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10. White privilege and the involution of deportation research

Barak Kalir

In his acclaimed book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon called on scholars to always remember what the quest for knowledge is all about: 'how can one then be deaf to that voice rolling down the stages of history: "what matters is not to know the world but to change it"'. Critical academics mostly research deportation out of a genuine interest in exposing and countering some of its disproportional and violent ills. Their hearts are in the right place, so to say. Equipped with academic skills, they seek to produce new knowledge in an attempt to alleviate or, if possible, eliminate the suffering caused to millions of illegalised people subjected to deportation. Realising the sharp ruptures and devastating effects that deportation causes in the lives of individuals, families, and communities, academic researchers take ethical precautions when studying this phenomenon. The last thing critical academics want is to augment, unintentionally, the pains of illegalised people. They want to learn how deportation works and to document the wretched lot of illegalised people in order to give their cause a voice, raise public awareness, and confront policymakers. There are few fields in which the drive to have an impact is more pronounced than in the field of deportation.

As social scientists, we know there is a gap. It is the bread and butter of our trade. People everywhere say one thing and do another, either not exactly what they said they would do or something altogether quite different. This gap is where meaning gets produced and our analysis weighs in. Why did I end up doing something slightly or entirely different than what I supposedly set out to do? Intrinsic aspects, acquired habits, external circumstances, group influences, conflicting loyalties, moral convictions, and many other factors bear on the production of the gap between intention and action, between speech and practice, between objectives and results. To avoid cognitive dissonance concerning such gaps, we must rationalise and justify them.

In the field of deportation, gaps are terribly evident. Guards in some prison-like detention centres turn off the lights in illegalised people's cells at 9:00 p.m. sharp, imposing darkness and preventing the possibility of reading or socialising. Guards allude to the strict regulations of detention centres when

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they shut off the lights. They tell you that their intentions are good, that these regulations are not to their liking, and that if it was up to them they would keep the lights on or even allow detainees to have the light switch available to them in their cell. However, what does it cost a guard to not stick to the regulations and to allow the lights on if detainees beg for it? Under what type of moral regime and motivational structure are blatantly stupid and inhumane regulations more important than the suffering of fellow human beings?

In this short chapter, I would like to examine our own gap as social scientists researching deportation. The gap we experience is straightforward. On paper, we seek to produce knowledge in order to drastically reform or even entirely abolish deportation and the harms it causes illegalised people. In practice, many of us grow increasingly frustrated with having only a minor or no impact on unjust deportation policies and practices. We progressively recognise that our ceaseless attempts to produce knowledge and to 'speak truth to power' have done little to bring about change. We ask a lot from our interlocutors, and we give little in return. With time, an even worse feeling than frustration begins to crop up in many of us, a feeling of both professional and personal discomfort. For while the situation of illegalised people almost everywhere we conduct our research goes from bad to worse, the situation for many of us as academics goes from good to better.

I would like to suggest that our white privilege is at the core of our predicament as researchers of deportation. White privilege fuels the motivation tanks of researchers in Western universities, helping them to believe in their ability to 'have an impact'. White privilege allows us access to resources for researching deportation. This access facilitates the production of knowledge, but it sometimes results in causing further harm to some of our vulnerable interlocutors. Finally, white privilege conditions us to aspire to the successful accomplishment of our research projects in terms of their contribution to academic standards. Here, the lines between the success of the research and the success of the researcher are blurred.

In this chapter, I use the plurals 'we', 'us', and 'our' because everything I charge deportation research/ers with is something I have been doing myself for many long years, and from a particularly privileged position. This is not a *mea culpa* moment but a hardnosed attempt to critically clarify and rethink our academic engagement with researching deportation. I am grateful to all the contributors and the editor of this book, for it is their openness and reflexivity that has provoked my critical intervention. In recent years, I have taken part in endless conversations with young and veteran deportation researchers about our growing frustrations, concerns, and moral inconveniences. This chapter is meant to make these conversations public and to open up an honest discussion about a difficult question: what might we do differently?

