Marita Lagidze

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Term Paper

Co-Creating safe spaces for migrant women – decolonizing knowledge production and knowledge sharing practices

Introduction

At a glance, it is not easy to realize how excessive part colonialism plays in the everyday life of every single person in the world. Consciously or unconsciously, everything we believe, we do, we know, or think that we know is influenced by colonial thinking, regardless of where we live - in the Global North or Global South, East or West, and whether we are considered to belong to the group of colonizers or those who are colonized. Starting from the smallest details, such as selecting our hobbies and activities that we enjoy doing, relationships and social connections, choosing travel destinations and beauty standards, ended but not limited by our understanding of world politics, migration, economy, and distribution of wealth is determined by the knowledge that the environment around us offers. While we usually tend to take for granted all these circumstances, questions like *how* we know what we know, *why* we think the way we think, and *for what reasons* we do what we do, have crucial importance for uncovering the real patterns of our everyday life and changing them for better.

These are the questions that laid the foundation for decolonial thought that has been slowly becoming prominent in multiple academic and non-academic disciplines and practices. Described as a social movement and an academic endeavor that aims to empower knowledge, culture, and people marginalized by the legacy of colonialism and its power structures[1], decolonization is a new perspective that (re)looks at the fields and practices that have already been studied and explored numerous times. Migration is one of these sorts of phenomena that has been researched from multiple angles and viewpoints. There is an extensive scholarship analyzing different reasons for migration, migration policies of different countries, representing migrants either as threats or victims, making a clear-cut line between Us and Them, or making attempts to integrate migrants into the society and give them equal opportunities. Yet, when it comes to making sense of the migration phenomena per se, migration studies have been remarkably slow to engage with colonial legacies. The history of migration is closely linked to the history of colonialism, and colonial thinking continues to influence the migration dynamic and the ways the states, societies, and individuals respond to it[2].

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[1] Soenke Biermann, "Knowledge, Power and Decolonization: Implication for Non-Indigenous Scholars, Researchers and Educators," *Counterpoints* 379 (2011): 386–98, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/42980909.pdf.

[2] Lucy Mayblin and Joe B Turner, *Migration Studies and Colonialism* (Cambridge, Uk ; Medford, Ma: Polity Press, 2021).

In this paper, I will first briefly introduce decolonial thinking and highlight why there is a need for decolonizing the ways of knowledge production and knowledge sharing in general. Then, I will connect it with migration phenomena and explore some of the hegemonic narratives and practices related to it, as well as look at some examples of decolonizing the field. Finally, I will discuss the practical ways of emancipation from these hegemonic views, drawing on my own experience of participating in designing a retreat for migrant women with an aim to create a safe space for them for sharing their experiences and knowledge. I will conclude by emphasizing the importance of such kinds of practices based on my reflections about this experience and decolonial thinking in general.

What is decolonization?

Even though the traditional practice of colonialism has ended, it is not hard to observe the traces of coloniality in the contemporary world. The legacy of colonialism expressed in social, political, economic, racial, and gendered hierarchical orders did not disappear together with European powers' geographical dominance in the global south. Established as a critique of the superiority of Western culture and universality of Western knowledge, decolonial thinkers have set a goal to destroy and dismantle a "colonial matrix of power". Developed by Walter Mignolo based on the work of Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, the concept interconnects the systems of hierarchies, knowledge, and culture creating a geographical, political, and epistemological extension of western domination[3]. Hegemony is seen as the foundation of Western imperialism from a decolonial perspective and critically engaging with the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, and racism is considered to be crucial in fighting against coloniality of power relations[4].

From the beginning of the 21st century, debates regarding the necessity for decolonizing social sciences started to emerge. With attempts to fight against the modern/colonial system maintained by the West's epistemic superiority, decolonial thinkers have been trying since then to go beyond binary concepts dichotomized as rational/irrational, modern/traditional, progressive/backward, etc.[5] In the field of International Relations this was expressed in questioning Western-centrism and advocating for pluralism through interacting with intellectual traditions outside of the Western world[6]. IR scholars have begun to rethink world politics in order to identify the instances of silencing, denying, expropriating, and extracting non-Western knowledge. Robbie Shilliam, for example, in his book "Decolonizing Politics" reveals colonial assumptions in the works of key political science thinkers such as Aristoteles, Kant, Woodrow

[3] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity : Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, Car. Du N.: Duke University Press, 2011).

