Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee[1]

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This article argues that humanitarian agencies represent refugees in terms of helplessness and loss. It is suggested that this representation consigns refugees to their bodies, to a mute and faceless physical mass. Refugees are denied the right to present narratives that are of consequence institutionally and politically. Narration of refugee experiences becomes the prerogative of Western 'experts': refugee lives become a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced. The central focus of this article is a detailed examination of a project by Oxfam GB called 'Listening to the Displaced'. It is suggested that Oxfam fails to consider that its interests as a humanitarian/development agency lead to the filtering of a particular sort of voice of the displaced. 'Listening to the Displaced' does not succeed in providing refugees with a means to speak for themselves, but rather results in a de-politicized and de-historicized image of refugees.

Title:
Refugee Mother and Child in Eritrea—Note Cards
    Item Type:
    Gift
Description:
This 5" by 5" full color card depicts a refugee mother holding tightly to her child in Eritrea. The inside is blank. Each packet includes 10 cards and matching envelopes.
Price:
$8.00
Author:
USCR
'Note Card' for sale at United States Committee for Refugees Online Store[2]

The image of the refugee as a person displaced from the protective confines of territoriality, an unfortunate creature stuck in purgatorial circumstances, conditions forms of therapeutic state-centric response. Through processes of repatriation or resettlement the refugee is reintroduced into the family of nations. This depiction of the refugee problem (of the refugee as a particular

sort of problem) depends on 'territorialized' notions of home, culture and identity. The refugee is lost, 'in limbo' (Malkki 1995: 9; citing Walzer 1970: 146), and helpless: without citizenship her plight is not to be characterized as merely culturally or physically precarious, she is without help, without the means to call on the protective agency of a state. As the bestower of identity, and its corollaries of autonomy and dignity, the state's relation to the well-being of its individual citizens pre-empts or defines in its terms other avenues of assistance. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees thus has as its principal strategies repatriation or resettlement. In effect these are premised on reintroducing the lost refugee back into the fold of a state (Chimni 1999).

The general theme of this paper is the figuration of 'the refugee' as 'speechless' (Malkki 1996: 377) and how this abstracts individual experiences of displacement from the political, social and historical context while putting in their stead a depoliticized, dehistoricized and universalized figuration of the refugee as mute victim. The central focus of the paper is a critical review of an attempt by Oxfam GB to remedy this silencing of individual refugee identity (Demusz 2000). The critique of Oxfam's project, known as 'Listening to the Displaced', is based on an Oxfam working paper, arguably conveying a particular bureaucratized knowledge about refugees and the methodology for 'listening' to them. The bureaucratization of knowledge about refugees, the extrapolation of refugee experience from individual social and historical contexts and the creation of a veneer of objectivity and dislocation, occurs in a text designed to impart exhortatory information without problematizing—indeed, making invisible—the author's position. What occurs is a failure to read the author into the text. The strategy of objective dislocation is furthered in the project itself—or to be more specific, the way in which the project is outlined in the text; indeed the interpretation of the project in the text accentuates through certain writing and documenting strategies the dislocation and transparency of the project's 'facilitators'. The theme of objective distance continues in the research methodology where the subjective influence of the facilitator is downplayed. More specifically, the role of the facilitator is downplayed in the reporting of the methodology: in the creation of a textual documentary of social reality, bureaucratization as that practice which distinguishes an action from the actor (and a text from an author) disregards the historical or political context in creating a delineation of reality intelligible and referable to the agenda of the agency (advocacy, fund raising, the organization of relief and development programmes and so on) (Hyndman 2000: 74). Given Oxfam's intention specifically to read the refugee into the project, this charge of violent reductionism requires defence. For now, it may be noted that the inclination to interaction with 'difference' is clearly different to 'traditional' inclinations but the methodology remains similar and because of this the reduction of difference may continue. As Scott notes, the difficulty arises when it is assumed that an unproblematized notion of 'experience' remains the bedrock of knowledge. She argues:

> . . . what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation upon which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place (Scott 1992: 24–5).

The point here is that the notion of experience has to be problematized in order to read Oxfam into the picture, specifically its importance in digesting this experience and facilitating its expression through what sorts of epistemological and methodological lenses and for what purposes.

The relationship of a text to social reality is, certainly, ambiguous. The present critique focuses on the limitations of the project as represented by Oxfam in their working paper. In this regard it focuses on how strategies of representation in the text can lead to the imparting of knowledge about refugees that is abstracted from the social and political context. Following on from this, it examines Oxfam's methodology of 'listening', finding in this a causal relation to the textual representation of abstracted voices. That is, Oxfam's methodology includes elements conducive to the abstracted representation of straitened refugee voices. It is suggested also that this methodology arises because of an inadequate critique by Oxfam of how their particular agenda and priorities as a humanitarian/development agency influence their approach to and contextualization of refugees.

The background and conditions under which Oxfam's report was written and the surveys undertaken are outlined in the working paper itself and by Simon Harris, Acting Director of Oxfam Sri Lanka, in the *Forced Migration Review* (Harris 2000). The survey of displaced people is based on three related concerns. First, the more general and very pertinent sense that displaced people are seldom allowed the opportunity to participate in decisions on their lives:

> . . . people living through the cyclical deprivations of displacement in an environment of complex and protracted violent conflict seldom have the opportunity of a meaningful say in shaping the decisions and factors affecting their lives (Harris 2000: 20).

