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Learning when not to share: Refusal as a methodological practice of purposeful data disclosure

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical complexities of research data sharing through Reese's concept of 'curtains' and Tuck and Yang's notion of 'refusal', with reflexivity serving as the guiding methodology. It explores the tensions between transparency and the protection of intimate, sacred, or culturally sensitive knowledge, particularly within specific communities. Through a series of vignettes grounded in lived experiences, the authors illustrate how researchers can practice purposeful data disclosure while honoring community trust, relational accountability, and participant dignity. These vignettes demonstrate the importance of resisting academic norms that may exploit vulnerability for institutional or intellectual gain. Drawing from Indigenous and decolonial epistemologies, the essay calls on researchers to critically examine their positionality, prioritize participant agency, and embrace refusal as an ethical imperative with the research process. The insights offered are especially relevant for doctoral candidates, novice researchers, and early-career scholars committed to ethically grounded and critically engaged research in education and the social sciences.

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Keywords

reflexivity, refusal, vulnerable population, data sharing, ethical research, positionality, data disclosure

Introduction

What does it mean to be entrusted with intimate and sacred stories as researchers while navigating a field that demands constant disclosure? Research issues emerge about how to reconcile validity, reliability, and openness (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015) with discernment about publishing certain information. The stakes are particularly high when research involves historically vulnerable populations whose narratives and histories have been subject to exploitation and misrepresentation (Aldridge, 2014; Shaw et al., 2020). Refusal (Tuck and Yang, 2014a, 2014b) challenges the colonial imperative to document damage or empirically substantiate the oppression of marginalized communities. Instead, refusal asserts the right to withhold certain accounts and experiences to prevent harm and resist extractive practices (Simpson, 2007). Simultaneously, Reese's (2018) 'curtain' metaphor provides a conceptual tool to delineate what remains behind the veil—protected, sacred, and reserved for community's discretion. By combining Tuck and Wang's 'refusal' and Reese's 'curtain' metaphor, we offer an approach that encourages rich data collection yet counters the taken-for-granted power dynamics latent in research processes and honors the customs individuals and communities hold dear.

At the intersection of these concerns lie critical considerations about the scholar's role in data sharing, specifically data disclosure. We refer to *data sharing* as the general practice of making data available (Piwowar and Vision, 2013), while *data disclosure* describes the act of publicizing or withholding specific data from a research project—especially data involving issues of confidentiality or risks that may carry ethical, cultural, or relational implications (El Emam and Arbuckle, 2013). We argue that everything experienced, witnessed, or said in the field (i.e., field encounters) does not automatically constitute research data that needs to be shared with a broader audience (Borgman, 2012). It should be only that which is collectively considered and ethically vetted that should be disclosed. Reflexivity and positionality are essential here, as qualitative methodologies emphasize the significance of understanding relational dynamics with participants and communities (Berger, 2015; Bhattacharya (2007, 2016); Finlay, 2002; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Yet, a gap persists in the teaching, training, and operationalizing of these frameworks into sophisticated, context-sensitive practices. As such, our notion of refusal and 'curtains' is not presented as the panacea for discontinuing damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009); however, we honor and expand these approaches by centering both as legitimate and rigorous pedagogical, methodological, and ethical tools of qualitative research. We illustrated how six scholars with different identities and research experiences approached data sharing and data disclosure in their own work (drawing on metaphor), as a way to center participant dignity and agency (Swartz, 2011). Essentially, *purposeful data disclosure* is reframed not as an act of withholding but as an intentional practice that

preserves the integrity of the research process, the communities it engages, and the relationships formed in the process.

In the sections that follow, we provide an overview of the extant literature related to research identity, vulnerable populations, sacred knowledge, and relational data. Next, we review the theoretical frameworks that underpin this work. The methodology section then outlines the reflective practices and processes applied by the authors (i.e., Marcus, LaShawn, Pablo, Julissa, Jasmin, and Devin). We then present, the results as vignettes, showcase lived-experiences, events, and applications of these principles. Finally, recommendations for researchers seeking to exceed ethical expectations (Swartz, 2011) and implement reflexivity within their scholarship are offered, along with a discussion and conclusion synthesizing key insights.

Literature review

Researcher identity

Central to any type of research, especially qualitative research, is an examination of self and our relationships to research and research participants (Dillard, 2000; Milner, 2007). For many, when we first learn about research we are taught to think about our research position and/or identity as consequential to the relationships we form and the studies we conduct. Research methods courses and texts often emphasize the importance of acknowledging our biases and subjectivity and how they might influence our assumptions, approaches, study design, sampling, research questions, analytic interpretations, and so forth (Punch, 2009). We are also taught that qualitative researchers themselves are the primary ‘tool’ or ‘instrument,’ and thus it’s important to be reflexive throughout the research process (Greene and Hill, 2005; Milner, 2007). Further, we are taught that research studies and researchers should be ‘objective’ and are cautioned against being ‘too close’ to the research and study participants in order to not impact the quality, rigor, and validity of the research study. Notably, questions of objectivity, or rather perceived lack thereof, are often asked of qualitative researchers, researchers of color, researcher-practitioners, and individuals with shared in group identities (Muñiz, 2024). Less often are these questions asked of researchers who conduct quantitative studies which reinforce the idea that quantitative studies are somehow inherently objective and therefore the standard of research (Miles et al., 2014). Yet, as Punch (2009: 45) reminds us ‘there is no such thing as a position-free project’ such that every researcher is responsible for interrogating their position in relation to their project and incorporating reflexive processes throughout. All researcher positions have their strengths and weaknesses, it is a matter of acknowledging, interrogating, and being responsive to how it might influence the study, data analysis, interpretations, and even what is pushed forth for publication (Boveda and Annamma, 2023).

