

From Activists to Terrorists: The Politics and Ethics of Research Representations of Transnational Resistance

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Abstract

This paper reflects critically on our ethical responsibilities as social work researchers who report on transnational resistance movements in the age of terrorism. Through my own research on the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests in Canada, I problematize why and how research representations of racialized activists and activism come to be profoundly political. I reflect on how a research project is framed, how the researcher and participants are involved, how attention is paid to ethical issues, and the extent of critical reflexivity around how movements are represented. Recognizing that all activism is socially constructed and that research labels inform social identities and social practices, I also examine contested categories of resistance to unpack how they inform or challenge dominant constructions of migrants, their activism, and their struggles in relation to Canada's own context of separatism, sovereignty, and colonization. Rather than employ any one term to refer to a singular narrative of transnational resistance in our research, I argue that we foreground the power structures and global relations that fundamentally mark colonized identities and their activism across spaces and movements. I draw upon Indigenous, critical, and anti-oppressive research approaches to centre the transgressive potential of decolonial representation and resistance.

Keywords: representation, diaspora, activism, social movements, terrorism

In Canada, the figure of the migrant activist engaged in diasporic politics provokes angst, if not outright hostility. Despite the constitutional guarantees for the protection of citizens' rights, and the promise of multiculturalism encouraging migrants to engage in transnational social practices (Fleras & Elliot, 2002; Satzewich & Wong, 2006), diasporas' transnational activism is often viewed as challenging forms of citizenship and political participation that are bounded by the nation-state. As Thobani (2007) put it, the fabric of the nation is threatened by "outsiders [who] have routinely been depicted as making unreasonable claims upon the nation" (p. 4), when their distinctive racialized experiences come to be known as the inadequacies of their communities, their culture, or their race. Their conflicts are constructed as a marker for Third World savagery imported into an otherwise progressive nation.

In the era of the global "war on terror," the Canadian nation-state mobilizes civilizational values through national security—"the crazed non-Christian savage of an earlier era of western expansion has been made to re-enter the global stage with a vengeance" (Thobani, 2007, p. 27). In this process, the discourse of terrorism exalts

the nation as “Western” and racializes the threat of fanatical, barbaric, non-Western, terrorist others. The very threat of their presence has transformed the meaning of Canadian nationality, while simultaneously increasing restrictions on immigration, citizenship, and civil liberties. Scholars demonstrate how “anti-terrorism” measures have evolved into the institutionalized suspicion, criminalization, and racialization of “Muslims” and “immigrants”—brown and black bodies who “look” like they might constitute part of this danger (Bahdi, 2003; Ismael & Measor, 2003; Razack, 2007; Thobani, 2007). Now, “racialization renders the distinction between citizen and immigrant all but meaningless in the eyes of nationals, who in the post-9/11 era imagine themselves to be terrorized” (Thobani, 2007, p. 246). The age of terror presents significant challenges to resistance movements in the West when bodies representing the racialized figure of the “terrorist” are further targeted for surveillance, discipline, and deportation. The very nature of activism is reconstructed when evidence of oppositional consciousness in “threatening” communities is discursively complicated through transnationalism, ongoing colonial logics, and structures shaping the global order. The 2009 Tamil diaspora protests in Canada provide one such case.

Through this paper, I reflect on a study of the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests to unpack my own practices of representation as I researched this movement within this Canadian context. Drawing upon a framework of citizenship, racialization, and spatiality to problematize conditions of resistance, this study developed an understanding of what activism comes to be for migrant communities who experience social injustices across local, national, and transnational scales. It included a review of 153 newspaper stories published on the protests in “mainstream” news sources in Canada between 1 January 2009 and 31 December 2011, and 8 interviews with journalists, activists, and community members who provided context and “spoke back” to media representations.

As a researcher, representing resistance has discursive and material consequences: I position my research representation of the Tamil diaspora’s activism as a “double-sided” political event (Agamben, 1988) that locates and historicizes activism as a site of agency but also inscribes and re-inscribes social demarcations within state order. As the representation of activism includes the discourse of resistance, it tacitly enforces disciplinary and regulatory practices granted through sovereign power in the age of terrorism. For these reasons, I face deeply ethical and political questions about my research process and the representations I construct: What were the political ideologies underlying contested discourses of the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests within the contested space of Canada? How can we, as social work researchers, ethically research and represent the resistance movements of others? How the research project is framed, how the researcher and participants are involved, how attention is paid to ethical issues, and the extent of critical reflexivity around how movements are represented, all require consideration. In negotiating these questions, I present my own preference for working within a critical tradition, and for performing social work research that aims to be anti-racist, anti-oppressive, decolonial, and transformative.