The consequence is that there is a tendency among humanitarian agencies to rely on top-down analyses of what displaced people need or prioritize. This means that there is a failure to contextualize, to understand different needs and priorities among different members of societies. Hence, the second and more specific motivation for the survey: to better understand the social context in which Oxfam Sri Lanka operates. In this regard, the surveys of displaced people sought to understand the different needs of different sorts of Tamil refugees, as well as to better understand the social position of the refugees, for example in terms of their relation to non-refugees. The third aim of the survey is to contribute to the 'empowering' (Harris 2000: 21) of the refugees themselves. Listening to refugees, Harris argues, allows for inclusive participatory

schemes, it allows for a shift from giving aid to participatory development schemes.

There are two broad reasons why the working paper was commissioned. First, the paper intends to outline a procedure or methodology for listening to displaced people in conflict situations that may be of use to other humanitarian agencies seeking to listen to the voices of people they aim to help. The author of the report, Kerry Demusz, writes that it 'explains the concepts and rationale behind the study, describes the methodology and discusses how such a listening exercise can be carried out in the context of a civil conflict' (Demusz 2000: 7). It is argued below that the scope allowed to the 'voices of the refugees, the displaced, the mothers and the children who have to live in a world torn apart by conflict or natural disaster' (Demusz 2000: 7) is restricted by the priorities and agenda of Oxfam as an aid or development agency. The points here may be taken as constructive and collaborative. Harris suggests that the next stage of the project is the awareness that 'what *you* [the facilitators] think you have heard is actually what *they* [the displaced community] think they said' (Harris 2000: 21: author's emphases). He suggests that there will be a shift here, focusing on Oxfam's facilitators and their ways of problematizing and digesting information. This paper focuses precisely on the way that refugee voices are received and suggests points to consider in moving on to this next stage.

The second intention of the project is to provide in digested form the stories of these Tamil refugees. This is intended to outline perspectives on the conflict that would not otherwise be heard. These stories also serve two other goals. First, they serve to help present a case to Oxfam's main donor in favour of 'a programmatic change away from relief efforts towards self-sustainability' (Demusz 2000: 16). Second, the stories are also intended to be of use for 'senior government officials and policy makers' who rarely get a chance to hear the voices of the displaced (Demusz 2000: 16). Thus in these vital areas, Oxfam's digestion of the information relayed must be problematized to allow for more nuanced information.

There are, of course, limitations to this critique. One of them is my lack of personal experience with refugees in Sri Lanka. A second limitation of the argument is the lack of an empirical means of testing or judging Oxfam's information on refugees in Sri Lanka gleaned through the project in question. A third limitation is, for reasons of space, the lack of a 'control', for example the study of a conventional humanitarian project and a discussion of how this compares to Oxfam's attempt at doing something different. It is for these and other reasons noted earlier that this critique is offered not as an attempt to disregard Oxfam's empirical work, but rather to highlight areas of concern unaddressed by Oxfam's methodology of engagement with the displaced. It is in essence to consider methodological problems of giving voice to refugees. Insofar as contextualizing the critique is concerned, a version of this paper was originally written for a doctoral thesis on the way refugees are rendered abject by a territorial political imagination. The current version is part of a wider project on representations of the refugee in different humanitarian and political contexts.

The article begins with an overview of humanitarian representations of the refugee. It is suggested that these amount to a blanketing and generalizing depoliticized depiction of refugees as helpless victims, thereby obscuring the particularity of different sorts of refugee experience. Indeed the pertinent point is that refugees are consigned to their body. That is, they are rendered speechless and without agency, a physical entity, or rather a physical *mass* within which individuality is subsumed. Corporeal, refugees are speechless and consigned to 'visuality': to the pictorial representation of suffering and need. One of the central effects of this consignment is the 'commodification' of refugee experience. With the capacity for agency, for presenting an oppositional discourse, suitably pacified, refugee events and experiences become a site where Western ways of knowing may be reproduced and recycled. The second part of the article will investigate in detail Oxfam's methodology in listening to refugees, suggesting that, contrary to Oxfam's intentions, refugee experiences appear to become similarly commodified in the working paper.

Representing the Refugee Body

Malkki associates humanitarianism with an objectification of refugee experience (Malkki 1996: 388). By this she means the identification of refugees not in terms of their individual humanity but as a group whose boundaries and constituents are removed from historical context, reduced to norms and terms relevant to a state-centric perspective.

Alonso emphasizes the hegemonic role in Western theory of a state-centric perspective on identity and politics; as a 'cultural inscription' this hegemony is not static or a finished article, it must be constantly 'renewed, recreated, defended and modified' (Alonso 1994: 381). Alonso argues that the state is granted a 'misplaced concreteness' born of the moral legitimation that comes from a separation of the political from social and historical processes. Rather than being understood as the temporal manifestation of particular historical processes, the state acts as the ultimate receptacle into which these processes— of the constitution of identity, heritage, kinship—are channelled.

Appadurai takes note of the constitution of subjugated 'others' in these disciplinary practices by which the state-centric imagination reinforces itself (Appadurai 1993). Bhabha emphasizes that the intention behind this is to aid the creation of an 'Other' that has lost its 'power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse' (Bhabha 1994: 31; Werbner 2001: 133). The connection of political identity and discourse to the territorial state means that those without citizenship or bereft of it are speechless (or taken to be speechless), requiring an agency or expert to speak for them. The 'speechlessness' of refugees reinforces the state-centric political imagination; refugees become a site where certain forms of knowledge are reproduced and justified.

