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# Positionality Statements as a Function of Coloniality: Interrogating Reflexive Methodologies

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Declaration of positionality and the confession of privilege as a way of revealing unequal power dynamics in knowledge production has become an increasingly encouraged reflexive practice in international relations and other disciplines. However, we interrogate the potentially negative implications of this methodology, occurring through a reification of material, assumed, and imagined hierarchies between people, which then is advertised and (re)produced by its utterance. We further query the modernist origins of reflexive methodology, which has inspired the practice of declaring positionality, and argue that its underpinning coloniality has bearings for its use today. We then explore how this coloniality manifests: Thus, first, we consider the extent to which publicly acknowledging privilege paradoxically acts as a means of centering whiteness through the narcissistic gaze and an assertion of legitimacy. Second, we argue positionality statements offer a redemption of guilt for the hegemonic researcher. And lastly, rather than ameliorating unequal power dynamics in the production of knowledge, we contend positionality statements may constitute hidden power moves in which one is able to signal and reinstate one's authority vis-à-vis people, but especially women, of color. We end with a call for a reparative scholarship that acknowledges these limitations in positionality statements.

La declaración de posicionalidad y la confesión de privilegio, usadas como una forma de revelar dinámicas de poder desiguales en la producción de conocimiento, se han convertido en una práctica reflexiva cuyo uso está cada vez más alentado en el campo las Relaciones Internacionales (RRII). Sin embargo, cuestionamos las implicaciones potencialmente negativas que tiene esta metodología, las cuales se producen a través de una reificación de las jerarquías materiales, asumidas e imaginarias entre las personas, que posteriormente se anuncian y se (re)producen mediante su elocución. Además, cuestionamos los orígenes ilustrados de la metodología reflexiva que ha inspirado la práctica de declarar la posicionalidad, y argumentamos que su colonialidad subyacente tiene implicaciones para su uso actual. A continuación, estudiamos cómo se manifiesta esta colonialidad. Por ello, en primer lugar, consideramos hasta qué punto el reconocimiento público del privilegio actúa, paradójicamente, como un medio para centrar el hecho de ser blanco a través de la mirada narcisista y como una afirmación de la legitimidad. En segundo lugar, argumentamos que las declaraciones de posicionalidad ofrecen una redención de la culpa para el investigador hegemónico. Y, por último, argumentamos que, en lugar de mejorar las dinámicas de poder desiguales en la producción de conocimiento, las declaraciones de posicionalidad pueden constituir movimientos de poder ocultos en los que uno es capaz de señalar y restablecer su autoridad frente a las personas, pero especialmente frente a las mujeres, de color. Terminamos con un llamamiento a que el mundo académico cumpla una función reparadora, que reconozca estas limitaciones de las declaraciones de posicionalidad.

En relations internationales (RI), les déclarations de positionnalité et les confessions de privilèges visant à révéler un équilibre des pouvoirs inégal dans la production des connaissances est une pratique réflexive que l'on encourage de plus en plus. Cependant, nous nous enquêrons des potentielles implications négatives de cette méthodologie, intervenant par le biais d'une réification des hiérarchies réelles, présumées et imaginées entre les personnes, dont la récurrence la fait connaître et la (re)produit. Nous nous interrogeons par ailleurs sur les origines clarificatrices de la méthodologie réflexive, qui a inspiré la pratique de déclaration de sa positionnalité, et affirmons que sa colonialité sous-jacente explique en partie son utilisation actuelle. Ensuite, nous nous intéressons aux manifestations de cette colonialité. Nous envisageons donc en premier le paradoxe suivant : reconnaître publiquement un privilège constitue un moyen de recentrer la blancheur par un penchant narcissiste et une affirmation de légitimité. Ensuite, nous affirmons que les déclarations de positionnalité font office de rédemption pour le chercheur hégémonique qui ressent de la culpabilité. Et enfin, plutôt que d'améliorer l'équilibre inégal des pouvoirs dans la production des connaissances, nous postulons que les déclarations de positionnalité peuvent relever d'une stratégie cachée qui permettrait de signaler et de réinstaurer son autorité vis-à-vis des personnes, mais surtout des femmes, de couleur. Nous concluons notre propos sur un appel en faveur d'une recherche réparatrice qui reconnaît ces limites des déclarations de positionnalité.

## Introduction

Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), the declaring of positionality has become an increasingly lauded

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practice, especially within critical, feminist, and postcolonial circles. Often seen as a cornerstone of reflexive methodology, positionality first made its debut in humanities disciplines (anthropology being one of the earliest) before gaining ground in IR during and after its so-called “reflexive turn” (Hamati Ataya 2013; Amoureux and Steele 2016; Alejandro 2021; Krystalli et al. 2021).<sup>1</sup> While other disciplines like anthropology (Narayan 1993; Russel y Rodríguez 1998; Jacobs-Huey 2002; Pillow 2003) have since sought to problematize the origins of reflexive positionality as a methodology, IR for the most part has not historicized positionality nor discussed its pitfalls in as much detail. We are indebted therefore to critical feminists, especially women of color (WoC) in anthropology and sociology, for historically initiating the interrogation.

Nevertheless, we contend that a discussion on the coloniality of reflexivity and the racial implications of positionality statements, albeit of interdisciplinary value, is especially relevant to IR given positionality’s entanglements with power. This article thus speaks to the scholarship on critical and reflexive methodologies, the scholarship on emotions in IR<sup>2</sup> (see Fierke 2013; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014; Beattie, Eroukmanoff and Head 2019), and decolonial methodologies that seek to excavate the colonial underpinnings in research. While this article focuses specifically on the methodology of positionality statements, it also offers a broader reflection on the politics and ethics of knowledge production and, in particular, enlightenment inheritances in western knowledge production. Notably, while much critical scholarship has (rightly) addressed the inherent limitations of objectivity in research, we explore here the limitations that also apply to *subjectivity* in research.

Cognisant of the debates in the above-mentioned literature, we argue that positionality statements (i) do not necessarily fulfill the reflexive, emancipatory function that some critical scholars have claimed they do; and (ii) they may in fact reproduce unequal, hierarchical power dynamics between researchers hegemonically racialized as “white,” and research subjects or fellow researchers who are racialized as “people of color” (PoC).<sup>3</sup>

Some clarifications are in order from the outset. We are certainly not eschewing reflexivity as a methodology, nor do we agree with positivist critiques of positionality. We contend that a distinction should be made between reflexivity in relation to practice or critique, versus reflexivity performed in positionality statements. Reflexivity regarding practice can help us scrutinize and oppose the way research might be used to justify or advocate harmful policies (see Steele 2015; Gani and Marshall 2022). Similarly, reflexivity that leads to critique can facilitate egalitarian and just progress in the discipline and the academy (see Bhambra, Dalia, and Nişancıoğlu 2018; Shilliam 2021), i.e., if all academics are operating within flawed institutions or disciplines, then any such critique is a critique of the collective self. These examples of (or calls for) reflexivity are *not* the targets of our critique, as they have actionable functions that lead to greater

academic accountability, which in turn elicit positive or just change.<sup>4</sup>

Instead, we are critiquing performative *declarations* of positionality in hegemonic contexts. We contend that within practices of reflexivity, positionality statements are problematic when signaling *racial difference*, in a way that is not as detectable when signaling gendered difference. Of course, race and gender are mutually imbricated, but as Crenshaw (1991) points out, there are situations in which the distinct functions of race and racialization must be recognized. Given that positionality declarations have been spearheaded in the global north, with a lack of diversity in the typical scholarly audience (Liu, Rahwan, and AlShebli 2023; Zvobgo et al. 2023), one must ask who is holding this signaling of racial difference to account? What do positionality statements achieve? And are they universally beneficial?