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THE BURGEONING FIELD OF DEPORTATION

From a critical long-term perspective, since the early 1990s the expansion of deportation measures in most countries worldwide has gone from bad to worse. Countries that had already installed morbid deportation regimes in the 1990s, like Spain, the USA, and Australia, have continued to intensify the measures taken against illegalised people, while countries that previously had no or very lenient deportation policies, like Bulgaria, Poland, and Mexico, have launched draconian anti-immigration policies and invested heavily in the installation of fortified borders and deportation infrastructure, including detention centres and special police units. As for illegalised people, with every year that passes there are more of them who die at killing borders, who get arrested for committing no crime, who face detention for months and years in inhumane conditions, and who are finally deported against their will, often with the use of excessive violence, to life-threatening places. Illegalised people are also increasingly lured or forced into all sorts of 'voluntary return' schemes, which hardly ever live up to their promises and instead throw illegalised people into greater depths of desperation.

It should be acknowledged that critical deportation research has occasionally helped to counter violent deportation practices by forcing amendments to brutal regulations, by proposing alternative measures for dealing with illegalisation, or by offering direct relief to individuals or even entire communities of illegalised people. We should also always be reminded that deportation measures might have been even more inhumane and damaging if it had not been for some critical academic studies that have served as a counterpoint. We nevertheless must take a serious and introspective look at the gap we experience between the growing production of knowledge in the field of deportation and the worsening situation for most illegalised people in our own societies.

There is a clear logic behind this inverted relation. A more aggravated situation for illegalised people implies they constitute an alleged greater risk for social safety and order in societies. This, in turn, means that having social scientists researching deportation becomes increasingly important. This importance translates to better career opportunities for academics, as more resources are made available to study deportation in the form of big and small grants, as well as teaching and research positions at different university departments. It is not exaggerated to put in the hundreds the number of PhD and postdoctoral positions that have been filled in recent years to research deportation.

Taking myself as an example here, I have conducted research on deportation throughout my entire postgraduate academic career: first during my PhD training, then as a postdoctoral researcher in a larger project. I had to quit my postdoc position halfway through because I managed to secure a tenure-track

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position as an assistant professor. Then, strongly encouraged by my university, I began writing and sending out grant proposals for research into deportation to different funding schemes and won a few of them. This meant I could hire a number of PhD and postdoctoral researchers to work on deportation under my supervision. It also meant that I moved up in the university hierarchy. Some 20 years into researching deportation, I have been directly involved in the supervision or examination of hundreds of Master students, tens of PhD students, and half a dozen postdoctoral researchers. There are many more expansive academic researchers like me out there in the burgeoning field of deportation.

It can be argued that what I am describing here is typical of institutional growth in an important field of academic research. This is of course true. Crucially, however, in the field of deportation, the motivation of most researchers is ethically grounded in a deep drive to change the realities of illegalised people (see Chapter 3 by Nevena Nancheva in this book). This drive emanates from an understanding of the unjust implications of a global colour line and the ways in which mobility – physical, social, and economic – is still heavily racialised in our interconnected societies. This is why the gap in researching deportation vexes white-privileged academics more than in many other fields.

ACADEMIC INVOLUTION

Pondering the production of knowledge in the field of deportation, I am reminded of Clifford Geertz's (1963) description of 'agricultural involution' in Indonesia. Geertz observed that under the strict economic regime imposed on Indonesia by Dutch colonial rulers, agricultural productivity in plots of wet rice increased per hectare. However, it did not lead to economic growth per capita. This was the case because the growth in population led more people to work within the same plot in an exceedingly intricate system of cultivation that increased the overall production of rice but eventually left everything stagnant. Geertz called this process, whereby the intensification of production led to no improvement or (systemic) change, 'agricultural involution'. He pointed at how colonial public institutions (intentionally) failed to introduce new technologies of production and thus perpetuated the ineffective and oppressive constellation of wet rice cultivation.

Using agricultural involution as an analogy, we can consider how an increased number of researchers working in the field of deportation produce overall more knowledge but have little incremental impact on changing the system. We can also push the analogy further to the structural level: ineffective public institutions, like various ministries and immigration police, refuse to introduce new techniques for dealing with and governing the illegalisation of

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people, thus perpetuating and even exacerbating a stagnant colonial constellation of human mobility and Othering.

