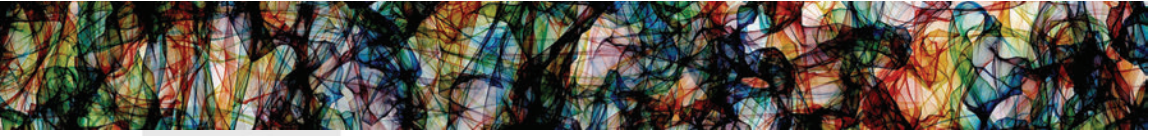


Openings and Retrospectives



THEORIZING REFUSAL: An Introduction

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To refuse is to say no. But, no, it is not just that. To refuse can be generative and strategic, a deliberate move toward one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another. Refusals illuminate limits and possibilities, especially but not only of the state and other institutions. And yet, refusal cannot be cast merely as a response to authority, or an updated version of resistance, or a concept to subsume under already existing scholarly categories. Instead, the contributors to this Openings collection find refusal to be about the social as much as the political, to be a concept in dialogue with exchange and equality. In *The Gift*, [Marcel Mauss \(1967\)](#) discusses refusal as the cutting of social relations, or in some instances as the raising anew of obligations and rituals. We seek to theorize refusal in this collection as concept to both think with and think about. We approach refusal as ethnographic subject and mode, recognizing each as making its own set of moral claims, including claims about how we receive, make sense of, and present (or not) ethnographic worlds.

Yet why the concept of refusal now? Why not just use the term *resistance* (see [Theodossopoulos 2014](#))? A quarter of a century ago, [Lila Abu-Lughod \(1990\)](#),

41) wrote of how the concept of resistance enabled a more complex recognition and theorization of “the nature and forms of domination.” We now feel a similar need to recognize and theorize refusal as an element of social and political relations, and to do so in ethnographically specific contexts, rather than positing an a priori landscape of domination and resistance. In our research, we collectively find refusals of both formal and everyday relations, including between claimed equals, in ways that redirect levels of engagement. We see individuals and collectives refusing affiliations, identities, and relationships in ways that are not about domination or class struggle (Scott 1985; Sivaramakrishnan 2005), but instead about staking claims to the sociality that underlies all relationships, including political ones. In that sense, we see refusal as genealogically linked to resistance, but not as one and the same.

We can also see refusal in earlier or other concepts in anthropology. Certainly refusal can be part of inclusions and exclusions, of self/other distinctions, and of the categorical and material denials generated in the wake of such divisions. We might also consider creative refusal on the scale of world history in rethinking cultures as “not just ways of being and acting in the world, but [as] active political projects which often operate by the explicit rejection of other ones” (Graeber 2013, 1). Refusal is often a part of political action, of movements for decolonization and self-determination, for rights and recognition, for rejecting specific structures and systems. Or refusal can be of politics itself, as in the case of *Médicins sans Frontières*, which articulates refusal as both troubled conscience and rejection of status quo conditions and apologies (Redfield 2005, 2013). Refusal marks the point of a limit having been reached: *we refuse to continue on this way*. We can also find refusal in refutations of theoretical models, decisions to withhold rather than share certain data by anthropologists and subjects alike, refusals of certain types of funding, and, of course, the realities of being refused, denied, and rejected as an expected part of academia.

Is refusal negative? At times it might be. In her article “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” Sherry Ortner (1995, 187–88) posed ethnography as the solution to what she saw as thinness in interdisciplinary resistance studies. Specifically, she argued against “a kind of bizarre refusal to know and speak and write of the lived worlds inhabited by those who resist.” An ethnographic approach, she argued, would enable an understanding of “the internal politics of dominated groups . . . the cultural richness of those groups . . . [and] the subjectivity—the intentions, desires, fears, projects—of the actors engaged in these dramas” (Ortner 1995, 190). This was to write against a sort of 1990s

academic politics in calling for attention to practice and contradiction as opposed to a privileging of discourse or text. This was to make a case for ethnographic knowledge as unique, and for our understanding of certain types of social worlds as incomplete without it. We now find ourselves in a different time, engaging with a different sort of ethnographic refusal, a time in which interpretive refusal might actually illuminate ethnography rather than flatten it (Simpson 2007, 2014; see also TallBear 2013). Predecessors to the current moment were earlier ethnographic writings on violence, including refusals to write, narrate, or interpret pain (e.g., Daniel 1996; Das 1995, 2006; Visweswaran 1994).

In her recent book *Mohawk Interruptus*, Audra Simpson (2014, 107) considers how refusal and disengagement structure possibilities, as well as produce subjects, histories, and politics. She writes of refusal as shedding light on something we've missed: "There was something that seemed to reveal itself at the point of refusal—a stance, a principle, a historical narrative, and *an enjoyment in the reveal*." Refusal appears in her scholarship as both subject and method. It is the story of Kahnawà:ke Mohawk refusals of Canadian and U.S. state sovereignty, along with their histories of being refused by both governments. It is also a political and methodological stance presented as an accounting, a cartography, an analytical strategy, and a writing style. Our collective of scholars writing on refusal for *Cultural Anthropology* includes Audra Simpson, and it also builds on her work.