In asking these questions and disrupting the presumption of universal benefit, our overarching goal is to historicize and provincialize the functions of positionality, and to address those discrepancies that necessarily emerge whenever theory or methodology (even critical ones) “travel” beyond the usual or expected narrators and audience (Said 1982; Bilgin 2016). We argue that the racial and hierarchical implications of “doing positionality” can be traced back to concepts of modernity and colonial practices from which reflexive methodologies originate. In other words, reflexive positionality, when declared (even if well-intentioned), can be an extractive methodology with colonial epistemic origins. Compounding the problem is the absence of discussion in critical discourse of the historical conception of reflexivity and its attachment to coloniality.

We theorize our claims via the work of Sylvia Wynter and J.L. Austin; methodologically, we draw from the autoethnography and lived experiences of PoC to corroborate the pitfalls of positionality, applying bell hooks’ validation of the latter as a source of theorizing (hooks 1994). Indeed, we believe that it would be difficult to identify positionality’s racial and colonial implications (so hidden as they are) without to some degree experiencing them firsthand and the insight that comes with that ‘border thinking’ (Anzaldúa 1999)—the prevalent encouragement of positionality statements by mainly scholars from critical, hegemonic (white, global north) communities reinforces this point.

Given the overwhelmingly positive and supportive responses we received upon presenting these ideas in multiple spaces,<sup>5</sup> especially from WoC, we write this article to validate and support marginalized academics whose discomfort with positionality might be misunderstood or even dismissed by critical scholars. Secondly, we want to provide a scholarly reference for marginalized students should they wish to refuse expectations, even pressure, to declare their positionality in their work (on refusal, see Simpson 2007; 2014; Tuck and Yang 2014, 225). Thirdly, this article is for

<sup>4</sup>Our thanks to the reviewers for inviting us to expand on these distinctions.

<sup>5</sup>This article was first presented on October 20, 2019 at the Millennium Conference at LSE in a panel titled “On Knowledge Production, Extraction, and Cooptation of Women of Color in the Academy” organized by Jasmine Gani. The visible and vocal validation received from the mostly WoC audience, who attested to the power of the paper in making explicit what they had felt intuitively but struggled to acknowledge openly given the critical and reflexive origins of positionality, was an important milestone in the development of this article. Many colleagues shared their own stories with us immediately after the panel. We also received emails from non-PoC colleagues and PhD students, who acknowledged this was the first time they had been asked to consider the harmful effects of positionality and that it made them view it in a new light. The stark contrast between those from marginalized backgrounds who were instantly able to recognize their experiences in our arguments, and those from hegemonic backgrounds for whom our arguments were entirely revelatory, was notable.

<sup>1</sup>One of the best-known accounts of feminist reflexive research practice in IR is Carol Cohn’s account of US “defense intellectuals” discussing nuclear weapons, strategy, and war (Cohn 1987).

<sup>2</sup>Since positionality statements are intended to signal one’s subjectivities and are an acknowledgement that any research might be affected by one’s standpoint and emotions.

<sup>3</sup>From here onwards, we will refer to these two categories as “white” and “PoC” (or “WoC” when specifically referring to women of color), though we recognize all such categories are constructed in geographical and political contexts.

us a way of holding ourselves and the discipline of IR to account by proposing the need for reparative scholarship—especially in response to the extractive processes that WoC have witnessed. In doing so we assert that the methodologies we use can and should reflect a wider range of experiences in the academy and beyond, and not be limited to those from a Eurocentric, hegemonic standpoint (Abdulrahman et al. 2021).

### Surveying the Literature: Reflexivity as a Lauded Practice

Positionality statements are meant to be an “accounting” of one’s privilege, situating the researcher within their fields of study. What began in anthropology in the 1970s (Wasserfall 1993, 24; Jacobs-Huey 2002, 791; Pillow 2003, 178) has become increasingly encouraged in IR as a reflexive methodology and as a challenge to the dominance of positivist claims to objectivity and truth (Hamati-Ataya 2013). According to Tickner, reflexivity has become the new “buzzword that is driving current debates within the field of International Relations” (Tickner 2013, 627 quoted in Hamati-Ataya 2013; see also Hamati-Ataya 2020), a trend that Hamati-Ataya (2013) has referred to as the “reflexive turn” in IR.<sup>6</sup>

In this section, we outline the purported normative functions of reflexive approaches that have aided the above trends. We interpret and categorize these under four labels: *truth gathering*, *self-accountability*, *mitigation of power imbalances*, and *multivocalism*. We follow this with an outline of existing criticisms of reflexivity by scholars in various fields. These criticisms, while helpful, do not explicitly address the question of race, nor the historical context of coloniality, which positionality statements stem from, and the consequently harmful potential for PoC, especially WoC.

The first purpose of reflexive approaches is to restore rigor and accuracy assumed to be lacking in positivist methodologies by accounting for limitations and biases—in other words, we argue reflexivity is encouraged for its *truth-gathering*. In contrast to the confidence found in positivism, reflexive methodologies depart from a place of acknowledged *lack* (Pillow 2010, 274). All unreflexive research is assumed to be lacking in legitimacy and validity given the failure to visibilize and disclaim subjectivities (Finlay 2002, 453). Identifying this lack through a positionality statement restores some of the rigor and accuracy of research by accounting for biases and thus gives the researcher more claim to truth. The traits that might have undermined the accuracy of the research, and therefore the authority of the researcher, are thus mitigated by this method.

The use of positionality as a part of reflexive methodology, then, is also a rejection of the notion of objective or neutral knowledge. Thus, being reflexive can ensure research is conducted better and more ethically, free of the constraints that traditional research practice places on the researcher, i.e., the expectation that “good” research is constituted through an “objectivist gaze free from personality” (Eagleton-Pierce 2011, 809; see also Ackerly and True 2006). Prior to this reflexive turn in research, objectivity and neutrality were (and still are) seen as the hallmarks of valid and robust research, but with reflexivity, the whole point in many ways is to demonstrate the inherent subjectivity of research

and, of course, the researcher: no longer a neutral perspective that comes from both everywhere and nowhere, but decidedly situated in time, place, and experience. The work on emotions in IR recognized the impact of such subjectivity on decision-making, foreign policy, and diplomacy (see Ross 2010; Head 2012; Fierke 2013; Crawford 2014; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014; Jeffery 2014; Hall 2015; Ericksson Baaz and Stern 2016; Hutchison 2016). This also went hand in hand with increased receptivity to feminist approaches to reflexivity.

In this spirit of honest research, positionality is also seen as *self-accountability*. The original purpose of reflexivity and positionality was to enable the researcher to reflect on their own biases and assumptions, to control them when writing, and to be wary of inserting judgment and one’s own values when analyzing the subjects’ ways of knowing and being (Pillow 2010, 272). It is a form of holding oneself to account (Ackerly and True 2006), or, as Geertz (1973) and Van Maanen (1989) have argued, a “confessional tale,” which implies responsibility, and indeed, we would argue, guilt.

Reflexivity enables a questioning of one’s own interpretations, reliability, and therefore a filtering out of distortions in the research along the way. So, while these scholars acknowledge the starting point is a recognition of unavoidable subjectivity, we would argue the purported end goal (perhaps unwittingly so) is objectivity and a belief that one can get closer to it through reflexive positioning. As McCorkel and Myers (2003, 205) note, “strong objectivity must coincide with strong reflexivity,” which “requires the researcher to subject herself to the same level of scrutiny as she directs to her respondents.” Pillow similarly notes that reflexivity is “ongoing self-awareness” (2010, 274), or as Kleinsasser states, reflexivity is a “process of learning about self as researcher” (as cited in Pillow 2010, 274).