[4] Aníbal Quijano, "COLONIALITY and MODERNITY/RATIONALITY," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (March 2007): 168–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353.

[5] Melody Fonseca, "Global IR and Western Dominance: Moving Forward or Eurocentric Entrapment?," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48, no. 1 (September 2019): 45–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829819872817.

[6] Erick Viramontes, "Questioning the Quest for Pluralism: How Decolonial Is Non-Western IR?," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, January 12, 2022, 030437542110645, https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754211064545.

Wilson, and Martin Wight, and critically examines the colonial and racist logics at the foundations of the discipline[7]. He offers a guide to de-centering the construction of our political knowledge and focusing on "imperial centers and colonial margins" suggests that marginalized perspectives should be taken seriously. Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa also gives great importance to studying politics from the margins with the goal of eradicating the hierarchical power structures[8].

Despite the fact that decoloniality is a complex theory touching upon many different spheres, efforts to decolonize knowledge are a point of convergence across most fields. Universality and hegemony within the domains of knowledge represent a primary legacy of colonialism. The coloniality of knowledge, according to decolonial thinkers, is an integral part of the coloniality of power to function and is considered to be epistemic violence towards the "Others"[9]. Decolonizing knowledge requires opposing the underlying modernity/coloniality standards for measuring the value of knowledge while facilitating actual dialog among pieces of knowledge through institutional structures. In other words, to decolonize knowledge production means rejecting and dismantling the Western hegemony and control over what counts and what does not count as knowledge. According to Shilliam, decolonial thinking 'cultivates knowledge' rather than generating it. Cultivation implies 'habitation': "knowledge is creatively released as the practitioner enfolds her/himself in the communal matter of her/his inquiry"[10]. What colonization does is devaluing the minds and bodies of the Others, making them feel that their knowledge is non-meaningful and that they have to validate everything they know and do by the Western standards and criteria. Therefore to decolonize means to believe in "multiculturalism of knowledge"[11] and be certain of the fact that everyone has the ability to be a producer, not only a consumer of the knowledge.

Hegemonic Narratives about Migration

Migration is a popular topic dominating traditional and non-traditional media, as well as political and academic discourses for a long time. Debates have been going on about what migration is, and how it should be managed and dealt with on different levels of analysis. These debates are usually characterized by and expressed through migration narratives that can be defined as "stories developed through communicative practices including framing, codifying, selecting,

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[7] Robbie Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics : An Introduction* (Cambridge, Uk ; Medford, Ma: Polity Press, 2021).

[8] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

[9] Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention : International Statebuilding in Mozambique* (London ; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 33.

[10] Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific : Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 24–25.

[11] Srabani Maitra and Shibao Guo, "Theorising Decolonisation in the Context of Lifelong Learning and Transnational Migration: Anti-Colonial and Anti-Racist Perspectives," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 38, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 16, https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2018.1561533.

omitting, and silencing in order to offer a specific view on migration or migrants or a country's migration history"[12].

It is not surprising that hegemonic migration narratives mainly discuss migration as a problem, emphasizing its negative implications and portraying it as an economic and security threat. In these narratives, usually, mobility and migration per se are described with metaphors such as a 'crisis', 'issue', 'flow', etc., giving it an inherently negative connotation[13]. Stressing the importance of identity, they put a clear-cut line between Us – civilized, educated, valuable citizens and Them – uncivilized, uneducated, invaluable outsiders. Migrants are often criminalized and dehumanized as "others against which the nation imagines, affirms, and strengthens its identity"[14]. These narratives are present in the rhetoric of powerful elites, masking vastly complex and interrelated social and economic processes associated with people's mobility across states, and result in anti-migration policies that deepen the gap between power relation intersections[15].

