ANALYTICAL ESSAY

A Decolonial Feminist Politics of Fieldwork: Centering Community, Reflexivity, and Loving Accountability

ALBA ROSA BOER CUEVA [iD]
The University of Sydney, Australia

KESHAB GIRI [iD]
The University of St Andrews, UK

CAITLIN HAMILTON [iD] AND LAURA J. SHEPHERD [iD]
The University of Sydney, Australia

International studies scholarship has benefitted from insights from anthropology, peace and conflict studies, geography, and other disciplines to craft a thoughtful set of reflections and considerations for researchers to take with them "into the field" when they embark on "fieldwork." In this essay, we map out a history of critical approaches to fieldwork, starting with the encounters that initially encouraged reflection on the positionality of the researcher and the power dynamics of research. Building on decolonial feminist scholarship, we show how a commitment to reflexive practice "in the field" has developed further, through a reflection on the self as a researcher and on "the field" as a construct. This ethical and political commitment prompts a rethinking of key concepts in fieldwork (and research more generally), including those of "the researcher," "the research participant" (or "population"), "expertise," and what constitutes "data" and "knowledge." We argue that a preferable approach to critical fieldwork is grounded in feminist and decolonial, anti-racist, anti-capitalist politics. This approach is committed not just to reflecting critically on "the field" and the interactions of the researcher within it but also to challenging the divisions, exclusions, and structures of oppression that sustain the separations between "here" and "there," "researcher" and "researched," and "knower" and "known."

El conocimiento académico en materia de estudios internacionales se ha beneficiado de los conocimientos de la antropología, de los estudios en materia de paz y conflictos, de la geografía y de otras disciplinas con el fin de elaborar un conjunto reflexivo de reflexiones y consideraciones que los investigadores puedan llevar consigo "a su campo" cuando se embarquen en "trabajos de campo". En este estudio trazamos una historia de los enfoques críticos del trabajo de campo, partiendo de aquellos encuentros que, inicialmente, alentaron la reflexión sobre la posicionalidad del investigador y las dinámicas de poder de la investigación. Par-

tiendo del conocimiento académico en materia de feminismo decolonial, demostramos cómo se ha ido desarrollando, en mayor medida, un compromiso con la práctica reflexiva "en el campo", a través de una reflexión sobre el yo como investigador y sobre "el campo" como constructo. Este compromiso ético y político impulsa un replanteamiento de conceptos clave en el trabajo de campo (y en la investigación en general), incluyendo los conceptos de "el investigador", "el participante en la investigación" (o "población"), la "experiencia", así como lo que constituye "datos" y "conocimiento". Argumentamos que un enfoque preferible para el trabajo de campo crítico debería estar basado en políticas feministas y decoloniales, antirracistas y anticapitalistas. Este enfoque se compromete no solo a reflexionar críticamente sobre "el campo" y las interacciones del investigador dentro de él, sino también a desafiar las divisiones, exclusiones y estructuras de opresión que sostienen las separaciones entre "aquí" y "allí", "investigador" e "investigado" y "conocedor" y "conocido".

La recherche en études internationales a bénéficié de renseignements issus de l'anthropologie, des études de la paix et des conflits, de la géographie et d'autres disciplines. Cela a permis d'élaborer un ensemble complet de réflexions et de considérations que les chercheurs peuvent exploiter ≪ sur le terrain ≫ lorsqu'ils se lancent dans un ≪ travail de terrain ≫. Dans cet essai, nous retraçons l'histoire des approches critiques du travail de terrain, en commençant par les rencontres qui ont initialement encouragé à la réflexion sur la positionnalité du chercheur et sur les dynamiques de pouvoir de la recherche. Nous nous appuyons sur la recherche féministe décoloniale pour montrer la manière dont un engagement pour une pratique réflexive ≪ sur le terrain ≫ a continué à se développer par le biais d'une réflexion sur le soi en tant que chercheur et sur ≪ le terrain ≫ en tant que construction. Cet engagement éthique et politique invite à réétudier des concepts clés du travail de terrain (et plus globalement de la recherche), notamment ceux de ≪ chercheur ≫, de ≪ participant à l'étude ≫ (ou de ≪ population ≫), ≪ d'expertise ≫ et de ce qui constitue les ≪ données ≫ et les ≪ connaissances ≫. Nous soutenons qu'une approche préférable du travail de terrain critique est ancrée dans des politiques féministes et décoloniales, anti-racistes et anti-capitalistes. Cette approche s'engage non seulement à mener une réflexion critique sur ≪ le terrain ≫ et sur les interactions du chercheur en son sein, mais aussi à remettre en question les divisions, exclusions et structures d'oppression qui entretiennent les séparations entre ≪ ici ≫ et ≪ là-bas ≫, entre ≪ chercheur ≫ et ≪ participant à l'étude ≫ et entre ≪ connaissant ≫ et ≪ connu ≫.

Introduction

Fieldwork is a colonial enterprise, but perhaps other futures of fieldwork are possible. Given the history of fieldwork and the way that international studies research—specifically within the discipline of international relations (IR)—has adopted fieldwork as a method from anthropology, its gendered and racialized colonial baggage is unavoidable. And yet, we—researchers, especially those of us in/from the Global North and embedded in IR—have not, as a scholarly community, sufficiently grap-

pled with this baggage or its effects on our knowledge production practices and the relationships upon which they depend. In this paper, we therefore open up and explore the coloniality of fieldwork relations, inspired by decolonial scholarship and feminist research ethics. We go beyond the imperative of "being feminist" in our analysis, to thinking about what "doing feminism" (Russo 2018) means for fieldwork.

Feminist research is not only directed at better knowledge production; it also seeks to work toward a larger project of gender equality as a part of a "feminist research ethic" (Ackerly and True 2019). This ethic urges researchers to conceptualize fieldwork not as an extractive process of mining data and information for the research output, but as a process of creating community with research interlocutors or consultants, of which knowledge production is only one dimension. We do not create knowledge in a vacuum; it is a product of complex relationships, negotiations, and interactions between the "researcher," "research participants," and the "field" (Parashar 2019). Knowledge does not exist prior to the research process but is co-constructed by the people involved in the research (Cavarero 2000). As such, in this paper, we begin to build a framework to guide our own research practices, demonstrating the possible positive effects of adopting a decolonial feminist ethico-politics in fieldwork praxis.

Our essay unfolds in three parts. First, we elaborate briefly on the claim that fieldwork is a colonial enterprise, exploring fieldwork as a method of data collection in the social sciences and specifically in the discipline of IR. In the second section, we outline the decolonial feminist framework that informs our own critical and self-reflexive interrogations of fieldwork practice. Third, we map out the commitments of a decolonial feminist ethico-politics of fieldwork, arguing that such an approach centers, among other things, knowledge cultivation as a collective endeavor; the building of community and kinship; reflexivity and emotional investment; and the practice of loving accountability. We conclude our essay with some comments on the limitations of our engagement and an encouragement to sit with some of the tensions that our discussion raises.

Stories of Fieldwork

Fieldwork is "a multimethod research approach where the researcher is involved in an ongoing relationship with a group, community, or organization for the purposes of exploring the complex social and cultural realities that mediate people's daily lives" (McIntyre 2003, 283). Despite perhaps being most closely associated with anthropology as a discipline—Seligman observed in 1912 that "field research in anthropology is what the blood of martyrs is to the Church" (quoted in Stocking 1995, 115)—it began largely as the domain of physical geographers, and

> originated during colonial times with single men travelers and explorers going on "expeditions" and setting up "base camps" where they could count on the assistance of local helpers who would cater to their daily needs (Katz 1994; Tuhiwai Smith 2016; Sharp and Dowler 2011). Expeditions were meant to "civilize" locals, and explorers would "speak for them" when reporting findings back in Europe. (Caretta and Jokinen 2017, 275)

Early iterations of fieldwork were therefore, in their very essence, designed to be exploitative and appropriative. Indeed, field research not only functioned as an essential tool used for imperial and colonial administration (Nhemachane, Mlambo, and Kaundjua 2016, 16), but the concepts, tools, and techniques of fieldwork were also informed and developed through the expansion of European colonies and the consolidation of both formal and informal empires (Mehos 2006 quoted in Kuklick 2011, 4).