Recognizing research as a political enterprise that also has the possibility of revolutionary resistance, I begin this exploration from a space that Smith (2004) encouraged us to—a space that attempts to disrupt homogenous constructions as universal, linear, totalizing, innocent, or depoliticized, and to challenge epistemologies constructed through “imperial eyes.” In this paper, I consider the ethical issues framing my research on a social movement in the age of terror, and problematize why and how research representations and self-representations of racialized activists and activism come to be profoundly political. I draw upon the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests to illustrate the different political ideologies that frame the logics of activism in the Canadian nation-state, and grapple with the ways that they inform or challenge dominant constructions of migrants, their activism, and their struggles in relation to Canada’s own history of separatism, sovereignty, and colonization. Rather than employ any one term to refer to a singular narrative of transnational resistance, I argue that we foreground the power structures and global relations that fundamentally mark colonized identities and their activism across spaces and movements. Through this lens, I position the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests in Canada as a historic and ongoing decolonial struggle, unfolding within a nation of many symbolic, discursive, and material occupations. I maintain that we cannot meaningfully examine resistance against colonization across borders without first centring Canada’s own colonization of Indigenous people and land. I conclude by drawing upon Indigenous, critical, and anti-oppressive research approaches to emphasize the transgressive potential of decolonial representation and resistance.

The 2009 Tamil Diaspora Movement in Canada

In 2009, thousands of Canadian Tamils and their allies—up to 45,000 protesters based on news accounts (Taylor, 2009)—joined a global mobilization of the Tamil diaspora to demonstrate against the escalating violence by the Sri Lankan government against the Tamil minority in northern Sri Lanka. It was a critical year for the Tamil diaspora who had once fled Sri Lanka in response to decades of violence. For many in my community, this period highlighted not only the journeys of individuals and their families, but also the collective struggle of a people against an oppressive, colonial state; it marked the culmination of a 26-year armed conflict between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who fought to create an independent Tamil state in the north and east of the island (Wilson, 2000)—a struggle whose roots are deeply embedded within the violence of colonization. Like many other countries around the world, Sri Lanka has endured long periods of colonization by the Portuguese (1505–1658), Dutch (1658–1796), and British (1796–1948) before gaining independence from Britain on February 4, 1948 (Wilson, 2000). Since its independence, this religiously, linguistically, and ethnically diverse country has struggled with political and social grievances as the Sinhalese-dominated state legislation enacted following independence has largely been discriminatory against the Tamil minority group. Unequal access to education and public service employment, state-implemented settler programs for Sinhalese farmers in Tamil-populated areas, and discriminatory language policies and practices all affected the citizenship, employment, education, and mobility of Tamils (Stokke & Rynqvist, 2000). Consequently, the Tamil minority

faced frequent outbursts of communal violence and systemic barriers in establishing equal civil rights and an independent homeland in northern Sri Lanka. Rising political and social tensions led to riots in 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983, which scholars attribute to the formation of a strong national identity and groups advocating a separate nation-state for Tamils (Tambiah, 1986; Wilson, 2000).

Since 1983, the conflict has caused over 80,000 deaths (“Sri Lanka military,” 2008), with over 146,000 people unaccounted for (“Mannar Bishop questioned,” 2012). It also displaced over 130,000 Tamil people in 2009 alone (Amnesty International, 2009). An estimated 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed during this final phase of the Sri Lankan army’s offensive against the LTTE (Darusman, Ratner, & Sooka, 2011), with estimates of up to 1,000 people killed each day during the last two weeks of the conflict (Chamberlain, 2009). Overlapping discourses framed the goals of the protests in Canada: Protesters aimed to persuade politicians to intervene in the 26-year conflict and establish a ceasefire; they appealed to humanitarian aid organizations to provide resources and investigate internment camps in affected areas of the country; and they called for a restoration of civil rights to the Tamil population in Sri Lanka (Duffy & Blanchfield, 2009; Javed, 2009). Through this movement, Canadian Tamils’ involvement in the politics of their homeland suggested a sense of belonging within and beyond Canadian borders that challenged dominant conceptualizations of citizenship. Despite the escalating violence in Sri Lanka’s North, growing death tolls, and accounts of mounting atrocities, Canadian media discourses delegitimized the 2009 Tamil diaspora protest(er)s as “others,” “outlaws,” and “outsiders” who threatened (symbolic) national space (Jeyapal, 2013). Their activism was criminalized and stigmatized. As Toronto Police Service’s Chief Bill Blair reported to the *Toronto Star* a year after the protests, “I had people calling me and insisting we should drive them and beat them off the street. Somebody suggested we push them off the street with snow plows, that we shoot them in the knees” (Stancu, 2010). These media reports and public responses to the protests exacerbated the immeasurable loss and suffering of a community who did not belong. This movement exemplified what social activism comes to be for migrant communities who experience social injustices and inequalities on dual scales: connecting them transnationally to the struggles and violence of decolonization in the East and, simultaneously, to the criminalization and marginalization they experience in their hostlands in the West (Jeyapal, 2014).

Ethical Considerations for Researching Resistance

I knew that there were limits to what I could ask—and then what I could say.