Another hegemonic narrative, that can be even considered as a counter-narrative of the one discussed prior, is representing migrants as victims rather than threats. These 'problem solving' narratives advocate for human rights protection, fair and equal opportunities for migrants, and consider humanitarianism, religious or cultural duties and empathy as the right way of response to migration flows and a base for forming migration policies. Nevertheless, perceiving migrants as victims naturally means neglecting their actorness and subjectivity[16]. Portraying them as helpless and vulnerable is reducing them as victims with no agency, and as Simon Turner puts it "suppresses their political subjectivity by treating them purely as forms of biological life"[17]. Things are *done to them* – they are killed, blamed, integrated, assimilated - and things are *done for them*, - they are supported, represented, and assisted. Yet, they don't seem to accomplish anything rather than fleeing or moving from their country[18].

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[12] Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek, "Migration Narratives in Policy and Politics," in *Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement (RCIS)* (Canada: Ryerson University, 2020), 4, https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/centre-for-immigration-and settlement/RCIS/publications/workingpapers/2020_17_Sahin_Mencutek_Zeynep_Migration_Narratives_in_Policy _and_Politics.pdf.

[13] Ibid. p6.

[14] Ibid. p8.

[15] Kira Erwin, "Storytelling as a Political Act: Towards a Politics of Complexity and Counter-Hegemonic Narratives," *Critical African Studies*, December 4, 2020, 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2020.1850304.

[16] Silvia D'Amato and Sonia Lucarelli, "Talking Migration: Narratives of Migration and Justice Claims in the European Migration System of Governance," *The International Spectator* 54, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1643181.

[17] Simon Turner, "What Is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29, no. 2 (December 31, 2015): 143, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev024.

[18] Mona Baker, "Rehumanizing the Migrant: The Translated Past as a Resource for Refashioning the Contemporary Discourse of the (Radical) Left," *Palgrave Communications* 6, no. 1 (January 21, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0386-7.

These hegemonic narratives are widely circulated discourses that exist everywhere and experience minor changes depending on specific geographical space. They are historically based and linked to power and influence views and attitudes about migration on an individual, societal, policy, and political levels all over the world. While traditional IR approaches look at migration with either one or another hegemonic lens, post-colonial and decolonial scholars argue that the essential underlying cause of modern migration is the result of living and working conditions created by colonialism. They focus on analyzing narratives *of migrants* rather than narratives *about migrants* or migration. Recognizing the necessity of giving agency to migrants and taking seriously the importance of hearing about their lived experiences enables decolonial thought to go beyond categorizing them as either threats or victims. To decolonize the migration and get rid of the ideological underpinnings of colonial relations it is important to actually listen to the voices of individuals, hear about their stories, accept the knowledge they want to share, and recognize them as valuable on their own, without comparing or connecting them to anything else.

It is also important to mention gendered intersections of migration phenomena. Gender has an impact on migration motives, who migrate and where they migrate, how individuals go and the networks they utilize, prospects and available resources at destinations, and relationships with the country of origin. According to Mignolo and Walsh, migration studies may be viewed as a colonial project that is highly gendered and sexualized[19]. Decolonial approaches reveal that perceptions of active men versus passive women, naturalized gender-related knowledge, and extra vulnerabilities associated with different genders (re) produce unequal circumstances for men and women, which result in a difference in how strongly the Othering processes are experienced based on migrants' gender. For this reason, proponents of the decolonial theory suggest deconstructing postcolonial and neocolonial environments from racialized, ethicized, and gendered knowledge systems which can allow or hinder migration and social movements.

While narratives have significant importance and it is extremally vital to speak and write about the decolonization of migration, embodying these theoretical observations into practice has even greater prominence. Creating spaces, initiatives, projects and activities inspired by decolonial thinking can make an actual impact on migrants on individual, as well as on community and society level.

Practical Ways of Emancipation

Non-state actors, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society have the power to play a significant role in producing different narratives around migration and may be used to oppose hegemonic state and elites narratives, as well as to develop cross-border

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[19] Walter Mignolo and Catherine E Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

solidarity networks[20]. There are numerous organizations with an aim to empower, support and integrate migrants on a local level, creating spaces, planning events, workshops, and projects to implement in practice their missions and values. I would like to draw upon one specific example of designing such kind of platform in which I have been honored to participate and narrate my personal journey throughout the process that had influenced and even changed the ways I think about these emancipatory practices.

