States of Refuge: Keywords for Critical Refugee Studies

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- To assist scholars at McMaster and elsewhere to clarify and refine their research on globalization in preparation for eventual publication.

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STATES OF REFUGE:  
KEYWORDS FOR CRITICAL REFUGEE STUDIES

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1. Introduction

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States of refuge: between displacement and reclamation

The phenomenon of displacement is increasingly evident across a wide range of human activity, but there have been few attempts to consider the connections between these movements. For several years the international community has been focused on the displacement of Syrians from their homes and the resulting flow of refugees into neighbouring countries and Europe. More recently, more than 600,000 Rohingya refugees have fled the violence in Myanmar and captured the world’s attention. Less well known, but no less significant, has been the more than one million refugees fleeing the violence in South Sudan. All this public and governmental interest in migrants is not surprising given that, in 2015, the United Nations estimated that there were 244 million migrants in the world, including about 65.3 million forcibly displaced people, of which 20 million are refugees. These numbers – and the stories of suffering and survival that accompany them – have led former United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon (2016), to declare that there exists a global “crisis of solidarity.”

However, forced migration is just one case in the movement of peoples between states. An even larger migration occurs within states as rural residents pour into cities around the world, vividly captured in Mike Davis’s (2007) phrase “Planet of Slums.” Within many cities gentrification displaces local communities in favour of new residents with greater purchasing power. These events, moreover, take place in the background of earlier colonial displacements of Indigenous peoples and the legacies of those violent episodes. Displacement occurs both in the physical sense of people being moved from one place to another and in a cultural sense as in the case of the Canadian residential schools system destruction of First Nations culture. Shifting focus to human interaction with the natural world, the planet is on the verge of a historic displacement with the extinction of ecological systems and thousands of species with climate change and further industrialization (Jones 2016).

These examples, ranging from urban planning to refugee studies, from political economy to ecology, from Indigenous studies to cultural studies, are often considered in isolation from one another. The connections between these different forms of human and non-human displacement demand further, interdisciplinary investigation. Indeed, it is becoming difficult to disentangle these various forms of displacement from one another. For example, it is increasingly clear that the forced migration of people is more and more caught up in the complex issue of climate change and other ecological displacements. We can, therefore, ask a number of critical questions about displacement: What assumptions are contained in the concept of “displacement” and what are their implications? What are the different forms of displacement that characterize the world? Are there connections between different types of
displacement? Are there common causes or spillover effects between displacements? Do we have a vocabulary that is sufficient to capture and make sense of these complex interconnections?

Displacement, however, is only one side of the question. Many individuals and communities have developed responses to displacement and are working to reclaim their former place or to fashion an alternative place which is neither displaced nor returned to the original state. In other words, displacement and reclamation can be investigated as occupying a shared field of action. To illustrate what I mean by this, consider the examples of displacement provided above. Each can be approached in a way that emphasizes a relationship with reclamation. For example, refugees and migrants cannot be exclusively understood as being caught up on structural forces beyond their control. Refugees can become involved in political mobilizations and community building in some of the most inhospitable conditions and unlikely contexts, such as organizing protests in camps to criticize camp governance (Nyers and Rygiel 2012). The urban displacements impelled by gentrification have similarly been contested by squatter groups, artists, urban food justice groups, and anti-poverty organizations, amongst others (Boudreau 2017; Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017). The ongoing history of forced displacement of Indigenous people is being met by a resurgence in Indigenous activism, including efforts to reclaim language and cultural practices as well as land and political authority (Simpson 2014). Finally, humanity’s entry into an era of the Anthropocene – when collective human activity is altering the ecological makeup of the planet – has been met with calls to reclaim our survival with new forms of “planet politics” (Burke et al. 2016).

As a result of these efforts to reclamation in the face of multiple displacements, another series of questions emerge: How have “displaced” people responded to their condition? What are the alternatives to displacement – return, renewal, recreation? Are there connections between displaced populations? What kind of alternative communities and subjectivities are being created in, through, or against displacement? And similar to a question we posed regarding displacement: do we possess a conceptual vocabulary sufficient to answer these questions in all their complexity?

To approach displacement and reclamation as part of interrelated dynamic is to emphasize the agency that people have in negotiating their relationship to both of these phenomena. In doing so, displacement is not simply an inevitable response to “objective” structural forces, such as war, persecution, environmental catastrophes, and disparities in the global economy. Instead, displacement involves complex forms of agency and subject-making. For example, the struggles of refugees and migrants have demonstrated that, despite the considerable risks and dangers, political subjectivity is being enacted within securitized sites and borderzones (Squire 2011). Indeed, struggles around issues of detention, deportation, regularization, and global freedom of movement have debunked some of the most cherished notions about political subjectivity. While the subjectivities of refugees, irregular migrants, and the undocumented have long been associated with expectations of victimage, helplessness, and dependency, recent theorizations of citizenship have challenged these assumptions. There has been some significant work done on how migrants negotiate, contest, and evade borders and, in doing so, constitute themselves
as political subjects (King 2016). These studies represent a shift in how we conceptualize citizenship: as being not only about formal or legal status, but also as being an enactment of political subjectivity that allows for an opening to investigate unexpected, unfamiliar, and irregular acts of citizenship (Nyers 2019).