Audra Simpson (2007, p. 73)

As researchers, we face profoundly ethical considerations in our studies of resistance. In an age in which dissent by others is criminalized, research on activism can be a powerful tool to challenge oppressive structures, but it can also evoke surveillance, control, and punishment. Scholars have pointed to the moral and ethical dilemmas of representing issues in research that may lead to their participants’ prosecution or deportation (Birman, 2005; Blee & Vining, 2010). Participants who

are undocumented; who are relatively powerless by virtue of their social class, race, or situation; or who engage in covert or illegal activities can face a high risk of repression through their involvement in research. Similarly, activists engaged in “controversial” or contested social movements face similar risks—particularly when their bodies are already constructed as threatening. While we can adhere to ethics protocols to minimize risk, as researchers, we must also ask whether it is ethically just for these participants and their stories to be included in our research.

Researching others also requires recognizing that research itself, from the position of the other, is intimately linked to imperialism (Smith, 2004). As Smith (2004) argued,

Research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized. It is regulated through the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and scientific paradigms, and the institutions that support them (including the state). It is realized in the myriad of representations and ideological constructions of the Other in scholarly and ‘popular’ work, and in the principles which help to select and recontextualize those constructions in such things as the media, official histories and school curriculum. (p. 1)

The knowledge production of research is a political tool of imperialism. Performing research in the age of terrorism on a movement that is othered, by a community that is marginalized, requires deep engagement with the choices and responsibilities of representation.

In my work, I recognize the precarious position of my participants and the contentious nature of the movement itself. As the most critical questions researchers should ask are whether the research is relevant to the community, and whether it will benefit the community rather than cause further harm (Adamson & Donovan, 2002; Benatar & Singer, 2000; Leaning, 2001; Smith, 2005), I made choices based on the risks that research participants might face, balanced with the importance of documenting the narratives of those who are otherwise ignored, to consider what I could report and what I should leave unsaid. I was aware that there were areas I should not document—areas that might exacerbate the risk my participants face or further stereotype their criminalization. Through the research process, in addition to adhering to institutional ethics protocols of consent and withdrawal, I also made space for challenge and refusal. For instance, during the recruitment phase for my project, two participants refused to participate without first engaging me in an interview to determine whether my preliminary analysis of the media and my own politics made it “safe.” Respecting these politics of refusal were critical; I believe that sharing my own positionality was a necessary stage of earning peoples’ collaboration, as well as openness, through the research process. To extend these politics, I also provided the opportunity for participants to guide the interviews with their own narratives, questions, and concerns. This approach helped challenge the regulatory position of research and problematize the ideological construction of the other we could co-create; more pragmatically, it enhanced the richness of the knowledge that was created.

As Mahrouse (2010) urged us to consider about social justice interventions, attempting to “do good” is not enough because benevolence consistently legitimizes racialized systems of power. Instead, we must directly and critically question our own complicities and reasons for doing this work, and challenge the constitution of our research and ourselves as Western, benevolent, liberal subjects. For most of us, including myself, this requires being honest about writing with a subjectivity formed by sympathy to social movements. I centred my research in support of the 2009 protests. I also consciously engaged in this work as a project shaped by a commitment to emancipatory goals—to produce work that is transformative and disruptive, and to provoke conversations about the messy spaces between identities, politics, and social research for, within, and on social activism. These reflections require ideological considerations because at the root of this challenge lie difficult questions: What do our research representations construct, and who benefits?

Problematizing Representation and Refusal

Ethically considering the representations we construct in our research is critical, as representation is essential to how meaning is produced and exchanged through the use of language, signs, or images between members of a culture (i.e., those who have access to a shared conceptual map) and allows the world to be classified and organized into meaningful categories (Hall, 1997). Representation is at the centre of how we understand the construction of social movements (Hetherington, 1998; McDonald, 2006; Tilly, 1997), and social movements are themselves constituted through representation. Belonging and empathy are “represented and reinforced through markers and symbols, buttons, pieces of clothing, flags, placards and so on, infused with symbolic value. These represent ‘us’ to participants, as well as marking off this group for and against ‘others’” (Eyerman, 2002, p. 8). Through this symbolic function, representation creates a category of sameness for people and their activism: It simultaneously “fixes” people and their politics.

While representation provides the sense that some labels are better or closer approximations of reality than others (Pitkin, 1967), “what such representations in fact offer are varying illusions of reality” (Gidley, 1992, p. 1). Nevertheless, representations constitute “reality” for the cultures that produce and consume them. As Said (1979) reminded us, representations of the other always represent the dominant group’s assumptions. Therefore, scrutinizing representations for accuracy is far less meaningful than examining how a representation is constructed and reconstructed, how it comes to appear coherent (even when incomplete), objective (even if sympathetic), and, above all, authoritative. This requires us to shift our responsibility from accurately representing things in themselves to representing the web of “structure, sign and play” of social relations (Derrida, 1978). Rejecting positivist definitions of “objectivity” or that one “neutral,” singular “truth” awaits discovery, postmodernists recognize the socially constructed nature of representations where competing interpretations of reality are inevitable. Therefore the researcher’s goal is “not to discover the ‘true’ interpretation, for none exists; instead the challenge is to uncover the multiple voices at work in society that have been silenced” (Tierney, 1994, p. 99). Every phase of the research process involves

representation: The research question that frames the study, the questions we ask our participants, and the information that we share about them and ourselves in relation to the topic is a representation.