Of course, there is one crucial difference between agricultural involution in Indonesia and academic involution in the field of deportation. Academic researchers, unlike agricultural workers in Indonesia, are not obliged to work in the field. They choose to do so. Here we arrive at the more confronting aspect in our analysis of the gap. How do we make sense of our motivations when choosing to work in the deportation field? As I mentioned at the start, most critical academics wish deportation to be drastically reformed or even entirely abolished. Yet when taking stock of the moderate or even poor achievements of academic research in bringing about change to deportation regimes, where does our motivation and audacity come from in believing that the next project we design will make a difference instead of simply compounding an already stifling involution?

To answer this question, I believe we need to talk about our white privilege.

WHITE PRIVILEGE

In researching deportation, white privilege plays a central role in perpetuating the inefficient engagement of most academics working in Western universities. Firstly, white privilege instils in us a sense of (self-)importance concerning our role as academics. It propels us to intervene in the field out of a strong conviction in the potential significance of our research projects. This potential significance is hardly ever undermined by the compelling evidence from numerous past ineffective projects because the source of this assumed significance emanates from us as white, highly educated, Western researchers.[1] If it was not for our white privilege that shores up in us a sense of our own importance, in all likelihood we would by now have undergone a serious correction that would have moderated our urge to research deportation.

Many of us feel an irksome sense of discomfort when we seek out, observe, or interview interlocutors in the field of deportation, especially illegalised people who fear, are dealing with, or are seeking to recover from deportation. We realise that even a modicum of reciprocity is difficult to incorporate in our terms of engagement. While interlocutors provide us with their time, energies, and knowledge, we provide them with little in return (see Chapter 3 by Nevena Nancheva in this book). We strive to do our best, but we agonise when decolonial scholars remind us that '[s]ocial science often works to collect stories of pain and humiliation in the lives of those being researched for commodification' (Tuck & Yang, 2013, p.223).

The ways in which we extract knowledge from vulnerable interlocutors can sometimes be damaging, retraumatising, or revictimising for them (see Chapter 6 by Almudena Cortés and Alessandro Forina in this book). We dread leaving

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our interlocutors empty-handed, disillusioned, and frustrated. We invest in establishing and formalising all sorts of ethical committees, procedures, and guidelines, which – as we know too well – 'do not necessarily protect research participants; they rather serve to protect researchers, universities and funding bodies' (see Chapter 1, p.11, by Agnieszka Radziwinowiczówna in this book).

The asymmetry in the power relation between us and many of our interlocutors is often the very reason why they feel compelled to collaborate with our research. Our white privilege is either a source of intimidation or a glimpse of hope for what we might do for them (see Chapter 3 by Nevena Nancheva in this book).[2] As resourceful academic researchers, we can pretty much impose our presence on many illegalised people. Working with 'local' or 'native' research assistants can sometimes mitigate this power asymmetry (see Chapter 4 by Susanne U. Schultz in this book). Working with a feminist methodology (see Chapter 6 by Almudena Cortés and Alessandro Forina in this book) or digital ethnography (see Chapter 2 by Witold Klaus, Justyna Włodarczyk-Madejska, and Dominik Wzorek in this book) can lower the level of shame and inconvenience many of our sought-after interlocutors experience. Yet it cannot mask the fact that researchers with white privilege have the most access to study deportation.

By now, based on their bitter past experiences, many illegalised people refuse to collaborate with academic researchers. The latest slogan of one activist organisation founded by illegalised people in Europe is: 'No More Blah Blah Blah'. It was inspired by their engagements with academic researchers and local politicians.

Truth be told, much of the knowledge we produce when researching deportation is already known.[3] Academic involution leads to little innovation. Activists, civil society actors, and street-level bureaucrats hardly ever learn from academics. It is more often the other way around. It is painful for us to realise that almost no one reads academic work. This is certainly the case among non-academic publics, but it is increasingly true even within academic circles. While we publish nowadays more than ever, we mostly do so because we are forced to by our neoliberal grant funders and universities. Publishing becomes inflationary, which diminishes its value to new lows. It repeatedly appears that the only beneficiaries of our studies are us, in our role as academics.

The knowledge we produce as researchers helps us to consolidate and advance our white privilege through class and status reproduction within the university system and the broader middle-class and racially segregated labour market. We are thus caught up in a downward ethical spiral. The field of deportation draws an increasing number of researchers who will mostly contribute little to the cause that drove them there in the first place. Yet they will nonetheless be vindicated in their attempts by the consolidation of their own

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white privilege as successful PhD students, postdoctoral researchers, and staff moving up the university hierarchy.