**Why keywords for critical refugee studies?**

In the wake of these struggles around displacement and reclamation, there is a clear need to develop a critical vocabulary that can articulate the complexities of these processes. To be sure, all social, artistic, or political movements are at some point confronted with the challenge that existing discourses may be insufficient for new ideas on a topic. Part of their struggle is to redefine, redirect, and reinvent the way their issue of concern is spoken about in public discourse. Take, for example, the way that the debate about the figure of the “illegal immigrant” has shifted (in some quarters at least) in recent years, with the Associate Press and other major media outlets dropping the term from their Stylebook (Bauder 2014). The scholarship on refugees and forced displacement faces similar challenges. This field, too, must develop a critical vocabulary or lexicon of keywords that is sufficient to the challenges facing the twin dynamics of displacement and reclamation. This can involve inventing new terms, concepts, and analytics – which can reinvigorate a field of study or action, as well as contribute to the building of something new. It can also involve revitalizing older concepts and terms, unpacking them, problematizing them, and repurposing them for new tasks, contexts, and realities.

Words are powerful. New key words are implicated in – and constitutive of – power relations involving domination and resistance. As the editors of *New Keywords for Radicals* (Fritsch, O’Connor, Thompson 2016, 5) state: “These concepts – these words – are neither static nor extrinsic to power. Words attain meaning through the history of their usage, and these histories contain traces of the struggle not only to name but also to *create* the world.” Our use of the word “keywords” is an obvious nod to the work of Raymond Williams (1985) and his book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture & Society*. Keywords, Williams (1985, 24) famously asserted, constitute “the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion.” Such a vocabulary, he goes on to say, “has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions.” This specificity, however, nonetheless demands that it “be made at once conscious and critical” (1985, 24). Williams (1985, 15) set two basic criteria for keywords: “they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought.” We think that refuge, displacement, borders, movement – all of these terms meet Williams’ criteria, and so it is crucial for us to think about them from a critical perspective.

Since the publication of the first edition of *Keywords* in 1977, there has been a proliferation of books and articles that have sought to generate new keywords. In addition to the 2005 *New Keywords* collection (Bennett et al. 2005) and the 2016 *Keywords for Radicals* (Fritsch et al. 2016), there is also the New Keywords Collective’s 2015 article on “Migration and Borders” (De Genova et al. 2015). However, none of these include an entry on refugees, forced
displacement, or any other term that we might include within the project of critical refugee studies. While there have been some isolated attempts to define the keyword of “refugee” from a critical perspective (e.g. Espiritu 2015), the most concerted effort to build up a critical vocabulary for critical refugee studies has been the “Critical Vocabularies” project. Initiated by the Critical Refugee Studies Collective in California, this initiative as an attempt to “define a set of critical concepts that are grounded in refugee histories and experiences.” In their theorization of key words such as “baggage/luggage,” “refugee camps,” “silence,” and others, the aim is to maintain a commitment to the everyday life of refugees; or, in the words of the Collective, “to expand on their everyday uses and imbue them with refugee meanings and knowledge.”

Similar to how Balibar (2004, 10) asserts that the concept of citizenship is subject to “permanent reinvention,” the language and vocabulary surrounding “refugees” is also subject to creative transformation. The task here is to write under conditions of what Derrida (1998) called “erasure” – that is to say, to write and cross-out simultaneously, to present and take away, to create and delete. The advantage of such an ethos toward writing is that it allows one to express oneself affirmatively while at the same time raising doubts and registering scepticism. This indeterminacy allows for a negotiation of paradoxes and ambivalences that inevitably emerge when approaching an existing discourse with a new vocabulary. We can no longer think about states of refuge in the terms we are used to; but we are also not in a situation where the old terms no longer apply. We have a responsibility to experiment and be creative in order to shape the discourse of displacements. But do we not also have a responsibility to understand the power of inherited terms that continue to shape the present? We are in a space that Arendt (2005, 158-62) described as being between “no-longer” and “not yet.” So while the struggles of refugees and other forcibly displaced people no longer recognize the discursive limits imposed upon them, there remains a tension in the fact that these struggles have not yet articulated terms appropriate beyond these limits. This does not imply either an attitude of hope or despair, of pessimism or optimism, but rather a critical ethos of vigilance and scepticism (Isin and Nyers 2014).

Summary of contributions

On May 10, 2018, a group of critical refugee scholars and activists met at the Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition at McMaster University to discuss the keywords that are urgently need to meet the twin dynamics of displacement and reclamation. Under the name of “Critical Refugee Studies Network Canada,” the core aim of the group is to build a community and network of critical refugee studies scholars and activists in Canada. The network strives to be transnational in scope, interdisciplinary in orientation, and unabashedly political in terms of our interventions into debates about refugees. While most of the members of this network are based in Canada, the international linkages of the group are strong, with connections with other like-minded individual and groups in the United States, for

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1 See: [http://criticalrefugeestudies.com/critical-vocabularies](http://criticalrefugeestudies.com/critical-vocabularies)
2 See: [https://www.criticalrefugeestudiescanada.org](https://www.criticalrefugeestudiescanada.org)
example. The Canadian network is in contact with the Critical Refugee Studies Collective in California, and Professor Eric Tang from the University of Texas (Austin) who was invited to deliver the public keynote lecture on his recent book *Unsettled* as part of the keywords workshop (Tang 2015).