While some scholars have argued that “the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of ... hierarchies” (Alcoff, 1995, p. 116), others have insisted that the issue of representation is nuanced. The choice and responsibility of representation is more complicated than that because representing others can be oppressive while simultaneously enabling political agency. Shome and Hegde’s (2002) key concerns are a constant reminder: “Who can speak? Who can represent? Do we position the colonized as incapable of speech? On the other hand, do we romanticize the speech of the colonized as resistant and thereby deflect the violence of the colonial encounter?” (p. 266). Offering spaces for minoritized voices rather than deconstructing the political, social, and cultural context is also problematic (Sawhney, 1995; Spivak, 1990). As Spivak (1990) explained:

It is a not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, [because] this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem. On the other hand, we cannot put it under the carpet with demands for authentic voices; we have to remind ourselves that, as we do this, we might be compounding the problem even as we are trying to solve it. (p. 63)

This issue of representation and self-representation through research in the West is compounded when researchers are “insiders” to the group they represent. My emic standpoint is situated, informed, and subjective, in contrast to an etic position that is objective, logical, and distant from one’s project (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990). In my own life, this movement and this project initiated an interrogation of my own identity and activism, as an individual and a member of the Tamil community, but also as a social worker and an academic in a white settler society. Yet, I was cautious about what my personal research narrative came to represent.

As Tuck and Yang (2014) wrote in “Refusing research,” settler colonial knowledge is premised on the entitlement of conquest; refusals in research are attempts to place limits on this colonization of knowledge and transgress this entitlement. Their critiques demonstrate how research and the racialized researcher are constituted by the production and representation of the subaltern subject. Importantly, this representation of the subject who has “partially escaped the silence of subalternity” (Morris, 2010, p. 8) through research is constructed through a story of pain (Tuck & Yang, 2014); i.e., when we are asked to speak, we are asked to speak of our pain. For this reason, I engaged with pain with caution through my study, whether I reflected on my own pain or the pain of the Tamil diaspora. Despite academic pressures to narrate my personal journey ethnographically, I drew limits to the representation of reflexivity of my “insider” status, and what I chose to share in the presentation of my research. While I shared issues of my positionality that are relevant to the research process, I chose not to engage the identity politics that have come to be expected from othered academics.

This decision was deeply personal and political, as it was fraught with difficulties and dangers. On a personal level, my own story in relation to this conflict and this movement is complex. However, as a researcher this was also a political choice: I chose to extend the logic of refusal I ensured my participants. I intended to use my own omission to draw attention to the academic practice of insisting that racialized scholars, as native informants, share their own experiences of pain. As I position myself and my work through critical race theory, it was important for me to do my research as a critique of white settler society rather than to focus on the subjugated experiences of a marginalized community or of myself. By turning the spotlight on oppression, I shifted the gaze on the other to the social problem and prejudice toward the resistance movements of others. I placed limits on how I framed this topic by situating this movement and the people I spoke to within a shifting historical context of the present. I do not re-tell the stories of violence that dominate mainstream discourse in the age of terrorism to further criminalize those on the margins. When I explore the subject of protest as pain as I do in my work, I do so only strategically to highlight how it is constructed through racial logic and comes to be commodified.

In her research with members of her nation, Kahnawà:ke scholar Simpson (2007, p. 78) asked the following questions that inspired how I imagined, designed, and pursued my own study: “Can I do this and still come home; what am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why?” Echoing Tuck and Yang’s (2014) urging, these questions encouraged me to grapple with “strategies of producing legitimated knowledge based on the colonization of knowledge” (p. 234). As social location and the production of knowledge are inextricably interconnected, I ensured that myself as “researcher” and my participants as “researched”, refused to actualize “the ethnographic want for a speaking subaltern” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 239). This is a refusal to engage the logic of imperialism in the age of terrorism, and the logic of normative social work research on racialized communities. Yet, as Simpson (2007) and Tuck and Yang (2014) emphasized, these refusals are theoretically generative: Refusal provides a redirection to questions previously unasked. Refusal creates the conditions for other r-words in research—for resistance, reclaiming, recovery, reciprocity, repatriation, regeneration (Tuck & Yang, 2014). I posit that refusal also makes way for ethical representation, i.e., representation that is critical, decolonial, and embodies the values of emancipatory social work research. This epistemological and ontological stance informed the politics of my research.

The Politics of Representations of Resistance

The core challenge I faced in my study was how to represent the activism itself. Through my research, I found that the movement was constructed through differing and sometimes contradictory narratives tangled across racial histories, imperial politics, and colonial geographies. Depending on the source of the media or the person, the discursive politics framing the Tamil community’s transnational activism were narrated through four recurring frames: a protest against an unfolding genocide, a separatist movement, a long-lasting ethnic conflict, or, predominantly, a terrorist

