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A Critical Autoethnography of Teaching and Writing from Palestine

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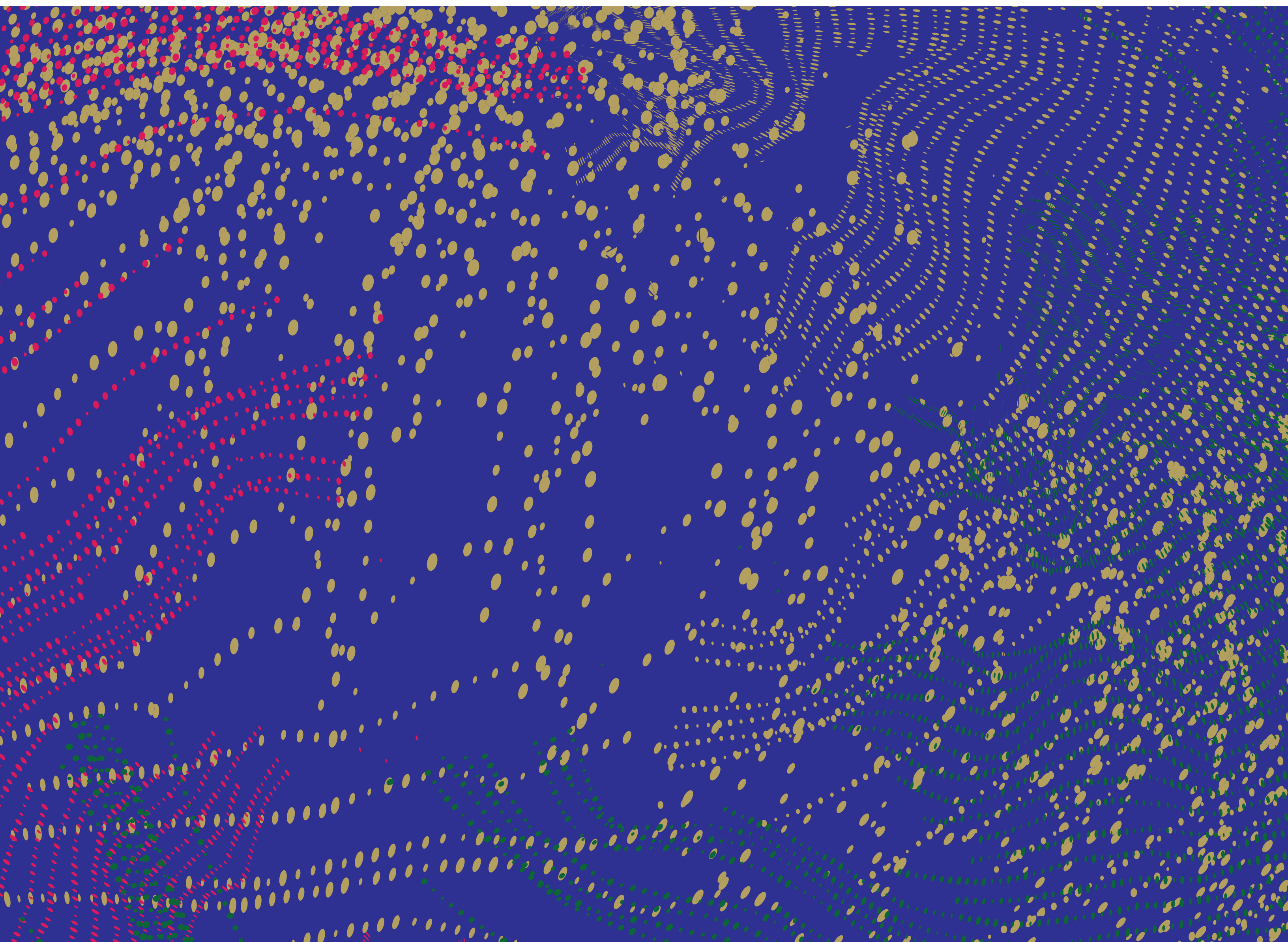

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A Critical Autoethnography of Teaching and Writing from Palestine

Rami Salameh Birzeit University

On the morning of April 24, 2016, I was doing my ethnography as if it were any normal day at the Qalandia checkpoint, until I heard sudden gunshots. Deep silence followed for a few seconds, then rapid and scared footsteps fleeing to escape death. At that moment, I was not an ethnographer; I was a colonized body among other bodies trying to take shelter from bullets. On that day, siblings twenty-three-year-old Maram Taha and sixteen-year-old Ibrahim Taha were shot dead by Israeli soldiers just for crossing on the wrong path at the checkpoint. I took off my glasses; I was relieved and grateful for my myopia for blurring the dead bodies on the ground. To some, this might seem like a horrific event, and to others it might seem like a perfectly poetic scene to start an ethnographic book or article. For me, it was something else entirely.