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century, however, that the importance of fieldwork was recognized academically. Rather than relying on evidence gathered by travelers and explorers, scientific fieldworkers themselves gained recognition, thus elevating and developing the relationship between fieldwork methods and concepts (Kuklick 2011, 3). During this time, the nature of fieldwork became established as a predominantly heroic masculine affair. Fieldwork, a product of the Victorian-era mindset, was seen as a moral journey where the view was that one could gain personal growth (of an implicitly masculine sort) through pilgrimages to unfamiliar places, enduring physical discomfort, and (genuine or imagined) danger:

> Fieldwork endows geographers with the right to describe themselves as bearers and producers of knowledge. Having been there lends one's claims an air of authenticity. And "going there" is not just about visiting a "field site". It's about how one visits that site and where that site is. Images abound of geographical fieldwork as "roughing it" and getting one's boots muddy in far-off, exotic (or, more accurately, exotified) and challenging locales. (Guasco 2022, 468)

As a result of this heritage, fieldwork remains something of a rite of passage in some social science disciplines.

Moreover, these same social science disciplines have utilized fieldwork as a means of constructing architectures of knowledge about the West's many "Others." Anthropological studies, in particular, played a key role in developing fieldwork as a method to construct a "consultable record" of "primitive cultures" on a global scale by using scientific methods (Geertz 1973, 30). Scholars focused less on the people they were representing and more on centering "fieldworker-theorists" who enjoyed authority over language, experience, and culture. The discourses around fieldwork today still reflect this; as Routley and Wright (2021, 87) explain, "fieldwork practices and narratives are often bound up with masculinist and colonial logics… [which] can undermine and indeed run counter to the virtues of the connection that fieldwork can provide" (see also Nhemachane, Mlambo, and Kaundjua 2016).

The gendered and racialized heritage of fieldwork as a tool and a product of the broader European colonial project has attracted critical intervention on multiple fronts, including from feminist and decolonial scholarship. Feminist and decolonial researchers, in particular, have considered various aspects of fieldwork, including the positionality of researchers; what the relationship between parties in the research relationship looks like (and should look like); the vulnerability and risk to all parties that research often involves (see, for example, Frank-Vitale 2021); and the emotional or affective dimensions of fieldwork (see, for example, Billo and Hiemstra 2013 on loneliness; Goerisch 2017 on discomfort; Beban and Schoenberger 2019 on shame, uncertainty, and fear; Irgil et al. 2021 on anxiety). Fieldwork is a complex thing: Its "spatial, material, discursive, and emotive registers" (Kanafani and Sawaf 2017, 4) can make for "difficult, exciting, challenging, surprising, [and] boring terrain" (McIntyre 2003, 285).

One of the contributions that critical scholars have offered to a rethinking of fieldwork is their recognition that researchers exist in the "field" in embodied forms, with "multiplex subjectivities" (Henry 2003, 239; see also Brigden 2019), including accent, age, caste, disability, education, ethnicity, gender, language(s) spoken, race, and religion. So too do research interlocutors or consultants (see, for example, Gordon 2021). Feminist researchers have particularly considered the various ways in which gender is implicated in research and fieldwork (see, for example, Abu-Lughod 1988; Altorki 1988; Katz 1994; Henry 2003; Faria and Mollett 2016; Caretta and Jokinen 2017; Baird 2018; Beban and Schoenberger 2019; Romero Plana and Martinez Santamaria 2021). Critical engagements such as these

have made important strides in disrupting the idealized image of the lone, ungen-
dered, unbiased researcher, going into the field like a neutral, empty vessel simply
waiting to be filled with data (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Cupples and Kindon 2003;
Frohlick 2002; Katz 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Sparke 1996; Staeheli and Lawson 1994;
Starrs 2001; Valentine 2002; Walton-Roberts 2010).(cited in Billo and Hiemstra 2013,
321–2).

The recognition that we, as researchers, are always constituted and encountered
through multiple intersecting markers of identity is as relevant in fieldwork as it is
in every other dimension of professional practice.

Other scholars have shifted focus from the perspective of the researcher doing
fieldwork to the need to recognize the others in the "field"; particularly in the con-
text of relationships and power dynamics between researchers and interlocutors
(see, for example, Holvikivi 2019; Sharma 2019; Shokooh Valle 2021) and between
researchers (see, for example, Nagar and Geiger 2007; Billo and Hiemstra 2013;
Beban and Schoenberger 2019). They have, therefore, sought to reframe fieldwork,
shifting from understanding it as a unidirectional process of data collection to en-
visioning fieldwork as a multi-focal process of relationship-building with a variety of
research stakeholders:

> The social world described in this paper is full. Its fullness is made up of co-
> researchers, friends, colleagues, and teammates; state officials from the top of the
> hierarchy to the bottom; everyday farmers, community leaders, and activists. All of
> our encounters layered and interlaced with one another so that taken together they
> formed the arrangement of lenses, mirrors and prisms of our periscope. (Beban and
> Schoenberger 2019, 97)

Drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality, Caretta and
Jokinen (2017, 277) explain that "[m]ultiple axes of advantage and disadvantage
are intrinsic in the interactions with participants and in the way in which they po-
sition our identities and relate with us." The fields that and in which we research
are "a hodgepodge of structure, constraint, agency, capitulation, and resistance"
(Meadow 2013, 471).

In many cases, however, fieldwork remains exploitative and appropriative; all too
often, researchers treat interlocutors "as mere mines of information to be exploited
by the researcher as the neutral collector of 'facts'" (England 1994, 82). Critical
scholars have sought to mitigate the more troublesome aspects of fieldwork, includ-
ing by "research[ing] *with*" participants in interlocutor-centered research (Butcher
2020, 1, emphasis in original). Emerging from a multi-disciplinary tradition, what
unites these approaches to research is a commitment to "generating knowledge that
is both valid and vital to the wellbeing of individuals [and] communities" (Brydon-
Miller et al. 2003, 11), instead of committing a "'drive-by' research project that ben-
efits the researcher and leaves the participants with nothing" (McIntyre 2008, 12).

Our focus in this article is the discipline of IR. In IR, fieldwork often sees re-
searchers travel to places where people face pronounced insecurity, such as areas
of conflict, disaster, and displacement. This heightens the need for a cautious ap-
proach to ensuring ethical frameworks are as robust as possible (especially but not
only in these kinds of research contexts) because, as Kanisha D. Bond et al. (2020,
n.p.) remind us, "[c]risis exacerbates vulnerability and inequality" (see also Clark
2012). Susanna P. Campbell similarly argues that "[t]hese environments present
unique challenges to informed consent, confidentiality, risk-benefit analysis, re-
searcher security, and beneficence" (2017, 89) and creates the potential for research
situations with particularly acute ethical considerations (Cronin-Furman and Lake
2018, 607). In fact, in these contexts, there is a very real danger that "one may actu-
ally be doing harm" (Goodhand 2000, 12). This makes the rethinking of fieldwork
in IR more generally—and particularly in research in which hierarchies and dispar-
ities of power are especially prevalent—even more vital and pressing.

Fieldwork as a method in IR is a relatively recent phenomenon. As noted above, fieldwork has transdisciplinary roots across the social sciences; many social science disciplines have had a much longer engagement with fieldwork than IR (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Montsion 2018, 2). In IR, however, fieldwork as a method has not been as extensively reflected upon in the collective disciplinary imagination (Driver 2000, 267; Montsion 2018). Critical literature on fieldwork within colonialist contexts, and feminist inquiry on the gendered nature of fieldwork are some of the exceptions (Mathewson 2001, 215), along with conflict researchers and scholars working with interpretive approaches (Fujii 2012).