The task we set for ourselves at this meeting was to collectively generate some keywords to animate our discussions within this nascent field of critical refugee studies. Participants were asked a number of questions to reflect upon while they were crafting their respective keywords. What conversations are the keywords involved in? What conversations do they open up? What kind of questions are they taking up? And crucially, what is critical about them? The result was a range of interventions on keywords that open up critical thinking on what is at stake politically, culturally, and socially with new dynamics of migration, refuge, and reclamation. The keywords that follow speak to fundamental challenges facing refugee studies, and include: community (Ang Ngo), decolonization, genders, and sexualities (Edward Ou Jin Lee), empathy (Don Goellnicht), humanitarian exceptionalism (Thy Phu and Vinh Nguyen), indebtedness (Malissa Phung), irregularity (Peter Nyers), migrant agency and rights to the city (Gülay Kilicaslan), refuge, hospitality, and protection (Laura Madokoro), resistance (Maral Moradipour), responsibility (Michael Gordon), sexual based violence (Massarah Dawood), and sovereignty (sasha kovalchuk).

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2. Community

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Community is an analytic used to understand the subject formation of the Vietnamese which is informed by and contributes to on-the-ground dynamics of conflict intra-community. Community is also a set of practices in shared identity making as conditioned by the historical socio-political events, the current contingencies of belonging to the host country, and the direct personal experiences of the refugee passage. These practices subject members to ideas of themselves and others while at the same time is subjected to the collective identities of its members. It is a space of both inclusion and exclusion. It is not entirely enacted upon by hegemonic neoliberal discourses, nor is it an independently informed grassroots movement. As set of practices, community itself is also productive as a set of practices of identity reproduction, but also a site from which to make claims for social justice (recognition, redistribution). Community needs to be reproduced in order to articulate political demands. Critical refugee scholars detail the dynamics of Vietnamese refugee groups in North America together to show the heterogeneity, conflicts, and power negotiations that conditions the subjectivities of members within a refugee community. The conditions of knowing are: ideological figure as a solution for North American host nations, hegemonic refugee nationalism, and the negotiations of expectations and demands on the “inheriting” second generations as proof of just cost of refugee condition.

Yen Le Espiritu has long challenged us to take the figure of the refugee as an ideological concept. She states, “critical refugee study scholarship conceptualizes the “refugee” as a critical idea but also as a social actor whose life, when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change” (2014, p.11). As an emerging solution in the continuity of colonialism to modern day imperialism, “refugeeness became a moral-political tactic,” demarcating the difference between the supposed uncivilized East and the civilized West and fostering “cohesion of the Western Alliance nations” (2014, p.8). Similarly, Mimi T. Nguyen interrogates the Vietnamese refugee integration into the United States as a grateful refugee, as proof of the moral righteousness of American war-making rebranded as liberal gift giving. She states this liberal gifting of freedom, “emerges as a site at which modern governmentality and its politics of life (and death) unfolds as a universal history of the human, and the figuration of debt surfaces as those imperial remains that preclude the subject of freedom from being able to escape a colonial order of things” (2012, p.5). I now turn to how it is the imperial saving of Vietnamese refugees inform the refugee community meaning-making of its collective identity of refugee nationalism and political exiles as both a response to this dominant discourse of saving but also as resistant to the discourse of hapless refugees.

Peter Tran theorizes refugee nationalism in examining the community political conflicts in Little Saigon, Orange County (2009). He explores how the Vietnamese American’s demonstrations of
anti-communism are in fact complex responses to the homogenizing American narrative of the war in Vietnam and mediated political belonging. Refugee nationalism is, “an imagined community rooted in the collective memory of exile from Vietnam, implying a righteous migration and a future return to reclaim their lost nation” (p.39). Similarly, Espiritu observes that the Vietnamese American’s reproduction of itself as political exiles is a means to become legible and intelligible to the American dominant narrative, “we need to recognize that this ‘anticommunist’ stance is also a narrative, adopted in part because it is the primary political language with which Vietnamese refugees, as objects of U.S. rescue fantasies, could tell their history and be understood from within the U.S. social and political landscape.” (2014, p.96).

Nguyen highlights the productivity refugee nationalism plays in the survival of this group: “The cultural broker defense and the anti-communist component of their refugee nationalism… actually helped them navigate a society sometimes incapable or unwilling to distinguish Vietnamese refugees from America’s former enemy the Viet-Cong” (p.173). Yet refugee nationalism, while argued as a protective response in the resettlement of refugees within a nation that too readily resort to xenophobia and racism, has its price on the wellbeing of a community. Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us that Vietnamese refugee stories themselves work to narrate a particular victimhood which both troubles and affirms regimes of power. He states refugee nationalism draws the spotlight away from the complicities of the Vietnamese during the regional conflicts of the Cold War, “In considering Vietnamese refugee memory and the way it serves the interests of the Vietnamese Diaspora, we should be skeptical of how the so-called “Vietnam War” is retold as a story in which the Vietnamese are the victims but not the victimizers.” (2006, p.33). Refugee nationalism also elicits patriarchy. Himani Bannerji in her study on the neoliberal exercise of democracy writes, “No discussion of nationalism is possible without paying attention to the roles played by patriarchy, gender, racialization and ethnicization in nationalist ideologies or imaginaries” (2011, p. 12). Any April 30th commemoration of the “Fall of Saigon” ceremony outside of Vietnam will feature a salute of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) flag and national anthem, and a moment of silence for the deceased “sons” of Vietnam. As refugee nationalism inherently supports gendered relations of power, it disciplines the community formation into a surrogate family structure disciplining its younger generation.