In autumn 2018 I showed my students at Birzeit University footage of another murder, that of Abdel-Fattah al-Sharif, also by an Israeli soldier. On March 25, 2016, al-Sharif, twenty-one years old, had been shot from very close range while he was lying injured on the street of Tel-Rumeida neighborhood in the old city of Hebron. My students were not shocked. Nor did they feel empathy or solidarity. But they did feel angry, scared, and vulnerable. For them, al-Sharif's body represented an average Palestinian body under the gaze of the colonial power, the quintessential place for bullets, maiming, or death.[1] Al-Sharif's body represents their bodies and what could happen to them just for being colonized students in the world. Violence in this part of the world is not something to be encountered, that is, it is not an event but a structure,[2] a way of living and

[1] See Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Security Theology, Surveillance and the Politics of Fear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," in *Foucault in an Age of Terror*, ed. Stephen Morton and Stephen Bygrave (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 152–82; and Suhad Daher-Nashif, "The Administration Detention of Dead Palestinian Bodies: Suspending and Freezing Death," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 107 (2016): 19–36 (in Arabic).

[2] Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Security Theology*; Fayez Abdullah Sayegh, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Research Center, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1965).

experiencing life, something that is lived continuously and that people are exposed to daily. It is an integral part of everyday life and experiences. Living in violence, whether as a university professor or as a colonized student, regularly and restlessly shapes subjectivities and perceptions of life, knowledge, and death. Indeed, violence is a social force that "transforms and reconfigures subjectivities, suffering, and place in telling ways."[3]

Given the complexity of this context (of everyday life, violence, and settler colonialism), critical autoethnography and phenomenological approaches to anthropology are crucial tools and approaches to understanding and elaborating lived experiences and perceptions. In autoethnography, the researcher's lived experiences are taken as an essential component of the research, and those experiences are at the center of inquiry, connecting the personal to the broader and collective social realm. As Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe articulate it, critical autoethnography involves understanding "the lived experiences of real people in context, [examining] social conditions, [uncovering] oppressive power arrangements, and [fusing] theory and action to challenge processes of domination."[4]

On the other hand, anthropology's phenomenological accounts encourage consideration of subjectivities, lived experiences, violence, and perception. They place the body as the constitutive horizon of different lived experiences, such as the mind and consciousnesses, sensory perceptions, suffering, illness, healing, and pain. Robert Desjarlais and Jason Throop note that phenomenology "helped anthropologists to reconfigure what it means to be human, to have a body, to suffer and to heal, and to live among others."[5] From this perspective, thinking does not precede being; instead, being and living in such a colonial context urges us to speak and articulate.[6] Furthermore, unlike the Foucauldian understanding of knowledge as power and its product,[7] a phenomenological approach frames knowledge as a tool and a possible method of emancipation and resistance. Critical inquiry can "contribute to our knowledge of power and

3 Lamia Moghnieh, "'The Violence We Live In': Reading and Experiencing Violence in the Field," *Contemporary Levant* 2, no. 1 (2017): 26.

4 Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, "Introduction: Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice/Choosing Critical Autoethnography," in *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*, ed. Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014), 20.

5 Robert Desjarlais and C. Jason Throop, "Phenomenological Approaches in Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 88.

6 Walter D. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, nos. 7–8 (2009): 1–23.

7 Stuart Hall, "Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse," in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage Publication, 2001), 72–81.

social inequality."[8] This essay draws on critical autoethnographic and phenomenological anthropological accounts to consider the implications of writing and teaching from Palestine.[9]

Writing

My research focuses on bodily lived experiences in a settler-colonial setting, more specifically on the repercussions of living under settler-colonial policies of elimination and control of people's bodily experiences and perceptions. The research started at the Qalandia checkpoint,[10] which was the focal point from which I followed individual life stories across various colonial spaces in Palestine between 2015 and 2017 for my PhD thesis. My method involved semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and interviews and discussions with nongovernmental organization personnel and academics.