The roots of a more ethnographic approach to method in IR are situated within post-positivist, subjective, reflexive, and critical scholarships that seek to explain world politics in its complexities and nuances by focusing on multiplicity in and of the international, using "non-scientific methodologies," and decentering the subject of the sovereign state (Cox and Sinclair 1996; Montsion 2018, 2). The ethnographic turn in the mid-1990s also facilitated a return to empiricism, albeit a new and improved kind of "emancipatory empiricism" (Pouliot 2007, 367), which promised to grapple with the colonial baggage of the discipline while upholding a critical voice and keeping its regulatory mechanisms intact (Vrasti 2008, 281; Montsion 2018). This accompanied a turn in IR toward micropolitics, which sought to privilege the vantage point of smaller units of analysis captured through face-to-face interactions, analyses of emotions, and observations of everyday practices (Nair 2021). In doing so, micropolitics moves beyond the mainstream perspectives of conventional actors such as states and international organizations, and highlights under-explored knowledge, linkages, and understandings of world politics (Montsion 2018).

The popularity of ethnographic methods among critical IR scholarship can be attributed to the way it helped researchers move beyond language and discursive analyses, to put mainstream studies in perspective by focusing on everyday sites of the international, subjugated knowledges, and under-explored linkages between the local and the global (Montsion 2018). The focus on marginalized subjects, coupled with its "conscious effort to become aware of and distance itself from the Eurocentric assumptions that informed the early days of ethnographic writing" (Vrasti 2010, 81), facilitated ethnography's ability to problematize IR's "state of nature" fantasy, question its core ontological premises (Beier 2005, 34–5), and challenge its reliance on the state as the only legitimate political actor. The dominance of positivism within IR, however, has generally impeded ethnography's ability to deliver on its emancipatory promises, or to expose the political nature of research. According to Vrasti, this is because IR has only borrowed from ethnography to the extent that it supports its cohesive and consistent epistemic constitution. Describing such research as "ethnographic lite" in approach, Vrasti critiques IR for "adopting a selective, instrumental, and somewhat timid understanding of what ethnography is and does" (2008, 280), without "be[ing] conscious of the contradictions of such knowing and the history of shame that precedes and marks" it (Behar quoted in Vrasti 2010, 81).

Even with more critical approaches to fieldwork, however, there remains an inherent "arrogance of research" (Katz 1994, 70); as Cindi Katz (1994, 70) notes, "I speak of choosing, deciding, wanting, traveling, reasoning, finding compelling, and being intrigued. My career in the balance, the object of my study was people's lives, lived in real time and space." At the heart of the Western research environment lies privilege and entitlement.

> This entitlement is often expressed by justifying our choice to conduct research in communities and spaces we do not belong to because we want to "give voice to marginalised groups," "provide a multiplicity of perspectives" or "do research no-one else wants to do." These rhetorical devices however often hide more prosaic reasons to pursue a certain research project, such as simply being interested in the topic, fol-

lowing a trend, or wanting to spend time in an "exotic" location. (Hagen et al. 2023, 2)

In the case of many projects—including those we ourselves have undertaken—the researcher has more to gain (such as in terms of career progression and professional benefits) than do the interlocutors (Katz 1994, 72; see also Kobayashi 1994, 76). Often, the interlocutors actually lose out—in terms of their time and energy in the best-case scenario, but for many who participate in research, their personal safety is placed at risk; indeed, "the real costs and liabilities may be borne by local residents" (Carapico n.d., n.p.) and local colleagues such as research assistants or research brokers (Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019; Cirhuza et al. 2020). As Cait says about one recent research experience:

> The project we started was designed to be participant-driven and co-designed between researchers and participants. We had planned a symposium with simultaneous translation into multiple languages, during which we hoped to develop an international network of peacebuilders and women activists. We had wanted to remunerate participants for their time. We had intended for the outputs to be meaningfully co-produced and as useful to the participants as they were to the researchers. But in the end, given the outbreak of COVID-19 and after our funding was drastically cut, it ended up like our other fieldwork experiences. It was extractive – there's no way around it. We weren't able to deliver the benefits to the participants that we had hoped to. But nevertheless, as researchers, we get the publication on our CV anyway, and we've moved on to the next article, the next round of data collection. Even with the best of intentions, the implicit recognition of what we didn't want to do in the research, and the commitment to feminist decolonial politics from the outset… it wasn't enough to turn the fieldwork into a meaningfully different experience for the research participants. Looking back, can we justify the time we asked them for in the middle of a global pandemic, when their capacity was already stretched to the limit, where many had already offered their insights into previous research projects? I'm not sure that we can. The research was ethical insomuch as we adhered to our ethics approval documents and maintained the anonymity of our participants, but I'm not sure that's actually enough to call it ethical research anymore.

The above discussion points to just some of the (un)ethical dimensions of fieldwork. In 1989, Allan Kellehear wrote, "If methodological problems question the reliability and validity of one's data, then ethical dilemmas question the validity of the researcher's actual presence" (quoted in Campbell 2017, 89). For us, this raises the question: Should scholars of international studies be doing fieldwork at all? After all, fieldwork "is the purposeful disruption of other people's lives" (England 1994, 85). How do we measure if fieldwork is "worth" this disruption? And, if we consider that it is indeed worth the disruption (and the research participants are in agreement with us), are there ways in which some of the more problematic aspects of fieldwork can be mitigated or removed? And how do we know when we should just be saying "no" (Guasco 2022; Hagen et al. 2023)?

We do not presume to have a complete answer—or indeed the only correct answer—to these questions. Rather, we argue that these questions are always necessary, and that it is not enough to reflect on "the field" and our interactions within it; instead, we need to challenge the very divisions, exclusions, and structures of oppression that create and sustain the binaries inherent to current conceptualizations of fieldwork: The "here" and "there," "researcher" and "researched," and "knower" and "known." In the next section, we argue that decolonial feminism can help us to grapple with fieldwork's substantial baggage and think through how we might overcome these challenges inherent to fieldwork.

Decolonial Feminist Ethico-Politics

Much of what is written today by mainstream, and even critical and feminist, scholars within IR about decolonial feminisms, usually starts by quoting and citing cisheterosexual men—and that is if decolonial feminisms are not altogether subsumed within '"women of colour feminisms'… or segregated in ethnic studies… where they have largely been ignored or appropriated" (Mendoza 2016, 103). There are several reasons why decolonial feminist theorizing largely remains unknown, ignored, or erased, ranging from the practical to the abstract, though all are co-constituted by intersecting structures of power. One of these more practical reasons has to do with the language and location of publication; much decolonial feminist work is published in Spanish or Portuguese by people and journals situated in the Global South. For many scholars, this is likely a deliberate choice to speak to and with the communities they are a part of, but it also clearly points to the Eurocentrism of academic knowledge production and the reproduction of the Global South as an object of study rather than as a site of knowledges. This is then also reflected in academic publication dynamics, as well as, for example, the continued exclusive hosting of the International Studies Association annual conventions in either the USA or Canada (Demeter and Istratii 2020; Noda 2020). Another reason relates to the origin of these decolonial feminist knowledges in the oral herstories, spiritual traditions, and collective memories of Indigenous women. Only recently have Global North feminist scholars, particularly within the emerging field of feminist peace research (Lyytikäinen et al. 2021), started to engage with these oral and spiritual traditions as part of transdisciplinary approaches to understanding peace and conflict.