Additionally, there is a burgeoning body of literature led by primarily scholars of color that have expanded our thinking and compelled us to think about our identities, or ‘position,’ as central to our funds of knowledge (Yosso, 2005), epistemologies (Cruz, 2001; Dillard, 2000), and approaches to research. Scholars, like Villenas (1996), Fine (1994),

Milner (2007), and Dillard (2000), have encouraged us to move beyond the binary conceptions of researchers as ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ and to instead lean into the affordances of our identities while being self-aware of possible tensions that may arise. Milner (2007: 388), specifically, warns that dangers can ‘emerge when and if researchers do not engage in processes that can circumvent misinterpretations, misinformation, and misrepresentations of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems.’ Milner’s call for researchers to consider how race and culture affect the research process and results is related to broader discussions about methodology and the unique responsibilities minoritized scholars have when working in or with silenced, exploited, colonized, overlooked, and marginalized communities. These perspectives recognize that our identities change meaningfully in respect to our surroundings and interactions. Thus, we should change how we approach, engage, and collaborate with communities. Villenas (1996: 712), for example, urges us to consider how ‘native’ ethnographers, meaning individuals who share identities or experiences with participants, ‘must deal with their own marginalizing experiences and identities in relation to dominant society.’ Villenas critiques the notion that as researchers we must only contend with the privileges of our identities when for some researchers the dynamics between power and privilege are more nuanced and complex. In this article, we also grapple with how our different roles affected our research with populations of varying vulnerability and how it informed our methods.

Vulnerable populations/subject

Vulnerable persons, as defined by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI, 2017: para. 11), refers to individuals who ‘may be less able to protect themselves and their interests relative to other persons in a given setting or situation’ and are perceived to have ‘diminished autonomy.’ In many cases, we are taught to think about *vulnerable populations* as it relates to individuals who are incarcerated, pregnant, minors, undocumented, struggling with substance dependency or housing instability, or individuals with disabilities that might impair their ability to understand the complexity of the study, terms of participation, or consent (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Miles et al., 2014; Punch, 2009; Thummapol et al., 2019). Other vulnerable groups, now more than ever, include asylum seekers, refugees, Indigenous communities, historically racially minoritized groups, and women (Davidson et al., 2024). Importantly, vulnerability is often understood in relation to exploitation, coercion, undue influences, and the need for special protections. As such, the role of power, research governance, ethics, and someone’s ability to consent are often emphasized as key research considerations when designing and conducting research. Yet, as others have argued, vulnerability can be ‘elusive’ and should be contextually evaluated (Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia, 2020; Larkin, 2009). Power, for example, can be understood and interpreted in various ways and should be interrogated in relation to ‘top-down’ pressures from institutions and institutional review boards, and ‘bottom-up’ approaches that reckon with inclusivity and adaptive methods (Aldridge, 2014). As researchers engaged with historically minoritized communities, we also understand that measures of vulnerability are in many ways ‘the floor and

not the ceiling' of how we must understand and engage with community members. In other words, historical legacies and harmful examples of research should be factored into our research approaches, relationships, and commitments. Relatedly, Indigenous scholars have urged us to also consider our relationships with Land (understood as a living, relational entity rather than merely physical space) and more than human species when conducting community-based research such that we do not inadvertently reinforce ideas of people, more than human species, and research as separate from Land relations (Bang et al., 2015; Bang, 2017; Jadallah, 2025; Patel, 2014).

While it's common to find method articles that grapple with what it means to access 'hard-to-reach' populations and strategies for how to do so (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Ellis, 2023; Flanagan and Hancock, 2010), it's less common to find articles that deeply examine who and what is considered vulnerable. Questions that consider what is at stake and overlooked when we determine that entire groups of people are too vulnerable to participate remain under examined. How, if at all, do notions of vulnerability impede individual and group autonomy and agency? This is not to suggest that research with vulnerable populations is impossible, as there are many studies that have taken on the institutional burdens that come with working with vulnerable populations, yet the institutional barriers, including the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, can and does discourage researchers from pursuing studies that involve working with vulnerable groups. Still, in the last couple of years, scholars have taken up these questions and considerations to highlight the affordances and strengths that come with working with vulnerable individuals. As an example, Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia (2020) argue that children living in alternative care or going through the adoption process have historically been excluded based on vulnerability, perceived lack of agency, and adult-centric perspectives of protection (1), when in fact what is needed is a better understanding of how youth experience these child protection systems. Instead, Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia (2020: 1) recognize that children can simultaneously be vulnerable and agentic and argue that youths' 'views should be considered through participative research design and methods.' By reimagining vulnerability as an active interplay of agency, context, and ethical responsibility, researchers can amplify voices rather than silence or distort them.

