

From Ethics to Refusal: Protecting Migrant and Refugee Students from the Researcher's Gaze

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Volume 38, Number 1, 2022

Refuge in Pandemic Times
Le refuge en période de pandémie

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091346ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40893>

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Publisher(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

ISSN

0229-5113 (print)
1920-7336 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Gavilanes, V. (2022). From Ethics to Refusal: Protecting Migrant and Refugee Students from the Researcher's Gaze. *Refuge*, 38(1), 88–94.
<https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40893>

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From Ethics to Refusal: Protecting Migrant and Refugee Students from the Researcher's Gaze

Vianney Gavilanes

ABSTRACT

This piece makes a methodological contribution to refugee studies in the context of the “ethical turn” in the field by arguing for a **spectre orientation** to the student voice that resituates participant knowledge as diffused rather than explicit. This orientation, as a methodological stance, goes beyond reflexivity and practices a refusal to engage in **damage-centred research**. Drawing from a broad theoretical and conceptual literature within the contexts of forced migration, this short essay expands the current literature focusing on procedural ethics by offering a more humanizing methodology for conducting research with migrant and refugee youth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS

humanizing methodology; testimonio; migrant and refugee youth; politics of protection

RESUMÉ

Cet article apporte une contribution méthodologique aux études sur les réfugiés dans le contexte du «tour-nant éthique» dans le champ en plaidant en faveur d'une *orientation spectrale* envers la voix étudiante qui resitue les connaissances des participants comme diffuses plutôt qu'explicites. Cette orientation, comme posture méthodologique, va au-delà de la réflexivité et pratique un refus de s'engager dans une **recherche centrée sur les dommages**. S'appuyant sur une large littérature théorique et conceptuelle dans les contextes de migration forcée, ce court essai élargit la littérature actuelle axée sur l'éthique procédurale en proposant une méthodologie plus humanisante pour mener des recherches auprès des jeunes migrants et réfugiés pendant la pandémie de COVID-19.

HISTORY Published 28 April 2022

It is 11:30 a.m. on Friday, March 13, 2020, a chilly Northern California Spring morning, and I'm introducing the photovoice project in Ms. Gonzales's sophomore bilingual world history class. As I finish the slide on the principles of photography, an unexpected message is announced over the intercom. Madison High School's secretary is announc-

ing the school will be closed for the next two weeks due to the shelter-in-place order issued by Governor Gavin Newsom. As I'm answering Victor's two-part question about the use of selfies and whether we would still conduct the project given the shelter-in-place order, I notice Ms. Gonzales's perplexed look. I finish the presentation amidst the growing uncer-

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tainty and confusion from the students regarding the announcement. The ones that understand more English are translating for their neighboring peers and the chatter of the students grows in crescendo as more and more are learning about the closure of the school due to COVID-19.

Little did we all know that chilly spring morning that our lives would drastically and quickly change as we continue to face the effects of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. As teachers, staff, administrators, and, above all, students were scrambling to transition to remote instruction for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year, none of us imagined what was in store for us. I was observing two focal classrooms weekly as part of my dissertation study, Ms. Gonzalez’s Spanish bilingual world history and Mr. Martinez’s Spanish bilingual algebra support. These classrooms were part of the Global House¹ program at Madison High School designed to support newcomer (migrant and refugee) students to learn English and integrate into the American educational system, culture, and society. As the whole nation and world were creating virtual classrooms and frantically learning best practices for remote instruction, the Central American forced migrant and refugee students I had been working with that school year were among the many that were lost in the hectic transition. In response to this call’s invitation to pause and reflect on the impact the pandemic has had on the protection of migrant and refugee populations and in our ability to conduct research, I offer my testimonio on the dynamics and intricacies that I witnessed as a researcher studying freedom and refuge within educational settings.