What the refugee is left with is biological corporeality: Malkki takes note of the tendency in humanitarian discourse and in the media to represent the refugee physically, as a mute body. She cites Feldman,

> Generalities of bodies—dead, wounded, starving, diseased, and homeless—are pressed against the television screen as mass articles. In their pervasive depersonalization, this *anonymous corporeality* functions as an allegory of the elephantine, 'archaic', and violent histories of external and internal subalterns (Feldman 1994: 407; Malkki 1996: 388).

The reduction of the refugee to the mute image of the body, argues Malkki, is to reinforce a sense of a universal, primordial humanity. Refugees are 'universal victims': a dehistoricizing generality that makes it difficult to understand that there are individual politics and histories behind the pictures of teeming masses of bodies.

When photojournalism and film focus on individual refugees, it is noteworthy that women and children tend to be prevalent. Malkki and Nyers both argue that these two groups of people embody in the Western imagination 'a special kind of powerlessness; perhaps they do not tend to look as if they could be "dangerous aliens".' (Malkki 1995: 11). Note the titles of 'note cards' for sale at the United States Committee for Refugees (USCR) website: all of them have photographs of mothers and/or children. Moreover, the simple titles of these cards suggest a fetishizing of refugee women and children: it does not take any particularity to sell these cards, the bodies— without narration that might contextualize politically, socially and histori- cally—are adequate.

> Refugee Mother and Child in Eritrea
> Sudanese Refugee Girls
> Refugee Mother and Child Returning Home
> Refugee Children

This faceless depiction of refugees will be connected below with Oxfam's publication of 'poignant' quotations from refugees and use of them for advocacy (Demusz 2000: 29). The point is that the depersonalizing treatment of refugees may continue if the purposes of their representation remain unproblematized. In USCR's case, the representations are for fundraising and, more complicatedly, for advocacy (generating pity). As will be shown, in spite of their attempts to work outside of the traditional contexts of humanitarian- ism, Oxfam simplifies and abstracts refugee voices so as to make them amenable to Oxfam's own purposes and agenda.

Speaking of third world women, Chow looks at cinematic or photographic images that make them appear to be powerless. She argues that 'one of the chief sources of the oppression of women lies in the way they have been consigned to visuality' (Chow 1992: 105). Her argument assesses the appropriation of the female body and its representation on the cinema screen and how this creates a mechanized 'automaton', where characters 'can be

guaranteed to think, speak and act exactly as you would expect' (J. Smith 1973: 18; cited by Chow 1992: 105). The female body's consignment to 'visuality' is then an act of power, undertaken by what Chow sees as a Western masculine subjectivity to reinforce its epistemological, ontological and political bound- aries. A similar act of reinvigorating power will be seen below, in the way that Oxfam restricts refugee voices. Chow maintains that there are three relevant consequences of this disciplinary practice which, it is argued here, are pertinent to the representation of refugees in humanitarian discourse. First, the reduction of the female to her body and then the consigning of that to 'visuality' which enforces a mechanistic predictability. Second, the cinema screen exaggerates and stereotypes physical characteristics, creating melo- drama and encouraging a certain sort of response from the viewer. Third, thus objectified—in the sense of having been made mechanistically predictable—the female subject becomes a thing to be utilized: Chow takes notes of the 'com- modification' and appropriation of an anaesthetized female figure by the 'culture industry'.

Humanitarian and media images initially depersonalize refugees, but they also exaggerate: suggesting a sense of universal primordial humanity, in all its naked helplessness. The exaggeration of 'bare humanity', Malkki argues, evokes a sense of empathetic pity, 'we are all humans after all' is the refrain (Malkki 1996: 388). Repetitive and predictable in the gamut of emotions they convey, archetypal refugee images become then ripe to be utilized to further particular ends (such as fund raising schemes).

Consigned to 'visuality' and stuck in static signification of particular meanings, refugee images (indeed the very resonance of the refugee experience) become commodities. The description of one of the USCR notecards ('Sudanese Refugee Girls') reads:

> This 5″ by 7″ full color card depicts 2 Sudanese refugee girls. Violence in Sudan has produced more victims than any conflict since World War II. All are individuals with thoughts and hopes like this young girl. Ten cards come in each set. A matching envelope is included. (http://www.refugeesusa.org/store/ individual1.cfm?item_id = 1460)

Perhaps the reduction of individual refugees to a $10 set of 'full color cards' with 'matching envelopes' does not sit very well with the claim of the note cards conveying individuality. This description is representative of the other cards being sold by USCR. Claims that the cards convey individuality are watered down by their instrumental use (fund raising); the images are anaesthetized, the people pictured can be guaranteed to think, act and speak as one would expect. While all may be 'individuals with thoughts and hopes like this girl', no narration, no outline of the girl's *individual* thoughts and hopes is actually offered.

The next section will look at Oxfam's attempt at redressing the abjection of refugees in humanitarian discourse. Their attempt to give voice to refugees, and indeed to make this voice central to the work that they do in Sri Lanka, is to be

commended. There are, however, a number of difficulties, especially metho-dological, that look like impairing the success of this attempt.

Oxfam's 'Listening to the Displaced' Programme

Oxfam's 'Listening to the Displaced' project (LTD) seeks to imbue humanitarian and development projects with the opinions and experiences of refugees. It tries to avoid predicating itself on an essentialized image of the refugee by attempting to hear the voices of women, children, the elderly, the disabled and other marginalized people within the wider community of refugees.