Within the Vietnamese community in Canada, this generation is affectionately referred to as the “thế hệ kế thừa” (inheriting generation). It is idealized as the generation that firstly is the beneficiary of the refugee generation’s loss, sorrow, and hardships. At the same time, it is the generation that will repay this refugee generation for their sacrifices by means of academic and economic achievements. Within refugee nationalism, the successes of this younger generation are also vindication for the loss of the RVN. Espiritu mourns “the poignant and complex ways in which Vietnamese refugees and their children use public achievements to address the lingering costs of war, to manage intimacy, to negotiate family tensions, and to ensure their social position and dignity in the racially and economically stratified United States” (p.162). For this generation, participation and inclusion within the refugee community means to shoulder the burden of being an inheriting beneficiary of the gross tragedies of this war that is too painful, too raw to speak of at home, yet is overly reproduced in dominant discourses. It is also to submit to the patriarchal demands of the refugee community that structures the young
person’s relations with other community members, even through the simple use of the Vietnamese language which already confers submission by the use of childlike signifiers, “con”, “chao”, “em”. Duong and Pelaud (2012) write of a violent clash in the Vietnamese community and analyzes the disciplining effect of the anti-communist backlash, “This ideal of the community is highly problematic since it assumes that the spaces of the family and community are always safe and that members need to prove their filiality to the communal family.” (p.248).

As an analytic to unravel the sentiments of the Vietnamese refugee group, community allows for the engagement of different sets of literature. This analytic also points to the productivity of the practices that make community enable groups to make social political claims on the basis of shared and constructed identity.

References


http://www.macleans.ca/culture/books/kim-thuy-on-how-refugee-literature-differs-from-immigrant-literature/


3. Constellating Co-Resistance

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I am six years old. My two-year-old sister and I sit in the front seat of a pick-up truck on my mother’s lap. A young Jewish woman sits next to us, terrified, digging her nails into my mother’s thigh. She has been caught and tortured in a previous attempt to escape. In the back of the truck, covered beneath a tarp, my father lays down pressed against the bodies of numerous other refugees. We are creeping through the mountains between Iran and Pakistan. The truck’s lights are off so the blackness of night can hide us, but we have to keep moving. I don’t know how, but I know that the driver, who is from this region, is guided by the stars because he can’t see anything on the land. This is one of my first important lessons as a refugee: Wherever you are located on the land, your relationship to the stars can help position you, orient you, and guide you. But only if, like our Baluchi smuggler, you understand what the stars and constellations mean to where you find yourself on the land.

My journey as a Bahá’i refugee eventually brought me to Canada, a place where the stars didn’t change. However, their relationships to each other, to the land, and to the land’s original inhabitants was different from what I knew. Soon after our arrival, my family became close with a Bahá’í family whose matriarch, Evelyn Loft-Watts, was Ojibwe and Mohawk. She is the author of *Return to Tyendinaga*, and she died in 2016. The connection between our families was immediate. Looking at me, Evelyn told my mother, “she looks like us,” naming the resemblance I shared with her people. For Evelyn, this resemblance and the meaning of my name, deer, which was her mother’s clan, was moving. She was a major part of my formative years, sharing her perspectives on Bahá’í as well as Anishinaabe teachings. My scholarship is very personal to me, as I try to live and develop a relational methodology for my research in the land where the Anishinaabe have lived with other Indigenous peoples since well before contact. In my efforts to develop a method for thinking through forms of relationality, in particular between Indigenous and diasporic peoples (with a focus, for the purposes of this workshop, on refugees), I turn to Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, 211) and her term “constellations of co-resistance.”

In her most recent work, *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson invokes the term “constellation” to explain how Anishinaabeg (or Anishinaabe people) relate to the land and to each other. For example, the astronomic constellations signal to Anishinaabeg when the time has come for certain relationships to the land, like “when the ice is no longer safe, or when it is time to move to the sugar bush” (Simpson 2017, 212), or when it is time for ceremonies such as the sweat lodge. In addition to teaching people how to move through the land and what practices to conduct both on and with it, constellations also hold teachings about how people relate to each other. Using the analogy of a group of people coming together to support the bringing of new life to the world through childbirth, Simpson demonstrates how “[c]ollections of stars within
Nishinaabeg thought are beacons of light that work together to [also] create ... conceptual doorways that return us to our core essence within Nishnaabeg thought” (Simpson 2017, 212). She argues that in the journey to dismantle settler colonialism and create an alternative, holistic way to live in Indigenous lands, non-Indigenous people of colour and Indigenous people are compelling counterparts to form “constellations of coresistance” (Simpson 2017, 211). For Simpson, resurgence is the current state of Indigenous nations in Canada and the United States. When assessing who the most likely supporters of Indigenous people are, Simpson asserts that,

[w]hiteness is not centred in resurgence. If we recognize settler colonialism to be dispossession, capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy that recognition points us to our allies: not liberal white Canadians who uphold all four pillars but Black and brown individuals and communities on Turtle Island and beyond that are struggling in their own localities against these same forces, building movements that contain the alternatives. (Simpson 2017, 228-9)

She explains that, according to Indigenous thought—especially Anishinaabe thought—the critical issue is not only how liberation is achieved, but “with whom” (Simpson, 2017, 229). Pointing out the Black community north of the Great Lakes as an example, Simpson (2017, 229) suggests that Indigenous resurgence must try to build “solid, reciprocal relationships with Black visionaries who are also cocreating alternatives under the lens of abolition, decolonization, and anticapitalism.” Furthermore, she posits this notion in accordance with Anishinaabe political practices of land-sharing and non-interference in the sovereignty of other peoples, contending that “we would have to figure out political mechanisms to respect each other’s governance, sovereignty, and jurisdiction while committing to taking care of our shared ecosystem” (Simpson 2017, 231). In this way, Simpson (2017, 231) conceives of the practice of creating solidarities through “constellation[s] of coresistance and freedom ... under radical resurgence.” Being part of constellations of coresistance as refugees and/or critical refugee studies scholars thus means that one should use one’s particular social and political position to foreground Indigenous autonomy instead of subscribing to the settler state’s dream for us to serve as brown pieces of a multicultural mosaic that effaces the particularities of Indigenous rights.

