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Decolonial research and artistic presentations of peace and conflict knowledge from and in Afghanistan.

(Before: Artistic Research Methodologies in Peace and Conflict Studies. With the Example of the
Afghan Theater Project AHRDO)

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Abstract

The paper is developed on the background of critical, feminist and decolonial peace and conflict studies. It is argued that research grounded in feminist and decolonial critique of epistemology needs forms of presentation that differ from the common academic style. Ideas of artistic research offer useful options. Nevertheless, the practical application is hindered because the academic education does not teach and value any artistic methods. But still, the artistic research approach provides a confirmatory background for understanding a research project as (always) being subjective and political.

I discuss these thoughts relying on my doctoral (empirical) research project on the knowledge of feminist and other anti-colonial and anti-islamistic grassroots organizations in Afghanistan and the epistemic violence of peace and conflict studies. I reflect on my search for new, subjective forms of presenting my research. In addition I refer to the Afghan artistic organization AHRDO (Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization) and their theater projects. The documentary theater play „Infinite Incompleteness“ tells the stories of victims of war who were interviewed accompanying to playback theater work in the villages. The theater play responses to the culture of impunity in Afghanistan and became part of an advocacy tour for Transitional Justice to the USA. This theater work is a non-acknowledged form of research and presentation of the local peace and conflict knowledge.

In this paper I discuss the need to decolonize peace and conflict studies and that thereby we need to develop new forms of presenting knowledge. Artistic research and presentation provide promising inspirations.

Research in Afghanistan: invisibleized peace and conflict knowledge

The background for this paper is my empirical doctoral research project in Afghanistan. With my research project I intend to contribute to decolonizing knowledge on the violent conflict and on possibilities for building a new social order. I searched for existing but invisibilized Afghan controversial positions about the interventionist state- and peace-building, which I understand as a neo-colonial redesigning of society (see for example Jabri 2010, Sabaratnam 2011a, 2011b). Thereby I did not contain the Taliban, other insurgent groups or other forms of islamistic-fundamentalist opposition. My search was motivated by some hints that in Afghanistan as in all parts of the globe there is a feminist and leftist critique and organizing as well as other groups which struggle for social justice, justice for war crimes and a democracy that is grounded in the ordinary people. I acknowledge and retell the peace and conflict knowledge of Afghan grassroots organizations, including an association of victims of war crimes and human rights violations, a feminist women's organization, which is for security reasons forced to work underground, a leftist-democratic party, who organizes a grassroots movement against occupation policy and for the prosecution of the war criminals in the government and in other power positions, and, last not least, an artistic organization that creates spaces for the articulation and debate of memories of war, of the need for transitional justice and of women rights.

While there is some theoretical debate on the coloniality of knowledge and decolonizing epistemology, still there is very little guiding or examples for implementing these thoughts into empirical research practice. I proceeded with few hints and ideas, that I found in particular within the literature on indigenous methodologies, in particular from Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2008). Also helpful was 'Decolonial Research in Cross-Cultural Settings' edited by Beth Blue Swadener and Kagendo Mutua (2004), that collects

examples from the field of educational research and discusses the difficulties of cooperative research and cross-cultural understanding in a context of asymmetric power-relations and neo-colonialism. In addition I relied on ethical guidelines and particularly the Charter of Decolonial Research Ethics of the network Decoloniality Europe (2013) as important orientations.

Relational epistemology (Bishop 2005) is fundamental to indigenous methodologies as for example the Kaupapa Maori Research Agenda (ibid.; Smith 2008). Research is considered a mutual exchange of knowledge in a communicative and caring relationship. Applying a relational epistemology meant to discuss my project idea early in advance with the Afghan organizations, to ensure it is seen as a useful project, to build relationships that include me, the researcher, as an emotional and bodily person (opposed to the distant, uninvolved ideal of a scientist). I learned by listening, asking, observing, participating in activities, sharing everyday life experiences, reading the declarations and background texts. Workshops on the theories and methodologies I rely on – the critique of liberal peace, peace-building and decolonial methodology – were an additional space for mutual understanding and learning. Understanding is limited because of the gap of similar life experiences and language to describe it. But still I intended to represent the perspectives of these Afghan grassroots organizations on the conflict, on the external state- and peace-building and on other options for designing the future. With their analysis and practices they express a rich and important knowledge and critique which deconstruct the liberal peace paradigm.