Sacred knowledge and relational data

The colonization, and continuing colonial logics, of the Americas led to systematic efforts to erase and suppress the knowledge systems, cultural practices, and intellectual traditions of Indigenous peoples, African-diasporic communities, and other colonized groups (Césaire and Kelley, 2000; Fanon, 1963; Said, 1995). Indigenous, Black, and decolonial scholars have termed this process epistemic violence, referring to the deliberate harm, discrediting, and distorting of the knowledge, experiences, and histories of these communities (Spivak, 1988). Within this context, Eurocentric perspectives, grounded in colonial dominance (Smith, 1999), have been positioned as universal and objective, while the intellectual traditions of colonized peoples have been systematically undermined (Quijano, 2000).

In response, Indigenous, Black, and decolonial scholars have called for the rejection and destabilization of Western knowledge as the dominant standard (Bhambra, 2014; Dei, 2000; Lugones, 2003; Mignolo, 2009). Central to this movement is the concept of *epistemic disobedience* (Mignolo, 2009), which emphasizes the need to reclaim and revitalize Indigenous and subaltern ways of knowing as integral to the process of decolonization (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Such epistemic disobedience is necessary to uproot and unsettle the lingerings of colonial epistemicide, or the purposeful annihilation and silencing of knowledge systems outside of Euro-western understandings (Redvers et al., 2024). For Indigenous communities, in particular, these knowledge systems are often described as sacred, interwoven with ceremonial importance (Smith, 1999; Coulthard, 2014). These sacred knowledge systems are not merely intellectual constructs but are deeply embedded in the Land, community, and lived/embodied experiences of people (Dei, 2000).

With this understanding, we engage in the question of relationality in our research, and how building relationships with our ‘participants’ necessitates a shared responsibility as researchers who now hold the ‘data’ that was gifted, given, and shared by them. In other words, we ask, what are the axiological considerations of ‘holding data’ through a theory of relationality (Wilson, 2008; Wildcat and Voth, 2023). In Wilson’s (2008) *Research is Ceremony*, he describes how space and therefore the relationship between people and the environment is seen as a sacred concept. Bringing everything together and reducing the spatial distance between things beyond materiality and physicality is what ceremony is (Wilson, 2008). Although our different research projects interact with various participants, some of which may not be Indigenous, the theoretical undercurrent of Wilson (2008) points to not merely how we should *treat* data, but how we should be *in relation* with the data we now hold. Furthermore, if we think about data in pluralities and always existing in interdependent relationships, every participant, data source, variable, and theme within the data set itself can be understood through ‘networks of pairs and pairs of networks’ (Yunkaporta and Moodie, 2021: 90). Data, then, is not simply a data set, but a constant system of relational networks.

Who and how we decide what is sacred or protected in research must also be interrogated and often considered beyond academic traditions (Berger, 2015; Jerolmack and Murphy, 2019). Scholars have found sacredness to be a communal, cultural, and spiritual determination; thus academics must avoid imposing their own standards of what is worth concealing or disclosing without deep relational accountability to the people and places involved (Dei, 2000; Wildcat and Voth, 2023). We engage with this theoretical curiosity because we are often asked to divulge sensitive details, romanticize stories centered on harm, and extract sacred knowledge that would ‘push the field forward.’ As Wildcat and Voth (2023: 480) share, relationality also must be considered in shifting, contextual, and emerging ways by thinking of relationality in terms of critical thinking. In other words, relational research methods ask us to consider how ‘relationality is not a simple matter of creating good relationships but thinking about how we create relationships that are capable of making judgements and decisions that have the power to further Indigenous self-determination.’

We draw inspiration from the above scholars to shape our emerging thoughts about our relationship to our ‘data’ and how we can engage in careful ontological analysis.

In particular, our work closely aligns with the C.A.R.E. Principles for Indigenous Data Governance—Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics (Global Indigenous Data Alliance, 2019). The principles of C.A.R.E. powerfully serve to reinforce commitments to honoring participants' authority over their own stories, ensuring community benefits, and maintaining ethical discretion toward what is revealed. We see our project as contributing to this growing discourse by modeling how purposeful practices can be enacted. The following theoretical frameworks build on insights from the literature review to critically examine these principles within our article.

Theoretical frameworks

The theoretical frameworks for our reflective practices were grounded in Reese's (2018) concept of the 'curtain' and Tuck and Yang's (2014a, 2014b) understanding of 'refusal.' Both theories were selected because they provide an analytical lens for examining the ethical balance between data collection and disclosure in protecting sacred narratives, knowledges, and rituals from outsiders and how research inquiries can be sites of invasion, especially when collaborating with historically vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Reese's notion of 'curtains'

Reese's (2018) curtain metaphor stems from her critique of the historical misrepresentation and commodification of Indigenous narratives by non-Native authors. The metaphor, curtains, builds on Bishop's (1990) seemingly straightforward yet profoundly significant metaphor of windows, sliding glass doors, and mirrors related to research literature's potential of engaging historically ignored and mocked children. As such, literature as windows provides views to worlds similar or different from students. With sliding glass doors, students imagine entering the world created by the author. Finally, literature as a mirror reflects students' identities and experiences. Various scholars have applied and added to Bishop's original metaphor (McNair and Edwards, 2021). Nonetheless, rather than pursue opportunities to reveal more of one's culture, Reese upheld a quality of Indigenous communities that protected knowledge, rituals, and sacred narratives from outsiders. The curtain acts as a mechanism to safeguard the integrity of stories not meant for public consumption. Rooted in respect for the sovereignty and privacy of communities where certain experiences belong, curtains defend and empower researchers and participants to generate their narratives, images, and representations.