While a mosaic makes a single, cohesive image from fragments affixed to each other in close proximity, constellations are comprised of stars that are individual entities, infinite distances apart and understood in relationship to each other in different ways by people on the earth depending on where and who they are. A mosaic tells a single story at the expense of its individual components, which is a feature that works to the benefit of the settler state. Yet a constellation avoids this by foregrounding the differences faced by the racialized stakeholders who attempt to imagine and create journeys out from existing under “dispossession, capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy” (Simpson 2017, 228). Moreover, using the concept of constellations can help those who have been most grievously impacted by Eurocentric Imperialism tease apart the ways in which their interests and oppressions have been interconnected or set against one another in order to bolster the designs of their oppressors. Lisa Lowe uses the term “constellation” similarly in *Intimacies of Four Continents*, wherein she undermines the logics of settler colonialism through a mobilization of affect, using intimacy as
an analytic for a rigorously historical tracing of relationships between the four continents. Specifically, Lowe (2015, 18) “emphasize[s] a constellation of asymmetrical and unevenly legible ‘intimacies’” by “drawing into relation” places that are geographically distant and yet intimately related in the ways they have been impacted by the pursuits of Euro-American empire and capitalism.

I am interested in drawing on these intellectual traditions to develop the concept of “constellations” for critical refugee studies. Doing so has the potential to think through political solidarities between Indigenous and refugee subjects. I think of solidarities as configuring different but related investments in notions of futurity—a concept that has been taken up by both Indigenous and racialized scholars. Referencing Black feminism, Tina M. Campt (2017, 17) explains that “[f]uturity is … a politics of prefiguration that involves living the future now … as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present”. The “you” she refers to includes “subordinates, sub-altern, and marginalized groups” (Campt 2017, 17), and I assert that racialized refugees are a part of these groups. Relationships enacted between these groups in accordance with the grammar of settler colonialism operate under the premise of the permanence of the settler colonial state and the dominance of Euro-American Imperialism, and they endorse a multiculturalist vision. By contrast, practicing relationality through constellations means upholding each other’s diverse politics of futurity in ways that must challenge, and ultimately dismantle, settler colonialism and Euro-American Imperialism.

In an attempt to work through this methodology, I present an image that I recently saw circulated on social media platforms. I am no cyber-detective, so the main source I could track down for this image was a Facebook group called Justin Trudeau Is An Idiot, which is listed as a Political Organization. Based on posts written for the account and articles shared by the account, it appears to be a right-wing account that supports xenophobia, the Conservative party, and domestic resource extraction. Despite this, however, the image was shared by people in my social media circles who constantly share opinions and articles that denounce all three things Justin Trudeau is an Idiot seems to celebrate. While I will not attempt to get into the reasons why, I will argue that this image, though it may appear to be championing the primacy of Indigenous concerns to the Canadian state, actually undermines Indigenous sovereignty by using xenophobia to reframe the issue within multiculturalism. As such, it effectively distracts those it claims to represent from a constellational mode of relationality.
These juxtaposed images take the existence and legitimacy of the Canadian state for granted insofar as both the state and whiteness evade visual representation at the same time as they order the relationship between those the images capture. While these pictures representing two different racialized groups are pieced together, white “Canada”—both the population and the white supremacist state—are not affixed to the national mosaic. However, the word “Canada” appears beneath both. Canada discursively orients each group to itself and thus mediates both their identities and their relationships to one another. The lower picture shows a harrowing image of the state of housing in many, particularly more rural, reserves. Yet there are no people in the image, offering a re-inscription of the tabula rasa fallacy driving European conquest in the Americas. The caption, however, is informative about how this picture positions Indigenous peoples. It reads: “Canada’s First Nations Housing.” A shorter phrase within this one, “Canada’s First Nations,” is reminiscent of the way the state and popular news media often speak of Indigenous peoples. They are frequently referred to in terms of possessions of the settler state when, for example, a government representative refers to them as “Our Indigenous people,” or, as in the case here, when First Nations are made the belongings of Canada through the apostrophe “s” of a colonial language. Indigenous peoples and, by extension, their lands, are claimed by the Canadian state. However, the image makes no mention of how reserves are a part of the systemic displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. There is no historical or social context framing the poverty, horrific housing conditions, and infrastructural issues faced on reserves as part of a centuries long, intentional program of genocide that began with the spread of European Empire.

On the contrary, the only thing contextualizing this state of affairs is the picture of a joyful, Brown, Muslim family inside a modern, white kitchen. In contrast to the first image, this family,
who are, as the caption implies, refugees, are not claimed by the Canadian state. What is claimed by the state, however, is the house within which we see them. At this point, it is worth noting that in 2016, Amnesty international reported that nearly 60% of the worlds refugees were hosted in 10 countries in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia (Al Jazeera 2016). Furthermore, in 2016, the top 5 countries from which Canada accepted refugees were Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, Congo, and Afghanistan (Puzic 2016). In the second image, this Brown, Muslim family as unclaimed refugees depicts a specific kind of unwanted, racialized alien. Moreover, it does so without paying any attention to the conditions through which these people were made refugees. Like the first image erases centuries of colonial context, the second image glossily ignores the fact that Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan—as well as much of the rest of the Middle East—have for decades been subjected to Western interventions which toppled democratic and non-democratic governments, wreaking havoc in the process. While these interventions have often been spearheaded by the United States, they have frequently been supported by Canada, both militaristically and otherwise.