movement. Research representations matter because they are a concrete outcome of discourse practice that is interpretative, subjective, and constitutive. Each representation of activism evokes a different narrative of resistance, embedded within different stories of ongoing struggle; and each functions to legitimize and/or delegitimize activists' voices in different ways. Importantly, each category of representation erases others that also tell an important story about the political framing of the conflict and the production of discourse itself. This is particularly powerful in a controversial conflict like the one in Sri Lanka. As Sharif (2002) pointed out, the "two sides [were] fighting vastly different 'wars,' based on vastly different views of reality" (p. 18). Official Sri Lankan government discourses framed the conflict as one against a group of terrorists attempting to destroy the government, while the LTTE represented themselves as leading a national liberation movement against a Sinhalese government bent on exterminating the entire Tamil minority. The portrayal of political contexts in research can problematize these diverse interpretations that then influence the public consciousness, political constructions, social behaviours, and self-conceptions of people who are exposed to and react to them. There is a fundamental difference in creating research that constructs a community as freedom fighters, activists, victims, or terrorists. Each representation requires critical ethical and political considerations in the age of terrorism.

Through my study, I began to unpack the different political ideologies that frame the logics of activism in the Canadian nation-state by grappling with the ways that they inform or challenge dominant constructions of migrants, their activism, and their struggles in relation to Canada's own. I reflected on discourses of the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests by juxtaposing the "threat of terrorism," Quebec's movement for separatism, the Tamil diaspora's struggle for an autonomous state in Sri Lanka, and the ongoing colonization of Canada's Indigenous peoples, in order to disrupt the geopolitical and temporal boundaries of anti-colonial struggles between the East and the West. Despite shifting narratives across time and space, I assert that these discursive representations are accompanied by material conditions of power, sovereignty, displacement, and colonialism.

I draw upon the political ideologies underlying tropes of activism (Jeyapal, 2014)—dominant discourses that frame the movement as either a terrorist movement, a separatist movement, an ethnic conflict, or a movement against genocide—to unpack the politics of research representation and knowledge production within a context of Western discourses about racialized others:¹

(1) The terrorist movement. While this construction of the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests was aided by the Conservative government's controversial 2006 decision to ban the LTTE as a terrorist group, media sources unabashedly estimated that 99.9% of the Canadian Tamil population were LTTE-supporters (Reinhart, 2009), and dominant discourses painted the entire community as terrorists. Conflating all protesters as "terrorists" or "terrorist supporters" erased the heterogeneity existing

¹ For a more thorough exploration of the political ideologies underlying each representation of activism, please see (Jeyapal, 2014)

within this community and discursively framed the politics of the movement to emphasize the indiscriminate violence and threat of “terrorist” groups in the age of terrorism (Jeyapal, 2013). It is fundamentally at odds with the values of social work. Rejecting the oppressive labels that mark others—labels of “terrorist” or “terrorist sympathizer”—is a critical and fundamental part of my project. By troubling the connections between how this construction of the terrorist outlaw is created and who is entitled to create it in the age of terrorism, I can explicitly challenge relations of power and reject the ever-growing industrial complex of criminalization and securitization. However, the issue of research representation becomes more complicated when contending with representations that community members themselves may grant their movements.

(2) The separatist movement. Since 1983, the LTTE has deployed a militant agenda in an effort to create an independent homeland for Tamils—one that would usurp the Sri Lankan homogenous state and the supremacy of the Sinhalese majority culture. In Canada, the discourse of the 2009 Tamil diaspora movement as a separatist movement emerged as an extension of the discourse of terrorism because it continued to frame the population as the aggressor. The representation of a “separatist” struggle uncomfortably echoes Canada’s own historical relationship with Quebec, which has been attempting to secede from Canada in varying degrees since the 1960s. However, here, the narrative of Quebec’s separatism is erased from the discussion of separatism globally (Jeyapal, 2014). The dominant representation of separatism also tends to be disconnected from any acknowledgement of Indigenous groups’ claims to recognition or sovereignty. This absence creates the illusion that conflicts of this kind are exclusive to other nations unlike our own.

(3) The ethnic conflict. In the West, the representation of the ubiquitous “ethnic conflict” triggers images of migrants’ ancient wars (Thobani, 2007). It positions activism as “not about Toronto’s Tamils ... [but] about the people of Sri Lanka, Tamil and Sinhalese, who have been killing each other for a generation, and hating each other for generations before that” (Cohn, 2009). The undertone of inevitability racializes the conflict and the protesters as primordial. While ethnic conflict is still popularly used to frame the Sri Lankan struggle, recent work has argued for a more nuanced understanding of relations between Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Theorists urge us to consider economic issues and global pressures that shift the focus of the conflict from a domestic problem toward an international context; this includes an understanding of South Asian geopolitics, concerns of the Tamil diaspora, international non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and other actors in the international context, who are all influential and contribute to the construction of the conflict (Bandarage, 2009). In exploring dominant discourses on ethnic conflict, Sadowski (1998) attempted to uncover common (mis)understandings of them. He suggested that despite popular belief, most ethnic conflicts are not rooted in ancient tribal or religious rivalries but are largely products of the 20th century. He claimed that despite their depiction, ethnic conflicts are no more “savage” or genocidal than conventional wars, and there is no consistent difference between ethnic or non-ethnic wars in terms of their lethality. This may represent a larger social and political bias or generalized desensitization whereby

racialized violence through ethnic conflict is considered *less than*; ultimately, unless an audience is receptive to the depiction of a condition as a relevant issue, interest groups are unable to address and challenge it.