Tuck and Yang's 'refusal'

Refusal has long been a generative discourse rooted in the deep political struggles of Indigenous people and has been implemented in various ways, from qualitative inquiry within education (Tuck and Yang, 2014a, 2014b) to territoriality (Simpson, 2007, 2014). Audra Simpson (2007) (Kahnawà:ke) introduced sociopolitical refusal as a way of documenting how refusal(s) were enacted in local, material, moral, and territorial ways for Kahnawakero:non (the people of Kahnawà:ke) against political and territorial

occupation. Simpson examined the way that Kahnawakero:non ‘refused the authority of the state at almost every turn’ (Simpson, 2007: 73) by enacting multiple registers of refusal at different scales. Simpson (2007: 78), in her work with her community, asked herself ‘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?’ What Simpson gifts us in the form of relational scholarship is the possibility to think of otherwise ways to produce generative alternative structures that emplace more relational ways of existing, politics, and knowledge (Simpson, 2007). By enacting ‘refusal’ not only as a stance but as a theoretical orientation, the concept of refusal can be further understood as a mode of analysis far beyond a simple act of non-acceptance.

Whereas Simpson (2007) puts forward ‘refusal’ as a site of Indigenous political mobility, other scholars have expanded this theory to transgress against methodological and data supremacy (Tuck and Yang, 2014a, 2014b). Tuck and Yang (2014a: 811) describe refusal as an analytical practice to address ‘inquiry as invasion.’ In other words, inquiry, including qualitative, quantitative, and mix-methods, has been a culprit of epistemic, material, and discursive violence and continue to serve as an auxiliary of settler colonialism, anti-Black racism, neoliberalism, cisheteropatriarchy, and epistemological superiority (Smith, 2021). As Smith reminds us, ‘research is a dirty word,’ to many Black, Indigenous and multiply marginalized communities precisely because of inquiry’s historical and contemporary extraction and confiscation of sacred knowledge, material, and people. To enact ‘refusal’ as an analytical practice, Tuck and Yang (2014a: 813) provide three axioms by which refusals are necessary to address inquiry as invasion: ‘[1]The subaltern can speak, but only is invited to speak her/our pain, [2] there are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve, and [3] research may not be the intervention that is needed.’ Furthermore, people are only asked to speak about their pain, narratives of harm, and discourses that see communities as culturally damaged (hooks, 1990; Tuck, 2009; Tuck and Yang, 2014b). Thus, inquiry as invasion reinforces how settler colonial logics are not only intertwined with the neoliberal production of knowledge in the academy, but invasion through inquiry-based means is a structure that the academy needs for its reproduction (Tuck and Yang, 2014a).

Both Reese’s (2018) curtain and Tuck and Yang’s (2014a, 2014b) refusal grant scholars ethical permission to be selective in their axiological and methodological decisions and dissemination of research data. These frameworks emphasize the significance of determining what to divulge and what to keep private. This study extends these ideas by encouraging and modeling reflective practices to assess research activities. Honoring the connection with community through curtains and refusal can lead to a more fulfilling, reciprocal, and humanizing form of research.

Methodology and data analysis

Reflexivity

This article posits that absolute transparency may not always benefit participants or be necessary, especially with private or confidential data from underrepresented populations.

Reflexivity, as the fundamental methodological approach, enables researchers to address the intricacies of data sharing by critically assessing their own responsibilities, actions, and the ethical implications of the research process (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity is widely acknowledged as a critical methodological approach in qualitative research, particularly in disciplines that contend with power dynamics, such as education, sociology, and health studies. Reflexivity entails a continuous self-assessment of the researcher's role in shaping data collection and interpretation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). The strategy has been frequently applied in qualitative social science research, for example with feminist epistemologies, to address and alleviate the impact of researcher biases and power dynamics throughout the study process (Schwoerer, 2025). Reflexivity, rooted in ethical and methodological principles, has utilized interviews, participatory observations, and document analyses within communities where selective data sharing is essential to avert exploitation or additional harm. We utilized reflexivity to identify, preserve, and honor the experiences of historically minoritized communities, whose pain and perceived pathologies are routinely overrepresented in research.