The LTD project operates in Sri Lanka in the region known as 'the Wanni'. This area comprises most of the northernmost administrative regions of the country, Jaffna excepted. The Jaffna peninsula is a stronghold of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the main militant group that has engaged in armed struggle with the Sri Lankan government. Oxfam works with people of Tamil origin displaced into the Wanni from Jaffna as a result of battles between the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE. Control of the Jaffna peninsula and the Wanni itself shifts periodically; Oxfam estimates that as a result of the army's taking control of the peninsula in 1995, up to 500,000 Tamils were displaced into the Wanni.

Initial humanitarian interventions in the Wanni focused on the quick provision of emergency relief. Oxfam argues that emergency relief provisioning is problematic for two reasons. First, by necessity, the need for urgent relief goods leads to 'assumptions about people's basic needs'. This means that 'what the IDPs [internally displaced persons] need or want is often unclear, and their voices are lost in the process.' However, this process often continues, Oxfam says, after the initial period of emergency has passed:

> . . . the process of 'helping' people can become a difficult habit to break. In addition, when field personnel work within a specific context every day, they feel that they are in touch with the IDPs' needs, even when these 'needs' have not been discussed with the 'needy' for some time (Demusz 2000: 15).

At least implicit in this criticism by Oxfam is the desire to move beyond casting displaced people as victims, helpless to express what they require. There is also awareness of the skewed power relations between Western aid agencies cast in the role of expert helper and displaced people cast as needy, speechless and helpless victims. The second problem Oxfam identifies in emergency relief provisioning is the difficulties in understanding how needs are prioritized (Demusz 2000: 15). Oxfam suggests that improving communication between aid groups and displaced persons will go some way towards providing appropriate and holistic relief.

In addressing this obscuring of refugee voice, the LTD is intended to act as a 'mechanism' to provide 'a rapid means of finding out what people [need]', to bridge the gap between what agencies think they need and matters on the

ground. Oxfam, as noted, also seems concerned with the objectification as mute victims of the people it tries to help. Consequently, the LTD also intends to try 'giving the displaced an opportunity to be heard amidst the chaos of the immediate emergency'. Oxfam describes the LTD as a way to bridge the gap between relief and development work, with the latter referring to 'promoting self-sustainability' (Demusz 2000: 16).

The LTD is thus an attempt to overcome the contextual limits of humani-tarianism to enable a shift from 'working for people to working with people'. In the LTD programme this involves primarily allowing the displaced to speak for themselves:

> The inclusion of direct testimony in the development debate can help to make it less of a monologue and more of a dialogue . . . it is not enough for the development 'expert' to summarize and interpret the views of others—*the others must be allowed to speak for themselves* (Demusz 2000: 16, citing Slim and Thompson 1993, my emphasis).

The burden of the present critique is on the methodological difficulties involved in creating conditions that would allow refugees to 'speak for themselves'. Four difficulties are identified in Oxfam's methodology of listening to the displaced. First, the reduction of the identity of 'the displaced' to fit the institutional frameworks and demands of Oxfam as a humanitarian agency. Second, the de-politicization of people in the study, which emphasizes in stasis and in isolation the identificatory variables of 'gender' and 'age'. Third, Oxfam's acting as an advocacy group for displaced people against government officials and within communities in favour of relatively more marginalized bodies of displaced people. This is a difficulty insofar as it is a way of 'decentring structures of political and intellectual privilege' (Jaschok and Shui 2000: 37) that is prone to the transferring of particular norms onto 'the displaced'. This is furthered by the de-politicizing essentialization of certain markers of 'identity' (such as gender) without taking into account the socially-located nature of gender as a construct. Fourth, an ethnographic relation premised on distance. This has four aspects. One, a reliance on a mode of knowledge-acquisition which assumes the possibility of a neutral survey, digestion and re-presentation of the voices of displaced people. Two, the concomitant utilization of this experience to authenticate and essentialize positions of identity and knowledge (Jaschok and Shui 2000: 37). Three, the consequent establishment of a hierarchical relationship between hermetic bodies of the aid worker as processor of experience and displaced people as conveyors. And fourth, the non-examination of the role of the aid worker as investigator, indeed the institutionalization of him or her as objective listener. The aid worker's role in influencing identity and reported experience through allowing a specific narration of past events is insufficiently recognized, neither is there cognizance of the way interaction with refugees relays back onto the identity of the aid worker.

Reduction of Identity to the Contexts of a Humanitarian Organization

The goal of allowing others to speak for themselves is undercut by what Sylvester has referred to as a tendency of alternative development strategies not to question the overarching paradigm within which development occurs (Sylvester 1999: 709). The LTD allows for narration by displaced people that is of consequence institutionally and politically only insofar as it conveys a series of material needs.[3] Couched within the depiction of 'the displaced' are a series of power relations that restrict the identity of displaced people in the Wanni to preconceived notions of the character of displacement. Narration by 'the displaced' is situated within a particular trajectory that culminates in the goal of making aid more efficient in its delivery and relevant in its nature. It is in this sense then that the identity of the displaced is perhaps reduced to the contextual imperatives of Oxfam as a humanitarian/development organization.

