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"You Know Now—Talk About It!" Decolonial Research Perspectives and Missions Assigned in the Research Field

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Abstract: Global relationships of unequal power are perpetuated by academic knowledge production. The latter clearly reflect epistemic violence as well as geopolitical (im)balances of power and knowledge. Decolonializing forms of academic knowledge production and no longer speaking only *about* and *on behalf of* the subjects as *other* is thus an important component of qualitative social science from the perspective of research ethics. In this article, I look into the question of how researchers can develop the potential for reciprocal research through "missions" that are assigned to them by specific actors i.e., oppressed people in the field. To this end, I will present my reflections on research ethics using dialogues gathered in my ethnographic research in southern Spain on the practices of migrant farm workers.

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1. Introduction

In ethnographic research, it became clear at the latest by the "reflexive turn" in the 1990s (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986) that it is relevant to reflect on researchers' interactions in the field from the perspective of research ethics (ESTALELLA & ARDÈVOL, 2007; ROTH, 2005; TOMKINSON, 2015). Researchers always bring something with them, even if it is only their ideas about the research field (SAID, 1979, p.10). They leave something there and then, in many cases, leave the field taking "their" data with them. Especially when scholars from the global North conduct research in the global South[1], with subjects from the global South, for example with marginalized groups, such projects are shaped by (global) relationships of dependency. Such relationships are also perpetuated by academic knowledge production, among other things when researchers return to universities in the global North and base their careers

1 "Global South" describes a geopolitical rather than a geographical positioning.

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on the data produced. Decolonializing academic knowledge production and no longer speaking only about and on behalf of "othered"[2] subjects is particularly relevant in the context of research ethics (BERKIN & KALTMEIER, 2012; SIOUTI 2018; SIOUTI, SPIES, TUIDER, VON UNGER & YILDIZ, 2022). [1]

These elements of research interwoven with power relations point to the need to reduce such power asymmetries. If studies are designed reciprocally and conducted with a focus on reciprocity, then—and this is my thesis in this article—this will create at least the potential to decolonialize research across the postcolonial divides of North and South. Reciprocity does not have to be a mirrored give and take, as I will show below, but can take on many forms (CORBIN & MORSE, 2003; HARRISON, MacGIBBON & MORTON, 2001; PITTAWAY, BARTOLOMEI & HUGMAN, 2010). [2]

To carry out the research for my dissertation, I stayed in Andalusia and especially in the province of Almería for different lengths of time between 2013 and 2016. I conducted participant observations (LAMNEK, 2010, pp.498ff.), semi-monological interviews (HELFFERICH, 2011, pp.36ff.) and expert interviews (MEUSER & NAGEL, 1991, pp.441ff.) at various sites (MARCUS, 1995, pp.96ff.). I have fully anonymized the semi-monological interviews for publication, and the interview partners have been each assigned an alphabetic letter. The expert interviews in this article are attributed to the organization on behalf of which the respective interview partner spoke. The research aimed to analyze the precarious living conditions, working conditions and agency of the immigrants employed there, primarily in agriculture (TIETJE, 2018, pp.196ff.). In many conversations and interviews with migrant farm workers, I was repeatedly asked to explain the experiences and situation of farm workers in Germany. [3]

In this article, I will show how researchers can deal with such requests of the research field in accordance with reciprocal research. To this end, I will present my reflections on research ethics based on empirical examples from my research in southern Spain on empowering practices exercised by migrant farm workers. In this respect, in the following contribution to the debate, I will give a brief overview of the research field (Section 2). In Section 3 I will present the methodological background of research ethics considerations on missions assigned in the field. Such missions will be illustrated by my practical work (Section 4) and then brought together in Section 5 with my methodological considerations in a conclusion. In this respect, the article will also highlight the agency of subjects involved in research in the debates on research ethics and reciprocal research. [4]

2 I understand "othering" as the process of homogenizing marginalized groups and constructing them as the "other." Intrinsic to this process is the construction of one's "own" group (HALL 1992; REUTER 2002; SAID 1979; VON UNGER 2022).