Adopting a reflexive methodology, then, also entails scrutinising one’s own epistemology (Ackerly and True 2008, 698). Enloe (2016) sums up this function by arguing:

[b]eing reflexive makes us more accountable, keeps us engaged and makes our work more reliable. Being reflexive reduces the chance that we will leave damage in our wake. Exercising genuine reflexivity, nevertheless, should not be easy. It should not be comfortable. (259)

Given this labor, then, positionality is also associated with the function of *mitigating power imbalances* between researchers, or between researcher and research subject. It is with this function that positionality statements dramatically expanded beyond anthropology to other disciplines. Feminist researchers added significantly to this field (see the work of Behar and Gordon 1995), connecting these reflexive developments to the relationship between knowledge and power “as an inherently social process” (Riach 2009, 359, cited in Pillow 2010, 272), and confronting the power embedded in knowledge production. In particular, that confrontation according to feminist research may be with oneself—i.e., how the person’s “self-location ... position and interests influence all stages of the research process” and thus have implications for their final research findings (Pillow 2010, 273). This assertion of reflexivity as a mitigation of any power imbalances between the researcher and their research subjects can be summarized with the following: “hearing, listening and equalizing the research relationship” according to Pillow (2010, 267), so that the research is being done “with” and not “on” an object of analysis.

<sup>6</sup>IR scholarship on reflexivity has primarily focused on reflexivity in relation to practice and critique (e.g., see Amoureux 2015; Dauphinee 2015; Steele 2015). In contrast, the scholarship on reflexivity in anthropology, sociology, and feminist IR, has provided greater insight on reflexivity through the method of positionality, and often coupled the two together. Hence in this section our discussion focuses more on the latter given our scrutiny of positionality.



The last category of positive justification for reflexivity and positionality is *multi-vocalism*. A “multi-vocal” approach facilitates research subjects to “speak for themselves” in a redistribution of speech beyond just the researcher. This approach began when anthropologists were increasingly questioned on their production of “partial” representations of their engagements in the field (Clifford 1986; Haraway 1988; Rosaldo 1989; Abu-Lughod 1991; Callaway 1992; Okely 1992; Jacobs-Huey 2002, 792). According to Pillow (2010, 272), this change occurred as more women entered the academy, and as those who had previously been the objects of the gaze became “the gazers,” particularly racialized and LGBTQ+ researchers (Narayan 1993, 672). So, if reflexivity meant everyone could now acknowledge they had biases in their research, it also meant accepting the research could *not* be complete without alternative perspectives from different subjectivities. Positionality statements thus are used to demonstrate there is not only one truth, acknowledging multiple subjective views, which in turn must be considered. It *should* therefore give increased opportunity for nonhegemonic communities to tell their stories to restore balance to the partial, incomplete narratives from white or male or able-bodied or heterosexual researchers.

Given these emancipatory functions, positionality statements thus tend to appear when white researchers reflect on their presumptions and power disparities between themselves and, especially, PoC (whether they are research subjects or fellow scholars). For example, Reissman (2000) reflexively states that her experience with WoC in India had “decentered her perception of their subordination” (as quoted in McCorkel and Myers 2003). McCorkel and Myers similarly reflect on how they were guilty of unjustly treating Black women differently from their white counterparts during their research. In their acknowledgement, they thank the Black women participants for having helped them gain “useful insights” about their research.

### Existing Criticisms of Reflexive Positionality

Despite the above plaudits, reflexivity has also attracted criticism. However, we argue those criticisms either relate to implications for the researcher, or they do not explicitly discuss racial hierarchies and certainly not the historical context of colonialism underpinning positionality statements.

Turning first to the criticisms from the positivist camp, Patai (1994, 68–9) argues scholarship does not have to be political and should be able to stand on its own, free from the “pretensions” of reflexivity and “endless self-scrutiny and anxious self-identification.” However, it is important to note that Patai’s criticism, unlike those put forward by feminists like Enloe and others, is not coming from a critical perspective nor in the interests of greater accountability, but rather is a dismissal altogether of the benefit of emancipatory politics in scholarship, a stance that we do not align with. We do not wish to exclude reflexivity from scholarship—on the contrary, we are arguing that reflexivity (as critique and practice) and accountability can go further.

As such, our interrogation is closer to the criticisms of reflexive positionality already produced by critical scholars. The first criticism they put forward are the risks associated with exposing the vulnerability of the researcher through positionality—in particular, where they are made “vulnerable to emotional harm” (cited in Pillow 2010, 270). The emotional harm here refers to exposing oneself (i.e., the researcher) to too much criticism or getting too close to the research subject in a way that means their suffering transfers

to the researcher. As Pillow notes, as a result of such reflexivity, it is no longer clear who the “they” is anymore.

One of the most well-known criticisms of the methodology is the risk of narcissism. The methodology has been accused of constituting “mere navel-gazing,” “self-absorption,” or “confession” (Okely 1992, 2; England 1994, 244; Enloe 2016; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2016, 118; 133), where the researcher risks centering themselves at the expense of the research subject. Arguably, Enloe (2016) has done the most to warn of the problems of reflexivity, arguing: “But the real discomfort comes when trying to draw the line between reflexive candor and unwitting self-absorption” (259). She says, “Reflexivity is usually done too late and in retrospect. Instead, we should be doing it early and during our research. It should never be comfortable or easy” (2016, 258). Enloe further calls for humility and accountability. This is echoed by others who have argued reflexivity should be less about oneself and instead should be focused on humility and practice-oriented disruption of unethical research (Amoureux 2015; Dauphinee 2015; Steele 2015).

The final criticism points to the fact that often, despite its purported aim to mitigate power imbalances, hierarchical relationships often remain *unchanged*. Thus Pillow (2010, 279) acknowledged that certain “entrenched, hegemonic social categories, such as gender and race, may remain untransformed by reflexivity,” or as England (1994, 250) puts it, “reflexivity can make us more aware of asymmetrical or exploitative relationships, but it cannot remove them.” Reflexivity may also entail practices and expectations of the researcher that are also potentially harmful for the subjects of research (Pillow 2003; 2010), with a possible perpetuation of unequal power relations (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2016, 118). However, *how* this occurs and how it appears is not explored.

Overall, the general consensus is that the benefits of reflexive approaches still outweigh the problems. To give an example of such a conclusion, McCorkel and Myers admit that “power, position and privilege remain salient” even after their applied reflexive approach to their (mostly WoC) research subjects (2003, 229); but they go on to note:

While we hope we have been fair to our respondents, we cannot claim to have been able to fully ground the research in their concerns. Indeed, we cannot even be sure that we have represented their concerns authentically. In the end, we still edited, silenced, evaluated, and categorized. Such practices are unavoidable in crafting sociological analyses.

Nevertheless, McCorkel and Myers (2003, 229) conclude that a reflexive approach still constitutes “better” objectivity than positivist approaches and therefore has more claim to truth.

However, we argue that the *consequences* of potentially exploitative relationships between the researcher and researched, especially in the context of racialized difference, cannot be so easily dismissed. The above criticisms are significant, but most of them offer a thin or undertheorized explanation of *why* and *how* inequalities may be perpetuated by positionality. Or, as seen in the above quotation from McCorkel and Myers, the problems are acknowledged as an inevitability but dismissed in favor of the greater good of reflexivity. We argue that this is not a satisfactory conclusion.