Returning to Palestine from abroad to conduct fieldwork felt like déjà vu. The Qalandia checkpoint brought back all the feelings and memories that I and others had experienced crossing this checkpoint in the past.[11] Over the years, I witnessed the checkpoint develop from concrete blocks with a few soldiers to a high-tech operation that uses the most sophisticated, and humiliating, technological means of surveillance and control. My prior experiences with checkpoints were especially intense during 2000 and 2004, when I was a student at Beth-

[8] Deborah Reed-Danahay, "Bourdieu and Critical Autoethnography: Implications for Research, Writing, and Teaching," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 19, no. 1 (2017): 144.

[9] Reed-Danahay, "Bourdieu and Critical Autoethnography"; Desjarlais and Throop, "Phenomenological Approaches"; Thomas Csordas, "Somatic Modes of Attention," *Cultural Anthropology* 8 (1993): 135–56; Michael Jackson, ed., *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[10] Although the Qalandia checkpoint, along with hundreds of others, was installed around the West Bank during the Second Palestinian Intifada (2000–2005), the checkpoint phenomenon was not implemented only during that time. In fact, fragmenting Palestinian society and space started from the earliest days after the Nakba (the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians from their homes) and continued through military rule from 1948 to 1966, the Naksa in 1967 (which marked the colonization of what remained of Palestine), the First Intifada (1987–93), and after the Oslo Accords in 1993. Checkpoints are one of the crucial methods to control, surveil, and spatially eliminate Palestinian society and individuals. They have become an essential component of Palestinians' lived realities and experiences.

[11] It is important to note here that I refer to being Palestinian not as an identity but as an experience. During the Second Intifada (2000–2005), hundreds of Israeli checkpoints were installed in the West Bank, controlling movements and mobilities between Palestinian cities. Being a BA student at Bethlehem University and living in Ramallah meant that checkpoint crossing was a daily routine. Such an experience was the average experience that most of the Palestinians have had to endure and still endure today.

lehem University in the West Bank. Traveling from Ramallah to Bethlehem always meant—and still means—crossing more than one checkpoint. Through autoethnography, I was able to merge my previous life experiences with the experiences I collected during my dissertation fieldwork.[12] Ethnography within autoethnography is both reflexive and collaborative. It involves interrogating and exploring “the life experiences of the anthropologist and their relationships with others ‘in the field.’”[13] Thus, my experiences are an essential part of my research and arguments. I am not concerned with the anthropological debate about insiders or outsiders. I am more concerned with understanding subjectivities, bodily experiences, and perception from a critical position and with incorporating and reflecting on my bodily experiences, among other colonized experiences and perceptions. My concerns thus did not arise from debates about what is really “real” or from discussions about the “native point of view.”

Violence . . . is not an event but a structure . . . an integral part of everyday life and experiences. Living in violence, whether as a university professor or as a colonized student, regularly and restlessly shapes subjectivities.

My experiences before and during fieldwork played a decisive role in developing my research questions. For example, once while pursuing my MA in cultural and critical studies in London between 2010 and 2011, I was hanging out with friends on a rare sunny day, when two police officers passed by. I felt anxious, nervous, and threatened—feelings and emotions I can still sense. When I shared what I felt with my two friends after the officers passed, they were surprised. On the contrary, they told me, they felt more safe and secure because of the officers’ presence. I soon realized that the difference between them and me was not a matter of cultural or social norms but a difference in the lived experiences that shaped our subjectivities and perceptions about ourselves as embodied beings in the world. By “lived experience” I mean the everyday process of embodying pain, suffering, dispossession, and vulnerability. My bodily perceptions at that moment were an image of negation and powerlessness. Frantz Fanon stresses the fact that “colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘in reality, who am I?!’”[14]

[12] Rami Salameh, “Life, Love and Death in a Settler Colonial Order: Palestinians’ Lived Experiences” (PhD diss., Geneva Graduate Institute, 2018).

[13] Reed-Danahay, “Bourdieu and Critical Autoethnography,” 145.

[14] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 250.

This event marked the beginning of a more comprehensive exploration of lived experiences in my research. My question was not only "In reality, who am I?" but also "Who are 'we,' and how are we are engaging with this world as colonized subjects?" I was concerned with understanding the subjective experience of living under a settler-colonial order. What does it mean to live and have a body in this part of the world? Settler colonialism, a recently popularized framework used to describe the Israeli occupation of Palestine, particularly the structural elimination of Palestinian lives and livelihoods, shaped my initial analyses.[15] However, I soon realized its limitations when applied to my fieldwork experience. Studies of settler colonialism are often more concerned with analyzing and destroying settler-colonial power and its modalities of control. Such analysis and engagement, however, can easily trap the researcher into doubling the objectification of the colonized subject. The colonized subjects are first objectified by the colonial power and then re-objectified by the researcher in the effort to deconstruct power. My concern to avoid this shifted the focus of my writing and research toward specific experiences, including love, death, crossing checkpoints, emotions, and sensory perceptions of sound, vision, taste, and touch. Through this approach, I realized that the experience of crossing a checkpoint has several dimensions. It is not a singular experience but different interrelated experiences and perceptions of being in the world, which vary across the different stages: beginning with the decision to head to the checkpoint, which elicits certain emotions, perceptions, and bodily rhythms, and continuing through the assorted security hurdles until you reach the other side.