The first author, Marcus, invited the remaining authors to contribute to this manuscript based on their previous research experience engaging individuals and populations that have historically and contemporarily been subjected to excessive damage-centered research. All the researchers identify as either Black, Latinx, and/or Indigenous, Marcus, LaShawn, Pablo, Julissa, and Jasmin are tenure-track professors, and Devin is a high-level administrator. Each author aligns with the methodological and ethical considerations that researchers are responsible for how data is shared and accountable for how data is disseminated. While there are methodological and ideological similarities, each author and their vignettes offer varying approaches, positionalities, and queries around refusal, reflexivity, and research. We initially met via Zoom to discuss the metaphor of curtains (Reese, 2018) which extended to concepts of refusal (Tuck and Yang, 2014a, 2014b). Much of our deliberations concerned how *to* communicate that which we decided *not to* collect and/or share within our research. As a result, during our second Zoom meeting, we decided to use vignettes as the primary means of capturing intimate and personal decisions regarding selective data collection and sharing, while also modeling how these choices could be generative to other scholars' work. We used the following questions as guides when writing each of our vignettes: (1) How do you think about relationality with your collaborators and the data? and (2) How do you practice refusal and what values/ethics guide your refusal? We recalled our methodological processes and extended on the metaphor of curtains to illustrate how even the outcomes of reflexivity can be distinct—granting scholars agency to uphold the integrity of data disclosure how they see fit.

The data analysis phase started after our second virtual meeting. For instance, our third Zoom meeting involved member checking (Creswell and Miller, 2000) of vignettes regarding consensus, cohesiveness, and developments of other sections of the study for relevancy. Notably, while reflexivity can involve 'fall[ing] into an infinite regress of excessive self-analysis at the expense of focusing on the research participants' (Finlay, 2002: 532), our vignettes sought to vividly portray how to not simply center but privilege the research participants' identities, experiences, autonomy, and ways of

knowing. Once all the vignettes were finalized, we conducted multiple rounds of analysis of each vignette to reflect upon how the vignettes aligned, diverged, or complicated the literature both individually and collectively (Miles et al., 2014). To add to the trustworthiness of the analysis process, we wrote reflective memos about each vignette. Throughout our discussion, we also individually and collectively reflected on our positionalities (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, professional rank) and how it shaped the decisions we made throughout the research process. Given our diverse identities, each vignette details aspects of our identities (anonymized for review) and how they were directly linked to their epistemological and methodological decisions implemented within the research process. The goal for this article was not data saturation (Erlandson et al., 1993), but rather a quilting together of experiences and differences that spoke to the methodological realities and complexities of doing critical research in relation that, at times, may conflict with the professional demands of being researchers.

Results via vignettes

Vignettes in research are descriptive episodes that model actual events in written or visual form. In recent years, vignettes have become more common in social sciences and the field of education (Johnson, 2013; Munz et al., 2024). Scholars have argued ‘that they could make an even greater contribution to qualitative research methods and be more broadly applied’ (Sampson and Johannessen, 2020: 56). Therefore, this study uses six individual vignettes organized into three themes: (a) crossing thresholds: navigating access, trust, and invitation; (b) revealing with intention & concealing with care; and (c) exposure without shelter: when visibility becomes vulnerability. In doing so, we show how reflexivity was operationalized to capture the authors’ experiences of withholding data and privileging the communities and individuals they collaborated with during the research process.

Crossing thresholds: Navigating access, trust, and invitation

Doors: Anyone can knock but everyone can’t come in—Marcus

My relationality with my research participants, in this case, young Black boys in early elementary school, rejected notions of ‘banking education’ (Freire, 1999) and children as strictly ‘citizens-in-preparation’ (DeZutter, 2023) completely naïve of social events and actors. These Black children displayed sophisticated interpretations of civic and democratic conceptions (Johnson, 2023; Johnson & Thomas, 2024). My orientation of how I recognized them, as epistemic agents in their own right, broke from traditional approaches of early childhood education studies. Acting as an older brother or ‘OG,’ I brought a ‘this-ain’t-that’ style to educational experiences that differed from schooling norms. I didn’t require rules such as having to walk quietly with a ‘bubble in your mouth.’ The only three guidelines I requested were for them to tuck their shirts in their pants, respect themselves, and respect others. I refused to enact conventional ideas of researcher objectivity and interactions such as ‘keeping one’s distance,’ not getting too close to the participants’, and seeking to learn *from* and *with* rather than depositing knowledge. I also

choose to emphasize Black accomplishment, not merely Black pain which inundate classroom textbooks. The most memorable way of practicing refusal was choosing not to publish a focus group conversation about citizenship, recognizing disclosure of our discussion may garner significant academic recognition due to its nuance and sophistication, yet the ethical choice (justified outside the bounds of an IRB approval) was to preserve the intimacy of that moment as something meant for only those present at that time. In doing so, I attempted to value *who* the participants were above *what* they could offer the field. Our interactions and connection resulted in certain ‘data’ that was only accessible through the ‘doors’ of trust we formed and closed off to others.