My representation of the knowledge of the Afghan grassroots organizations as partners in research is a contradictory idea and process. Again a white western researcher speaks for the marginalized and colonized of the global south. The idea to become an 'allied other' of the anti-colonial movements is more a leading ideal, but not fully implemented. The collaboration is supposed to continue during the process of writing and presentation, but in fact is in this phase of the research process reduced to very limited contact. For sure I prevent to speak on behalf of the Afghan organizations. Just as sure I am not producing a neutral description. Decolonial research is political. I position myself at the side of the struggle for decolonization and contribute to it. It is not a question of closeness or distance to the movements, as is declared in the Charter of Decolonial Research Ethics.

“Decolonial research is not close to decolonial struggles located outside of the academic realm, nor in solidarity with them. Decolonial research is existentially and politically committed to decolonisation.” (Decoloniality Europe 2013: 3).

The presentation of decolonial research

The obstacle that was and still is my biggest challenge, is the form of presentation of my 'research findings'. The style of writing or other forms of presentation of knowledge is neither neutral nor unimportant. Linda Smith warns: “Writing can (..) be dangerous because we reinforce and maintain a style of discourse which is never innocent” (2008: 36). Swadener and Mutua explain that “attempting to conduct and write research that is decolonizing is (..) complicated by both these facts of lack of decolonized research methodologies and lack of research language to represent it” (2004: 12, my emphasis). On top the Decolonial Research Ethics of the network Decoloniality Europe (2013) demand that as white European researchers we have to abandon the privilege of the last word.

“[T]he privilege of the last word [is] a privilege that is fiercely defended by most academics. The privilege of the last word refers to the act of saying things about realities of others without caring for these peoples’ priorities, analyses and struggles. It is a very harmful, and hidden, principle in social and humanistic research.” (Decoloniality Europe 2013: 5)

I wanted to write and present my research without leaving the decolonial research ethics and the general idea of decolonizing knowledge behind as soon as I had collected my information and left 'the field'. How could the writing process and style be decolonized?

Our academic training how to work scientifically includes terminology and methods, but also a certain style of writing and presenting knowledge. In the very beginning of our studies we are taught to distinguish between facts and fiction, between literature and science, between objective and subjective approaches. We are called to reproduce this distinction (Singer 2005). The academic books and articles we are reading express a language that is cleaned from any expressions of life (Stitzel 2000).

When we intend to write differently, to include subjectivity and situations of life with joy and with grievances, when we want to describe the relationships of communication, of exchange of knowledge and learning that a research is grounded in – for these forms of writing we have very few models to follow. If we continue and experiment with alternative forms of presenting our studies we easily risk that our work is devalued as non-scientific.

On my way I found inspiration from the ideas of artistic research. Roland Bleiker (2001, 2009) has built a bridge and brings the 'aesthetic turn' into the discipline of international politics. Bleiker is mainly concerned with legitimizing artistic expressions as source of knowledge to be integrated to conflict studies and thereby with employing a broader register of human intelligence and creativity to the existing elements of security policy, and considering military operations as crucial part in it (Bleiker 2006: 77). But, different from that, I search for new ways to conduct and to present research that are conform with the overall aim to “put research in the favour of decolonial processes of change” (Decoloniality Europe 2013: 1). This aim leads me to at least three essential aspects:

First, decolonial research is positioned against eurocentric power relations and against continued forms of (neo-)colonialism and imperialism. It is most important not to produce any harm or disadvantage to anti-colonial social movements that might be partners in the research. Therefore I have to seriously consider a possible exploitation of the research by military forces or other institutions of counterinsurgency and prevent it.

Second, a decolonization of research methodologies is not an innovative idea that can be added to the existing canon of methods and methodologies. It necessarily challenges and disrupts the foundations of science, of ontology, of epistemology, of methods/methodologies and practices of writing and publishing of the western and universalized academy. Walter D. Mignolo talks of an epistemic decolonial upheaval (2012: 169) and calls for epistemic disobedience (2011).

Third, the academic style of writing and presenting knowledge cannot stay the same when we intend to decolonize knowledge and also when we take serious the 'aesthetic turn' in social sciences. For that reason I regularly get disappointed when I read publications for example on the aesthetic turn in international politics (Bleiker) or of

thinkers of decolonial theory (Mignolo, Grosfoguel etc.) which are written in the conventional academic style.