The LTD is a means of collecting data on material needs and on assessments of what 'the displaced' consider to be the most pressing issues of their displacement. It constructs refugee identity in terms of a knowable constellation of physical and economic needs. As a corollary to this, 'especially poignant' things that participants said were used in reports disseminated to government authorities and local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) as a means of illustrating 'the points more clearly . . . and to allow the participants' own words "to be heard".' (Demusz 2000: 29). Such 'poignant' quotations also pepper Oxfam's project report on which this critique is based. They are chosen for their poignancy, a means to elicit sympathy; like the pictorial representations examined above, they do not convey a sense of the historical, political or cultural locations of displacement. Disembodied, de-politicized and de-contextualized, these quotations further restrict refugees to an identity characterized by helplessness and puerility, and further a de-humanizing process. Moreover, this is akin again to restricting refugees to a bare corporeal existence: simple quotable words conveying physical and economic peril are taken out of context, institutionalizing a social history in documentary form that is perhaps 'invariably detached from the local historical context of the reality that they supposedly represent' (Escobar 1995: 108; cited by Hyndman 2000: 74). The quotations which follow have been selected as representative:[4]

We don't lead a life. Three years of displacement looks like 35 years; young people look very old now (man in Mannar District 1998).

Who ever rules us, we are not bothered: we want peace (man in Jaffna District 1998).

Our problem is not a shortage of cooking pots or shelter. Our problem is the war. If you offer cooking pots, we will take them; but if you ask what you can really do for us, we will say help to stop the fighting. If you can do anything to help bring peace, we will be able to take care of ourselves and stop being a burden to you (woman in Kilinochchi District 1997).

The army hassles us more because we are poor, and the big people walk about freely (man in Jaffna District 1998).

The mines are everywhere. Only when our husbands and children return at the end of the day do we know whether they still have their legs (woman in Jaffna District 1998).

So many people are coming, asking and then going. Please don't do that (man in Mullaitivu District 1998).

I had to leave school to look after my brothers and sisters (13-year-old girl with five siblings and no mother, in Kilinochchi District 1998).

Oxfam's goal of allowing 'the others . . . to speak for themselves' must be assessed against a perspective that has already pre-defined displacement in a humanitarian context. 'Speaking' means outlining material needs to contribute to the efficiency and relevancy of aid delivery. This further fixes refugee identity by essentializing certain aspects of refugee life. It allows for a commodification of refugee experience; their identities fixed and predictable, simple and 'poignant' quotations apparently representative of refugee personality and experience may be utilized in discussions with government and donors; this involves removing them from the social, historical and political context.

The representation of 'refugee experience' in documentary form, in reports to government and donors, suggests a second form of marginalization. This contextualization of refugee voices is a bureaucratization of refugee experience; the co-option of narration into pre-conceived categories 'familiar to the knower but not necessarily to the "known"' (Hyndman 2000: 74). The end result is akin to the 'bureaucratization of knowledge about the Third World' (Escobar 1995: 106; cited by Hyndman 2000: 73); the creation and institutionalization of fixed bodies about whom knowledge is attainable and upon whom particular strategies of aid are enacted.

Malkki suggests that such context is important for a humanitarianism that would emphasize the political, historical and human nature of 'refugeeness'. She writes of the resistance of Western aid officials in Tanzania to her research on the productive nature of Hutu refugee experience. She notes how the refugees she spoke with saw exile not first and foremost as a tragedy but as a 'useful, productive period of hardships that would teach and purify them' (Malkki 1996: 382). Certainly there would be as much reductive generalization in suggesting that all refugee experience is necessarily productive as there is in the opposite view of emphasizing tragedy. Nevertheless the sense of tragedy and loss in Oxfam's report leaves one to wonder if humanitarianism as a means of providing material help can take into account non-tragic depictions of refugee experience, and also if these may be unnecessarily complicating of aid delivery and fund raising.

Depoliticization and Eternalization

The LTD project primarily sub-divides 'the displaced' into categories of 'gender' and 'age'. The LTD differentiates between relative states of marginalization, distinguishing traditional figures of authority from those traditionally

bereft of voice and agency, hence experiencing a secondary state of marginalization; and distinguishing the effects of displacement on people of different socio-economic status. The LTD project tries then to make assessments of development needs more nuanced, reflecting the specific physical requirements of women and children on the one hand and, on the other hand, refusing to be dictated to by traditionally authoritative voices on communities' priorities and requirements.

The concern here is that the LTD essentializes in biological stasis gender as a particular determinant of identity. Oxfam notes that 'women and men have different priorities, related to their different responsibilities within the household and household economy, and their different personal needs' (Demusz 2000: 44). Gender is important as a social category because it reflects different physical needs and social roles of men and women. The category 'gender', then, rather than diversifying or making more nuanced Oxfam's method of listening to refugee voices, serves to reinforce the pre-established ideas of refugee identity and the role of the humanitarian agency. 'Gender' becomes a 'knowable set of relationships in humanitarian situations' (Hyndman 2000: 75); emphasis is placed on 'gender' as a category about which facts may be ascertained. The corporeal sense of 'gender' is highlighted by Harris's claim that a commendable outcome of the listening exercises has been 'a gender sensitive revision of NFRI [Non-Food Relief Items] family pack contents (such as the inclusion of menstrual towels)' (Harris 2000: 21). This does not seem to be a particularly innovative or remarkable result of listening to refugees; nor does it augur a politically, socially and historically nuanced sense of 'gender'.