The first time I got meaningfully acquainted with decolonial thought and practices was in (Mis)performing World Politics course at Central European University during my one-year master's program in International Relations. The course was different from any other courses I have ever taken and felt like turning IR upside down. Looking at things from different angles, going beyond usual and normal, thinking outside the box, and seeking inspiration in transforming everyday practices have been part of each and every class. By getting to know the works of authors such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière, Edward Said, Jenny Edkins, Judith Butler, Catherine Charrett, Gloria Anzaldua, and many others, the course has prepared a strong theoretical foundation for the main highlight of the semester – a collaboration with Feminist Research Network SEEK to work on a real-life project dedicated to migrant women.

SEEK is a feminist initiative based in the Netherlands led by migrant women, and reuniting scholars, researchers, activists, and advocates from all over the world. With the main goal to dismantle structures of oppression and elevate the voices, ideas, experiences, and knowledge of young migrant and refugee women in Europe, they organize projects that (re)create narratives and perceptions about migrants and contribute to long-term institutional and structural reforms to achieve social justice for everyone. Using a decolonial lens, SEEK works on transforming existing scholarship and practices in a way that knowledge and perspectives of migrants are in the foreground. It brings their ideas and initiatives to policy-makers through policy briefs and proposals that can be potentially translated into public policies for strengthening and engaging migrants and refugees and fighting against social discrimination and inequality[21].

The project "Portraits of Power" in collaboration with CEU is the most recent initiative of SEEK. The idea of the project was inspired by conversations with migrant and refugee women as part of the previous initiative of the organization, who shared their frustration, difficulties, and struggles to establish themselves in new cultures, societies, and traditions. The project envisages creating a retreat for migrant and refugee women with marginalized and underrepresented backgrounds in order to assist them in overcoming taboos in their communities related to sensitive topics such as gender violence, body policing, etc. Decolonial approach towards the project is expressed with the fact that agency will be fully in the hands of participants. Migrants will identify taboos they want to reflect on themselves, they will be the ones deciding what is

[20] Daphné Josselin and William Wallace, "Non-State Actors in World Politics: A Framework," *Non-State Actors in World Politics*, 2001, 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403900906_1.

[21] "SEEK | Feminist Research Network | Netherlands," SEEK, accessed April 29, 2022, https://www.seekresearchnetwork.eu/.

their preferred way of storytelling or knowledge sharing and choose the topics and experiences they feel comfortable discussing. The role of the facilitators will be solely to create a safe space, encourage them, and propose different methods of reflection and self-expression.

Our role, as students of (Mis)performing class, was to design a plan of the retreat which could be used in the future as an inspiration for a real project outline. We were divided into three groups of four and were asked to think about creative tools, methods, and activities of storytelling that would give participants maximum freedom, and at the same time would enable them to express themselves and interact with each other in a meaningful way. We also had to make suggestions about the logistical side of the retreat, such as desirable group size, location, number and duration of the sessions, as well as original ways of documenting and disseminating the practice.

The first feeling was the excitement, we were all happy to be given a chance to do something meaningful and since all of us had a certain level of experience in organizing different kinds of events and we have also been provided with sufficient bases of knowledge about decolonial approaches and methods, designing a retreat did not seem a hard thing to do. Throughout the semester we have been experiencing ourselves some experimental methods of knowledge sharing, such as an online anonymous document where every participant of the class could freely share their ideas and thoughts, as well as some class time without a professor, enabling us to initiate and discuss different topics between us. Moreover, we have read about some interesting and creative decolonial practices of knowledge production and knowledge sharing developed by professionals, such as the quilting workshop that was described in the book Arts-Based Methods for Decolonizing Participatory Research. Collaborative and Co-created workshop by Vishnu Vardhani Rajan, Shyam Gadhavi, and Marjaana Jauhola served to transform Eurocentric forms of knowledge practices and offered a platform for collective learning through the practice of quilting, in which a range of materials, such as colorful recycled fabrics are combined to produce quilt - a multi-layered textile which is considered to be an important part of many indigenous cultures[22]. The most astonishing feature of quilting practice is that the combination of dissimilar, mismatched, and incompatible pieces of fabric creates one whole wonderful piece. Quilting workshop is an amazing way to bring together people with different backgrounds and knowledges, who might not even share a common language and still feel a sense of belonging and appreciation by acknowledging that, like each piece of quilt, each one of them is different but unique and important in their own way.