By removing Canada from its obvious role in the creation of the conditions for both of these images, and juxtaposing them, the story they tell becomes one that primarily takes up issues of multiculturalism. This narrative is one in which the land’s resources belong to the Canadian state and are then distributed by the state amongst the mosaic of racialized people. However, by framing the people in the shiny new kitchen as refugees next to a destitute depiction of First Nations’ housing, this image suggests that Canada is failing at its role as a benevolent distributor of equal wealth among its constituent people of diverse cultures. It insinuates that Canada and the contexts and conditions of its existence are not the problem; rather, Justin Trudeau is simply an “idiot” who should be replaced by a Conservative government. Analyzing this image through a methodology that foregrounds the concept of constellations reveals the lie of multiculturalism and asks us to consider the relationship between the settler colonial logics that differently dispossess and displace the Indigenous people here as well as racialized people in the Middle East. Such a framing recognizes Indigenous futurity in multiple ways, including by highlighting the fact that the resources at issue here belong to Indigenous people and not the Canadian state, and that Indigenous law is what should decide who is given refuge in this land. Though this is commendable, as a refugee I think that refugee futurity aspires to a time not of refugee status and resettlement assistance given by a legitimate source, but rather a time when we are not made refugees in the first place.

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4. Decolonizing Genders and Sexualities

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I propose thoughtful engagement with the following key concept for critical refugee studies: *Decolonizing genders and sexualities*. This key concept is mostly mobilized by scholars who engage with feminist, queer and trans transnational, diasporic, of color and indigenous critiques to highlight the operation of multiple colonial logics across white settler colonial, post/neo colonial and mestiza-colonial geographies. Although most scholars tend to apply this key concept within a particular geographical and colonial context, placing these scholars in critical conversation with each other can generate a robust, complex and multi-valent way to engage with *decolonizing genders and sexualities*.

*Decolonizing genders and sexualities* exceed identity formation and extend into modes of knowledge production and anti-normative politics. Recent scholarship suggests that a decolonial trans analysis and politics should situate Western-driven trans identities within various colonial geographies, whether it be in relation to Coast Salish Territories (British Columbia, Canada), India, Madagascar, etc (Dutta & Roy, 2014; Wesley, 2014; Palmer, 2014). Indeed, the use of trans as the primary category for all gender diverse identities and expressions obscures more complex gender formations (Dutta & Roy, 2014; Ekine & Abbas, 2013; Valentine, 2007). Pathways towards the decolonization of trans knowledge production include through the interrogation of Western notions of gender, medical pathologization of trans categories as well as situating these categories within the complexities of global capitalism (Boellstorff et al., 2014, p. 421). According to Dutta & Roy (2014), the decolonization of the Indian context requires “the transformation of the political economy of social movements, the dismantling of scalar geographies of development and the class/caste/racial hierarchies within this they are embedded.” (p. 335). A decolonial trans politics thus can not be limited to a nation-state’s recognition and protection of trans identities.

Although lesbian and gay centered identities, as well as queer theories and politics often marginalize, erase and appropriate issues directing concerning trans and gender diverse people, the colonial modes of knowing and linking gender and sexuality should be recognized. Indeed, the historical production of gender and sexual identity categories in the West informs the contemporary global universalization of these categories (Dutta & Roy, 2014; Lee & Brotman, 2011; Manalansan, 1997). Sexuality is entwined with racialized, gendered and classed formations since “the gendering of sexuality and the sexualization of the gendered is also riven with class and racial origins, dynamics, and processes” (Valentine, 2007, p. 60, citing Ferguson, 2004). Recently, scholars have explored how sexuality intersects with race, class, gender and religion to produce colonial violence on a transnational scale with particular impacts on queer and trans people in the Global South and queer and trans people of color who live in white / Western nation-states (Bakshi, Jivraj & Posocco, 2016). These processes of colonization and
racialization are simultaneously gendered, classed, able-ized and sexualized, resulting in an uneven and hierarchical distribution of life chances and exposure to death. At the same time, the intentional creation of a queer decolonial politics can also re-imagine vibrant and sustainable futures (Bacchetta, 2016).

Another key feature of this concept draws from queer and trans diasporic critique to highlight how complex notions of home and nation are imbued by cisnormativity and heteronormativity\(^3\) (Bhanji, 2012; Eng, 1997; Haritaworn, 2012; Puar, 1996). In my research, I suggest that the historical continuity of the ‘Canadians First’ t-discourse, contributes to a white settler colonial logic that valorizes and naturalizes the heterocisnormative nuclear family (Lee, 2015). This t-discourse continues to reinforce racialized, gendered and heterocisnormative hierarchies that inform the ways in which the Canadian immigration / colonization regime shapes the everyday lives of queer and trans migrants with precarious status. Part of my study includes situating contemporary queer and trans migrations to Canada within a colonial context whereby sexual and gender transgressions of Indigenous people and Asian migrants were differentially regulated and criminalized in order for the state to consolidate the making of a white settler and patriarchal society.