The privileging of a particular sense of 'gender' divorces—again—refugee voices from social, political or historical contexts. Jaschok and Shui wonder at the relative positioning of gender analysis with respect to other forms of inequalities (Jaschok and Shui 2000: 35). They suggest that this privileging of gender as an analytical category in stasis and in isolation from historical and social processes embeds a simplified view of women that is not cognisant of 'diversely constituted constellations of inequality.' They suggest that the simplistic analyses of gender may be a case of Western academics—a point that is also potentially applicable to Western non-governmental organizations—marginalizing the compound nature of women's voices or narratives by 'inscribing their political correctness' upon different lives (Jaschok and Shui 2000: 35). Refugee women's voices in the Wanni are heard within a context that allows for their appropriation by the terms of a traditional humanitarian discourse: their restriction to an exposition of physical needs means that women's voices are heard within a context that does not question the paradigmatic sense of the refugee as tragic, voiceless and corporeal victim. Pressing questions that may illuminate a study of the situation of refugee women in the Wanni may include: how do we interpret the historical relationship between Tamil ethnicity and women in pre- and post-colonial Sri Lanka? How do we conceive of the place of women in LTTE vis-à-vis 'traditional' places—in Hinduism or Dravidian culture for example? How is the situation of Hindu

Tamil women of different castes different from that of Muslim or Christian Tamil women? How is the body of the Tamil refugee woman inscribed as a site of warfare (rape and sexual abuse occur as a normal by-product of the war in Sri Lanka and as a means of conducting war—as they do elsewhere)?[5] The necessarily unique situation and compound political identities of Tamil women refugees—as 'women', as 'Tamils' and as 'refugees'—may begin to be understood through moving away from simple generalizations to specific and compound questions that wonder at the manifold identities taken up by and pressed on to refugees as well as how and by whom these have been narrated over time.

Having said that, Oxfam appears very conscious of the need to keep the Sri Lankan government's support, and this may be a pertinent reason for restricting the extent of political analysis.

Association with Marginalized Groups

It is difficult to mount a critique against a perspective that in resisting hierarchical and hegemonic structures of authority avoids dominant voices and seeks out the marginalized. It derives from a critical resolve not to allow co-option into 'self-serving discourses of hegemonistic regimes' (Jaschok and Shui 2000: 37) and is laudable in many respects. Oxfam notes that

> LTD tends to focus on widows and their households, because Tamil culture constrains the activities of this particular group . . . While the LTD has never purported to be representative of the entire population of the Wanni or Jaffna, it has attempted to enable the voices of those who do participate to be heard. In Sri Lanka it is difficult for INGOs [international non-governmental organizations] and LNGOs to avoid working with the elite of the community . . . because the entire system of relief is channelled through them. Humanitarian workers in Sri Lanka often do not know how to conceptualize working outside this system, because they have never done anything else. LTD provides a starting point for putting the focus back where it belongs: in communities, taking advantage of their wisdom and their experience. *It does not ignore the elite, but tries to make their voice equal to that of the displaced* (Demusz 2000: 44, 48, my emphasis).

As noted above, the LTD project restricts refugee identity: giving a particular space for refugees to speak is not the same as working 'outside the system', it is rather to make more efficient the workings of another system that also predefines and restricts the scope of refugee voices. Confining refugees to a cycle of repetition of physical needs reinforces their identity as helpless and abject; it does not easily subvert, question or threaten hierarchical structures and, indeed, leaves them intact. The LTD programme, rather than taking advantage of the 'wisdom' of 'communities', not only establishes another hierarchical structure of dependency (between 'communities' and Oxfam) but in ignoring traditional forms of authority also potentially increases the vulnerability of marginalized groupings. The emphasis on making everyone the same or equal

also has potentially the effect of reducing the 'elite', those with voice and with an articulated sense of themselves that is perhaps not conducive to efficient aid delivery, to a common abjection. It is to reinforce the primary role of Oxfam over the 'indigenous' elite in marking out the identity of the less dominant groups. It is to suggest innocence in Oxfam's mediating of who can speak and who cannot; it is to suggest that Oxfam has no particular interests (or can ignore these) when they render all voices equal. Moreover, the link between Oxfam's levelling approach to refugees and the abstracting of refugee voices from context should be emphasized: when voices are taken in their contrived isolation the compound nature of identity—that it is construed on different levels in different inter-actions in different contexts—is downgraded.

Oxfam's role is not rendered transparent, Oxfam's equalizing of diverse peoples is undertaken with a particular aim in mind. Difference is not enabled by this process but is rather constricted within a particular framework that emphasizes homogeneity, thereby not only reinforcing a general abjection as those marginalized groups are encouraged to speak within Oxfam-established parameters, but also couching relations of power that remain unthreatened. Ultimately Oxfam's democratizing work is, on this evidence, another attempt at isolating, commodifying and rendering abject refugees by isolating them from wider political and social processes.

An Ethnography of Distance

Within the scope of the LTD, refugees in the Wanni configure their identities through a narration of the present. It has already been noted that this re-narration is forced into particular parameters that restrict refugee identity: what the 'present' constitutes is narrowed down with emphasis placed on aspects of physical deprivation. The role of Oxfam as a body with power to determine the limits of refugee identity so that it remains in accord with its own ends is inadequately examined. For a project that intends to allow 'others to speak for themselves' this lack of reflection on the part that the investigator can play in restricting identity through a restriction of narrative is problematic.