Doorsteps: Learning when to leave it at the door—LaShawn

LaShawn: As a Black woman scholar, my research which centers Black feminist ways and notions of love, healing, and community (hooks, 2001a) amongst Black women in academia, is not for everyone. Furthermore, I have little control over what stories may arise during data collection. Due to my positionality, many of the stories Black women participants shared with me I personally related to in some way or witnessed vicariously through friends and family. Most stories are bubbly, humorous, and insightful, while others are heart-wrenching, laced with precarity, and difficult to digest as a researcher. While participants gave me ‘consent’ to share their interviews, ethically I felt some intimate stories were not mine to share with academia. Per in-depth peer conversations and reflexivity (Berger, 2015), I decided just because I had *permission to share* these stories, does not mean everyone should have access to *know* these stories. This is a deliberate methodological act of refusal (Tuck & Yang, 2014a). I believe some stories need to stay safely inaccessible from the looming and ever-present gaze of whiteness and white heteronormative research norms (Luker, 2009). Ultimately, Black life encompasses more than oppression (hooks, 2001a; Tichavakunda, 2021). Yet, due to misogynoir (Bailey and Trudy, 2018), anti-blackness (Sharpe, 2014) and white supremacist cis-hetero patriarchy (hooks, 2001b), Black women’s lives in collegiate settings have been flattened within the canon (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Thereby, what I choose to ‘send out the door’ (to share via scholarship) *or* ‘leave at the door’ (refuse to disseminate) will assist in broadening a more holistic understanding of Black women’s lives that elevate joy, love, sisterhood, healing, and community in academia (Washington 2024, 2026; Washington et al., 2025). Frankly, given the plight of Black womanhood (Collins, 2000) additional narratives are earnestly needed to elevate research on Black women in qualitative inquiry- and I boldly accept this charge.

Revealing with intention and concealing with care

Threading ceremonial curtains: Remembering data gifts and weaving intuitive futures—Pablo

Cotheorizing with Two-Spirit, Queer, and Trans (2S/Q/T) Indigenous people, the first question I asked myself was ‘how do I sustain being *of* community and *doing* research?’

At times I felt the two were incommensurable; that the academy would want things that I refused to give. How, then, do I hold these multiple realities that feel like they are in constant collision? Ceremony. Reading *Research Is Ceremony* by Wilson (2008) transformed my thinking and allowed me to align with what I felt and what I knew must be done in the research. I asked myself ‘Where am I needed? What does the Land need? Where are my ancestors guiding me?’ and from there made intentional decisions.

While rooted in ethnographic methods, I had to understand the violence of ethnography to dream of otherwise Indigenous methodologies that felt like they honored my co-theorists, Land, community, and ancestors. One example was during our annual Sundance ceremony in El Paso, TX that breathed life into Queer Indigenous futurities. I did not record, write, or observe anything that week. When my spirit, body, and mind felt in a good place to think with what had happened, that is when I picked up the pencil. I lit up my popoxcomitl, and asked, ‘guide me to what needs to be remembered, and help me write honorably.’ What I remembered was woven in, and what I didn’t remember was best left undisturbed. My acts of refusal are guided by protocols and that was how I decided what ‘data’ or ‘gifts’ were ready to be shared. There is still much I have not revisited because those stories were meant only for that space and time while others felt the urge to be shared. Ultimately, weaving together the stories felt like ceremony—a great responsibility and huge honor.

Windows into the lives of incarcerated youth—Julissa

In learning *with* and *from* youth while they were incarcerated, I learned the importance of revealing with intention and concealing with care. As the only Black Latina and one of the few adults of color at the juvenile detention center, youth often shared or did things in front of me that signaled a level of earned trust. Youth would at times engage in life-affirming practices and create third spaces that helped them feel a sense of relative ‘freedom’ and ‘normalcy,’ even if only for a few minutes (Muñiz, 2024). These practices did at times violate rules and protocols that the facility had arbitrarily created to restrict their freedom and maintain the institutional demand for safety.

As an ethnographer and researcher, who at times witnessed these interactions, I had to decide whether I should document those moments knowing that it could lead to write ups, loss of privileges, or forced isolation for the young people involved. Most times, I witnessed and noted their brilliance and the ingenuity involved in their resistance without documenting it in any way. Instead, I assessed whether their actions posed a threat to themselves or others and if the answer was ‘no’ then I resisted the urge to write it in my notes. I was attuned to their resistance and refusal practices, and in kind I too resisted the ethnographic urge to document and write about all that I witnessed (Erickson, 1986). As a practice, I asked myself ‘Who is this for?’ ‘Who am I answerable to?’ and ‘Could this lead to more harm than good?’ These questions became my compass when working with youth who had entrusted me with their stories and welcomed me into their lived realities. As researchers, we must continuously revisit our ‘why’ and be answerable to the communities we work with (Casar and Noguera, 2025; Jadallah, 2025; Patel, 2014) at all stages of the research process which might mean holding on to certain stories and experiences.

Windows shut: Keeping the noise out—Jasmin

‘She is a Marxist,’ a newspaper once said about me. It wasn’t the first time I’d been called that, but it still stung as a PhD student (at the time) just trying to build a career. So when the teachers I interviewed for my dissertation shared stories of how they were vilified for teaching ethnic studies, I was no stranger to that feeling.

As a Xicana from Chicago, I approach research through an ethic of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), honoring and respecting those I am in relationship with. I firmly reject the researcher-as-expert paradigm, seeing collaborators not as data sources but as cothinkers and community members. This aligns with Tuck’s (2009) desire-based research which centers complexity, contradiction, and agency.