My use of testimonio is informed by a theoretical and methodological *mujerista/feminista* tradition of bearing witness to

injustices and taking action whereby “testimonio is both a product and a process” (Delgado-Bernal et al., 2012, p. 365). As such, the process of “*testimoniar* (to give testimony) is the act of recovering—previous experiences otherwise silenced or untold—and unfolding them into a narrative that conveys personal, political, and social realities” (Delgado-Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). Thus, I use “the emotional force and intellectual depth of testimonio [as] a springboard for theorizing” about the ethics of conducting research with migrant and refugee youth during pandemic time (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 2). In what follows, I examine thoughts and feelings kept in my research notes while I conducted participant observations that I now return to review and analyze as I theorize the politics of protection for migrant and refugee youth. In particular, I question the gaze of well-meaning researchers who engage in **damage-centred research**—“research that intends to document peoples’ pain and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for their oppression” (Tuck, 2009, p. 409). Through my testimonio, I render perceptible and legible this imperceptible researcher gaze with the goal of disrupting its perpetuation within my work and hopefully the work of others. I invite those that work with and for migrant and refugee communities to join me in (re)imagining a politics of protection by implementing a **spectre orientation** as a methodological stance that preserves the dignity of these communities.

In April 2020, I participated in a talk at the University of California Berkeley, “Researching in Troubled Times,” where I shared my hesitation to continue conducting research in a business-as-usual manner, hinged, among other concerns, on the inequities my research

¹ Pseudonyms have been assigned to the city, school, program, and actors.

participants were experiencing in their daily lives and how I could conduct ethical research in the midst of these disparities. Since then, I have been pondering the role of the researcher and of research during a pandemic in relation to Ruth Behar's (1996) notion of the vulnerable observer² and Eve Tuck's (2009) call for a moratorium on damage-centred research. Behar (1996, p. 2) offers us provoking questions and scenarios in which observers "stay behind the lens of a camera, switch on the tape recorder, [or] keep pen in hand" in the face of tragedy. She then asks if these actions constitute transgressions of unsaid limits of "respect, piety, [and] pathos—that should not be crossed, even to leave a record?" (p. 2). Tuck's (2009, p. 413) call for a moratorium on "research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" poignantly answers Behar's question. Damage-centred research in the form of border-crossing stories and pain narratives has been a central premise for many research projects and media stories that have worked, unfortunately, to sustain a dominant narrative of illegality and loss surrounding migrant and refugee communities. Thus, although I recognize the deep psychological impact border-crossing experiences have on migrant and refugee youth, I refuse (Simpson, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2014) to perpetuate that narrative through my research. Consequently, I find myself asking: What is our moral obligation to our participants as researchers during pandemic time? Do we risk observing too coldly or detachedly in our attempt to record the evolving dynamics and intricacies that our participants are experiencing? Ultimately, how can we conduct ethnographic

work in the midst of a pandemic without objectifying refugees and forced migrants as passive objects of study? Through the act of reflection, albeit one laced with the privilege of the researcher role, one can embark on a mindful process of understanding what it means to conduct research during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. An ongoing mindful practice of reflection not only helps us to be versatile and flexible as our research plans become upended; it also allows us to be attentive to our surroundings including our relationships with our participants. However, my contribution extends beyond reflexivity to a committed approach to research that enacts relations between my research, my participants, and the communities I seek to help and protect.

During the initial transition to remote instruction when everyone was hurriedly gathering food and other essential items to hunker in our homes before the shelter-in-place order took effect, the last thing on my mind was observing the remote classrooms. Just as Behar (1996) asks about the limits that should not be crossed when observing, in this case, a pandemic, I could not continue to observe and record the quotidian everydayness when people around me were dying of COVID-19. A sense of selfishness and callousness engulfed me when I thought of approaching the overwhelmed, stressed, and overworked teachers about continuing my observations now in their virtual classrooms. It was May 2020—two months after the turn to remote instruction—and the district was still working on providing Chromebooks and internet hotspots to all of its students. Many of the students in Ms. Gonzales's and Mr. Martinez's classrooms did not have access to a computer, have a reliable internet connec-

²Behar conceptualizes the vulnerable observer as one who acknowledges what goes on within them during observation and utilizes such subjectivity to continue to explore both the topic being studied and their own imbrication with the actors, field of observation, and extended context.

tion, and/or did not know how to navigate the email platform—the default mode of communication. Consequently, these teachers, along with others at Madison High, were cut off from some of their students during that transition time.