2. Migrant Farm Workers in the Industrialized Agriculture of Southern Spain

Since the 1970s, increasingly mechanized and technologized cultivation methods in the south of Spain, an area known as the "vegetable garden of Europe," have made it possible to produce fruit and vegetables at low prices all year round. The crops, destined mainly for northern Europe, are produced in large parts of Andalusia on monoculturally developed latifundia. They include the strawberries that are sometimes available in supermarkets from February onwards. Other regions in southern Spain also focus on "agri-food production" of this kind (PEDREÑO, GADEA & CASTRO, 2014, p.200). In the province of Almería, this type of industrialized agriculture takes on a special form: vegetables are produced in greenhouses for northern European supermarkets on an area of over 30,000 ha (JIMÉNEZ DÍAZ, 2008, p.75). [5]

These greenhouses also produce a large proportion of the organic fruit and vegetables that are supplied to Northern European organic supermarkets (ISLAM, 2011). However, European organic labels for fruit and vegetables do not specify the conditions under which people work on their actual production.[3] Fairtrade labels exist for globally produced foods such as coffee or other products, but still not for fruit and vegetables produced in the EU (FAIRTRADE DEUTSCHLAND, 2009). The certificates issued by and used in supermarkets are mostly linked to locally limited small support projects that do not change or monitor the working conditions in the production processes. [6]

The production is not organized in systematic bilateral recruitment agreements, such as those used for strawberry or asparagus harvesting in Germany (BECKER, 2010), or in individual provinces of Andalusia, for example for the strawberry harvest in Huelva (REIGADA OLAIZOLA, 2013). In the province of Almería, due to the almost year-round production, immigrants living there illegally are mainly used for planting, growing and harvesting (MARTÍNEZ VEIGA, 2001, pp.21f.; TIETJE, 2019a, pp.183ff.). In order to keep production costs as low as possible, the high costs for water and fertilizer are compensated by particularly low wages for workers (TIETJE, 2015, p.118). As a result, the hard work, often lasting many hours, in greenhouses that reach over 50°C in summer, is not popular among people with regular residency statuses and work permits. Because of the poor pay, many of the migrant farm workers live in shanty towns (*chabolas*) between the greenhouses. In many cases, they have neither electricity nor water, let alone a sewage system (JIMÉNEZ DÍAZ, 2008, p.74; MARTÍNEZ VEIGA, 2001, pp.81ff.). For the illegalized migrants, working in the poorly controlled greenhouses is a chance to earn money, but working conditions there are usually informal, creating precarious living conditions. [7]

3 EU Regulation 2018/848, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02018R0848-20220101&from=EN [Accessed: October 19, 2022].

3. Reciprocal Research, Dialogical Work

Research carried out in precarious living conditions or with people living illegalized must be thoroughly reflected upon (KARAKAYALI, 2008, p.266). For the subjects involved in the research the question of what knowledge can be passed on under what conditions may be existential and thus require special attention in terms of research ethics. Research ethics considerations, as Hella VON UNGER (2014a, p.16) demonstrated, relate to the entire research process. Researchers are confronted with ethical dilemmas not only when it comes to writing up and anonymizing interviews, but also at the beginning of a project or even beforehand, during the application process (ROTH & VON UNGER, 2018, §6). Here, I will focus on the data production phase and talk about the aspect of research ethics in relation to reciprocal data production, which have been gaining increasing academic attention in recent years (ROTH, 2005, §2; VON UNGER, DILGER & SCHÖNHUT, 2016, §6). [8]

In scientific research that takes place in the global South or is carried out with subjects from the global South, one significant difficulty is that researchers enter people's everyday lives, leave them again and then undertake academic knowledge production without the subjects of their research. These practices by "Western" academics (people from the global North conducting research in the global South), which are widely taken for granted, involve hierarchizing constructions of the *other* (TIETJE, 2022, p.131). The power imbalance that becomes clear at this point, points to what Walter MIGNOLO calls the "geopolitics of knowledge" (2005, p.111). A far-reaching demand made by feminist and decolonial scholars and activists is to go beyond the research ethics of avoiding harm, in that research should at least offer the marginalized or vulnerable persons and groups involved in it a chance to be heard. Being heard means more than just the interviewers listening: the interviewees' narratives and experiences should also find a place in the research and in the discourses connected with it. In this way, facts could be articulated that otherwise might not be made clear (SPIVAK, 1988). [9]