A major challenge for knowledge production about this topic are the ways in which vast histories related to the colonial management of gender and sexuality on a global scale, and especially within the realm of the intimate, have been forgotten and/or erased (Lowe, 2016; Stoler, 2006). A key aspect of decolonizing genders and sexualities, requires rendering visible coloniality, as a global matrix of power (Quijano, 2000). The coloniality of power is obscured by the prevailing narratives of modernity: progress, civilization, development, and market democracy (Mignolo, 2016; Quijano, 2000; Wynter, 2003). The naturalization of contemporary global governance through the nation-state obscure its colonial and imperial origins as driven by Western European empires, that simultaneously constructed, as Wynter (2003) suggests, “the ‘world civilization’ on the one hand, and, on the other, African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation.” (p. 257). These “residual intimacies” of conquest, slavery, and indentured labour thus persist and deepen into the present (Lowe, 2016, p. 19). Central to coloniality is how modernity has defined the “civilized” human subject as white people/Whiteness in relation to the non-human black people/blackness (King, 2014; Walcott, 2013). Moreover, an analytical focus at the scale of empire makes legible what Byrd (2011) describes as the “cacophonies of colonialism”—interlacing colonial and imperial logics across geographies.

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\(^3\) An analysis of cisnormativity reveals the ways in which social institutions and practices presume that everyone is “cis” – whereby one’s gender identity and physical sex are entirely aligned, thus erasing trans realities and rigidly enforcing the gender binary (Serano, 2007). Whereas heteronormativity can be defined as the presumption that everyone is heterosexual through dominant institutions and practices that reproduce heterosexuality and naturalize monogamous marriage between a cis man and cis woman (Cohen, 1997). The term heterocisnormativity can also be used to highlight when cisnormativity and heteronormativity overlap.
Tracing the ways in which cisnormative and heteronormative processes inform coloniality on a global scale helps to situate the historical, social, economic and political conditions of queer and trans migrations. This type of macro analysis attends to the matrix of power that shapes post/neo-colonial nation-states in the Global South that drive out queer and trans people as well as the white settler nation-state that queer and trans migrants enter into upon arrival to Canada. Its analytical strength is also its major challenge – how might we engage with an analytical framework that attends to multiple colonial logics without erasing local, regional and national specificities?

Finally, decolonizing genders and sexualities is equally invested in generative practices both theoretically and politically, that not only critique the current global climate and its historical continuities, but also present alternative, anti-normative futures, whereby those most impacted by coloniality, queer and trans people of color (who are a combination of Black, Indigenous, person of color and migrant) are at the center of building sustainable and egalitarian life-worlds for everyone. Indeed, the everyday realities and standpoints of queer and trans migrants gesture to multiple ways of being and all together new futures and possibilities (Manalansan, 2014). Decolonizing genders and sexualities both engages with identity politics and extends beyond it (Tuck & Yang, 2017). The fostering of a decolonizing genders and sexualities politics is thus invested in creativity, collective survival and life affirming practices.

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Empathy is usually invoked as the necessary or desired affect for those in the host country to feel towards those seeking refuge; indeed, many scholars consider empathy to be essential to our understanding of refugee subjectivity. For example, Bridget Hayden (2006, 478) states: “The significant factor that distinguishes a refugee from other people who cross borders, people who are internally displaced, or indeed from those who have not moved at all but live in abysmal conditions, is the sense of responsibility and either pity or empathy we feel for them. ‘Refugee’, like all other such categories, is a relational term.” Hayden doesn’t think that empathy should necessarily be a central criterion in our understanding of the term “refugee,” but rather that this is the case. Caroline Wake (2008, 188) also considers empathy as significant in theatre that performs the “witnessing” of asylum seekers: “the figure of the performing witness refers to the observer who becomes so ethically and empathically engaged in or by a performance that he or she is transformed from a passive watcher into an active witness.”

Literary texts—fiction, life writing, drama—are often seen as avenues for creating or enabling empathy by narrating the refugee’s story for an audience or readership. My research asks whether the creative writer might have a particular responsibility to convincingly represent refugee experience—which the refugee often cannot do, for both political and psychological reasons—and in the process to make the listener to refugee narratives—the general reader and members of Refugee Boards—more understanding and empathetic? Conversely, is the idea of understanding that leads to empathy and compassion itself a misguided objective that 1) places too much restriction on the artist/writer; 2) assumes the right of the listener/audience to intrude into the intimate, usually traumatic, memories of refugees; and 3) diverts attention from the ethical responsibilities of states?

There is a stream of feminist and queer theory that rejects empathy and understanding on psychological and ideological grounds. Patti Lather (2008, 19), for example, drawing on the work of Douglas Crimp, Elizabeth Ellsworth, and Doris Sommer, argues that the concept of empathy leading to understanding constitutes a liberal move that is “premised on structures that all people share” and that “reduces otherness to sameness within a personalized culture.” Such a move towards empathy collapses genuine, messy difference between observer and observed, reader and text, rejects “counter-practices of queering, disidentifying, denaturalizing and defamiliarizing,” and thus enacts the very kind of imperial violence, the voyeuristic right to know the Other, that it claims to be opposing.

Discussing the role of empathy specifically in the context of actual women refugee claimants in Canada, Sherene Razack (1996, 167-68) writes:
given the fact that most judges come from dominant groups, they are unlikely to be able to empathize with marginalized groups. In any event, in the area of discrimination, . . . Massaro points out that empathy is not the ultimate goal. It is not enough to try to find ways to communicate to the judge that discrimination is hurtful. It is equally necessary to convince him or her that an action is morally wrong and requires legal sanction.