After the district informed teachers and families that remote instruction would continue until the end of the school year due to public health guidelines, I reached out to the focal teachers and offered my time and support to help them and their students finish the school year. Ms. Gonzales thanked me for my offer but said she would not be holding synchronous virtual classes; instead, she was finishing the school year asynchronously because she did not have the emotional bandwidth to do otherwise. I joined Mr. Martinez's class sessions once a week and observed the drastic drop in student attendance: out of 25 students, on average, 4 or 5 would show up, and many days, it was just two students besides the teacher and myself in the virtual classroom. According to Mr. Martinez, this was a growing trend across the school, accompanied by decreased student work and disrupted communication with students and their families. Per his request, I made myself available to all students after class but in particular to those flagged by him as in need of someone to talk with.

Maciel, a carefree and warm-smiled student described by his teachers as un periquito or a little chatterbox, was one of the flagged students. As an outspoken and social person who can strike up a conversation with just about anyone, he would get lonely being the only one in his apartment during the day when his mother went out to work cleaning houses. One day, I spent an entire after-class session teaching Maciel how to compose, open, and reply to emails since he had never used email before and was very confused.

During this session, Maciel's family's pre-existing income disparities, now exacerbated by the pandemic, became apparent when his mother asked him to ask me for resources to help her pay the rent. I was struck by the crude contrast between my current lesson on email literacy and this mother's concern for keeping a roof over her family. After I shared the resources I had at my disposal and offered to connect her with others, I realized I had reached a threshold I was not willing to cross for the sake of research. I refrained from taking notes on the conversations I had with Maciel that centred on pain and brokenness because it went against my refusal to conduct damage-centred research. During those painful conversations, I felt unable to continue my research because the haunting image in Behar's (1996) opening pages of a girl being swallowed by the earth during a mudslide while the photographer observed and recorded the tragedy reminded me of what I could become. However, at other moments, I thought that my documentation of these stories might help to obtain political or material gains for marginalized and asylum-seeking communities such as Maciel's family.

In a back-and-forth dance between my refusal to conduct damage-centred research and my desire to continue to show up in ethical ways for the students, I vacillated at the liminal intersection between self-sabotage and a damage framework. It was during the moments when I believed, for a split second, that documenting the need I was witnessing and the pain that was being shared with me could make a difference that I realized how enticing damage-centred research is. But I quickly recognized that the seduction of this framework capitalizes on the desires for social change and the well meaning of researchers. However, it is precisely this seduction that Tuck (2009) warns against and

that urges communities to **suspend damage** by instituting a moratorium on this research strategy. When entertaining the notion of protection, particularly, who is being protected during pandemic time, I think about the forced migrant and refugee students in Ms. Gonzales's and Mr. Martinez's classes. I wonder if the forced migrant and refugee students at Madison High and in other parts of the world might be in need of protection from COVID-19 alongside the gaze of well-meaning researchers engaging in a damage-centred framework (including myself).

Sometimes, there are instances wherein we as researchers participate, (un)wittingly, via an empiricist methodology in the dismembering of our participants into undignified fragments of human beings (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015; Dillard, 2012). This tends to happen when the impetus for a student voice becomes a commodity sought after to advance a research agenda resulting in the disregard of ethical considerations in a series of decisions that seek said voice by any means necessary. Some of these highly extractive means include placing students in a position of power imbalance between them and the researcher seeking their voice. Consequently, in the search for this commodity, the students cease to be multi-faceted, complex human beings and instead become objectified as student voices dismembered from their socio-politically inflected corporeality. This type of dismembering is most pernicious within the research on vulnerable populations of migrant and refugee youth. Consequently, in the absence of a sustaining mutual relationship between the students and researcher, the act of securing the student voice for the sake of the research morphs the researcher into a consumer of bodies. In this sense, void of the relationship between, in my case, student and classroom aide, the act of seeking

a voice without a body reduces the participant into a fragmented self. These fragments are subsequently pieced together through ink on paper or pixels on a screen for the consumption of others. As such, ending with the act of reflection is insufficient; **we** as researchers and advocates of vulnerable populations need to take action. However, these actions are not the mainstream kind that lead to writing award-winning accounts of precarity and brokenness that warrant a collection of accolades. Instead, these actions dwell in the interstitial spaces (Anzaldúa, 1987) where we as researchers acknowledge both our complicity with empiricist objectifying methods and our commitments to disrupting these harmful practices in our work. Thus, the choice to refuse damage-centred research during these moments of reflexivity and pivot towards more critical and humanizing methods is a part of (re)imagining a politics of protection.