To appease our cognitive dissonance about the gap we create and experience, we build academic communities that provide us with collective moral support. We attend conferences and workshops that offer solace and ample time to socialise in enjoyable venues. These supporting structures buttress our white privilege, as we reassure each other about the merit of our knowledge production. We often seek proofs outside the walls of academia for the value of our research. We are delighted to be 'invited to the table', to present our findings to policymakers, even when we know this is largely a sham. We relish in acts of gratitude expressed by some of our vulnerable interlocutors, even when we realise they do so out of desperation and a messed-up urge to satisfy us.

MOVING FORWARD?

There are at least three detectable paths that some of us take to try to mitigate the dominance of white privilege in the production of knowledge in the field of deportation. To some extent these paths can lessen our ethical discomfort and counter academic involution, yet they all have their thorny perils.

Studying Up and Sideways

One way to redirect research in the field of deportation is to stop focusing on illegalised people as if producing more knowledge about their lot can lead to the resolution of their predicament. Setting the 'white gaze' (hooks, 1992) on illegalised people mostly results in 'epistemological violence', as De Genova (2002) already alerted academics more than two decades ago.[4] Instead, we can aim to study up or sideways; to interrogate those who devise deportation policies or those who are willing to implement harmful measures. Yet studying politicians, policymakers, and high- or low-ranked officials can be very difficult. These designated interlocutors usually enjoy as much white privilege as we do or more. Accordingly, most researchers are not likely to get access when attempting to study up or sideways. We are regularly asked to satisfy intricate requirements for ethical approval and confidentiality clearance and to sign 'show before you publish' agreements. When successful, the sites and moments that are made accessible to our attempts are carefully chosen and controlled by our interlocutors (Rosset & Achermann, 2019).

Researching up and sideways is often successful when our white privilege is recognisable to our interlocutors, and we are seen as standing together with, or not too far away from, them in our positions and views (see Chapter 5 by Lisa Marie Borrelli in this book; see also Eule, 2016). It is then often easy for policymakers to either agree with our findings or to see them as little more than

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a nuisance where we raise serious critique. Not only is there no mechanism in place to make policymakers and other state officials accountable to academic research, but it is also the case that our white privilege makes our critical findings lose their edge and appear more like a Robin Hood act. Critical academics are then easily compartmentalised together with other sorts of 'radical' activists who politicians and implementers regularly despise and effectively ignore.

Collaboration beyond Academia

Our impact as researchers can potentially be enhanced by collaborating with other actors, like NGO workers, journalists, artists, or activists of all sorts. Collaborations can be productive in reaching out to different and broader audiences. A successful provocation of the public debate around the ills of deportation policies can create more effective leverage when negotiating reforms with politicians and policymakers. Herein we can use our white privilege to channel resources to draw attention to the topic while having collaborators who are more qualified in outreach lead the way in public communication and political campaigning.[5] While such collaborations can amplify our impact, as those of us who do try to engage in them know, they require much time and energy. The dedicated and continuous commitment required for such collaborations is usually a challenge for academics to add to their already busy university career, and it often squares difficultly with a middle-class (family) life (see Chapter 9 by Shahar Shoham, Lior Birger, and Tesfalem (Saimon) Fisaha in this book).

Recognising the growing debate around the (non-)usefulness of social scientific knowledge for wider society, universities nowadays strongly emphasise the 'valorisation' of research. We can always pride ourselves in having refined previous theories, in advancing existing academic debates, or in coming up with new concepts. Yet, especially in a field like deportation where the stakes are high for millions of illegalised people, making sure that our research projects get valorised is not simply about checking the box; it is for many of us the very motivation that draws us into this field in the first place.

We can reprioritise the goals of our research projects, dedicating more attention, resources, and time to engaging in creative collaborations and innovations. Unfortunately, many funding schemes for academic research are largely counterproductive to 'radical' ideas. They generally reject risk-taking proposals (even when they claim the opposite) and regularly demand that we base our projects on previous findings and premeditated outcomes. If some of us are lucky enough to win a grant, we can always try to deviate from our original proposal in daring new ways. Yet this would likely damage our 'publication strategy', our chances of winning future grants, and our overall career in academia.