(4) The genocide. While the sustained military offensive against Tamil civilians in the northeast of the country undoubtedly justifies this term, the category of “genocide” is complicated on the global scale. On the one hand, the discourse of genocide used to frame the 2009 crisis may have appealed to Canadian human rights constructs that commonly conceptualize human rights as granted to all people by virtue of being human, but this process also requires legal sanctions. Genocide challenges the universality of human rights and conventional understandings of human rights as normative setbacks on sovereignty (Agamben, 1988; Brown, 2004; Daly, 2004; Douzinas, 2007). Agamben (1988) argued instead that these “rights”—which the label *genocide* is part of—simultaneously reinforce the sovereign powers that produce “bare lives”—lives that are produced as a result of sovereign decisions regarding what is human—lives that are irredeemably constructed as unworthy or non-human and thereby continually exposed to violence. Prevalent in conflicts worldwide, the genocide label is always contested and often denied—possibly because naming any conflict “genocide” requires a specific response by the international community. Given this complexity, the representation of genocide is a highly political tool that does not necessarily interrupt an international community’s ambivalence.

Labelling activism against ethnic conflict, genocide, and separatism is justified, and stems from specific historical narratives that address the oppression of a people and the struggles of a diaspora. Each discourse embodies spectral figures of otherness that haunt and authorize the sovereignty of the Canadian nation-state. As a researcher, I decided that the most meaningful position may be to reflexively interrogate the formation of representation to combat the logics that marginalize migrant activism in Canada. In recognizing the historical contingency in the meanings and representations of activism, I want to foreground what I see as the fundamental political and ethical danger of an unproblematized reliance upon categorical approaches to resistance. This danger relates to representations that reify categories of activism as “true” entities that can inform appropriate social practices and identities, instead of approaching these categories as socially constructed labels that are dynamic and in the process of being and becoming. “Fixing” singular categories of resistance places limitations upon analysis and reproduces wider forms of stereotyping and essentializing a struggle. As researchers representing resistance, we must recognize that there are dissenting voices within all categories and groups of activists. When it comes to activism, like all other forms of social phenomena, we must problematize the assumption that “we” all agree upon what we resist and why we organize. Researchers must reject the idea that we might be in fundamental agreement about the content of the “political interventions” our communities engage in, or about the politics our own research should enact. While all representations are shaped by ideology, regardless of the label framing its activism, we cannot lose sight of the issue: Extreme violence means extreme suffering.

Representing the Sri Lankan Conflict as a Decolonial Struggle

Language is also a place of struggle. We are wedded in language, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination—a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you? Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.

(hooks, 1990, p. 146)

As Gladney (1998) reminded us, “majorities are made, not born” (p. 1). With this in mind, I initiate a critique of representation

which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings. (Smith, 2004, p. 56)

For the Tamil struggle, this requires returning to the underlying root of the oppression and to the need for separatism, which are not about an ancient conflict but are about undoing the destruction of colonialism (Bandarage, 2009; Spencer, 1990; Wilson, 2000). In Sri Lanka—similar to other nations who have experienced and are experiencing civil conflicts around the world—British colonial policy established the ethno-religious differences and competition between groups through language, economic, and employment policies that survived and exacerbated differential experiences and powers between the Tamil and Sinhalese populations. Arguably, after struggles for independence, colonialism can and does persist as forms of “internal colonization,” whereby dominant groups continue to enact similar forms of administrative, political, and material power over minority groups (McClintock, 1994). Oppressive Sri Lankan state politics continue to limit the parameters and representations of resistance through practices and distinctions implemented by colonialism.

In our research representations, it is paramount that we position our politics of resisting these colonial realities with an understanding of complex and competing interconnections across seemingly distant colonial projects (Lowe, 2006; Povinelli, 2002). For the Tamil diaspora, multiple forces and structures of colonialism continue across geographies. A community that faces persecution in Sri Lanka continues to be repressed in the West for its racial, ethnic, and social markers, as well as through the construction of “terrorists” or “terrorist sympathizers” during the age of this threat. The majority politics erasing the liberation struggle of Tamil people in Sri Lanka bind similar systems of media and knowledge production to marginalize the diaspora’s voices in the West (Jeyapal, 2014). These “spectral figures of indigeneity,” to use Mawani’s (2012) phrase, continue to evolve, be appropriated, and deployed to further the effects of colonialism. As she reasoned, it is critical to “question and unsettle the presumed linearity of colonial time implicit in the configuration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjectivities and in colonial legal

histiographies that depict encounters among Indigenous peoples, Europeans, and non-European migrants in successive spatiotemporal terms” (p. 373). Therefore, following the work of anti-colonial and Indigenous theorists who have demonstrated how colonialism is not simply a historical relationship but a continued process of domination and oppression (Barker, 2009; Razack, 2002), I claim, as Lewis (2012) has done, that we “as academics and activists committed to social justice, need to incorporate and further develop an anti-colonial analysis to expand our ethical research considerations” (p. 227). We need to employ this anti-colonial ethic to research processes and research representations of resistance by diaspora communities as they produce unique cultures that both maintain and build on the perceptions of their original cultures and their unique decolonial struggles (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998). In representations of these communities and their movements, it is crucial to recognize the imperial forces that historically led to people’s displacement, but also the continued subjugation they and their movements face in white settler society that discursively erases regimes of violence and revolution rooted in the legacy of colonialism.