The ostensible pursuit of a goal of allowing 'others to speak for themselves' is perhaps in itself misguided. Not only is there a sense of the primeval purity of these others ('the wisdom of the communities') that can be reached once the blanketing voices of 'the elite' or the Sri Lankan government or the LNGOs are pushed aside, but there is also a sense that identity is developed in isolation, that neutral knowledge of refugees in the Wanni may be gleaned by an investigator. There is little cognizance that interaction with Oxfam as investigator may play a role in the processual development of refugee identity. Kristeva's insight that it is interaction with the stranger that refines 'our' identity works both ways (cited by Jaschok and Shui 2000: 38). Hyndman quotes bell hooks: 'Their [white people's] amazement that black people watch white people with a critical "ethnographic" gaze, is itself an expression of racism' (Hyndman 2000: 65).

It is as a result of this ethnography of distance that refugee experience is distilled into essentialized identities; it is also a result of this ethnography of distance that the encounter with refugee experience need not be premised on an examination of the role of the humanitarian agency as 'knower'. A hierarchical relationship of dependency ensues between refugees as transparent objects and a shadowy aid worker. Oxfam's *Listening to the Displaced* report on which my critique is based uses quotations from 'research facilitators' to make its points. Like the refugee voices, these disembodied extracts of two or three sentences are removed from social context. Arguably, on the one hand they reflect a bureaucratized mode of acquiring knowledge where, Hyndman suggests,

bureaucracy is *par excellence* that mode of governing that separates the performance of ruling from particular individuals, and makes organizations independent of particular persons and local settings (D. Smith 1993: 12, cited by Hyndman 2000: 74).

This bureaucratic separation of individual actors—'research facilitators'—from their subjects of study—refugees in the Wanni—justifies the usage of disembodied quotations to illustrate points relevant to the development of a bureaucracy of knowledge about Tamil refugees. Bureaucratic interventions, however, not only separate the investigator from the investigated but also encourage a de-individualization and a concomitant sense of investigative objectivity. Whereas the excerpts from refugee voices (cited above) emphasize a subjective insight through a clarification of the gender of the person speaking, an investigator is only a 'research facilitator' or a 'report writer'. This rein-forces the simple subjectivity of the refugee whose insights are contextualized within the essentialized—and corporeal or biological—gender category; the Western aid worker is able to transcend determinants—like 'gender'—of a subjective viewpoint.

Another view may note that the complex subjectivity of the aid worker remains evident in the disembodied quotations. When juxtaposed against the 'voices of the displaced' peppering the same report, sometimes on the same or on adjacent pages, two differentiating characteristics are evident. One, whereas refugee voices are mostly descriptions of tragic situations relayed in a plaintive and helpless manner, aid workers' voices relay power: they give expert recom-mendations, they outline actions undertaken. For example:

I had a difficult child in my group. He wanted all of the attention. So I made him the leader of a younger children's group and asked him to supervise their work. This worked very well and he did a good job (debrief notes, Mullaitivu District 1998).

Sample size should have been increased, location(s) should have (been) selected randomly, attention should have been paid to take a sample resembling the different classes. Process has to be improved to get the maximum participation of the people (Jaffna research team 1998).

In April 1999 10 months later, I was based [near a field site] for a short period. One evening I cycled with the driver [into town] to buy fish. As soon as I entered the village, people recognized me and came to see me. One man . . . called other people, saying that I had come back to see them . . . (research facilitator's comments 1999) (Demusz 2000: 33, 41, 51).

The second characteristic differentiating aid workers' and refugees' voices is that the sense of individual humanity in people able to take decisions and do mundane things along the way ('buy fish') is more apparent than in plaintive and predictable laments. This is furthered, crucially, in the way the quotations continue to convey aid workers as individuals, hinting at complex lives, whereas refugees are part of a wider community. The pronoun 'I' is used by aid workers, refugee voices are made to reflect a collective: 'we' is the pronoun most often found in the 'voices of the displaced' used by Oxfam. Depictions of refugees subsume senses of individuality—and the nuance, detail and specificity that that would entail—in favour of generalizing and violent collectivization.

Conclusions: Ways Forward?

Against the essentializations of identity that arguably run through Oxfam's LTD project, a sense that identity is a '"production", signifying the dynamic interplay of history, culture and power' (Jaschok and Shui 2000: 37–38) may provide one with a more nuanced understanding of refugee identity. Jaschok and Shui's definition of identity would convey the 'intersubjective and em-bodied' and 'irredeemably social and processual' nature of identity formation. Identity here is an ongoing production, involving ethnographer and subject in a mutually constitutive relationship (Jaschok and Shui 2000: 37–38).

A way forward for schemes such as Oxfam's which try to incorporate refugee voices may thus perhaps begin with a more nuanced consideration of how identity is formed and constrained through interaction and dialogue. 'Listening' to refugee voices may have a less than remarkable effect on the workings of a humanitarian/development organization if the broader concept of development and of the purposes and agenda of aid organizations remain unproblematized. That is, if the institutional framework of the aid organization continues to set the boundaries within which refugee identity is voiced, then the outcome is likely to be conceptions of refugees that are resistant to have empowered refugees (or having been a step in that direction), Oxfam's methodology of listening may obscure what amounts to an act of power in pre-emptively setting the boundaries wherein refugee identity is articulated. In this erasing of the trace of a forceful attempt to set boundaries that secure the positional leverage of the humanitarian agency, the refugee is subject to ever deepening abjection, one that appears to be all the more hazardous because the abjection is disguised as empowerment.