While the above criticisms acknowledge positionality and reflexivity might leave power relations intact, we argue positionality statements have the capacity to *exacerbate* power relations. Rather than leaving harmful, colonial, and hierarchical relationships unchanged, positionality can

subtly reinforce and cement those hegemonic structures. As such, critical researchers with claims to emancipatory politics must take the statements on the potential harms of reflexive positionality more seriously and ask why and how they exist and manifest. To answer those queries, we will now explore the underpinning coloniality behind reflexive positionality, first by historicizing the methodology within western academia's colonial roots, and then by analyzing how, if viewed through the prism of race, its narcissistic colonial functions become more apparent.

### Coloniality of Reflexivity: Conception versus Concept

Reflexivity, and its public utterance through positionality declarations, has roots in enlightenment philosophy and norms. For modernist scholars, demonstrating one's objectivity reflected the pinnacle of intellectual endeavor. In that vein, Eagleton-Pierce (2011, 807) has noted the methodology of reflexivity is not as new a practice as sometimes perceived, stating reflexivity has a "long tradition in social theory or philosophy" with thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Bourdieu engaging reflexivity in one form or another. A positionality statement, then, as a declaration of reflexivity, contains a duality, in that it is an attempt on one hand to acknowledge the inability to separate the self from one's subject of enquiry, while at the same time expressing sufficient distance and rationality to know this.

Portraying the practice as progressive, modern, and emancipatory (most commonly associated with feminism but latterly decolonial approaches, see Abdelnour and Abu Moghli 2021) detaches it from this longer history, in which knowledge production, especially in the west, was more explicitly entangled with colonialism and race.<sup>7</sup> To counter this amnesia (Krishna 2001; Lentin 2008), therefore, reflexive positionality needs to be historicized, through which it becomes clear that for all its laudable goals, it has inherited enlightenment valorizations of reason,<sup>8</sup> with its various colonial implications.

Does it matter, though, that positionality owes its roots to enlightenment norms? As Gani (2017) has argued elsewhere, the prioritisation of a *concept* (in this case reflexive positionality) over its historical *conception*, "erases the historical, racist context in which it was conceived." And yet, even with such contextual erasure, the concept cannot be entirely abstracted from its conception (Gani 2017, 429). Drawing on this historical approach, we argue that the implications of positionality's lineage need to be taken seriously, especially in western academic contexts where intellect and the capacity for reason are so strongly tethered to the colonial genre of the human. Sylvia Wynter (2003) provides one of the most thorough tracings of the "coloniality of being," where contemporary packaging of universality and inclusivity are peeled back to reveal the hierarchical and exclusionary origins of the category of the human (see also Asad 2015; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Çubukçu 2017).

Turning to premodernity, Wynter argues that prior to mass European colonization, European distinctions between inferior and superior beings were based on judgments

about spiritual perfection/imperfection. The right to enslave others was based on a notion that those others had been offered salvation and entry into a superior category of being, but had wilfully rejected it and thus chose their own enslavement and degradation. With the colonization of the Americas, a loophole in the prevailing western code became apparent: The indigenous Americans had never been offered any such salvation having not encountered Europeans, and thus never had the opportunity to reject it (and justify) their enslavement. Rather than withdraw from the injustices perpetrated against them, an apparent solution was formulated not through religion but via (by then increasingly buoyant) secular intellectual endeavors where the believer/infidel distinction was replaced with a rational/irrational description.<sup>9</sup> This, as Wynter frequently asserts, became a "descriptive/prescriptive statement" (2003, 264) of what it was to be a human. With that, the human genre was reinvented in "biologized" (2003, 266) terms rather than spiritual terms.

To make clear what this meant for non-white non-Europeans, Wynter states,

While the "Indians" were portrayed as the very acme of the savage, irrational Other, the "Negroes" were assimilated to the former's category, represented as the most extreme form and as the ostensible missing link between rational humans and irrational animals ... (2003, 266).

The non-white, non-Western person, she argues, became the "timeless ethnographic Other," and, we infer, a mirror to and therefore as much a part of the "descriptive statement" of the ideal white European. The descriptive statement Wynter speaks of thus necessarily evokes this Other as an assurance of what the rational self is not. This sums up Wynter's expansion and excavation of how Quijano's (2000) founding concept of "coloniality of power" (that is, hierarchies of being, knowledge, and order) came to be. Crucially, Wynter states, with all this, there must be a "logical inference that one cannot 'unsettle' the 'coloniality of power' without a redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its over-representation..." (2003, 268). Additionally, she argues this "biocentric" descriptive statement institutes our present (2003, 269).

In short, if one invokes a "biocentric" "descriptive statement" for the self, they are reproducing the coloniality of power inscribed in these descriptive statements. It is safe to say a redescription of the human has not, still not, been adapted and adopted (not in the west, nor within the western knowledge system that has been globalized). We live still with a colonial genre of human that is merely overlaid with less explicit human/subhuman distinctions such as developed/developing, state/tribal, civilized/barbaric, or modern/traditional.

Secondly, to further connect the concept (of positionality) to its conception (colonialism), we argue the following: Although positionality was more recently introduced within anthropology and latterly in other disciplines as a "counter methodology" against colonial and racist approaches, one cannot ignore the fact it was founded *for the white researcher* to better conduct his/her research *on the non-white other*, albeit in a more ethical way. Indeed, as Jacobs-Huey (2002, 792) confirms, the origins of reflexivity as a methodology in anthropology emerged from the practice of studying the "native other." From this, we can see that it was assumed and

<sup>7</sup>On the entanglement of race and colonialism within knowledge production in the west, and especially within the discipline of IR, see, among others, the work of Grovogui (2001), Bhambra (2011), Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam (2014), Bhambra, Medien, and Tilley (2020), Lentin (2020), Shilliam (2021), Henderson (2014), Sajed and Persaud (2018), Bell (2013, 2022), Quijano (2000), Mignolo (2007), Sabaratnam (2020), Madhok (2021), Pasha (2017), Rao (2020) and Gani and Marshall (2022).

<sup>8</sup>Gentry (2020, 121) notes the idea of rationality is a "deeply loaded concept tied to gendered and racialized structure stemming from the Western Enlightenment."

<sup>9</sup>For more on religion as a signifier for racial difference in colonial-modernity, see Rabea Khan (2022, 2023).

taken for granted that the “studying” or “researching” was done by the Western, white anthropologist or researcher. While Jacobs-Huey does go on to note that in more recent times the “native” has “been duly observed *gazing and talking back*” (792), the question remains of how a methodology that presupposed a Western gaze on the non-Western, non-white “other” benefits or impacts a person of color.

Narayan (1993, 672; 682) also notes the colonial setting from which western disciplines emerged, producing the polarization between “native” researchers and “real” researchers. Positionality statements were first introduced by and for the so-called “real” anthropologist or researcher to mitigate their own blind spots and discomfort when interacting with racialized, native research subjects (and, we would add, with racialized researchers as they entered the western academy in greater numbers). There is a danger then that declarations of positionality by a “real” researcher are meant to distinguish them from the racialized “native,” given that our disciplines are founded on such distinctions.