Further, our Global Northern citational practices are directly implicated in the gendered and racialized erasure of women's and feminist work in the field. While decolonial feminisms may not have been explicitly articulated until the 1990s (Martín Alcoff 2020, 14), women have been contributing and developing its concepts and theories for centuries. For example, before the invention of the Americas, Indigenous women like Cacica Gaitana and María Madigua were already key in the development of their groups' various ontologies and cosmovisions, as well as being important leaders against the Spanish invasion and colonization (see, for example, Tattay Bolaños 2012; Gestoras de Memoria Histórica del Resguardo de Jambaló 2015). Later, in the seventeenth century, women like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz became central in highlighting and promoting women's participation in the international sphere (Harding and Mendoza 2020, 105). Then, in 1910, Buenos Aires hosted the first international feminist congress in Abya Yala, and by the 1980s, there were region-wide feminist *encuentros* (meetings) (Sternbach et al. 1992; Vargas 1992). These women's and feminist movements, their ideas, and proponents—which are by no means homogenous, as we will explain below—rather than being simply inspired by more mainstream modernity/coloniality/decoloniality scholars and Western feminism, emerged as a challenge to the gendered and racialized foundations of these approaches.

Decolonial feminisms are not just marginalized; however, they are also often simply misunderstood. Hierarchical ordering happens not only within decolonial theory, but also between different variations of anti-colonial theory, most notably in relation to postcolonialism. In the words of Mariana Ortega (2017, 507), "different genealogies of decoloniality [emerge] depending on who is telling the decolonial story." In this case, the binary ordering between decolonial and postcolonial theories is based on overdetermined "simplistic (mis)readings" (Asher and Ramamurthy 2020, 544) of their respective contextual origins, genealogies, aims, and critiques. These (mis)readings not only discount "the political economy of knowledge-production," but also "do little to explain the complex relations by which colonial differences endure and bind us" (Asher and Ramamurthy 2020, 545).

Finally, these (mis)readings are also directly related to the aims of decolonial feminisms. Decolonial feminisms not only seek to identify the inherent inequalities of the international sphere, but also actively work to deconstruct the racist, capitalist, cisnormative, and heteropatriarchal ontological foundations of the world, including the discipline of IR itself. Decolonial feminists are therefore not often interested in participating, let alone supporting, an academy (the institutional site and intellectual space [Rodríguez 2012, 810]) that, as "an internal auxiliary agent of the state" (Udas and Stagg 2019, 66), has arisen against a backdrop of capital accumulation, "dispossession, enslavement, forced assimilation, and integration" (Grande 2018, 47). Given their roots in political activism, decolonial feminisms are produced and practiced not just on the margins of the academy, but often outside of them as a "political and ethical stance" of refusal (Simpson 2014, 11; see also Tuck and Yang 2014; Grande 2018). So, while IR may read decolonial feminism, if at all, as a theory for recognition and inclusion, such a characterization misunderstands its deconstructive aims while continuing the unknowing and erasure of its theorists and their thinking.

It is important then, to engage meaningfully with decolonial feminisms, and to not characterize them as singular. Indeed, we use the plural throughout because they are not comprised of a homogenous group of people, locations, or ideas; they include mestiza/criolla Abya Yalan and US Latinx (Isasi-Díaz 1996; Segato 2000; Lugones 2010; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012; Marcos 2019), Indigenous (Cabnal 2010; Paredes 2010; Cumes 2012), and Africana and Caribbean feminists (Anzaldúa 1999; Pérez 1999; Sandoval 2000). Additionally, they not only differ between their affiliations and support for Leftist or independent feminist political mobilizations, but more fundamentally regarding the role of women and gender both in ancestral knowledges and contemporary mobilizations. That is, for example, while some decolonial feminists like Lugones (2007, 2010) consider gender to be a colonial construct, others like Paredes (2010, 71, own translation) argue that what women experience today in Abya Yala is the result of a "historical patriarchal juncture between precolonial and Western patriarchy," which differs from others again, like Rivera Cusicanqui (2014), who see gender as a corollary to the formation of nation-states following independence.

Decolonial feminisms are brought together, however, by several key commitments and experiences. These include commitments to "thinking and practicing… 'deep coalitions' that are not 'epistemically shallow' but rather seek 'a loving connection toward liberation'" (Lugones quoted in Velez and Tuana 2020, 367), and the "honouring [of] non-Western rights, non-modernist values, epistemologies, cosmologies, knowledges, lifestyles, and stories… without assigning rank or evolutionary potential" to them (Carrasco-Miró 2020, 773). These coalitions also come together as resistance to and rejection of the intersection between patriarchal capitalism and white race privilege, which includes white feminism[1] (Amos and Parmar 2005; Kelley 2018; Thunig and Jones 2021).

Decolonial feminisms are thus well positioned to make key contributions to emerging analytical discussions within the mainstream about whiteness and coloniality in the discipline, as well as broader and continuing debates about the politics of knowledge production. Such approaches also counter-hegemonic narratives or dynamics, such as the insidious attachment to liberalism and the Global North as reference points even in some critical and anti-colonial works, ignoring South–South power dynamics (Eriksson Baaz and Parashar 2021), as well as discussions

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[1]The term "white feminism" is rooted in Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color feminist genealogies (Lorde 1984; Frankenberg 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Ahmed 2004a; Carby 2007). As defined by Razia Aziz (1997, 70, emphasis in original), white feminism is not any feminism by white feminists, but rather "any feminism that comes from a white perspective, *and* universalizes it." It is "a way of seeing" and "subsists through a failure to consider both the wider social and political context of power in which feminist utterances and actions take place, and the ability of feminism to influence that context" (Aziz 1997, 70).

about the origin stories of IR. Specifically relating to women, decolonial feminist perspectives challenge narratives about Southern women's need to be saved or separated from local norms and values in order to be empowered; the "genderwashing" of colonial policies and interventions justified on the basis of women's rights; and the binary idea that the private sphere, as opposed to the public, is always already an apolitical space where women are devoid of agency. It is not about romanticizing or homogenizing the Global South, but rather a way to acknowledge and engage with women's everyday processes of "seeking, interpreting, and bringing forth the sacred," which are "all the practices that validate… [their] lives and ways of being" and knowing (Martín 2020, 21).

Finally, decolonial feminist approaches contribute important methodologies for research in IR, such as storytelling, which is based on a recognition that all "thought is collective" (Cadaval Narezo 2022, 142). Storytelling as epistemology challenges both Eurocentric notions of knowledge production, and essentializing narratives about women's experiences and theorizations. These collective knowledges inspire our own theoretical and ethical commitments as well. Further, decolonial feminist research encourages scholars to change their conceptual frameworks in our encounters with research interlocutors, human and/or other-than-human, and their human and/or more-than-human worlds to co-create knowledge that is non-hierarchical.

Our theoretical and ethical commitments in fieldwork take inspiration, then, from decolonial feminisms calling for a "humbler approach" to the deconstruction of colonialism and ontological racialization in theory, policy, and practice (Iman Jackson quoted in Chipato and Chandler 2022, 12). As such, and borrowing from critical Black studies, we seek to center an "inquisitive practice" (Iman Jackson 2020, 212) that "neither presumes we already have an adequate epistemological model for comprehending the nature and stakes of [the force of antiblackness (and colonization)] nor presupposes that a sufficient political framework for intervention already exists" (Iman Jackson quoted in Chipato and Chandler 2022, 12). These commitments are both positive and negative; that is, we commit to a relational ethics, which means to listen and learn "deeply across difference—inter-generationally, interculturally, and inter-cosmologically" (Dupuis 2022, 50), as well as to not presume to think, know, or write about people unless it is *with* them.

A decolonial feminist approach entails deep and iterative reflexivity. Reflexivity is "a necessary ingredient for attempting ethical research" (D'Arcangelis 2018, 340), but reflexive practice is not, in and of itself, a decolonial feminist practice. For it to become one, it requires a "double turn" (Ahmed 2004a) from us as researchers, to recognize our personal positionalities as well as the broader structures of power and the "interconnected and enduring struggles" (Weatherall 2019, 480) in which the personal (as political) is embedded. Linked to this is the idea of relationality of knowledge in contrast to the idea of knowledge characterized by ownership and individual expertise. "[K]nowledge is relational" and co-produced (Wilson 2001, 177). This relationality is not only invoked with respect to knowledge, but also to accountability, and the need to embed commitments of "respect, reciprocity, and responsibility" (Wilson 2008, 77) in all our research encounters.