My research explores how teachers navigate K-12 ethnic studies mandates in restrictive policy contexts (Patrón-Vargas, 2025). I aim to highlight the layered decisions teachers make when implementing ethnic studies in the classroom. Within this work, teachers have opened up about the challenges of teaching ethnic studies in a Republican state, sometimes receiving accusations for ‘indoctrinating’ students. During such vulnerable moments, I, too, shared my own experiences with far-right backlash (e.g., Finne, 2021). This reciprocal vulnerability created trust, mutual recognition, and solidarity. Furthermore, these exchanges remind me that research is it not about neutrality, it’s about purpose. It’s about supporting educators navigating hostile terrain, amplifying their voices, advocating for their needs, and ensuring their lived experiences not only speak back to the background noise, but more importantly, inform the discourse around ethnic studies. In this way, relationality and refusal are interviewed. I remain accountable to those who trust me with their stories. And when research frameworks demand I flatten or distort those experiences, I refuse.

Open to the world but not open season

Passports, portals, and protection—Devin

As a Black scholar and international educator, I have long believed that education abroad should not be reserved for the privileged few. Too often, Black student-athletes, particularly those in revenue-producing sports, generate visibility, institutional pride, and financial capital for universities while remaining excluded from transformative educational opportunities beyond the athletic arena. My work has always pushed against that contradiction. I entered this research not interested in studying Black male student-athletes as spectacles, but as multidimensional young men deserving of intellectual, cultural, and global exploration. In spaces where they are frequently reduced to their athletic utility, I viewed international education as a way to interrupt athletic identity foreclosure (Walker & Johnson, 2022; Beamon, 2012) and cultivate fuller understandings of self, possibility, and future orientation. One *research consultant*, a term I used to honor their contributions and shared narratives, claimed, ‘this (being an athlete) is something I do, it’s not who I am’ (Walker, 2018: 182). This statement reaffirmed how urgently these students needed spaces

where they could exist beyond the narrow confines of an isolated athletic environment.

Yet, conducting this work also demanded a politics of refusal. In an era shaped by Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL)—the right to profit from one’s personal brand—social media surveillance, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) transfer portal, visibility itself can become a form of vulnerability. I continually wrestled with the tension between amplifying their stories and guarding against further exploitation masked as scholarship. Some of the most intimate reflections shared about race, pressure, disconnection, and identity abroad were never meant for public consumption simply because they were emotionally compelling. I sought to construct a space where Black student-athletes could safely author counter-narratives about curiosity, joy, growth, and humanity. Another research consultant reflected that abroad he ‘finally got to take advantage of not only the world class athletic opportunities, but the world class academic opportunities’ (Walker, 2018: 267). That statement captured the larger purpose of my work toward not only getting underserved populations, in this case Black student-athletes, an international experience, but unearthing their imagined lives and identities beyond the boundaries institutions so often impose upon them.

Discussion

Rooted in Indigenous and subaltern ways of knowing and being (Collins, 2000; Tuck and Yang, 2012), going beyond curtains, these vignettes granted insights into the nuanced approaches we individually exercised within our respective research processes. Constantly mindful and questioning of our own sociocultural positionings as researchers (Dillard, 2000; Milner, 2007; Punch, 2009), all of the authors aligned with the methodological decision to enact ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo, 2009) and refute many of the ‘Western white research logics’ (Bhambra, 2014; Dei, 2000; Lugones, 2003; Mignolo, 2009) that were antithetical to our cultural roots and values as scholars of color (Greene and Hill, 2005; Miles et al., 2020; Villenas, 1996; Washington, 2024). For instance, within Pablo and Julissa’s ethnographic research, they refused to document ‘everything’ (Erickson, 1985) they saw during ceremonial events and within the youth prisons. Instead, they decided to record more humane details about participants or to not write anything at all out of respect for the people and the Land. While each authors’ work had unique characteristics and populations, all the authors were intentional about acknowledging the historical context from which each project was situated and conducted desire-based research (Tuck, 2009). Similar to Villenas (1996) and Schwoerer (2025), Marcus, Pablo, and Julissa’s vignettes highlighted the importance of disrupting power dynamics within research by desiring to learn *with* and *from* participants and committing themselves to ‘ceremony and community’ first and, as a researcher second. Akin to Wilson (2008) and Milner (2007), and many of the authors (e.g., LaShawn and Devin), mentioned notions of tying relationality with accountability and responsibility to the participants and the stories they shared and how they grappled with what was best for the communities they were apart of/research within against what the academy requires and commodifies for intellectual gain and progress.

Theoretically, the authors varied in their descriptions of Reese's (2018) metaphor of curtains, which ultimately empowered both researchers and participants to sculpt their images, and narratives that are meaningful to them and not just the gaze of academia. Notably, there was a lot of synergy across authors on the need to enact refusals, a political analytic tool to fight against 'invasive inquiry' (Tuck and Yang, 2014a). While all the authors in some way emphasized that there is some research the academy does not deserve (Tuck and Yang, 2014a), others emphasized specificity of refusal as well. For instance, when asked by journal article reviewers to disclose details about what crimes the youth committed Julissa refused, and Marcus and Jasmin emphasized doing work that was 'purposeful' and meaningful. Moreover, Marcus and LaShawn were adamant about not conducting and disseminating research that merely 'spoke [about] the pain' of marginalized communities but rather showed their vitality and joy. Julissa, Jasmin, and Devin were also intentional about centering the humanity of participants who are often exploited and overlooked by weighty societal labels such as 'incarcerated youth,' 'bad teacher,' and 'college athlete.'