This conventional form of presentation is applied even though I can read in these same texts that “[w]riting styles are issues of substance, sites of contestation. Any approach that attempts to resist the encroachment of thought by dominant and monological discursive practices must grapple with the question of style“ (Bleiker 1997: 73). Bleiker discusses the way Adorno experimented with style to open up thinking space, but rejects it as elitist and exclusive. Critical knowledge in this form would only be accessible to a small circle of intellectuals who solve the puzzle of Adorno's texts (ibid.).

Mutua and Swadener encouraged the authors who contributed to the volume 'Decolonizing Research in Cross-Cultural Contexts' (2004) “to present their work in ways that best meet the need of the message of their contribution“ (ibid.: 13). Thereby they intended to extend their attempts and commitment to decolonize research (ibid.). Other feminist-decolonial scholars decide to present their work in the common academic style as Gaile Cannella and Kathryn Manuelito do:

„Our narrative is categorial and linear, so obviously uses traditional, colonialist, academic forms of presentation – because we believe that for contemporary academic usefulness, at least the structure of 'the master's tools' must be employed.“
(Cannella/Manuelito 2008: 47)

As I mentioned earlier, not to follow the conventions of academic presentation can result in delegitimization and exclusion. When I told my former doctoral supervisor that I want to present aesthetically, he answered immediately without asking questions that this is unscientific and impossible for a doctoral thesis. I stucked with my decision, found new supervisors, but have continued to struggle with the implementation. During my academic education and during my professional life I have not learned any artistic forms of presentation. It feels like being aesthetically dyslexic.

Why then do I still adhere to applying artistic research and presentation? The standardized form of academic presentation pretends that the writing person is not involved and that the academic product is cleaned of subjectivity. By finding a personal and for a specific case adequate form of presentation, the subjective that is always a part

of research is not hidden. By choosing a form of presentation, the subjective in research and the political character of any research is deliberately made visible. That is the strength of artistic approaches to research.

Artistic approaches to research in peace and conflict studies

The 'hard field' of security, war and peace studies is very slowly influenced by innovative methodologies. Mimetic approaches to research and positivist methodologies continue to be highly valued. My path from there to artistic approaches went through the ideas of cultural studies about the social constructions within representation. We need words, we use language to make sense of the world and language always already contains values. This linguistic process is never neutral (Hall 1997; Bleiker 2009). There is always a gap between the represented and the representation. "No representation, even the most systematic empirical analysis, can be identical with the object of inquiry" (Bleiker 2001: 532). The terms and descriptions to represent are limited, interpretative and problematic. Therefore representation is an act of power. But the process of representation as a location of political struggles is erased from recognition (ibid.: 518). "Indeed, aesthetic understanding is based on the very acknowledgement that signification in an inherently incomplete and problematic process" (ibid.: 520).

By applying an aesthetic approach I make the political character of research visible, that is always there. Because decolonial research intends to bring the perspectives of the colonized and oppressed to forefront, I wanted to find a form of presentation that retells their stories. These stories, that contain rich experiences and knowledge, are produced non-existent, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls it, by the powerful tools of western social sciences, by its logic and methodology (de Sousa Santos 2004). My dissertation does not reproduce an usual, acknowledged research design which ends with my academic analysis on the basis of empirical data from field research in Afghanistan. Instead I re-narrate the analyses, activities, ideas and theories of the Afghan grassroots organizations. This is knowledge on its own terms. While I narrate I do not hide the encounters and relationships, the people and their emotions, the difficulties of understanding (of translation) and my process of learning that are the basis of my

research and re-narration. I follow the intention to contribute to a political process of decolonization of knowledge on the conflict and possible peace in Afghanistan. Therefore I present a selection of promising Afghan grassroots organizations to visibleize a certain radical critique of external liberal peace-building by military intervention.

Artistic expressions of decolonial knowledge in Afghanistan

The artistic organization AHRDO – Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization – is one of my research partners. I have known the actors and organizers since my very first visit to Afghanistan in 2009. I enjoyed spending time with them and in 2010 I accompanied them on a tour with their theater projects to a province of Afghanistan. But it took more than a year and one more visit to Afghanistan before I considered to include them to my research.

I was looking for divergent political ideas to the official peace-building. I liked the theater projects, grounded in the ideas of the theater of the oppressed from Augusto Boal of Bolivia. But it took me a long time of learning before I could see the political interventionist character of this theater work. Today I am most impressed of the societal and political impact of the artistic projects of AHRDO.