Part of doing such engaged work also means researching and theorizing back to the whitestream and its knowledge paradigms (Moreton-Robinson 2000; Tuck 2008; Tuhiwai Smith 2016). Based on a "politics of dignity" (Icaza 2018, 62), researching and theorizing back is not just a form of resistance but re-existence: a "redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity" (Albán quoted in Rodríguez Castro 2020, 3). We commit to a politics and ethics that includes "[t]aking love and care seriously [especially] in contexts of violence and armed conflict" (Krystalli and Schulz 2022, 3), not only as a way of having a more nuanced understanding of people's individual and communitarian experiences of peace and conflict, but as an active ethical and political process of deconstructing oppression and moving toward

epistemic justice and equality. In the following section, we build on and develop this decolonial feminist framework by showing the effects that adopting critical and self-reflexive commitments in fieldwork can have in practice. We argue that the commitments we present here can translate to an approach that centers, among other things the collectivity of knowledge cultivation; the building of community and kinship; reflexivity and emotional investment; and loving accountability.

Fieldwork as Decolonial Feminist Ethics in Practice

In this final section, we offer not a "what is" or "how to" but a "with what effects" analysis of feminist ethics in practice. We do this in recognition of the experiences of fieldwork we have had as researchers, including the failures, doubts, and discomforts that inspire us to contribute to the "*conduct* [of more] *ethical, beneficient field research*" (Irgil et al. 2021, 4, emphasis in original). Indeed, a key contribution of "[f]eminist approaches [to fieldwork is that they] can provide the language and tools to open up such Pandora's boxes to address questions of complicity… on the part of the researchers of the discipline" (Kappler and Lemay-Hébert 2018, 176). Our contribution to decolonial feminist ethics in practice, then, is "part of the feminist project… to dismantle the smokescreen surrounding the canons of neopositivist research-impartiality and objectivist neutrality-which supposedly prevent the researcher from contaminating the data (and, presumably, vice versa)" (England 1994, 81).

Above, we outlined the contours of contemporary debates about critical fieldwork in international studies, which draws on a range of disciplinary traditions and approaches but which, we argue, still produces knowledge within a largely hierarchical, extractivist, and short-termist paradigm. In order to address this problem, we argue that, to paraphrase Flavia Dzodan (2011), fieldwork must be feminist and decolonial, or it will be bullshit: If we want to cultivate knowledge in nurturing and sustainable ways, we need to embed decolonial and feminist ethics into our research practices. In this section, we outline what this ethical stance means, focusing first on the implications of a shift to an ethos of knowledge cultivation, then on the dimensions of decolonial feminist praxis that supports the kinds of engagement we find generative; the importance of relations of care, community, and kinship; the key role of reflexivity and emotions; and the practice of loving accountability.

Knowledge Cultivation as Collective Endeavor

Our elaboration of decolonial feminist ethics begins with the concept of knowledge cultivation. The process of knowledge cultivation is a part of decolonial praxis, emphasizing not the isolated and individualized process of incremental addition to a stock of knowledge "products," but rather the collaborative effort to think in relation *with* "the communal matter" of enquiry (Shilliam 2015, 25). Recognizing knowledge cultivation as a collective endeavor works against the grain of colonial science, which allocates the pursuit and documentation of knowledge to the privileged dominant group; Lila Abu-Lughod describes this as "the basic political issue at the heart of most anthropology—the issue of Western knowers and representers, and non-Western knowns and represented" (Abu-Lughod 1990, 11), although this presumption operates not only within anthropology but also across the social sciences. The foundational binary of knower/known not only separates forms of knowledge from their social context but also individualizes the production of knowledge in line with Western philosophical traditions that dictate the primacy of the liberal political subject. Conversely, knowledge cultivation is communal and creative: "to cultivate knowledge is to till, to turn matter around and fold back on itself so as to rebind and encourage growth … knowledge cultivation is a necessarily creative pursuit as it requires the practitioner to turn over and oxygenate the past" (Shilliam 2015, 25).

Situating knowledge cultivation as the ultimate aim of our research as scholars of international studies necessarily shifts our ethos from individual gain/production to collective endeavor, bringing with it—as we discuss below—a focus on relations of care, community and kinship, and accountability.

Understanding—and disclosing—who we are, with whom we relate, and how we relate to our many others is central to our approach because these are the communities and relations in and through which we work to cultivate knowledge. Thus, refusing to efface our *selves* in our research is not simply a performance of fidelity to the norms of Western social science but an ethical choice. The expectations and ideals that govern research practice are frequently presented as technical requirements without normative value, but

> [t]he ways of doing things of the different research approaches are hardly just 'neutral instruments', as believers in science have claimed. They carry normative content. One important such aspect concerns the questions of who is included in the community of inquiry and interpretation, and what/who are the subjects of study. (Eikeland 2006, 39)

If we proceed from the assumption that research design and research dissemination in publications and presentations are communal practices that blur the boundaries between those who enquire and those whose existence and experience are the subject of enquiry, then the relations that structure those communities become visible as transcendent, and must be accounted for in our endeavors in order to facilitate continued commitment to ethical research practice. As Jana Krause (2021, 10) observes bluntly, "[w]hen academic publications discuss fieldwork in identity-neutral terms they undermine ethical reflections."

Structuring our work, then, is an understanding of knowledge "as partial, social, produced through practices, and both spatially and materially relational" (McFarlane 2006, 288). This understanding "sees knowledge as emergent from daily material practices, embedded in interactions, and inextricable from the context in which it is produced" (McFarlane quoted in Butcher 2020, 3–4). It is this inextricability of knowledge from context and its embeddedness in community relations that particularly inspires us here, as we commit to cultivating knowledge in relation as the linchpin of decolonial and feminist practice. When we engage in research, this understanding enlivens

> an ethical practice that invites meaningful reflection and provokes an uncomfortable, disquieting reckoning with power [that] can go beyond disclosure and documentation, leaping off the page to affect daily interactions, collaborations, and acts of acknowledgment and solidarity. (Krystalli 2021, 44)

In the following subsections, we outline how ideas about community and kinship, reflexivity and emotions, and loving accountability inform our research efforts.

Community and Kinship

A decolonial and feminist research ethos starts from the position that "[t]he academy, the field, and the societies in which both are nested are continuations of one another, not boundaries" (Poets 2020, 112). Recognizing that all research is always already research in and with the self and our community/ies (the institutions, values, norms, and expectations of which shape not only our selves but also our research encounters) *even as it is perhaps also* research on and with "others," changes the terrain of our research endeavors and shifts our focus to, in the first instance, the relational connections that produce and hold us. Moreover, approaching the communities with which we cultivate knowledge—whether or not they are geographically or politically proximate to our worlds—in the spirit of kinship fosters more sustainable and potentially more equitable relationships and forms of care.

Feminist scholars in particular have emphasized the need to build empathy and cross-cultural relations (Mullings 1999; Apfelbaum 2001), which includes balancing the practice of gathering data, benefiting the community (Goerisch 2017), and designing collaborative projects that give power and voice to the researched community through shared responsibility (England 1994). This relates back to a core idea that runs through this article: that research needs to go beyond "being feminist" to "doing feminism" (Russo 2018). Decolonial feminist praxis teaches us the importance of community-building and kinship, and can prompt us to ask the following questions about how to incorporate these concepts into our research methods: How do we work together collectively to transform injustices and inequalities without reproducing the same systems and the violences they produce? And how do we cultivate knowledge ethically and reach emancipatory decolonial feminist goals by building a vibrant and sustainable community?