Our core argument here, therefore, is that you cannot easily abstract the methodology of reflexive positionality from the colonial context in which both its core principles and its epistemology were conceived. To sum up, this means positionality is tied to: (i) the historical assumption that the researcher must be white, both in the capacity to be rational and in the need for self-accountability; (ii) that it was designed to help the researcher identify and research the “other”; and (iii) it emerged to counter colonial ethnographic practices, which served to “other” the non-white object of analysis, and therefore takes as a given that the colonial encounter (and the colonial researcher) is the starting point. Consequently, the starting point assumes a racial hierarchy, investing the white racialized researcher with latent power. Who then does this stand to benefit?

There is a single reference to this colonial conception in Pillow’s extensive work on positionality and reflexivity, where she states, “[r]eflexivity then always occurs out of an unequal power relationship and in fact the act of reflexivity may perpetuate a colonial relationship while at the same time attempting to mask this power over the subject.” (Pillow 2003, 185). This crucial acknowledgement was made in 2003, so why have positionality declarations not been interrogated further by critical scholars in IR? Such unequal power relationships should not merely be acknowledged; rather, they should be challenged more honestly with a commitment to repair. Having explained why positionality is tied to coloniality in theory and history, we explore in the rest of the article three ways in which positionality may reassert racial power dynamics in practice: via legitimacy, redemption, and hidden power moves.

### Narcissism and Performance in Positionality: Centering Whiteness through Legitimacy

Here we probe Enloe’s caution about narcissism more deeply, but through the lens of race and coloniality. Much of the existing criticisms we elucidated earlier do not adequately (if at all) acknowledge how *race and coloniality* facilitate that narcissism to the detriment of the racialized research subject or racialized scholar-interlocutor.

As explained, we do not contest the intrinsic value of reflexivity (especially relating to practice or critique), but we focus on the declarative, even performative, avowals of it through positionality. Focusing on the importance of reflexivity for knowing the self not only overly centers the researcher in their research, foregrounding their own unease (cf. Spivak 1988; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2016, 118), but it

is also extractive in that it makes the object of research an instrument in the process of self-knowing and indeed *self-asserting*. The scholar’s emphasis on self through positionality as a process of self-awareness simultaneously obscures the apparently less privileged “other,” who is nevertheless always present in reflexivity—the Other’s erasure, as well as the dialectic positioning that is imposed on them, unasked for, through the researcher’s declaration of positionality, is not accounted for in this process. Add race to this mix, and it becomes clearer how positionality can in fact reify or even newly produce unequal racial dynamics.

As noted, a reflexive approach promises a claim to increased validity of one’s research, which we argue consequently results in increased legitimacy of the *researcher*. Pillow indeed recognizes that reflexivity might in fact be a “validity method” (2010, 271; 278; see also Hamati-Ataya 2018, 4), one which we need to move beyond, but she does not expand on this point. We build on this to expose two forms of legitimacy capital provided by positionality that carry racial implications: legitimacy through one’s critical identity and legitimacy through proximity to the racialized other. In both ways, the person of color is instrumentalized for the researcher’s need to perform the critical scholar.

Thus, first, positionality and the critical identity that comes with it can be used not only to identify limitations and make the research more rigorous and accurate but also to assert the researcher’s critical (often feminist or postcolonial) credentials. Since it grants more authenticity and claim to truth, it may actually reassert enlightenment valorizations of objectivity, not refute it. Moreover, feminist and critical labels (which are deeply tied to reflexivity—see Ackerly and True 2008, 256) play an important role in affording hegemonic/white speakers’ critical credibility while simultaneously enabling them to retain mainstream legitimacy through their position/embeddedness within the structures of whiteness. As Hamati-Ataya (2018, 4) notes, reflexivity has often become a “discursive marker used to distinguish selves and turfs within IR’s internal order and hierarchies, as if brandishing it in utterance or practice were sufficient to establish one’s legitimacy’.

While that critical academic label can and frequently is taken as radical (and therefore risky) if compared to more orthodox and traditional approaches, it is in fact welcomed within progressive political circles and therefore allows a “radical” identity within acceptable boundaries. Thus, within this perception of radicalism also lies a source of legitimacy for the researcher who, when seen to be adopting “radical,” nonconventional, or critical approaches, will be accepted for their courage and innovation, if not by the wider research community, certainly so within the critical one.

This is especially true of white feminism, both as an ideology and epistemology, with “white feminists” as its enactors (Hamad 2020; Zakaria 2021; Shepherd 2022).<sup>10</sup> Thus, while the white feminist’s radicalism and statement of

<sup>10</sup>White feminists do not exclusively represent white women. In fact, white feminist ideas, attitudes, and behavior can be displayed and embodied by actors from diverse backgrounds. As Zakaria (2021, 1) points out, “[t]he term describes a set of assumptions and behaviors which have been baked into mainstream Western feminism, rather than describing the racial identity of its subjects. At the same time, it is true that most white feminists are indeed white, and that whiteness itself is at the core of white feminism.” As she further explains, “[m]ore broadly, to be a white feminist you simply have to be a person who accepts the benefits conferred by white supremacy at the expense of PoC, while claiming to support gender equality and solidarity with “all” women.” While white feminism is not limited to those racialized as white, it is not possible to separate the racial foundations and signifiers (i.e. the whiteness) from this feminism, especially given the way it is deployed through positionality.



positionality do have to brave the latent and historical associations with female irrationality (see Pateman 1989), it still benefits from simultaneous associations with whiteness—i.e., Wynter’s descriptive statement—which therefore offers a mitigation in irrationality. Moreover, this radicalism still escapes the centuries of stereotypes and assumed irrationality tied to the radicalism or passiveness, actions, words, even mere existence, of a racialized woman. Or this radicalism can be selectively abandoned when it no longer affords legitimacy, notably via silence on issues deemed “too controversial” or risk-laden.<sup>11</sup> Thus, white feminists adopting a critical label can still, when needed, fall back on the structures of white supremacy, which offer protection through racial solidarity and presumptions of rationality. It is important to note here that some racialized women, through their caste, class, religion or lack of, in the west or in the Global South, can also be the beneficiaries of positionality statements that allow them to straddle both privileged and marginalized status. In contrast, the nonhegemonic WoC’s radicalism is unlikely to be treated as brave or a “good” kind of radicalism, and her use of radical methods is less likely to result in increased legitimacy unless adhering to the politics of her white counterparts.

With this combination, the critical reflexive label expressed through a positionality statement can function as a legitimizing validity method, which WoC cannot rely on with the same sense of certainty as those racialized as white. Again, returning to Wynter, the WoC through a positionality statement would, in many hegemonic contexts, be reproducing the other, perceived irrational, half of the human/subhuman binary in the human descriptive statement.

Secondly, we argue that claims of reflexive frameworks enable the researcher to get closer to the racialized research subject, a proximity that will often be revealed through a positionality statement. This, too, provides legitimacy (Pillow 2003, 182–3), and furthermore, in a way that makes it very difficult to critique the reflexive endeavor and research in question. Given the personal nature of positionality, it ties the researcher more closely to their research, seemingly disclosing a personal investment and dedication of the researcher to the racialized subjects. The claimed closeness to the object of analysis, contrary to the main purpose of reflexivity, obstructs accountability.