By choosing to represent the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests as a decolonial struggle in my research, I account for colonial inheritances of otherness. Yet, following hooks (1990), I recognize this discourse as a site of struggle. Producing this research representation in the West requires negotiations and reflections of the colonial, nationalist, racist context within which my research was constructed, as colonial, national, and racial standpoints are not homogenous or fixed. The instability of these social constructs also required reflexivity, analytical awareness, and an ethical consciousness to fully appreciate the social relations of power that form complex matrices of domination and subjugation in this age of terrorism. This reality urged me to pay attention to the ways in which the knowledge I produced will be represented, challenged, and contested in different spaces. Paradoxically, it also propelled me to consider the potential of recovery and resistance offered through decolonial research representations of others (including ourselves as other) and the activism of those on the margins.

Locating Research Representation as Decolonial Resistance

Indigenous, critical, and anti-oppressive approaches centre the transgressive possibilities of research to establish a position of resistance (Brown & Strega, 2005; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Ristock & Pennel, 1996; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). I refrain from granting one research methodology the status of “truth,” but call upon researchers across frameworks to position their representations of resistance within the wider emancipatory project of decolonization. While this position brings new challenges in white settler society, representing resistance through an engagement with anti-colonial representation also takes us to a new place, a different “beginning.” In my work, I believe producing the representation of the Tamil protests as a transnational decolonial movement connects it across time and space to other movements grounded in localized communities and in subjugated knowledges that also resist residues of colonialism. These discursive tactics allow us to make visible and speakable the normalization of colonization in the contested settler state.

For Indigenous peoples across borders, these discourses are never separate from the loss of lives and the theft of land and resources. These considerations are not meant as a solution but as a point of departure—uncovering the tense interdependences, entanglements, and ruptures between representations of resistance may allow us to more fully valorize resistant thinking and resistant action. Mignolo (2011) suggested that rethinking independence movements

means to think of them as moments of de-linking and opening within the processes of de-colonizing knowledge and being; moments that were veiled by the interpretive mechanism of the rhetoric of modernity, the concealment of coloniality and, in consequence, the invisibilization of the seed of de-colonial thinking. In other words, decolonizing independence movements were interpreted within the same “revolutionary” logic of modernity. (p. 52)

Decolonial thinking requires not only an epistemological delinking, but also a political delinking from imperial knowledge and disciplinary management (Mignolo, 2009). It encourages us to trace decolonial practices that have challenged Western power—it allows us to enlarge the scope of the conversation and shift enduring epistemological and political implications by decoding subaltern knowledge and struggles as a necessary process for us to recognize our present moment despite the totalizing (and criminalizing) narratives of the West. Situating a transnational protest movement as a decolonial movement shifts the terms of the conversation.

This discussion must be centred within the reality that Canada is engaged in the continuing colonization of its own Indigenous peoples (Barker, 2009; Razack, 2002). As activists and researchers on Indigenous lands, we must represent anti-colonial movements by seeking to stand in solidarity with Indigenous people against all forms of oppression, regardless of the complicated, uneasy, and unsettling nature of this alliance. For this, it is vital to understand the complex ways that diasporic settlers and colonials maintain aspects of this ongoing colonization. In their seminal work, Lawrence and Dua (2005) demanded that the issue of land as a contested space must be taken up by anti-racist theory, practice, and research. Although racialized communities may be marginalized in the colonial state, they also participate in colonialism by living on and acquiring appropriated land, accepting the apartheid-like segregation of Indigenous communities, and by decontextualizing their own histories of oppression from that of Indigenous populations in Canada (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). While debates complicate the conflation between different forms of migration and settler colonialism, question the possibility of securing decolonization through a nationalist project (Sharma & Wright, 2008), and posit that settlers aren't necessarily colonial—because the “settler” is a statement of situation, whereas a “colonial” actively participates within the empire and spreads the imperial sphere of influence (Barker, 2009)—for Indigenous people living in the Canadian state, imperial forces colonizing Indigenous bodies and spaces remain foreign empires, regardless of resemblances to early imperial and colonial forms. Therefore, in exploring the contemporary context of imperial domination, we have to recognize not only the creative ways in which the Canadian state remains simultaneously colonial and post-

colonial, but also the heterogeneous experiences of racial others and encounters within the white settler society that may challenge or validate settler colonialism.