Another inspiring project discussed during our classes was a video experiment Look Beyond Borders conducted by Amnesty International Poland and Polish ad agency DDB&Tribal. Based on a theory that uninterrupted eye contact increases intimacy, they brought together in Berlin refugees from Syria and Somalia who have lived in Europe for less than one year and citizens of different European countries. The principle of the experiment was simple – people who have never met before were sat across from each other and asked to look into each other's eyes. The

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[22] Tiina Seppälä, Melanie Sarantou, and Satu Miettinen, *Arts-Based Methods for Decolonising Participatory Research* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

powerful short film that lasts for four minutes shows spontaneous, natural reactions of people who seem to not need words to express themselves and understand each other and demonstrates that "borders exist between countries, not people"[23].

Having read, watched, discussed, and analyzed all these resources, it felt like we had enough inspiration and knowledge to design a creative retreat that would empower, support, and give voice to migrant and refugee women. However, on our first group meeting to start working, we realized that it was not as easy as it seemed. After brainstorming some ideas, we discovered that designing a retreat for people with potentially difficult and traumatic pasts required skills that we might not even possess. From this point of view, what I think was the problem is that we had imagery of weak, fragile women who needed assistance and with whom you need to tailor every word and action in a way to not revive their past trauma and suffering. While choosing correct words and approaches is definitely important, after meeting some of the future possible participants of the retreat everything has changed. I was astonished by how strong, powerful, educated, and empowered women they were, who regardless of their difficult past, were brave and experienced enough that they could design the project much better than us. I was ashamed to admit even to myself that despite reading so much decolonial literature and having numerous discussions about how important it is to not categorize migrant and refugee women as victims or threats and to think about them as subjects with agency and power, I was still influenced by stereotypes and common perceptions about them. I am not sure about the experiences of my peers but my positionality and the way I used to see my role in this project has changed drastically.

After this meeting, we had already a clearer idea of what was expected from us and as a result of several working gatherings, we have designed a retreat proposal that consisted of meeting 3-4 times, on Saturdays for 1.5-2 hours. Plans for all of the sessions included some fun, art-based ice breakers to help participants to get to know each other and encourage them to start sharing, as well as bigger activities allowing them to reflect on taboos or anything else they felt like discussing. The main idea we had in mind while planning the sessions was to imagine ourselves in the place of the participants and plan everything in a way to give them as much freedom as possible. We have presented our proposals to collaborators from SEEK and listened to each other's ideas as well, which all together created a meaningful contribution to a future real retreat project that is going to take place sometime soon. While it is not yet decided how the final design of the retreat will be, I am confident that it will be full of empowering, fun, and interesting activities, that it will make an impact and change the life of migrant and refugee women for better.

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[23] "Look Refugees in the Eye: Powerful Video Experiment Breaks down Barriers," Amnesty International, May 24, 2016, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/look-refugees-in-the-eye/.

Conclusion

The main reason why I have recalled my personal journey of designing a decolonial retreat for migrant and refugee women is not only to show how important such kinds of initiatives are but also because it demonstrates how easy it is to become influenced by hegemonic narratives and public perceptions. Migrants and refugees do not experience difficulties only during crossing the borders, or during their first years of leaving their homes, but they carry the burden all their life. The hegemonic narratives that exist in the society marginalize and discriminate against migrants for generations, making them feel like their knowledge, ideas and perspectives are not valuable enough. It is our duty as a society to change these hegemonic narratives, to reeducate ourselves in such ways to realize that each and every person has the full potential to contribute to the world. This is what decolonization is about and only after emancipating from colonial legacies in every aspect of our lives we will be able to make a world more just, equal, and better place for everyone.

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