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Teaching and Training

Many of us who research deportation take much professional pleasure in feeding our findings into the classroom. It can be immensely gratifying to teach students who learn from our research experience. Our most significant impact might very well be in lecturing for courses or giving seminars about topics like illegalisation, bordering, the securitisation of migration, racialised mobilities, and so forth. Given that education is one of the most efficient ways to bring about (systemic) change in societies, we should not underestimate the value of passing on critical knowledge in the field of deportation to curious students.

A more direct and immediate way to counter the dominance of white privilege in our production of knowledge is by insisting on filling up vacancies for junior researchers with students from different backgrounds. We should likewise require the retention of these junior researchers, who would then move up the university hierarchy into tenure positions, teaching and training new students. Researching deportation can benefit tremendously from including different 'gazes'. This is made obvious when researchers, for example, are bilingual and share linguistic and other cultural understandings with interlocutors in the field (see Chapter 7 by Agnieszka Martynowicz in this book). It is telling that arguably the greatest impact any academic work has had in the field of deportation comes from the work of scholars who experienced it first-hand (see Khosravi, 2010; Boochani, 2018). It is even more telling that both Sharham Khosravi and Behrouz Boochani only managed to enter Western academia 'accidently' and after many years of bearing the brunt of illegalisation. Indeed, as the editor of this book on the power-knowledge conundrum in researching deportation reveals in her introduction, the 'one researcher with first-hand experience of deportation to a Global South country had to withdraw from this book project; she was unable to write her chapter due to work commitments outside of academia' (see Chapter 1, p.5, by Agnieszka Radziwinowiczówna in this book).

Discussing attempts to enhance 'diversity' and to reform the university as an institution for the reproduction of white privilege is beyond the scope of this short chapter (for more, see Bhambra et al., 2018; Mbembe, 2016). I shall only highlight here one concrete aspect that directly relates to academic involution in the field of deportation. In recent years, we have produced hundreds of PhD students who must then compete for just a few lucrative tenure-track positions at the end of their training. Fierce competition leads to high pressure, mental distress, and burnout for many young scholars. Detrimentally to the production of knowledge, such competition forces young (and veteran) scholars to focus on building an impressive CV rather than opting for innovative and 'radical' projects. Taking the risk that our research project might fail is out

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of the question for most of us (and for funding schemes). We therefore end up intensifying the 'publish or perish' paradigm, we compromise the goals of our projects, and we shun creative but time-consuming collaborations with non-academic actors.

CONCLUSION: CAN WE DO NOTHING?

There is not an easy way to conclude this afterword. Researching deportation seems to be a double bind for those of us with white privilege. If it is our desire to change the inhumane realities imposed by deportation on illegalised people, we must reckon with our modest capabilities and thorny predicaments. If it is our desire to accomplish successful research projects, we must declare ourselves outright as self-serving academics. Moving the needle to any point on this inconvenient spectrum might not do the trick in quieting our growing ethical discomfort.

One way to capture our conundrum is to realise that given our position(ality) as white-privileged researchers in Western universities, we are inadvertently working with/in the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), which is shaping racialised global mobility regimes. This means that researching deportation is as much part of the solution as it may be part of the problem. As long as resources for researching deportation go to white-privileged academics, who are easily ignored by unaccountable state actors, we un/willingly contribute to the reproduction of an existing power configuration. Looking at it from the other side, for oppressive mobility regimes to withstand criticism, it is best for the state to proactively cultivate its own benign opposition. Academic involution leads us to come up, year after year, with similar research findings. These findings seem to have no incremental impact and thus help to reproduce a ghastly system of inhumane treatment of illegalised people.

This reminds me of how, in a recent interview, Roger Hallam, the co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, insistently refused to debate with his interviewer the fact that climate change causes disastrous and irreversible damage to the lives and livelihoods of millions of people in the Global South (Hallam, 2023). He refused to 'prove' the case for the nth time. Instead, he referred the interviewer and anyone in the audience to go look at the endless conclusive scientific findings on the issue. These findings, he added, have been there for decades already. More or new research, Hallam avowed, was no longer the issue. Accordingly, he only agreed to talk about responsibility for the situation, accountably for current policies, and what steps should be taken to resist the ongoing calamity.