Both autoethnography and phenomenological anthropology play a crucial role in filling the gap that studies of settler colonialism have created through a fixation on the nature of power, rather than the ramifications and consequences on the lived experiences of colonized subjects. Autoethnography and phenomenological anthropology also offer a crucial method not just for explaining or deconstructing power but also for understanding what it means to live in such a context and in similar contexts where people are living in constant violence and justice and equality are absent.[16]

[15] See Rachel Busbridge, "Israel-Palestine and the Settler Colonial 'Turn': From Interpretation to Decolonization," *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, no. 1 (2018): 91–115.

[16] It worth mentioning that critical anthropological knowledge production in Palestine has been boosted with the establishment of Insaniyyat—a society of Palestinian anthropologists that seeks to develop critical anthropological knowledge about Palestine and Palestinian lifeways, and to develop ethnographic research attuned to political and social justice. For more information about Insaniyyat, see http://www.insaniyyat.org.

Teaching

Since September 2016, I have taught at Birzeit University in Ramallah, first as a part-time lecturer and then as a full-time assistant professor. I have taught many different courses in the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies or the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences. I committed myself to enabling my students to engage at the deepest critical levels with social and cultural topics, issues, and phenomena. My take on knowledge resonates with my being-in-the-world and my lived experiences. That is, knowledge is not objective, nor it is produced out of curiosity, nor should it transcend lived realities. On the contrary, knowledge is at the heart of lived realities. In short, I approach training in anthropology as informing my ethical position, which entails a commitment to better understanding lived realities and to remembering that a different, more just world is possible. This commitment is inspired by Karl Marx's understanding of knowledge and philosophers as functioning not only as interpreters of the world but also as participants in changing it. I keep thinking and asking, "What does it mean to teach? What is the relation between teaching and living? What is the purpose of teaching and writing? What kind of knowledge might contribute to a better understanding of realities and experiences and vice versa?"

During the 2018/19 academic year, I taught two modules that focused on autoethnographies of teaching from Palestine. The first was a multidisciplinary module that I designed in the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies titled The Body: Representation of Knowledge and Power. I was afraid that not enough students would enroll in the course and that the university registrar would eventually cancel it. I was surprised when the course reached the maximum capacity of twenty-five students. This module emerged, first, from my research interests and my doctoral dissertation. Second, and most important, it came from the heavy yet invisible presence of questions about bodily and lived experiences in a colonial context and how such experiences form perceptions about life and living. The invisibility of questions about the body in our intellectual debate and discussion has roots in not considering the body as a pivotal epistemological question and instead reducing it merely to a suffix of the mind-body dichotomy. Although Birzeit University faces numerous challenges concerning its identity and has adopted the type of neoliberal policies that have shaken most of the universities in the world, it remains one of a few universities in Palestine and the Arab world that respects freedom of knowledge and expression. This orientation has made teaching this module possible. The second module, Introduction to Anthropology, had been designed and stan-

dardized previously. It is a compulsory course for students studying sociology in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

I divided the modules into two primary levels of engagement. I began with theoretical engagement and discussion: In the Body course, we started by briefly exploring different theoretical approaches: ancient philosophy, religions, Islamic philosophy, modernity, postmodernity, and postcolonialism. Theoretically speaking, the module covered two main themes. The first was the dualistic approach to body and mind; the second was the somatic turn, including phenomenological and critical theories, along with postcolonial approaches to the question of the body. For Introduction to Anthropology, we started by exploring different dominant anthropological theories and methodologies from a historical perspective. The second level of engagement was practical, in both modules concerned with understanding different lived experiences, life histories, and stories from Palestine. It was clear for my students and me that dominant theoretical discussion, concepts, and theories did not speak directly to their contexts or their concerns here and now. What was important to us was not understanding the "other" or understanding "there" (as in "away-from-home cultures and places," which are subjects of traditional anthropology), but understanding our livelihoods individually and collectively. Conducting anthropological and ethnographic research in an ongoing and structurally violent context raises many questions, both ethical and practical, that go beyond classical anthropology. Theories and concepts that dominate anthropological discussion do not adequately capture realities and experiences of being oppressed or colonized.[17] Anthropological discussion tends to reduce understanding of different lives and context as culturally and socially constructed representations and worries about what is really "real." These tendencies objectify stories and experiences for the sake of broader analyses of culture, society, and power.[18]