To give just two examples: First, their forum theater and legal theater projects motivated processes of self-organization of victims of war and of women to struggle for their violated rights. Second, with a project of memorialization of war-time experiences of loss through memory boxes of ordinary people, in which they collect small personal items that belonged to their lost loved ones and that were arranged and publicly presented in exhibitions, they intervened into the culture of silence and of impunity for the perpetrators of crimes. Through this artistic approach of presenting pictures and everyday items they could break into the taboo to tell the truth. Additional conferences and a signature campaign on a big white piece of fabric provoked a political debate and an official recognition of the need to memorialize experiences of 30 years of war.

In addition, I would like to suggest that these artistic projects are in itself a form of research. The documentary theater play 'Infinite Incompleteness' that was written by AHRDO in December 2010 is a good example. When I accompanied a group of AHRDO

during a theater tour in the Afghan province Bamiyan I could observe Zahra Yagona from AHRDO interviewing an elderly woman in the garden of the private house where soon after a playback theater performance was started with families from the neighboring villages. Zahra motivated the woman to tell her story of war experiences and recorded it. In the evening time we were all sitting in one room that was furnished only with seat cushions on the floor. Zahra sat in one corner and transcribed the interview. She was tired, had a headache since days and could not sleep well. During the forum theater workshops, the playback theater performances and while interviewing and talking to people she had heard too many stories of suffering and grievance and re-played the emotions. But she was motivated to continue her work with love for the people and the desire to enable a change in the lives particularly of the women. I do not know what happened with the story that was documented at that day. But few months later AHRDO wrote the play 'infinite incompleteness' in which they included nine stories of victims of war in their original words and language, speaking in Dari, Pashto and Hazaragi. All stories were collected and documented by AHRDO members themselves during their theater workshops and other activities. AHRDO introduces the script with these words:

“After more than three decades of violent conflict with millions of victims, accountability for massive human rights abuses remains elusive while the voices and stories of the victims continue to be silenced and therefore unacknowledged, adding insult to injury and preventing any kind of individual and collective healing from becoming but a distant possibility.” (AHRDO 2010: 3)

This documentary theater play is a form of representation of the perspectives and the knowledge on war of the ordinary people and oppressed. The request from victims' groups involved in participatory theater workshops, that a theatrical work be created based on their own experiences, initiated the development of this play. 'Infinite Incompleteness' was performed several times in Afghanistan, in Germany, in Japan and in the United States. The script is translated to English and Japanese. In November 2011 a group of AHRDO members travelled to the US with this play for an advocacy tour. It was 10 years after the military intervention into Afghanistan by US and its allied forces. And it was only weeks before the second Afghanistan Petersberg Conference took place in Bonn, Germany, where again decisions over the future of Afghanistan were made or

prepared. Not only have AHRDO members performed the documentary theater play and facilitated the subsequent discussion, as they always do, in Washington and New York for members of the US-based human rights and civil society organizations, US state and UN officials, Afghan Diasporas and ordinary American citizens. More over they acted as policy advisers to the US Department of States, and UN Officials discussing the human rights situation, transitional justice and the prospects of peace and stability in Afghanistan. AHRDO also provided briefings to diplomats representing the permanent missions of Finland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Switzerland and Iceland to the United Nations on the situation of human rights and women rights in Afghanistan. And last not least

“AHRDO participated in a workshop on accountability at the UN Security Council where the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights and Deputy Prosecutor for the International Criminal Court also participated. AHRDO strongly intervened during the Workshop to attract international attention of lack of accountability and culture of impunity in Afghanistan and called upon the ICC to focus on Afghanistan in the same way as it has intervened in Libya and Sudan.”
(<http://ahrdo.org/component/content/article/20-home/43-ahrdo-advocacy->)

The play 'Infinite Incompleteness' and the accompanying activities of AHRDO could be regarded as research with public presentations, international impact and a subsequent application to the policy field with recommendations and expert talks. Moreover applying the research to teaching of students and to educate the general public.

While AHRDO and their knowledge is not acknowledge as scientifically valid, my very limited knowledge of perspectives on the conflict and peace in Afghanistan is most likely accepted as valid – at least in case I follow the rules and conventions of presenting it like objective facts from my analysis of the empirical data collected during field studies. But that I am not doing.

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