To elucidate, both of these problematic functions of positionality statements are exemplified in a reflective article on fieldwork by van Wingerden (2022). The article starts by drawing on our argument that positionality statements may “reinscribe researcher authority,” and Nassar’s (2018) argument that fieldwork plays a performative role in asserting one’s status as an expert; but it then goes on to manifest the very problems we are critiquing. There is a detailed outline of the author’s activist training in Palestine and the greater value of “being there” compared to curated knowledge. The article then describes encounters with “bodily others,” i.e., local Palestinians. The phrase “bodily others” is used repeatedly in the article, through which the Palestinian locals come across as strange masses. The only “bodily others” who are afforded agency, voice, and complexity, are in fact the non-Palestinian nonlocal activists who traveled to the region to “know what it feels like” to be at the site of indigenous resistance (van Wingerden, interview with an Israeli activist, 2022, 9). The reader learns of the “muscle spasms” of the

Israeli activist, the fact that a Norwegian activist feels vulnerable and “threatened all the time,” and that the author herself was “crying uncontrollably” upon seeing images and articles of Israeli violence (2022, 12). Without diminishing the challenging experiences of the author, it is nevertheless notable that by the end of the article, the one subject the reader knows the most about is the author herself. We come away with a reaffirmation of the complexity, depth of emotions, and thought processes of the white woman researcher, and to some extent, her white activist counterparts. Meanwhile, the brown research subjects, the Palestinians, are the backdrop and vehicle for the activists’ self-discovery. The detail of the corporeal experience is intended to mitigate the confidence that comes with positionality statements—but it (inadvertently) appears as a claim to researcher authority; the display of emotional investment and sincerity, and proximity to the research subjects (at times of danger, no less) may help accumulate legitimacy. The article’s preamble critiquing positionality statements, interestingly, is thus effectively a lengthy positionality statement by the author as an expression of her reflexivity, while the narrative of corporeal experience serves a humanizing function that confers the author authority among critical academic communities.

Positionality statements are used in other areas of academia beyond the research itself, typically in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) projects and in research training across institutions, with problems akin to those outlined above. We offer here the example narrated by WoC academics and students about an EDI event in which a drama company was invited to provide diversity training to students at a UK higher education institution. The “skits” depicted a student from Hong Kong (played by an actor of Hong Kong heritage) as timid and submissive, holding patriarchal views, until she was convinced about women’s rights by her British white feminist classmate. The few WoC among the tutors who had to watch this performance criticized this stereotyping of the Asian student, arguing (from their knowledge and experience as minoritized people in western contexts) that it would in fact reproduce stigmas toward the institution’s Asian students rather than combat them. This produced two reactions—first, this criticism was initially dismissed until supported by a white colleague before gaining any credence in the institution; second, it was refuted by the white, British director and script-writer of the drama company who argued the skit was preperformed to ninety students in Hong Kong who did not raise any objections (overlooking the power dynamics of that interaction). The function of that declaration of proximity was to make any criticism of the drama company’s Orientalism look like a negation of the views of the students in Hong Kong rather than a valid critique of the drama company itself. Those students and their assumed approval were weaponized as a shield against criticism, in turn reversing guilt onto the critic. Thus, positionality statements that highlight one’s proximity to and interaction with racialized subjects of research assert researcher authority and shield the researcher from critique via an extractive process toward PoC.

### Racial Redemption as a Function of Positionality

The second narcissistic function of declared reflexive positionality is that of redemption of guilt for the researcher racialized as white, a function that yet again the WoC does not stand to benefit from. As noted, many feminist scholars have recognized that reflexive methodology should never be comfortable for the researcher and rather should be a methodology of “discomfort” (Pillow 2003) or “unease”

<sup>11</sup>To give an example, during Israel’s military assault on civilians in Gaza in 2023–24, normally vocal, critical academics - feminists, philosophers of forced displacement, and experts of empire among them - were criticised by fellow academics for their conspicuous silence on the issue of Gaza.



(Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2016, 126; see also Enloe 2016, 258). Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2016) further note how this methodology allowed them to “linger” in their unease. However, even this lingering in their own unease ultimately centers the white researchers at the expense of their (often racialized) research subjects, which becomes a means for the redemption of guilt. We identify two categories of this redemption of guilt for the researcher. First, redemption is achieved through confessional declarations of unease or “privilege,” which ultimately is a cathartic recentering of the (white) researcher and sidelines the research subject. Second, redemption is achieved through a performative action of reflexivity, which we identify as a self-defense mechanism.

Turning to this first function, Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2016, 126), researching wartime rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo, discuss at length how the method of reflexivity led to their “unease” and discomfort. In their case, discovering some of the biased assumptions they held before interviewing were untrue led to shame (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2016, 126). Indeed, their feelings of shame and unease left such an impression on the researchers that they concluded their chapter by arguing that a “methodology of unease” was their main finding. Firstly, this unease (unintentionally) centers them, the researchers; secondly, in acknowledging it, they appear to redeem themselves of that shame and indeed are able to procure a new research methodology out of it. In fact, Eriksson Baaz and Stern acknowledge that this is a pitfall of their method, which they do not know how to move beyond (118).

Pillow (2003, 186) similarly notes, “[r]eflexivity fulfils the function of release of discomfort as an absolution from guilt, as a confession.” This, we argue, means it can perform a cathartic, absolving function for the researcher who is aware of the power imbalances and inequalities. Admitting and centering unease, then, without changing those inequalities that have caused it, absolves the white researcher from guilt and simultaneously recenters the (white) researcher and whiteness more generally.

For example, Black History Month, intended to celebrate and raise awareness of important Black people or events, has in many British classrooms ended up focusing on slavery and supposedly English-led abolition (Doharty 2019). Thus, Black people’s trauma and pain are emphasized instead of Black intellectual achievements and social contributions, while white people’s altruism is centered. Black History Month, then, has become yet another story of white people’s guilt and a means for white people’s redemption from it. Sometimes, as mentioned earlier, the positionality statement effectively obscures the “other” in the ego-driven process of self-knowing. Other times, even more problematically, the search for absolution places the burden on a PoC audience or interlocutor to provide the absolution in an act of generosity. And who would want to be accused of lacking generosity?

However, we argue that this function of redemption can go even further than that in its performative nature, especially when it comes to the reflexive practice of declaring “privilege.” Declaring one’s privilege as a way of positioning oneself becomes a way of ensuring it is not pointed out to you by others—if one can arrive there first and take control of the discourse, then they cannot be accused of being blind to it. Thus, the reflexive method can also constitute a preemptive self-defense mechanism for the white critical researcher that actually forecloses deeper probing into power inequalities—first, because it has now been addressed, but on the terms of the white researcher; and second, through

the projection of discomfort (or, as noted above, through the expression of vulnerability via the researcher’s tears), the racialized interlocutor may wish to avoid exacerbating the expressed guilt felt by the white researcher. In this way, the discussion promptly moves on from the power inequalities, but having recentered whiteness in a way that might not have occurred if, ironically, no declaration of positionality had been made at all.

Thus, in sum, even this process of disclosing unease offers comfort to the white researcher through its redeeming function, with little to offer the PoC, who has no redemption to chase if researching the injustices inflicted on their own communities. Positionality, when used by the WoC, can potentially contribute to decentering whiteness, as was intended by PoC anthropologists.<sup>12</sup> But disclosing discomfort via positionality can also be weaponized against her or misinterpreted as failure in the profession (Doharty 2020); it is more likely to come at a cost to the WoC in question and can undermine her legitimacy with no redemptive function to fulfill.

It is worth making some distinctions at this point. We do not categorize autoethnography as a type of a positionality statement, and not only because the methodology requires greater depth. Notably, autoethnography is a methodology that WoC have historically engaged in readily (hooks 1994; Mehta 2019; Rutazibwa 2020; Barthwal-Dutta 2023; El-Malik 2023); in part, this reflects the fact that it is a mode of storytelling (Brigg and Bleiker 2010; Inayatullah 2010; Krystalli 2023), a practice with a long history in multiple, global cultures and traditions and therefore without necessarily the same colonial implications. Autoethnography is a methodology that draws primarily from the self and their experience as the main site of observation and learning; this largely precludes it from charges of extractivism. The centering of the self in this case is very clear in the autoethnographer’s stated intent without necessarily impinging on an otherized subject or a search for redemption.