Critical autoethnography introduces an alternative form of academic engagement for my students. They are students and colonized humans at the same time, part of a society that has been suffering from colonialism for more than seventy years. Their individual life experiences and perceptions are part of a larger societal experiences. Autoethnography offers them the chance to link their own

[17] Delmos J. Jones, "Anthropology and the Oppressed: A Reflection on 'Native' Anthropology," *Annals of Anthropological Practice* 16, no. 1 (1995): 58–70.

[18] For more on socially constructed representations, see Lanita Jacobs-Huey, "'The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back': Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability among 'Native' Anthropologists," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 791–804; for more on concern about the "real," see Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

experiences with those of others, to better their reflexive and critical analyses, "and to be critical thinkers who ask questions about social contexts and power relations that inform life trajectories."[19] It also affords them the opportunity to sense their positionality in knowledge production as object-subjects of analysis. They are encouraged to produce knowledge about the objectification of their bodies, whether it is objectification from colonial powers or society. For both courses, students completed a critical autoethnography about their experiences with checkpoints. I focused on their subject positions and experiences in a social and cultural context in Introduction to Anthropology. In the Body course, I asked them to attend to their experiences in relation to other bodies, as well as the material and architectural structures of the checkpoint. Positioning the self in a social context was a remarkable experience for the students; they were able to discuss issues and dilemmas arising from being a colonized person living in a colonized society, and for the first time they felt they could relate to and critique the theoretical discussions based on their experiences. Critical autoethnography grounded this knowledge for them and made it relevant and crucial for understanding and surviving.

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Furthermore, the challenges in the classrooms were not solely theoretical. Our focus on lived experiences and the complexities of power dynamics made evident the layers of hegemonies that students experienced. Women students were keener for autoethnography and more aware of their bodily experiences at the checkpoints than were men. Women experience other layers of power that men do not. The first layer is the effect of colonial power, the second comes from the fact that this colonial power is masculine,[20] and the third comes from the patriarchal system of a large part of the Palestinian society that renders women more vulnerable and precarious, not only at the checkpoints but also throughout the colonial space. Another crucial dimension of these layers was revealed through classroom discussions about the ethical contradictions arising from the

[19] Reed-Danahay, "Bourdieu and Critical Autoethnography," 151.

[20] For more details and discussion on this topic, see the brilliant Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Sarah Ihmoud, and Suhad Dahir-Nashif, "Sexual Violence, Women's Bodies, and Israeli Settler Colonialism," *Jadaliyya*, November 17, 2014, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31481.

tension between critical knowledge production and the institutional commodification of knowledge. Students in these classes rightfully discussed the irony of producing critical knowledge for the sake of understanding and surviving in an institute that is progressively shifting toward a more market-oriented approach, which renders them as numbers, objects, and "commodities."

Conclusion

My experience at the checkpoint and my students' experience in the classroom unravel a complex state of being, a dialectical relation between knowledge and life experiences. My students and I realize that in discussing these events we are producing knowledge about our objectification and subjugation by colonial power. But we did not set out to produce knowledge about something "there" in an anthropological sense or to bear witness to something happening "out there." Rather, we were trying to understand our lived experiences, not as autonomous individuals but as parts of a broader constellation in which different manifestations of power play crucial roles in shaping our lives and perceptions.

I do not think that we can detach our lived experiences from our understanding and our take on knowledge. Even though I did my fieldwork in Palestine for my graduate work, I do not consider myself a scholar of Palestine. Nor do I see myself as an anthropologist studying or teaching Palestine, but as a Palestinian practicing knowledge-making in general and anthropology for a better critical understanding of human subjectivities. Consequently, I was not concerned with the originality of teaching or writing, as originality is one of the "basic expectations of modern control of subjectivity."[21] What concerns me, then and now, is to engage with the deepest level of experiences and existence and to understand how Palestinians are engaging with the world. Critical autoethnography and phenomenological anthropology tellingly serve that purpose, and they enable students to reach a deeper level of engagement.

[21] Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience," 4.

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