In this context, the central aspect is how researchers communicate and negotiate their concerns and their role in the research field. In the field of practical research ethics, research perspectives aiming at a reciprocal relationship work towards the ideal of entering into a *dialogue* with the *other*. Horizontal exchange, dialogue and reciprocity become the point of departure for the production of knowledge (BERKIN & KALTMEIER, 2012, p.7). Decolonial knowledge production is not only oriented towards the mere production of theory; it is always also about how that theory links to the respective research field (KASTNER, 2022, p.183; ROTH 2008, §13). The aim is to develop reflective and communicative practices that make it possible for research subjects to "regain their own history and corporeality" (RIVERA CUSICANQUI, 2015, p.28)[4] in postcolonial contexts. For, as Silvia RIVERA CUSICANQUI goes on to write, "decolonialization can only be

4 All translations from Spanish texts are mine.

realized in practice" (ibid.). In the research process, this means being open to learning, and questioning hegemonies. [10]

In view of the centuries-long history of colonial power relations, forms of theory production created from a decolonial perspective have, among other things, the function of denaturalizing the social (KASTNER, 2022, p.191). Moreover, European forms of academic knowledge production are often seen as corresponding to modern/rational and thus legitimate knowledge. Not taking historical and contemporary practice for granted also allows that assumption to be questioned and exposed as an expression of colonial power relations (QUIJANO, 1992, p.14). Gloria ANZALDUA sums up this way in which power relations work and are internalized—what could be called "internal colonialism" (CASANOVA, 1965, p.27)—in two sentences: "Even our own people, other Spanish speakers *nos quieren poner candados en la boca*. They would hold us back with their bag of *reglas de academia*" (ANZALDUA, 1987, p.54).[5] [11]

Reciprocal research is an elementary component of research ethics. Above all, it means engaging in encounters that allow people to look at and talk to one another (BERKIN & KALTMEIER, 2012, p.10). The different preconditions that those involved in the research bring with them must be considered; in the example on which this paper is based, for example, academic training and funding vis-à-vis precarious working conditions of illegalized migrants. The "Fairy Tale of Equality," an idealized view of supposedly equal *others*, can thus be achieved only to a limited extent (GLOKAL E.V., 2020). For research in the field with subjects from or in the global South, this means not only achieving co-presence, but actually being present. In this respect, researchers must also reveal something about themselves, make a serious effort to engage in dialogue, and disclose their own motivations and goals and the reasons for the research (SMITH, 2008 [1999], p.173; for transparency in research ethics see also EßER & SITTER 2018, §11ff.). Reflecting in such a power-sensitive way, without falling into narcissistic self-reflexivity (KALTMEIER, 2012, p.25), works especially well in dialogue with the subjects who are present in the field. That dialogue is not meant to hide the power asymmetries, which continue to exist. Nor is it intended to be about achieving reciprocity between the interviewer and the interviewee during the interview. Nevertheless, interviews are situations of dialogue (CORBIN & MORSE, 2003, p.342), in which researchers must also answer the question "what knowledge will the community gain from this study?" (SMITH, 2008 [1999], p.173) [12]

From a research ethics perspective, the first consequence these reflections have for academic knowledge production in the context of the global South is that researchers must clarify *whose* missions they accept in the field. To resolve that question, it is necessary to reflect in a power-sensitive way on what forms of knowledge production exist in the research field and what power relations are associated with them that might also *re*produce marginalization. On a related note, researchers must make sure to include *othered* knowledge in their

5 In English: Even our own people, other Spanish speakers, want to shut our mouth. They would hold us back with their bag of academic rules.