In contrast, positionality statements are usually used as a preface and disclaimer before the researcher proceeds with their (problematic) research agenda anyway, despite the acknowledged caveats. Typically, positionality has greater use in contexts of racial difference—the relationality invites greater power dynamics that are not necessarily present when a researcher chooses to observe themselves.

### Instrumentalization of Positionality: Hidden Power Move

The above explored the functions of positionality, which not only uphold the existing academic culture of narcissism but also (re)center whiteness. In this section, we turn attention to an even more harmful potential function of declarative positionality, and that is its weaponization as a power move to assert the white researcher’s dominance over racialized research subjects, or often minoritized scholars within the academy. This is worse than the functions discussed above because it also seeks to diminish the racialized other and is not solely about aggrandizing the self.

Having recognized the fact that positionality offers validity, Pillow cites Britzman to acknowledge that it also facilitates “ethnographic authority.” This needs to be unpacked: When referring to authority, it is in reference to the

<sup>12</sup>For further examples of decolonial, feminist scholarship that seeks to recenter WoC and challenges the whiteness inherent to mainstream white feminism, see Rosalba Icaza (2021), Akanksha Mehta (2019), Anna Agathangelou (2017), and Olivia Rutazibwa (2018), among others.

authority *to speak* (about a topic or a people that one might not actually hail from). But, we note, it also could entail authority *over others*, and indicate the presence of power.

We argue that this power produces a paradoxical outcome: Reflexivity is meant to be self-accountability, an awareness of limitations, and an act of humility to recognize one's inability to be objective. And yet, it is also a way of restoring authority, reliability, and an air of objectivity, which, even if lacking in the processes of knowledge production, is then supplied as a remedial during, but usually after, the research has been conducted. The methodology, therefore, is a protective mechanism against the loss of power; but a 'loss of power' in relation to whom? And a reassertion of power, again, in relation to whom and when?

To answer those questions, one must consider when positionality is particularly valuable or necessary. It is often utilized when the researcher's subjectivities are scrutinized especially in relation to the target of research and especially in a context of *difference*. Indeed, on the subject of difference, let us turn to this statement from Pillow (2003, 184), that reflexivity is about "recognizing the other." This relates to a context in which the "other" is different from the researcher, especially geographically, or ethnically. This recognition of the Other is considered a laudable goal as an act of hospitality, except it does not interrogate the politics within the concept of "the Other" and the potential for "othering" involved in this form of recognition. In declaring one's (usually "privileged") positionality, it must be remembered that it is never in a vacuum but in a relational context, and necessarily requires cognizance of the Other and how one relates to them. Acknowledgment of white (or any other dominant) positionality almost always is an acknowledgement of an advantageous relationality vis-à-vis the Other, a status that gets labeled as "privilege." But by focusing on the value of recognition in positionality, the process (and possible negative consequences) of having to know and define who and what the other is, has been overlooked. Recognition must also be historicized here—that recognition can never be neutral when there have been centuries of western discourse already defining and categorizing the racialized Other precisely for the purposes of recognition—yet again, a reaffirmation of Wynter's "descriptive statement." Indeed, colonizers were especially keen to recognize "exotic" colonized peoples for the purposes of administration, domination, and knowledge extraction (Mitchell 1991). Mistakenly, for reflexive scholars who advocate this, the familiarity that comes with recognition does not necessarily equate to humanizing and equalizing the Other.

So, through the declaration of their own positionality, a white researcher is simultaneously defining the Other, a process that first necessitates the reification of actual material differences, but also concretizes *assumed*, perhaps imaginary differences between people plucked from "the archive of systematic statements and bodies of knowledge" about racialized people (El-Haj 2005), differences that then feed back into the production of racial hierarchies. We see how the colonial function of Wynter's biocentric descriptive statement comes into play here.

Knowledge of material inequalities may well be empirically supported. Take, for example, the statistics of ethnic minorities in western countries subjected to structural inequalities due to political decisions that trap them in higher rates of unemployment and with less access to healthcare. These material inequalities are in many contexts true, but then there are also perceptions and stigmas of inferior status and intellectual inequalities that stem from colonial, racist inheritances. So, although critical scholars have up-

held positionality and recognition of the Other as routes to "self-knowing," this is nevertheless disturbingly congruent with the notion that knowledge of the Other is precisely about (congratulatory) self-knowledge and European identity-making (Said, 1979), or the notion that proximity with the colonized Other is needed to supply a white superiority complex (Fanon, 2008) [1952] within a "colonial relationality" (Gani 2021, 555). Declarative positionality can thus have the function of informing people, even reassuring people, that racial hierarchies (and one's position at the top of that hierarchy) are safe. Advocating positionality as a way of "recognizing the other" is hardly emancipatory when this recognition occurs within, and does nothing to dismantle, a hierarchical and inherited colonial context. This is the hierarchical context in which a positionality statement reasserts "ethnographic authority"; moreover, declaring positionality is not merely exposing, or even *primarily* exposing, one's own limitations, but in fact acts as self-affirmation.

As should be clear by now, our contentions are not with reflexivity per se, but with the demonstrative form of reflexivity, particularly *declarations* of privilege, designed to make public an internal process of reflexivity. We turn here to the work of J.L. Austin 1975 [1962], Butler (1990), and Sara Ahmed (2004) to explicate why the declaration is a particular problem.

Among the most important contributions by Butler (1990) is her exploration of language as a performative act, where the thing uttered is materialized through language. Butler draws on speech act theory, of which J.L. Austin's work (1975 [1962]) is the most well-known and influential example. Put simply, Austin argues that the utterance of words *does things*. Saying something performs an action—well-known examples he provides are naming a ship or pronouncing someone married; in both cases, the statement is not without consequences (Butler 1990, 6). "It indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action"—it is not "just saying something" (6–7). Butler then expanded on this by applying it to one of the most powerful social constructions: gender. According to Butler, gender, rather than constituting a biological reality, is a performance. Its validity is upheld through repeated (discursive) performance, i.e., action.<sup>13</sup>

The "reality" of racial difference is upheld in the same way through repeated speech acts and the performance of "race." The declaration of racial positionality, we argue, may function as a tool for the continued reification of racial hierarchies. To further understand how declarations of positionality, especially those that relate to so-called advantageous racial positionalities, reify unequal power dynamics, we draw upon what Sarah Ahmed (2004) refers to as the "stickiness" of words. According to Ahmed (2004), words and emotions "stick" to certain bodies if repeatedly attached to them in discourse (and imagination). Derogatory words or slurs used against Black and Brown people, and other unspoken words and emotions (e.g., "irrational," "violent," "outsider" or "fear" and "disgust") associated with those slurs become sticky, forming a chain of negative associations that stick to and consequently restrict their bodies' freedom of movement and behavior (Ahmed 2004, 79). This means that whiteness, too, is not just an empirical "fact" but a container of emotions, of legacies, and of historical associations with power—quite literally, as Wynter put it, a descriptive *and* prescriptive statement. When a researcher states their

<sup>13</sup>For a good application of speech act theory in IR, see Faye Donnelly's (2013) exploration of securitizing speech acts by the Bush administration during the 2003 Iraq War.

positionality to be a white person, especially a white person with “privilege,” they are reinforcing the stickiness between power and whiteness. Declaring one’s whiteness as a privilege, then, is a speech act that performs an action; it asserts a racial position that is sticky with emotions and associations of superiority and power.