This concept of community resonates with the metaphor of "tribe-building" by Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay (2016), which problematizes the perception of a researcher as independent and in control. Tribe-building is also a helpful metaphor to recognize the value of a trusted set of interlocutors to make introductions, share hard-earned wisdom, and offer support and insights so that the researcher can start the process of knowledge creation. Trust cannot be forged just by following ethical research codes and guidelines in a formulaic manner. The idea of "tribe-building" cannot be imagined without building meaningful reciprocal relationship of trust with the research interlocutors. Researchers need to establish "respectful" ongoing relationships with the research interlocutors, which requires enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in their interviews for the consultants to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds (Sherman-Heyl 2001, 387). The dependencies, biases, and vulnerabilities of field research manifest in creative and conscientious ways to co-construct knowledge (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016). The researcher–research broker relationship, affective performances by the researcher, broker, and research consultants, and complex insider/outsider dynamics highlight this idea of research as a part of "tribe-building," adding greater transparency to the research process (Parashar 2019). Similarly, the complex emotional and affective energies generated by the research encounters often compel the researcher into attachments creating a "we" (Ahmed 2004b, 188), which is consequential to the research process and outputs. One such instance of formation of "we" occurred in a research encounter during Keshab's fieldwork in Nepal:

> In the harsh winter of January 2018, I spent two weeks in Thabang, Rolpa, the epicenter of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996–2006). For the first week of my stay, not a single female Maoist ex-combatant was willing to share her story. My hostess, a well-known teacher and social activist in the community, tried in vain to get some Maoist female ex-combatants she knew to talk to me. During the freezing evenings, my hostess would often invite her neighbors just for chitchat after dinner. Everyone would sit in a circle around a firepit and tell stories of war, the harshness of winter, politics, childhood experiences, crop harvesting, culture, and everyday experiences. I would keenly listen to their simple stories infused with deep meaning, wisdom, and complex understandings of life. My hostess asked me to share my story as well. I told stories of my childhood, my parents and their struggles, and my own struggles for education. After that, they started talking to me more and asking many questions about my family, my work, and my research. One of the neighbors was a Maoist female ex-combatant. After hearing about my story and my research, she offered to be interviewed. She introduced me to one of her friends who was also a Maoist female ex-combatant. I asked why they had initially declined to be interviewed. They said that they didn't know if I was "like" them until they heard my story, which resonated with them. Now, whenever I speak to my then-hostess, I ask about my interlocutors and convey my regards to them. Sometimes, I get to talk to them via Facebook. When

> I told them that I got my PhD and published my paper, they said that they were very happy. They asked me if I will ever return to Thabang.

As demonstrated, our research is the result of relationships of trust and rapport with the interlocuters as well as the research brokers. As we discuss in the subsection on loving accountability, however, building enduring kinship requires that we transform these relationships into something tangible that seeks to fight inequalities and injustices without reproducing hierarchies between researchers and interlocutors.

Another key aspect of community-building in the research process happens between the collaborating researchers who occupy different roles, such as the principal researcher and the research assistants (Monk et al. 2003). Besides the interactions between researchers and interlocutors, research is also shaped by continuous interactions between different researchers engaged in collaborative work with various backgrounds, varying levels of seniority, and different capacities. There are inevitable power dynamics and interactions within research teams—including ours—and broader research communities (including across axes of gender, ethnicity, linguistics, culture, seniority, employment precarity, and area of expertise) that influence the research process (Monk et al. 2003), further demonstrating the negotiated and collective nature of knowledge cultivation.

These relations are never innocent, of course; even as "[m]any feminist methodologies emphasize non-hierarchical interactions, understanding, and mutual learning" (Sultana 2007, 375), it is important to hold space for those encounters with kin that are hard to navigate, that challenge our beliefs and values, or that arouse antipathy in us in other ways. Christine Sylvester (1994) gifts us a methodology to enact such a principle in her development of empathetic cooperation as a mode of encounter. Empathetic cooperation, she explains,

> is a process of positional slippage that occurs when one listens seriously to the concerns, fears, and agendas of those one is unaccustomed to heeding… taking on board rather than dismissing, finding in the concerns of others borderlands of one's own hopes and fears. (Sylvester 1994, 317)

Engaging generously and empathetically with kin, even as we might struggle to align ourselves with their position, is part of enacting community, and taking this principle into our research ethos keeps relations central in the research encounter and encourages generosity and compassion, both with our interlocutors and ourselves. Just as with kin by birth or by choice, considering research as a relational endeavor and practicing empathetic cooperation does not mean uncritically accepting every behavior or expression: When community, care, and relations are at the center of our practice, each evaluation acknowledges the distributed effects of every encounter—effects on the self, on what we carry back to those that journey with us and nourish us, on our wider communities of practice, and on the possibilities that inhere in the research. "Ethical dilemmas are, at their core, dilemmas about power and the ways in which it shapes choices and relationships" (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay quoted in Krystalli 2021, 37).

Simply put, a decolonial feminist research ethos involves recognizing that *all* relationships in research are (at least potentially) reciprocal, asymmetrical, and exploitative, structured by power operating along multiple axes to produce fluid subjectivities held in fluid relation. "Geographically contingent histories of race indelibly mark the research encounter" (Faria and Mollett 2016, 88) along with other structures of power and domination. As England succinctly concludes, "[r]eflexivity can make us more aware of asymmetrical or exploitative relationships, but it cannot remove them" (England 1994, 86); these hierarchies cannot be erased "because the control of power structures is not totally in the hands of researchers" (Yu 2020, 273), and because we are always exceeding our researcher selves in our research practices. The illusion of singularity that is invested in both our *selves* and our re-

search encounters obscures the dense and shifting pluralities that constitute us all as humans and in and through which we interweave our practices of knowledge cultivation.

Reflexivity and Emotions

Beyond the external process of building meaningful communities, feminist research also means embedding reflexivity as part of our practice throughout the research process, including in fieldwork. Reflexivity is a feminist practice (Chilmeran and Hedström 2021) concerned with recognizing and engaging with our own intersectional and messy identities (Bond 2018), as well as reflecting on the "contextual economic, political, and institutional processes and structures that shape the form and effects of fieldwork" (Nagar and Geiger 2007, 270).[2]

Much like the early paradigm of fieldwork with which we opened this paper, it remains the case that the presumption of who the researchers are in the global context is still anchored to people in and from the Global North. As researchers ourselves, based in (and mostly from) the Global North, we contribute to this narrative as well, with (Western) feminism not immune from a history of academic "imperialism and discursive colonization" (Ehlers 2016, 354). Abya Yala, for example, has long been portrayed as a place that is studied and analyzed rather than a place where knowledge and theories are created (Mignolo 1996; Escobar 2012). As such, a decolonial feminist ethic means taking the various and intersecting fields of power that transverse our work and our embodied identities seriously and recognizing that they permeate all dimensions of the research process. Indeed, "it is the very existence of privilege that allows the research to be undertaken" (Patai 1991, 137). This privilege inherently influences the access and experiences researchers have in the course of our fieldwork (Datta 2008), and how we translate, interpret, and write about the lives and experiences of our interlocutors.

As noted above in the discussion on community-building, however, good intentions are not enough; "reflexivity is not a 'get out of jail free' card" (Hagen et al. 2023, 15). Being aware of the need for reflexivity does not keep us from the risk of exploiting our interlocutors or the reality of our privilege and the profits we gain from our work. Our recognition of this is not capable of overcoming oppression, nor is telling the stories of "*womenoverthere*"[3] (Henry 2021, 23, emphasis in original) capable of challenging the inequalities upon which the system of research is largely based. Even if it were, it would still not be enough; as Marsha Henry (2021, 24) critiques, "by applying an 'intersectional analysis' or intersectionality as a 'heuristic device', there is no accountability for using Black feminist theories without [the presence of] Black women" nor does it "challenge the foundations of power as they are reflected in universities" (Henry 2021, 24). Indeed, it just introduces an additional kind of exploitation into research. As Laura Shepherd (2016, 11) suggests, we need to instead recognize "the silences in the selves we admit to." Of course, this process of reckoning is difficult, and as we explore later in this piece, it involves doubt, discomfort, and missteps.