These vignettes pose as weaving of stories that can be used as 'relational networks' to critically think about and promulgate the continued need for reflexivity and refusals against colonizing research logics, and the centering of empowerment and community from both research and participants. These considerations are especially pertinent for budding researchers, who may not have yet deeply engaged with these axiological and methodological choices. Yet, in a field such as educational research, which has an increasingly diverse demographic, researchers need to continually wrestle with the ways in which research is taught, conducted, and disseminated. Unfortunately, we understand that this may not be at the forefront of every researcher's mind; nevertheless, we present this article as a guide for those who do desire to refuse and reframe depictions of vulnerable populations, sacred knowledge, and research spaces.

Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on a small group of researchers/coauthors, potentially failing to encompass the full range of experiences across disciplines or cultural contexts. The study, while grounded in reflexivity, excludes direct participant perspectives regarding decisions on data disclosure. Furthermore, the focus on qualitative, relational research may not adequately apply to disciplines governed by different epistemological or institutional constraints.

Recommendations for enacting reciprocity

While the C.A.R.E. Principles provide a framework for Indigenous data governance that emphasizes collective ownership and oversight, our recommendations extend and draw attention to the everydayness of researcher accountability, engagement, and discernment throughout the research process. Inspired by scholars such as Bhattacharya (2007, 2016), below are suggested queries and mindful considerations for researchers employing reflexivity to frame data-sharing inquiries:

Before data collection

- Who am I, in terms of the academic structure but also outside of it?
- What brought me to this work?
- What are my personal prejudices, preconceptions, or preconceived beliefs regarding the people or issue I am investigating, and how may they influence my approach?
- In what ways do the power dynamics between myself, as the researcher, and the participants impact my development of my research questions and the type of the data I intend to collect?
- What do I know or have I learned about the communities I intend to work with? How will that inform how I enter into relation with them?
- What ethical principles should inform my judgment about the possible withholding of data, and how can I discern what constitutes highly sensitive or detrimental data to disclose?

During data collection

- In what manner are my interactions with participants influencing the nature and quality of the data shared, and how should I be conscious of my positionality throughout interviews or observations?
- In what ways can participants' interactions, responses and body language indicate their comfort or discomfort in sharing certain information? How am I being responsive to their needs and feels? How should I manage instances requiring withholding or purposeful disclosure?
- Am I consistently evaluating my own responses, feelings, or beliefs during data collection, and how are these elements affecting the data I collect or decide to exclude?

Post data collection

- What are the possible tangible and moral consequences of revealing specific data, and how can I negotiate the call for transparency with preserving participant and community privacy and autonomy?
- How has my understanding of the research question, context, participants, or community evolved due to the collected data, and what data could potentially be concealed to honor participants' trust and vulnerability?
- How does my final interpretation of the data demonstrate reflexive understanding of my participation in the study process, and how am I addressing the possible effects of selective data sharing on the overall results?

These questions engender continuous reflexivity toward desire centered research (Tuck and Yang, 2014a, 2014b) during all phases of research, assisting scholars to make ethical data sharing decisions. These questions are not meant to be exhaustive and should be

adapted to meet the specific needs of the researcher, context, and communities with which the researcher is engaged.

Conclusion

This article highlights the essential requirement for researchers to implement mindful and purposeful data disclosure practices, especially when interacting with historically vulnerable populations. As Jerolmack and Murphy (2019) asserted, ‘we should dedicate more attention to asking ourselves and our subjects what the stakes are’ (818). We present purposeful data disclosure practices understanding the stakes of refusal within a socio-political landscape of increased surveillance of research projects can be costly. Yet, even amid the insatiable appetite for academic production and the problematic privileging of certain research narratives, refusal as methodological practice, better protects the dignity and honor of communities forwarding that ‘everything is not data.’ More so, (re)consideration of publishing certain data is a vital element of researcher responsibility. Revisiting existing arguments about sacred knowledge, relational data, vulnerable populations, researcher identity, and frameworks of refusal and curtains exposes conventional research ethics’ limitations and allows space for methodologies rooted in critical thinking, protection, sovereignty and reciprocity. The collective reflection and critical reflexivity of the coauthors highlight the tension between protecting participant dignity and scholarly production and affirms the necessity of researchers to grapple with methodological assumptions and commitments.

To address challenges of data disclosure effectively, researchers must embed reflexivity into every phase of their work, from the design of the study to disseminating findings. By treating data as an element of a relational network, rather than a commodity to be exploited, scholars can honor the relationship with participants. Ultimately, purposeful data disclosure is not an act of withholding but an intentional strategy to center and uplift voices and experiences, especially those of vulnerable populations, without exposing them to further harm under the guise of research. Our stance is clear ... true ethical research demands we uphold the integrity, sanctity, and essence of constructive scholarship, not out of benign obligation, but as a transformative act of respect for the human-beings, Land, ancestry, and communities we serve.

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