We contend, therefore, that the utterance and advertising of positionality can be used and exploited as a *speech act* to perform and (re)assert racial and class hierarchies. Most insidiously, it can masquerade as a critical, feminist, or postcolonial methodology that simultaneously affords critical legitimacy while in fact signaling and reinstating power above others. This use of declaring positionality as a hidden power move can occur in multiple contexts, for example, in relation to racialized research subjects, to subtly assert authority that affords greater access to communities while at the same time earning their trust. It has also been used in the ever-increasing competitiveness of academia, usually to offset the insecurities felt by a researcher whose conventional understanding and expectations of racial disparities in the workplace are unsettled upon meeting successful scholars of color. The cognitive dissonance caused by this apparent contradiction can lead to self-assuring and compensatory declarations of positionality. And finally, the strategy might be used in everyday social contexts. Our conversations with numerous WoC indicate the recurrences of such experiences that corroborate this function of positionality.

The propensity for positionality to be used as a power move is all the more likely and possible given that white feminist researchers have written about the advantages they enjoy during field work on account of their whiteness, and all the tropes and assumptions that are attached to it thanks to western knowledge production. For example, writing about the value of autoethnography, [Mara and Thompson \(2022\)](#) state:

Furthermore, when researchers are open about their own experiences, they may engender equal openness on the part of others and thus gain access to more “personally intimate data” (2010, 52). Vulnerability from both the researcher and researched produces writing equipped to inspire readers’ empathy.<sup>14</sup> (2022, 380)

The above statement is an admission that positionality can be and is used in an extractive way to gain greater access to the “native” research subject’s insight, where the hegemonic researcher benefits from a perceived dual legitimization and empathy as both a “rational” (due to whiteness) and “vulnerable” (due to their womanhood) status. What is interesting is that the authors suggest acknowledgement of positionality offers a general advantage to all researchers, but the actual examples within their article attest to the limitations PoC researchers encountered when engaging with positionality. Meanwhile, all their examples of advantage were only experienced by white women researchers. Again, it appears the authors, and other white researchers, are in fact cognizant of this disparity, since they state:

For example, some non-African women observe that their [the authors’] positionings as “white female researchers” or “female expats” may have favorably influenced their interlocutors’ decisions to interact with them.. (2022, 381)

This is framed as a realization of discomfort. And yet, judging by the authors’ (and others’) existing research (in

particular, [Thompson 2019](#), also see [Maczynska 2020](#)), there is not enough discomfort to prevent continued utilization of the advantages of their positionality. The evidence—that of persistent research deploying problematic methodologies in which their positionalities are used as leverage—belyes the reluctance and discomfort being proclaimed here. These are, then, hidden power moves, not only used at the time of conducting the research but also in the writing up of the research: Rather than inviting uncertainty (as is claimed), the speech act of asserting a white positionality invites familiarity with the researcher against the backdrop of their research subject’s “exoticness,” and a reassurance of intellectual objectivity.

The methodology of positionality statements has increasingly made its way into everyday academic settings as well, with the same intended effect. To give an example relayed by WoC academics, in an academic panel on “freedom of speech,” a critical-leaning white woman researcher stated her positionality in the middle of her presentation on the dangers of unrestrained free speech. When explaining how some derogatory terminologies can affect some demographics more than others, she proceeded to say, “I, as a white, upper-middle class, educated woman, have more power than an undocumented migrant or a Woman of Colour.” On the surface, this could be seen as a simple statement of fact, self-awareness, and allyship. But placed in context, it was meant to serve as a reminder and power move against the WoC in the audience, who, in that utterance, had their achievements and equal status stripped away and were effectively constructed as powerless in relation to the white woman researcher. Moreover, rather than humanizing the racialized person, all those considered to have less power than her, according to the speaker’s statement, had their differences and particularities flattened. They became the amorphous, disempowered mass, like the aforementioned “bodily others.” As a result, the academic space was immediately rendered a hierarchical one, in which the speaker unequivocally placed herself at the top, alongside the white men in the room. She not only situated herself in such a way that she could garner the critical, radical legitimacy from her feminist and liberal politics, but also aligned herself with power, attempting to straddle both sides of a perceived power divide. What it was meant to give her was access to authority, the authority to speak and be heard, and the assumption of objectivity in relation to the “emotional” and “disempowered” WoC. From our conversations with fellow WoC, we found they often reported such incidents to more experienced peers to make sense of the contradictions. This shows that, on the one hand, WoC had been trained to identify such reflexive methodology as emancipatory *in theory*; on the other hand, their intuitive reactions told them the opposite. Their peers often corroborated their sense that these incidents were indeed covert performances of dominance by their white counterparts.

Thus, for all the good intentions behind declarations of positionality, they can be manipulated in ways that reify the very power dynamics and hierarchies that feminists, critical theorists, and postcolonial researchers seek to destabilize. In this worst-case scenario of the hidden power move, it can be used as a competitive strategy to convey a futility of merit, hard work, or justice, given everything the utterer knows about structural racism. If we extrapolate from this beyond researcher interactions to apply to other critical practices in academia, this also should make us interrogate the value of land acknowledgments in settler-colonial territories. If unjust “privileges” are simply declared with nothing concrete done to dismantle and redress them, then such positionality

<sup>14</sup>Authors cite [Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang \(2010\)](#).



statements may simply come across as gloats and taunts. In such instances, real humility and reflexivity are more likely to be conveyed through introspective intentionality and action than through declarations paired with little action.

### Conclusion

Being reflexive entails rethinking knowledge and opening up to the possibility that our own thinking is clustered with stereotypes and preheld assumptions that can inhibit our pursuit of knowledge (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 791). This is a form of knowledge production and methodology that we encourage and with which we identify as scholars working with critical approaches. However, the colonial origins of reflexive methodology in Western academic contexts must be acknowledged and the (resulting) colonial and harmful possibilities in its corollary, positionality, rectified.

As we have argued, positionality can encourage the reproduction of racial and colonial hierarchies, consciously or not. More specifically, we have demonstrated how the declaration of positionality—which for the white (or indeed any other materially or politically advantaged) researcher usually constitutes declarations of so-called privilege—functions to reproduce and reify colonial, racial, and classed relations or practices. Declaring positionality has three main functions: They provide legitimacy, redemption, and an assertion of power for the white researcher in relation to PoC and especially WoC. What is more, contemporary practices of this methodology ultimately serve to escape the original intention of reflexivity in research, which was meant to defy claims to “objectivity.” Instead, and paradoxically, the increased uptake of reflexive positionality, at least in part, stems from the fact that it provides a reformed claim to rationality, a concept which cannot be divorced from its colonial roots.

What, then, is the solution? As Barbara Applebaum’s work on privilege as complicity (2010) suggests, critical researchers should avoid asserting “privilege,” which serves as a power move, and instead, if they want to engage with reflexivity, carefully consider their *complicity*. This does not mean, however, that we are calling for renewed, even more detailed, declarations of complicity that replicate the performative, narcissistic, and colonial practices we have observed with declarations of “privileged” positionality. Instead, we advocate reflection, a centering of humility (Tuhiwai Smith 2013), and resistance to the temptation of performance; followed by action in the form of material and intellectual reparations. Beyond this, to expect an immediate solution without first understanding the problem is itself reminiscent of a positivist approach to science. Rather, our goal has been to hold our academic disciplines to account and to encourage future reparative scholarship in response to the extractive processes that we have laid out in this article.

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