considerations. Finally, the above reflections also mean that reciprocity should generate added value for all participants in research in the form of "give and take" (HARRISON et al., 2001, p.325). However, the acceptance of missions needs to be prioritized in terms of marginalization and vulnerabilization[6]: who tends to be *othered* through knowledge production and whose voices are potentially less heard? As the subjects' concerns must also be considered, time must be spent understanding those concerns. Under certain circumstances, resources must thus be used that extend beyond forms of academic knowledge production. [13]

4. Missions Assigned in the Research Field

In the ethnographically oriented research, I conducted in the southern Spanish region of Andalusia, I followed migrant farm workers from an actor-oriented perspective. Many of the people with whom I conducted conversations and interviews had migrated to southern Spain from Ecuador, Morocco and Senegal. They were directly or indirectly employed in industrialized agriculture or at least made a living there in some way (TIETJE, 2018, pp.26ff.). [14]

4.1 Questioning forms of hegemonic knowledge production

During many participant observations, conversations and interviews, I gained insights into the working and living conditions of migrant agricultural workers in the province. These contrasted with the knowledge on working conditions in industrialized agriculture produced by for example the liberally oriented trade unions UGT[7] and CCOO[8], or the farm workers' union COAG[9]. In line with this knowledge, the organizing secretary of COAG insisted in an interview that

> "people without papers don't work because they don't have papers. There have been very heavy sanctions on this for a year now. The undocumented workers have no work in this province. That's why we have big problems here, because there are a lot of undocumented people coming because of the high demand for labour" (interview[10] organizing secretary, COAG, Almería, May 21, 2014). [15]

During my field research it became clear that for the whole area only five inspectors are contracted to monitor working conditions after announcing their visit to the respective producer. The many small, mainly family-run farms were run by members of the families owning them for most of the year. Additional labor was then needed especially at the peaks of harvest and sowing. In this way, the producers could keep production costs very low. Regarding illegalized workers in the province, the general secretary of the local UGT went one step further in the

6 Refers to the process of making someone vulnerable as a discursive and by society produced doing.

7 Unión General de Trabajadores, major trade union.

8 CCOO, Comisiones Obreras, workers commissions.

9 Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Agricultores y Ganaderos, trade union of farm workers in Spain.

10 The interviews in my research were conducted mostly in Spanish and I have translated them here for better readability.

interview and stated that "there are currently very few undocumented workers in the region and at the moment we do not know of any company that contracts irregulars; if we come across any, we'll report the incident" (interview general secretary, UGT, Almería, May 26, 2014). [16]

Since part of my research objective was to focus on everyday life in industrialized agriculture and not to *other* the perspectives of migrant farm workers, it was important to hear about their everyday life and work from their point of view. Thus, at the beginning of my field research, I already got to know activists and trade unionists through the local group of the minority trade union SAT[11]. They took me to *acciones sindicales* [trade union actions][12]. The forms of knowledge production held by the migrant agricultural workers stood in contrast to those presented above, which are assumed to be official. The many *chabolas* between the greenhouses mainly house irregular migrant farm workers. They are exposed to the constant contradiction of being urgently needed and at the same time unwanted. A member of the red Cross in Almería spoke of "seven thousand people—the ones we know about, the ones we know" who live in the *chabolas* (interview board member, Red Cross, Almería, May 19, 2014). The day laborers themselves also saw themselves as tolerated in the province mainly because of the labor required in the greenhouses: "Here they see it as the work in the greenhouse is for the immigrants, nothing more" (interview worker A, May 9, 2014). So not only were there a lot of migrant agricultural workers on the ground, but they were also informally employed and worked without the required permit. [17]

4.2 Capturing marginalized forms of knowledge production

Migrant farm workers did not participate in the hegemonic discourses around industrialized agriculture, or participated only to a small extent, and thus could draw attention to their situation publicly. Positions as speakers in the discourses on agriculture in "Europe's vegetable garden" remained primarily with the majority unions and the producers (TIETJE, 2019b, pp.157ff.). In my research, the stories told by migrant farm workers not only made it clear that they lived in large numbers between the greenhouses and worked in them, but also that the conditions in which they did this were extremely poor and dehumanizing. The informal workers found it difficult to assert their right to remuneration in line with the collective agreements:

> "He gave me two hundred euros every month [...] and I asked him: 'Give me a contract so I can get my papers in order.' He said 'Worker B, wait.' He always said that [...]. For three years: 'Wait, wait'" (interview worker B, September 10, 2013). [18]

The *chabolas* in which many of the migrant day laborers lived were made of old pallets, boxes and plastic waste. With the little money they got, they could not

11 Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajador@s, a small trade union organizing precarious workers in Andalusia.