Ethnographic object, historical possibility, methodological form—refusal occupies a vast swath of conceptual ground. In this Openings collection we offer four theses on refusal. These theses are not discrete, but instead blur and blend into one another despite being generated out of four distinct cases—military refusal in Israel, vaccine refusal in the United States, citizenship refusal by Tibetan refugees in South Asia, and ethnographic refusals by Kahnawà:ke Mohawks in North America. Erica Weiss's (2014, 2) scholarship centers on Israeli conscientious objectors, whose refusal of military service challenges state primacy in the political sphere as well as liberal ideas about rights, and posits "the Palestinian other [as] the ethical object of refusal." In Elisa Sobo's (2015) work, the objects of refusal are pediatric vaccines, refused or delayed by highly educated parents acting in socially valued and legitimated, responsible ways for their children. Questions about individual rights and broader society present in both Weiss's and Sobo's research also arise for Tibetan refugees in debates over citizenship. My research on Tibetans' refusal of citizenship in India and Nepal since 1959 asks how we might see this not merely as a form of resistance or lack but also as an insistence on a certain sort of grounding in the world. Audra Simpson's (2007,

78) signature contribution is the idea that people's refusals, a community's refusals, are theoretically and methodologically generative, or that ethnography "can both refuse and also take up refusal in generative ways." Our theses sketch out four of them:

1. *Refusal is generative.* Refusal might be thought of as a stoppage, an end to something, the breaking of relations. And it might be just this. However, the ending of one thing is often the generation of something new. This creative, productive aspect is evident in each of the four essays in this collection. In Erica Weiss's contribution, for example, she differentiates between the publicly declared refusal of military service in Israel and silent, private refusal. Classifying private refusal as abstention from rather than engagement with the state, Weiss argues that refusal as a form of abstention forges a new kind of political space, one that bypasses the state. Seeing refusal as generative moves away from default negative connotations into spaces that might be more social than antisocial.
2. *Refusal is social and affiliative.* What does refusal create? In both my and Elisa Sobo's essays, refusal produces or reproduces community. I argue that Tibetan refugees forge community in exile by refusing citizenship, collectively staking a political claim to Tibet rather than formally planting roots in India or Nepal. This suggests belonging as a refiguring of community, a conceptual partner to refusal's role in animating sociality among vaccine-cautious parents in California. In her study of pediatric vaccine practices in a Waldorf (Steiner) school, Sobo finds that refusal cements social relations, enabling new and meaningful affiliations among parents. These parents demonstrate a shared belief that they are making the best, most responsible decisions for their children's health. This choice concerns insistence, not resistance.
3. *Refusal is not another word for resistance.* We are not lacking anthropological critiques of scholarship on resistance (e.g., [Abu-Lughod 1990](#); [Ortner 1995](#); [Sahlins 1999](#); [Seymour 2006](#)), and yet a theorizing of refusal does not constitute a revamping of resistance to accommodate critique. Instead, refusal is a critique. In Audra Simpson's essay, it is the revenge of consent. Approaching Kahnawà:ke Mohawk refusals as both stance and theory of the political, Simpson argues that available concepts of resistance or recognition remain insufficient in that they often overestimate the place of the state. Refusal as revenge, then, rejects external state and

institutional structures. For the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk this can be to call forward “the prior,” that is, all that preceded, and desires now to succeed, settler colonialism. This stance challenges the presumption and enactment of inequity in, for example, state-society relations. If resistance involves consciously defying or opposing superiors “in a context of differential power relationships” (Seymour 2006, 305), then refusal rejects this hi-erarchical relationship, repositing the relationship as one configured al-together differently. Each of our four essays moves in this direction, refiguring social and political relations as an aspirational move toward change.

4. *Refusal is hopeful, refusal is willful.* Refusal is insistence on the possible over the probable, and thus in Isabelle Stengers’s terms, is aligned with hope. As she explains in an interview with Mary Zournazi (2002, 245), “If we follow probability there is no hope, just a calculated anticipation authorized by the world as it is.” Hope combines with will to refuse authorized anticipations, thus moving away from the probable into the possible. The willful aspect of refusal brings us back to transformation and generation, to the possibility of acting to spark change. For Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal, this means belief in the possibility of returning to a Tibet no longer ruled by China. Or, for parents who refuse pediatric vaccines, it is the insistence that this decision will keep their children healthy. As with those who abstain from performing state-endorsed expectations of public military refusal in Israel, these acts of willfulness generate both political alternatives and ethical critiques.

Together these four essays work toward opening new theoretical conversations on refusal. The current political moment demands it. As we find our bearings in the present, it is clear that social and political terrains have shifted for many around the world. Occupy. Black Lives Matter. Idle No More. The Umbrella Movement. The Sunflower Student Movement. The BDS Movement. 350.org. Decolonizing the Academy. The list could go on and on. The list does go on and on. If refusal is continually appearing in the present moment as creative and potent, then our job is to consider how and why. We invite you to join us in the work of thinking through refusal as ethnographic concept and practice.

NOTES

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