Enjoying the flow of money that goes into funding our research on deportation can be seen as a red herring. It keeps us busy proving what is already obvious. Worse yet, nowadays we often need to respond in our research designs

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to the latest whims of the very politicians and policymakers who devise new deportation measures and oppressive mobility schemes. Evaluating, with generously funded research, all sorts of 'voluntary return' programs is a prime example of how we are kept running after the facts.

As I do not have a satisfying conclusion or the ability to point to any productive direction to reorient research on deportation, I would like to end by considering the option of doing nothing. In the context of researching deportation under the predicaments of white privilege, which this book so effectively exposes, can we choose to do nothing? It might seem that we then become renegades as we quit researching deportation. Yet this is only true if we believe the battle can be won using the master's tools (Lorde, 1984; see also Dei, 2000; Ziai et el., 2020) or if we fail to recognise that 'research may not be the intervention that is needed' (Tuck & Yang, 2013, p.224).

Refusing to research deportation, under current conditions, might actually be seen as a method. It would mean that we would stop applying for conservative funding schemes. We would stop publishing all-too-known findings and only debate responsibilities and alternatives. We would fight for research and teaching on deportation to be conducted away from the 'white gaze'. We would dedicate our time to creative collaborations. We would engage in acts of resistance beyond academia (and we would do so mostly as concerned citizens). Instead of thinking that 'doing nothing' is an easy way out, we could try to answer these confronting questions: What would it cost us to do nothing? Our (professional) 'investment' in the field? Our next promotion? Maybe even our job? Another way of pondering these questions would be to pose the ultimate one: If we – white-privileged researchers – choose to stop researching deportation, who will miss us the most?

NOTES

1. I owe this observation to Catherine Besteman. During a workshop at the University of Amsterdam, some colleagues and I were sitting around a table venting our frustration over having no impact on deportation policies with our research findings. It was Catherine who then bluntly prompted us to consider why it was in the first place, if not for our white privilege, that we thought we would or should have an impact with our academic research.
2. White privilege also plays out in contexts where researchers and interlocutors share the same nationality and a white skin color. What white privilege represents mostly in these contexts is the difference in class background between researchers and interlocutors. In Poland, for example, there are thousands of people who have been subjected to illegalisation and deportation (mostly by other countries in Europe such as France or the Netherlands). Given their lower-class background, there is little chance that they will ever make their way into academia in Poland (or any other country for that matter). Consequently, the asymmetry in power relations is still very present between white-privileged

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academic researchers and deprived white Polish interlocutors (I thank Agnieszka Radziwinowiczówna for drawing my attention to this point).

3. In a recent article, Maurice Stierl analyses how the 'current "migration knowledge hype" has particularly benefited scholarship that claims to be of relevance for EUropean policymakers in finding responses to "migratory pressures"' (2022, p.1083). Stierl dissects the problematic effects of an 'increasing intimacy' between scholars and policymakers in the field. He alerts academics to expand the idea of 'do no harm' to the knowledge they produce and share with policymakers, and he provocatively calls for them to adopt a 'do harm' approach that is 'critical and impactful' in terms of upsetting oppressive border regimes. While I appreciate much of Stierl's analysis and share with him a combative attitude, I believe that his take still falls within the paradigm of the impactful, white-privileged scholar. It is my contention that academics already 'do no harm' because their knowledge is all too known to the involved parties, nor can academics really 'do harm' because their more critical knowledge is easily ignored by policymakers and recurrently hits a wall of non-accountability (see Kalir & Cantat, 2020).
4. In her concluding comment on a special issue on 'Deportation, Anxiety, Justice: New Ethnographic Perspectives' (edited by Heike Drotbohm and Ines Hasselberg), Susan Bibler Coutin (2014, p.678) invited social scientists to reflect on 'how the field of deportation studies is enabled by the very alienation and dislocation that scholars analyse and critique'. Coutin thus warned ethnographers about the thorny challenge in 'depict[ing] violence and suffering without sensationalising violence or engaging in intellectual voyeurism' (ibid.).
5. Most academics are never trained in communication skills or, more particularly, in the translation of their work to wider publics. One might even argue that the set of skills required from academics – self-restraint, skepticism, complexity, dedication to long-term investigation, self-criticism, etc. – stands at direct loggerheads with what it takes to be an efficient public communicator in the fast lane of news making and social media.

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