Making these conditions visible through our research is critical. In my own work, it involved highlighting the interrelations and solidarities of this dynamic that extends to protest practices, personal alliances, and the analyses of representative politics related to resistance movements. For example, when I explore the protest practice of road occupations as employed by Tamil protesters in 2009, I contextualize this strategy as one that focuses on access (usually to mark the lack thereof) to space through land and the body politic. I connect this strategy to the activism of the Tamil diaspora around the world, but also to a history of Indigenous movements for land and sovereignty in the Canadian context. While dominant discourses framed the protest movement in Canada as one exclusively consisting of Tamils, I also acknowledge that local Indigenous groups were also active in supporting and protesting alongside Canadian Tamils. In addition, when I consider the contributions of my critique on media representations of othered protesters, I consider parallels and differences in how the migrant other and the native other are constructed: While representing a fundamentally different relationship to the state, land, and inclusion or exclusion through the state, both are made to be the “threatening protester,” an embodiment of decolonial resistance that symbolizes the “other,” the “outlaw,” and the “outsider.”

My argument for decolonial research representations is not meant to imply that various aspects of decolonization can or should be embodied under the flag of a single theoretical term. In this call, I hear Tuck and Yang’s (2012) appeal:

Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn’t have a synonym. (p. 3)

To frame my research, I draw upon Duara’s (2004) definition of decolonization as the processes by which colonial powers transfer institutional and legal control over their territories to indigenous, formally sovereign nation-states. I do so to emphasize that nation-states like Canada and Sri Lanka are not past the structures and processes implemented through colonialism, but that the agency of the colonized within, across, and between borders is critical to addressing and eliminating the unique and destructive legacies of their continuing colonialisms. The term *decolonization* embodies the dual spatial and temporal significance of thinking through the colour line’s perspective. It captures an intellectual activist project that challenges anti-democratic policies of imperialism along the global colour line to develop more egalitarian societies (Luis-Brown, 2008). As Luis-Brown (2008) suggested, working within a decolonizing theoretical framework provides the opportunity to build on the Gramscian theory of hegemonic coalition building. By

embracing a counter-hegemonic perspective on the colonial encounter, its discursive and institutional resistance allows us to further historicize the global contestations to exclusion and imperial powers. Representing “decolonial resistance” allows us to embody a new epistemic frame of the decolonial project. Mignolo (2011) explained that a basic assumption of the project takes knowledge production as a fundamental aspect of “coloniality”—the process of the capitalist, patriarchal, imperial, Western metropolis’s domination and exploitation of the rest of the world. Through its representation as a decolonial struggle, the 2009 Tamil diaspora protest allows us to recognize and challenge the historical violence and present-day complicity and responsibility of British colonial and Canadian imperial forces (Coles, 2011; Hyndman, 2003)—during the 2009 militant crisis as well as through the ongoing domination of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka and throughout the diaspora. The representation of this contemporary decolonizing encounter may expand our theoretical and conceptual framework to challenge the project of modernity by relocating prior moments of revolution and resistance alongside ongoing ones.

Conclusion

My intention through this paper is to problematize social work research representations of transnational activism to consider the ethics and politics of the activists and activism that we produce through our work. Producing research on communities’ activism allows one to document the struggles and agency of people who may otherwise remain silenced, and whose stories may be marginalized. Yet this visibility can also contribute to representations of others’ movements that are continually marginalized and policed within the academy and the wider social context. Through the focus of my study, the questions I ask, how I present my participants and myself as “insider,” to how I represent the activism itself, I consider: Do the representations I construct through research ultimately help or hurt the movement? Do they ultimately help or hurt the activists? As Derrida’s (1967) controversial quotation suggests, “there is nothing outside the text” (p. 158): Nothing can be experienced outside of context and culture. Through this lens, it is easy to realize that no protest group or individual can be experienced without cultural interpretation. This framework also informs which researchers, communities, political goals, and mobilizations become appropriate and conducive to the dominant public and/or academia, based on one’s own political ideology and understanding of the moral vision of Canada and the world. The movements we choose and the labels we grant these struggles are not only symbolic of an intellectual project, but are deeply grounded in the material conditions of resistance in the age of terrorism. As competing conceptions of racialization, imperialism, and power are mobilized rhetorically through the implicit claims of contested struggles, we must pay attention to the ways research representations come to challenge Canadian sovereignty, while reinforcing and legitimizing contestations of racialization, land, and the global dispossession of Indigenous peoples through colonization.

By representing the marginalization and activism of the Tamil diaspora in Canada, I join a growing conversation on the mobilization of racialized communities—people who have been, and are continually, criminalized for their

resistance in the West. In doing so, I also consider how to frame diasporic struggles for resistance in ways that do not disempower the resistance of Canada's Indigenous peoples, but foster solidarity between groups targeted for travelling conditions of colonial violence. The entanglements of imperial histories and colonial power that become visible and persistent across time and space govern and order suppressed knowledges including alternative visions of nationhood and sovereignty. Through these considerations, we may begin to expand the limited Western version of the present, where "ethnic conflicts," "separatist movements," and "genocides" are themselves marginalized, and "terrorism" discourses dominate public consciousness. By problematizing these representations, we may more critically examine different geo-political and social positions that are deeply marked by histories of imperialism and racism—not only to mark our continual fight against the biopolitical colonization of people, land, and resources, but to expand our struggle toward decolonial nation-states, self-determination, and freedom within, across, and between borders.

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