Regardless of our various theoretical commitments, how we think about and then do our work "in the field" is co-constituted by the institutional contexts within which we are located, and these are intimately entangled with the processes and structures of fieldwork. So, while we may do our best to *do* our theoretical assumptions—to *do*

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[2]It should be noted, however, that while our discussion on positionality is focused within these paragraphs, reflexivity is in fact a practice we engage in throughout this paper and in our "doing" of academia, and not something we believe can or should be "tacked on" to a project after it is complete. As Wibben et al. (2019, 92) explain, "a reflexive intersectional approach is much more than a methodological tool; it is central to the axiology and epistemology" of research.

[3]Henry (2021, 23) explains her theorization of "*womenoverthere*" as "women ethnicized and/or racialized as the archetypal victims of conflict and armed violence."

our decolonial feminism instead of just *being* decolonial feminists—and make solidarity and collaboration with our interlocutors central to our research, we remain nonetheless complicit, through our participation and the benefits we gain, in the validation of the wider racial, classed, and gendered structures within which we operate. Ilan Kapoor (2020), for example, suggests that racism provides an "inherent support" (Kapoor 2020, 241) to development as a discipline and practice. He argues that whiteness as a system of power and whiteliness as a racialized form of existing in the world (on whiteliness, see Syed and Ali 2011) "[pervade] not just colonialism's cultural practices, but also its political and socioeconomic institutions… manifest[ing] in the way that knowledge is constructed, authority is exercised and activities are organized" (Kapoor 2020, 242, 4; see also Parpart 1993; Tuhiwai Smith 2016). Similar criticisms have been leveled at the scholarship and practices of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda (Haastrup and Hagen 2020, 2021; Henry 2021) and IR more broadly (Mignolo 2017; Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019; Eriksson Baaz and Parashar 2021). As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2016, 226) explains, "research exists within a system of power," and work by the subaltern has always had to "talk back to" or "talk up to" power (Moreton-Robinson 2000).

Following the examples, Kapoor (2020) provides as to how racism taints discourses of knowledge, we—both the authors and the academy more broadly—need to engage not just with the terminology we use in our work and how we decide not only what counts as knowledge, but also the funding and decision-making processes that guided it. The funding for the project of which this article is a part, for example, came from the Global Challenges Fund, which is part of the UK's official development assistance and seeks to address the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in "developing regions and countries," with most decision-makers (including in our research team) being white and based in the Global North. This reality necessitates a frank discussion, then, as to the extent that our decolonial feminist ethics can hope to achieve what we would like it to. For example, how can we destabilize established knowledge production processes and structures in our field, when our funding originates from and enables institutions and programs based on colonially-founded relationships (Rivas 2018); when we live and work on the stolen land of Australia's Indigenous peoples; when our discipline is rooted in the desire for the domination of the Other (Mignolo 2017); and when so much of what leads us— the authors—to do this work, is tied up with our own desires to be legitimized as *knowers* within IR? Feminist decolonial research teaches us that it is about reflecting with fierce vulnerability and uncomfortable honesty, and relinquishing the safety of our own privileges, in order to start to think and know otherwise (see, for example, Snyman 2015; Icaza 2017).

This reflexivity also necessitates a recognition of all the ways in which we are messy, embodied, human beings that feel. Despite mainstream assumptions that IR is devoid of emotions, so much of what we study and what drives our study in/of ir/IR as academics is embedded in affective discourses. Indeed, emotions form an important part of our gendered and gendering (re)production as embodied subjects (as well as racialized, sexualized, and classed embodied reproductions). Emotions are specific to researchers and interlocutors, but also relational within the interview space, as well as in the overall context in which the research is being done and the context in which the research is then being shared. In the case of fieldwork specifically, emotions are important because they inform so much of how we come to know one another "in the field" (Hedström 2019, 665). In these next paragraphs, then, we consider both how emotions function as "social and cultural practices… [that] allow power to be felt and negotiated" (Waller-Carr 2020, 677, 683) by researchers and interlocutors alike; and how interlocutors draw on emotions in ways that allow them to think and know otherwise. As researchers working on and in conflict, post-conflict, and peacebuilding contexts, we are acutely aware of this.

As Elisabeth Porter (2016, 37) reminds us, it is important to consider the "relational dimension of storytelling." That is, stories (or interviews) are told *to* someone, and the spatio-temporal and affective spaces where these stories are shared matter for how we then co-produce knowledge (Hedström 2019; Krause 2021; Nyman 2021). Indeed, this is particularly important to consider during interviews and periods of fieldwork given that the "emotional framing" of people's experiences situates them within gendered, sexualized, racialized, and classed hierarchies of power (Waller-Carr 2020, 683). Engaging with emotions, then, is part of the process of crafting narratives that recognize the spatio-temporal situatedness of our theorizations. That is, as Alba's personal reflection below shows, we theorize about political events and phenomena based on relational and affective conversations with *people* in a particular time and space (Kappler and Lemay-Hébert 2018).

> Knowing (in)security, for me, is part of my relationship with my mother and my late abuela, their stories of a persecuted life under Franco's dictatorship in Spain. It was those relationships of care that meant that before I left to go on fieldwork, I made a little pouch from left-over green and white polka-dot fabric with a safety pin on the back. It was just big enough to fit a bank card, should I need it, and extra folded-up cash I didn't keep in my wallet. It was my abuela who had first shown me this trick and how to pin it to the inside of my trousers at the waist without anyone ever noticing it was there. Once in Colombia, knowing (in)security meant the prickling of my skin when I saw heavily armed soldiers on what seemed like every corner. As I developed relationships with the research interlocutors, that knowing came to include their care for me, whether it was sharing their stories, walking me to the metro station, or inviting me to lunch at their house; it was also in my running up three flights of stairs worried about the potential intruders that the building manager told me could be hiding in the dark corners of the building; and it was in the night I woke up screaming, covered in sweat, and trying to pin my partner to the mattress on my bedroom floor before I realized he wasn't a rapist intruder in my bed.

Emotions, like those felt by Alba and described above, "are knowledge, in the sense that they contain knowledge" (Hedström 2019, 663). Paying attention to their role in knowledge production, including in fieldwork, has much to teach us about, for example, women's everyday experiences of living through conflict, the tolls of peacebuilding work, and the way emotions function to connect individuals to and within political collectives. Emotions are also central to community-building and sustaining, as emotional engagement and bonding can create stronger and more resilient communities. María Torre and Michelle Fine (2007) argue that we must engage with the emotions provoked by our research. After all, fieldwork—living with and listening to people's intimate stories—is an emotional relationship between people requiring the investment of mutual trust between researchers and interlocutors (Apfelbaum 2001, 29); the "spaces of fieldwork" are made up of "emotional entanglements" (see Laliberté and Schurr 2016, 72). As part of the process of telling one's story, research interlocutors identify their individual experiences as shared, as social, and then in turn as political (Cahill 2007a, 2007b). Similarly, engaging with our own intersectional and messy identities as scholars, and reflecting on the emotions that structure our experiences in relation to the "field," not only shows us "what effects" our positionalities have on our research in practice, but also allows us to feel, and therefore negotiate, the intersections of power we embody.

Loving Accountability

As established above, communities are made up of relationships, and meaningful, authentic relationship-building requires reflexivity and the honest reckoning with emotions, even when it is uncomfortable to do so. Taken together, identifying researchers as reflexive community members encourages loving accountability: both

in terms of holding the self to account; and asking that, as a community of scholars, we hold each other to account, with love, for the effects of our research.