12 *Acciones sindicales* are trade union activities that primarily involve visits to production sites by members of the trade union SAT Almería. These visits are often prompted by reports to the union by workers about their working conditions.

afford to live elsewhere and at the same time, without a residence permit, there was a risk of deportation if they would move around the province too much. The picture painted officially, for example by the large trade unions mentioned above, did not bear much resemblance to what I encountered during ethnographic fieldwork in industrialized rural work. Listening to them and meeting the workers revealed difficult everyday life marked by hard physical work and precarious working and living conditions. Not only did the interviewees tell me about their lives, but they also learned a lot from me. During we worked together in the greenhouses or on trips to the beach, for example, we told each other stories. In that process, I not only got to know individuals better, but it also allowed my interviewees to get to know me better and at the same time made me much more sensitive to the different themes and relevance of their stories.[13] The migrant farm workers in the province were often exploited and held back with promises. The high number of available workers and their insecure status enabled the producers to exploit them without fear of consequences: "It is a very bad life" (interview worker C, September 13, 2013) is how one worker concludes the description of her situation. [19]

4.3 Give and take extending beyond academic knowledge production

The dissatisfaction that resounded in many conversations was a particular incentive for me to go beyond mere academic knowledge production. I saw the notion of understanding reciprocity in research as a give and take as being fulfilled not only by my co-presence: reciprocity extends beyond mere co-presence. However, it was precisely the fact of being there, combined with the forcefulness of the descriptions, that made me listen more closely. In their description of reciprocity, Juliet CORBIN and Janice MORSE went on to say that a

> "frequent reason cited by persons for consenting or requesting to participate in a study is the hope that telling their story will help others. [...] Usually, there is no overt or spoken contract between participant and researcher about what the exchange will be. However, a conscientious researcher will try to discern what it is participants are seeking, then if possible provide that either during the interview or once it's over" (2003, p.342). [20]

Listening attentively during the research allowed me to discern a recurring mission that was related to migrant farm workers' invisibilized positions as spokespersons. This was made particularly clear by a worker interviewed on a farm taken over by squatters. At the end of the working day, we sat there together in the shade and while a friend at times interpreted between Arabic and Spanish, she once again pointed out quite forcefully the connections between her output and the global North:

> "It has to change! We need support from outside, or something. The whole world eats the vegetables from here and the immigrants live badly. They can't even get permanent employment. But we want to have permanent employment. But you know

13 Regarding the implications of friendship in research, see BARTOLINI (2021, pp.99ff.); regarding transparence in the research process, see LESTER and ANDERS (2018, §27).

> now what is happening here. You know now—talk about it!" (interview worker C, September13, 2013) [21]

The worker's direct request to me to pass on the knowledge that I had acquired about the conditions of work and the agricultural workers' associated living circumstances made a lasting impression on me. I took the request as a mission and began to look for opportunities to reveal the conditions under which the vegetables, which are largely sold in the supermarkets of the global North and especially Northern Europe, are produced. Starting with newspaper articles (e.g., HUKE & TIETJE, 2014; TIETJE, 2014; TIETJE & ZÖRNER, 2013) that succeeded in reaching readers beyond the realm of university knowledge production, I participated in several events in Germany that drew attention to manufacturing conditions in southern Spain (e.g., INTERBRIGADAS E.V., 2014), advised a Berlin NGO in its support initiatives in Andalusia and organized a series of events in several cities together with activists, journalists and colleagues. Here, it was especially important to us that people involved in Almerian rural work could tell their stories themselves (VERANSTUNGSKOLLEKTIV, 2016). The focus was on the possibility of making the conditions of the vegetables' production and the voices and stories of those who produce them visible to those who primarily consume them. The way to do this was to adopt the knowledge produced by the migrant farm workers—it was not just a matter of reproducing and confirming the official framing by the majority trade unions, for example. In this way, it became clear how important it is to them that their situation is also made known where their products are consumed, in the hope that in this way something will change for them or those who succeed them. [22]