As I manoeuvre my way through the complexity of being an educational researcher and critic of normative educational practices while being an ally to educators seeking a more just and equitable society, I find myself asking, how can we (re)imagine a politics of protection for migrant and refugee youth in relation to COVID-19 and damage-centred research? Pandemic time teaches us more than what perhaps we are ready to or want to hear. When individuals and/or communities feel compelled to share their stories, those stories will find a way to be told. If we listen with our whole selves, we can hear the silences that speak volumes. In this spirit, at the core of my work is a **spectre orientation** to the student voice as a methodological stance. Rather than being a prescriptive method, the spectre orientation allows one to recognize that the student voice is not missing but is diffused throughout our data.

In my dissertation, as a result of multiple disruptions due to COVID-19, I was not able to capture the direct student voice through interviews. To refrain from exploiting the students for research's sake, I analyzed the student voice through a spectre orientation wherein students are not situated as ghostly apparitions; rather, they are centred as a dif-fused presence throughout the dissertation. In this manner, the students' voices are exca-vated from the interactions between them and me during the months³ of in-class par-ticipant observation highlighting our inter-actions. By revisiting my field notes, now with the spectre orientation in mind, I was able to engage in the analytical process of exca-vating the voices of students from the doc-umented short dialogues and interactions with them.

Furthermore, this methodological stance is a position informed by predispositions to criticality and humanizing research meth-ods (Paris & Winn, 2014) along with a commitment to social justice. Thus, tak-ing a stance is as much of a political act as not taking one since the latter upholds the unmarked norm (objectifying empiricist research). Consequently, adopting a spectre orientation is part of how I (re)imagine a pol-itics of protection for migrant and refugee populations that does not dismember them into undignified fragments of human beings. As such, this methodological stance aligns with my ongoing commitment to disrupt empiricist approaches to data collection and analysis that objectify refugees and forced migrants as passive objects of study. In cen-tring the moments of interaction captured in my field notes, I am able to portray my partic-ipants in more humanizing ways and refrain

from unethically "tracking" them down for an interview. Again, given the extenuat-ing circumstances due to COVID-19, I could not ethically conduct those student inter-views at that particular moment in time, and these are the difficult decisions one is faced with as our research develops. However, just like with any other method within any methodological stance, there are always new sets of ethical considerations that arise. The spectre orientation is not a perfect solution, but it is the most suitable one for my study given my circumstances and external limita-tions. Although this orientation might centre the researcher more than the direct student voice, this is not in and of itself a limitation given that in ethnographic work, we are the instruments of our data collection.

I close by inviting others to introduce a practice of mindfulness within their research endeavours through whichever forms work best for them—for example, reflections, refusals, reflexivity. Especially for those of us doing work with vulnerable populations such as migrant and refugee youth, it is imperative to foster and sustain our research relation-ships in respectful and ethical ways to at least "do no harm." By engaging in ethical prac-tices of doing no harm that centre humaniz-ing methods, we can begin to co-create a col-lective practice of (re)imagining a politics of protection for migrant and refugee popula-tions that foregoes damage-centred research in favor of more humanizing approaches such as a spectre orientation.


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vianney A. Gavilanes is a PhD candidate at the University of California Berkeley in the Graduate School of Educa-

³I collected ethnographic data for over 12 months at Madison High and its newcomer program. Within the more than one hundred pages of fieldnotes from my in-class participant observations, as well as informal interactions during school hours, I was able to document short moments of dialogue between the students and myself, between teacher and student, and between student and student.

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