide them. The first practice is disoccupying the discursive space by critically engaging with privilege and reflecting on notions of “readiness” when “listening” to the subaltern voice. A related practice is destabilizing taken-for-granted concepts like the state-nation-community triad. It is also important to view refugees as knowledge producers and historical narrators in their own right, refuting assumptions that refugees can only speak to the particular and the embodied, and recognizing that they are capable of authoritatively speaking to structures, norms, and processes that condition their lived experience. A third practice is to seek guidance from a feminist research ethic, as set out by Ackerly and True, which calls for attentiveness to the power of epistemology,

boundaries, relationships, and situatedness. In doing so, scholars can inquire about why other epistemological traditions have been silenced or marginalized. Scholars can also reflect on how their biases affect the research process. In addition, forced migration scholars can integrate decolonial practices as it relates to the politics of representation and ownership, which recognize marginalized communities as groups with sovereign research jurisdictions, the right to provide informed consent, and expectations of reciprocity, accountability, and respect. Finally, forced migration scholars must be attentive to, and have respect for, strategic displays of silence by refugees, especially to avoid the essentialization and fetishization of the refugee voice.

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