Accepting this mission was my way of giving something back—in this case not to specific individuals, but by helping offer migrant workers working in industrialized agriculture a small platform to raise their issues in the global North. Wolff-Michael ROTH described disseminating insights from research in different ways as a "form in which ethnographic work is returned to the other" (2008, §17). The importance of such information became particularly clear in the context of campaigns to force the reinstatement of workers. Only international pressure by consumers on the companies in question achieved limited, temporary progress in this context (PACHECO, 2012, 2015). In this respect, the events offered migrant farm workers an opportunity to tell their stories and report on the situation in industrialized farm labor. Sensitizing consumers in the global North to the conditions of supermarket fruit and vegetables' production also made it possible in some cases to exert a certain pressure on producers. Although the general impact of such events on production conditions is limited, it is an important opportunity to be heard. [23]

These contributions also involved my intervening in the research field and implied my participation in the political practices of migrant farm workers while doing fieldwork. At the same time, a much more intensive dialogue developed in which I was no longer addressed only as a researcher from Germany, but also as an ally. For my academic work, it became all the more important for me to advance my research through many stays of varying lengths and always to maintain a

reflective distance from the field. Scientists always make political decisions, whether consciously or unconsciously. Who they talk to about what in the research field and who not; how they conduct research and who they ultimately give authority over knowledge production (researchers or research participants)[14] are decisions that have an impact on more than just science policy: "Failure to make this distinction might result in disgruntled postpositivists who have used qualitative methods but are still trying to fit these methods into a Procrustean bed of objectivist standards of reliability and validity" (HARRISON et al., 2001, p.324). [24]

5. Conclusion: Reciprocity in Research Ethics

The brief introduction to the situation of industrialized agriculture at the beginning already showed that it is not enough to take up hegemonic forms of knowledge production for a reflexive, critical examination of the production of fruit and vegetables in southern Europe. The power relations between the global North and South make it necessary to focus on invisibilized knowledge production and speakers. It is precisely such power relations, as I have outlined, that pose particular challenges to academics from the perspective of research ethics. Giving greater weight to decolonial aspirations in academic knowledge production means striving for reciprocity in research itself and, if necessary, also raising resources outside the university. [25]

What the researchers give back depends, of course, on them and must be appropriate to each situation (CORBIN & MORSE, 2003, p.349). It is important to consider exactly with whom reciprocal conditions are negotiated within a research field. Decolonial research also means intervening in hegemonic relations. Engaging in self-reflection and thus moving towards reciprocity may also lead to resource-intensive engagement that goes beyond academic routines at the university. Perhaps this is a little "less comfortable" (HARRISON et al., 2001, p.325) than other actions in the research field, but there is nevertheless something to be said for such an approach. [26]

By this means, researchers can thus realistically come close to fulfilling the decolonial demand—implicit in research ethics—for give and take in studies with subjects from the global South. The prerequisite for this is for them not only to gather knowledge in their research, but also to act in a manner that is sensitive towards power relations. Not *othering* forms of knowledge production in the process and remaining open to new things also directly link in with the reflective requirements of ethnographic social research. Whether or not a researcher incorporates research ethics reciprocity in their own research depends partly on the basic conditions found in that specific field, and should be explored anew in every case. This also includes deciding which mission they should accept from whom in that field, and how that mission can be undertaken. Thinking about this together with the research participants is, however, also an opportunity for researchers to learn a lot of new things. [27]

14 One opportunity for dealing with this opposition is participatory research (VON UNGER, 2014b).

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