Being accountable means recognizing how our words, actions, and decisions are always embedded in relations of power and acting from a place of that recognition (Patai 1991; Russo 2018, 20). Even if we try to foreground our commonalities and identification in the context of differences, we might nonetheless reproduce structures of oppression and exploit research respondents (Finch 1984). To borrow from Morgan Bassichis, irrespective of our good intentions, "the very systems we are working to dismantle live inside of us" (quoted in Russo 2018, 2). While research might be informed by feminist theories and facilitated by feminist methodology, we can still perpetuate and reproduce the structural inequality that knowledge production involves. In this sense, to borrow from Connie Burk, accountability is "an internal resource for recognizing and redressing the harms we have caused" (quoted in Russo 2018, 19). Being truly accountable, therefore, means acknowledging that all of us are capable of harm and complicity in systemic oppression, and need to be accountable for our involvement in the perpetuation of oppression and violence.

Accountability, however, extends far beyond the mechanisms of institutional accountability with which researchers will no doubt be familiar: Ticking boxes for human ethics requirements and asking interlocutors to sign a consent form does not absolve researchers from their political commitments to their research community (Cahill 2007b; Fujii 2012). While human ethics guidelines and informed consent are, from a somewhat logistical perspective, important elements of research to ensure the safety and well-being of the research interlocutors, they do not compel, or even encourage, researchers to nurture sustainable community relations that extend beyond the end of the research project, or beyond the stipulated timeframes to retain signed consent forms. There is "*constant work* that needs to go into *ethical knowledge encounters*" (Poopuu and van den Berg 2021, 237, emphasis in original), before, during, and after institutional mandates. Current institutional structures of academy, research funding provisions, and ethical guidelines, and requirements do not envision responsibility and commitment to extend temporally in a holistic way (see also Exley, Whatman, and Singh 2018). In other words, we need to rethink the role and impact of research "beyond the journal article" and the ivory tower (Cahill and Torre 2007; Torre and Fine 2007).

Ezgi Irgil and her colleagues comment on accountability as a dimension of reflexive practice in their recent essay on fieldwork, noting that

> academics, including in the social sciences and especially those hailing from countries in the Global North, have a long and troubled history of exploiting their power over others for the sake of their research—including failing to be upfront about their research goals, misrepresenting the on-the-ground realities of their field research sites (including remote fieldwork), and publishing essentializing, paternalistic, and damaging views and analyses of the people there. No one should build their career on the backs of others, least of all in a field concerned with the possession and exercise of power. Thus, it is highly crucial to acknowledge the power hierarchies between the researcher and the interviewees, and to reflect on them both in the field and beyond the field upon return. (Irgil et al. 2021, 18)

While we agree wholeheartedly that acknowledging and reflecting on power hierarchies is a precondition of ethical research practices, we propose that the process of knowledge cultivation must include not only a commitment to reflection but also a commitment to *acting* on such reflection to hold our *selves* and our communities accountable, with love, for the practices we undertake and for those that are undertaken in our names (narrowly and broadly conceived). As Roxani Krystalli (2021, 42) elaborates: "I envision this conceptualization of transparency as encouraging researchers to hold ourselves accountable to reckoning with power dynamics – not only vis-à-vis our research participants, but also our collaborators, citations,

and broader networks of conversation and influence." This is something that Laura reflects on often, following years of research on the UN:

> I have no doubt that "doing fieldwork" at and around the United Nations Headquarters in New York over a period of years has been instrumental in my own career advancement. Thinking back to 2013, the year of my first visit, how good it felt to have told people, "Yeah, we're going to New York in the summer, I'm doing some work on peacebuilding at the UN". I still benefit from the insights and generosity of those I spoke to—I polished their words and set them like gems in my books and articles and went on to secure more funding for more projects and wrote more books that were nominated for more awards. I have increasingly focused on race and relations of colonial power in my work and yet I only learned in recent years that the name Turtle Island is preferred by many Indigenous people when referencing what I have unreflexively described as North America my whole life. I am lost in guilt and what use is that to anyone? I fall easily into the trap of what Carol Lynne D'Arcangelis (2018, 340), in her own critique of self-reflexivity, called "the White settler fantasy of transcending colonialism."

Sometimes, loving accountability requires us to say "no";

> no to conducting that research, no to sitting on that panel, no to speaking to that journalist, no to writing that op-ed, no to collaborating with that think tank, no to doing that consultancy. If that seems restrictive, just remember that every single of these *no*'s comes with a potential yes: yes to collaborative partnerships, yes to participatory approaches, yes to emancipatory research, and yes to liberatory work. (Eggert in Hagen et al. 2023, 12)

But when it is a "yes" to fieldwork, we suggest that a focus on power and multiplicity as outlined above can keep a feminist and decolonial research ethos honest and humble, aware of the hubris of claiming expertise based on extractive encounters enacted for the betterment of career prospects (and is this not all research?). Discomfort in research can result in a much more nuanced and reflexive analysis of the data, especially in terms of acknowledging and experiencing systems of power and privilege (Goerisch 2017, 308), but it is not enough to wallow in shame provoked by reflecting on the benefits of our positionality. If it is to be enacted in a feminist and decolonial research ethos, sitting with discomfort requires holding our *selves* and our communities to account, with love and compassion.

It may seem peculiar or out of place to come to the conclusion that love matters in an academic article on research practice (although we are in good company; see Krystalli and Schulz 2022; Poopuu and van den Berg 2021). Acknowledging the wholeness of our humanity, however, is central to a feminist and decolonial ethos, and there are rich resources to draw upon to nurture connection with emotion in the relations we establish in our work (including with our selves).

Conclusion

We set out to explore the possibilities of fieldwork for international studies, particularly in the discipline of IR, an exploration that necessarily begins with reckoning with the ways in which fieldwork produces and reproduces hierarchies and exclusions in line with existing structures of (racialized, gendered, classed, sexualized, and embodied) power. Research is a community-building practice, a community-building *praxis*, which connects theory to lived experience, and in many ways, this collaboration is an example of such praxis. Working together requires connection, communication, listening, patience, generosity, self-awareness, and openness—values that are condensed in the commitments to honoring community and kinship, reflexivity and emotions, and loving accountability that we argue here characterize a decolonial feminist fieldwork ethos.

One of the primary goals of feminist research is taking research as a part of emancipatory politics to consolidate the political commitment to a just, egalitarian, and fair society (Ackerly and True 2019). As a corollary, feminist research attempts to deconstruct the barriers between the academy and the lives of the people it professes to represent (Kobayashi 1994, 73) by challenging the myth of value neutrality and detached observation, through ethical engagement, connection, and reciprocity with the community of our study (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1988). Leveraging our connection and engagement with the community in research beyond tokenism and supporting their participation as a way of challenging unequal power relations is a primary concern of decolonial feminist research (Kothari 2001; Kesby 2005), along with a fierce commitment to challenging hierarchies and injustice.

Decolonial feminist research cannot stop at community-building within the academy to cultivate knowledge ethically; such an ethos necessarily includes transforming the process of knowledge cultivation into a durable engagement, characterized by interaction and reciprocity. It involves not just giving back to those who so generously lend us their time and knowledge (Knott 2019, 148) but also valuing them as a part of a larger effort, actively or otherwise engaged with ending all forms of oppression and discrimination to build a just and egalitarian society. This is part of "doing feminism," where research is seen as a continuous process rather than a single act (Russo 2018). As such, accountable feminist research is always an ongoing practice, not an end in and of itself. Transparent reflection and a willingness to hold ourselves and others, and in turn be held, to account for the practices and possibilities of research in the process of knowledge cultivation are part of how relations are built and sustained; keeping love and compassion at the core of our endeavors not only foregrounds our shared humanity but also connects us to our better selves, our communities, our places and spaces of knowledge, and those with whom we become entangled as we learn.

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