To what extent is it possible to transgress institutional demands that call the refugee to definition in terms of the institution's agenda and purposes? An initial step may begin not with a corralling of refugee voices to humanitarian agendas nor with an ethnographic relation premised on distance, but with a cognizance of the way in which identities are formed and influenced through different sorts of interaction. Such a move may indeed fundamentally affect the basis and definition of humanitarianism. A new humanitarianism may come about, one that strives to understand refugees contextually and in a compound and multi-faceted sense, moving away from tragic depictions of puerile helplessness.

Practically, however, one must ask to what extent is this sort of transgression possible, given the agenda of the humanitarian industry? Oxfam's digesting and re-presenting of a plethora of refugee voices serves in part to present a viable argument for extra funding. It is also used in advocacy, as a means of highlighting refugee issues before government. Is it helpful to refugees to endanger efficient and beneficial aid delivery and government attention? Indeed, there are significant dangers in the presentation of decontextualized and depol-iticized bodies of suffering refugees to government, LNGOs and donors. The presentation of 'poignant' quotations is not a means of empowering refugees.

Acknowledging the demands of other interested parties does not necessarily have to mean a simplified and abstracted conception of refugee identity. Indeed, While acknowledging the difficulties faced by humanitarian agencies in this regard, significant attempts to negotiate these are important. Steps should be taken to present a more nuanced view of refugee identity. In broadening refugee identity away from immediate humanitarian concerns, Oxfam may contribute to a far greater understanding of conflict and of the demands of post-conflict recovery. An acknowledgement of the limits of Oxfam as a humanitarian/ development agency in being able to 'listen' would also be welcome. This is to acknowledge the limits placed upon refugee voices by Oxfam, it is to acknow-ledge that 'empowering' refugees in the context of a humanitarian action is also to restrict them. Most fundamentally, progress should be made towards a more nuanced view of identity and its expression. A sense of identity as ongoing and dialogical may lead to a more significant 'empowering': one that recog-nizes that development must be a collaborative exercise between aid worker and refugee, it must systematically challenge the hierarchies that exist. In this sense, then, refugee situations should cease to be sites where Western knowledge is reproduced; collaboration involves understanding and working with place-based cultures and ways of knowing. This does not mean understanding them so as to accommodate them within a Western model; it means allowing Western and non-Western epistemes to engage with each other and to hybridize.

1. A first draft of this paper was written and presented at the Department of International Relations, London School of Economics.

2. United States Committee for Refugees Online Store, http://www.refugeesusa.org/store/individual1.cfm?item_id=2352

3. The next stage of the programme is to allow refugees to set their own agenda in the discussions (Harris 2000: 21). This is commendable. However, the institutional demands of Oxfam as a humanitarian/development organization and their role in digesting and re-presenting information still have to be negotiated.

4. There is certainly some reductionism involved in my extrapolating some quotations over and above others. Yet I think they are fairly well representative of the tone of Oxfam's report.

5. See regular articles on the rape or abuse of women by soldiers at http://www.tamilnet.com.

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Contextual Determination of Migration Behaviours: The Ethiopian Resettlement in Light of Conceptual Constructs[1]

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In the literature, two types of migrations are recognized: voluntary and involuntary. This approach, which assumes a strict distinction between the two concepts, simplifies complex migration behaviours. It does not distinguish, for example, between voluntary settlers and other migrants who embrace forced removal out of desperation, because of sustained inducement, or due to social pressure. The study of displacement understandably maintains that forced relocation would meet resistance by the majority of those affected. However, cases where forced migration is accepted have been inadequately explained. In the 1980s, the Ethiopian government initiated an involuntary resettlement programme. Desperate famine victims and people swayed through enticements welcomed the resettlement, while others tried to resist dislocation. How voluntary was the Ethiopian voluntary migration? How do we explain the differential responses to the forced resettlement initiative? Besides answering these questions, the paper will provide a new conceptual model for analysing the range of population movements.
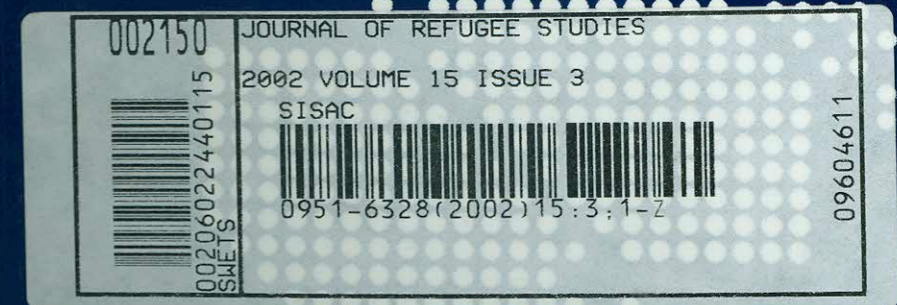
Introduction

This article addresses two fundamental resettlement-related issues that seem to be insufficiently addressed in displacement and resettlement literature. First, the concepts of 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' migration have been commonly used to distinguish the manner of population movements or the decision of people to settle in places other than their own. New evidence, however, suggests that we cannot clearly discriminate between the two concepts and that there are other dimensions of migration as well. Second, displacement researchers have reasonably argued that involuntary resettlement would face resistance by the majority of affected people. However, the reasons why some people welcome involuntary resettlement have not been explained sufficiently. The core objective of this paper is to identify and explain the mismatch between the conventional wisdom with respect to migration behaviour and decisions, and the empirical occurrences. Based on research conducted in

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