Razack also stresses that empathy replicates colonial/imperial power relations between North and South, the West and “the Orient,” observing that “Tolerance, understanding and compassion are not situations that easily lead to respect. . . . [T]hese words conceal relations of power and a position of superiority—who is tolerating whom, who enjoys the power and position to be compassionate?” (Razack 1996, 171-72).

Rea Dennis, summarizing a number of performance theorists, also dismisses empathy as the ultimate goal for the writer/performer to convey to the listener/viewer. Contradicting Hayden and Wake, she asserts:

empathy impacts the listener’s capacity to act. As Nicholson argues, ‘passive empathy’ can be comfortably pleasurable and lead to consuming the Other. Likewise, Rowe notes that overly empathic responses ‘close the difference between self and other’ and threaten to eradicate ‘the other through representation’. He maintains a gaze on the morality of the performer citing openness, willingness, sensitivity, vulnerability, and commitment as essential for accountability in representation (Dennis 2008, 213).

Dennis urges that, rather than aiming for mimesis, “performers are charged with creating some form of transformation of the telling through the languages of theatre” (Dennis 2008, 213).

Razack’s critique of empathy is made in support of an approach to refugee claims that is based instead on moral responsibility, on Western countries like Canada accepting their complicity or agency in causing or exacerbating the conflicts that produce refugee crises in the first place. In other words, she argues for an approach that focuses on large structural issues rather than small inter-personal ones. Razack’s and Dennis’s dismissal of empathy, understanding, and compassion is also predicated on the observer, audience member, judge or refugee board member, being white, straight, patriarchal. This leads me to two questions: Can art that tackles refugee issues effectively focus on large structural injustices or is the strength of art to represent the interpersonal, to operate in an affective register? Second, what happens to the dynamics of power between narrator and listener when the writer creating the story of Others is not white, straight, patriarchal but instead occupies some kind of minoritized subjectivity? A couple of examples from recent refugee novels in Canada prove interesting in this regard.

Kim Echlin’s *The Disappeared* is a novel about the Cambodian genocide and a Cambodian student who decides not to seek asylum in Canada but returns to Cambodia, written from outside the Cambodian Canadian community by a white woman. Echlin discusses her aims in
writing the novel as follows: “I wanted to think about how literature witnesses to human conscience. I wanted to find language that both holds and interprets memory. I wanted to find the stories that connect us. . . . To see from another’s point of view is central to compassion and empathy; to experience our own well-being as a function of everyone else’s well-being is to be connected” (Echlin 2013, 127-131). Echlin’s concept of connection, compassion, and empathy owes a lot, I believe, to Zen Buddhism.

Another interesting case is Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* in which Brand, a Black, Caribbean, lesbian, feminist—a celebrated and much-awarded writer in Canada—presents a narrative of a Vietnamese refugee family living in Toronto, a narrative that deals extensively, via its aesthetics and form, with the difficulties—perhaps the impossibilities—of truly (re)presenting and understanding refugee trauma. At the same time, Brand insists that her narrative generates cross-racial empathy and she is proud of having written a novel that some Vietnamese Canadians identify with. Brand tells a story that exemplifies empathy as the effect of her novel:

At a reading once in Calgary of my last novel, *What We All Long For*, a woman waited in the book line and when she approached me I noticed she was in tears. And the book was in part about a Vietnamese family who had arrived in Toronto after the Vietnam War, and who were wrecked and broken after losing their son in the crush and panic of that time. And the woman who approached me weeping asked me, when she got to me: “How did you know? How did you know?” I was taken aback but then understood what she was saying and rose to comfort her. She had been a refugee from Vietnam herself and found a similarity between herself and the characters in the book. Kinship, that is what literature means!

Brand is not making a claim here that she has produced in her novel an *authentic* Vietnamese Canadian refugee narrative, whatever that might be (even though she did a great deal of research on the Vietnamese narrative); rather, she makes the claim that her text gets the Vietnamese story *right enough* that it has the affective power to resonate with Vietnamese refugees. It creates a sense of kinship across lines such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. One question raised here is whether Brand may be able to achieve this affective response of empathy because she is a Black lesbian-feminist immigrant to Canada from the Caribbean, someone who knows the experience of outsider status, of state and personal discrimination, of abjection, but I don’t know how far I want to push such a claim. I do think that, freed of any need to produce a narrative of refugee gratitude, she is able to be more critical of the Canadian nation and to dispel notions of Canadian exceptionalism in the treatment of refugees and other migrants, in a way that Madeleine Thien is also freed to probe the Cambodian refugee experience from “outside” (Thien is Sino-Malaysian Canadian) in an act of supreme literary “kinship” in *Dogs at the Perimeter*. Does the creation or evocation of empathy and compassion in art and literature depend on the identity—race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality—of the writer/artist? Further, can empathy and compassion exist without understanding the refugee’s condition because all of these novels—Brand’s, Echlin’s, Thien’s—insist that refugee trauma
cannot, in the end, be understood by the reader—which may be their most important lesson to refugee boards.

References


6. Humanitarian Exceptionalism

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On January 27th, 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 13769 (Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States), commonly known as the Travel Ban or the Muslim Ban. The Order suspended the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days; placed an indefinite ban on refugees from Syria; and barred entry to anyone from seven predominantly Muslim countries in the Middle East and Africa. The next day, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau went on Twitter to proclaim: “To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength #WelcomeToCanada.” Fourteen minutes later, Trudeau tweeted a picture of himself greeting a Syrian refugee child at the airport in 2015. These two tweets, a discursive declaration of hospitality and visual evidence of this hospitality, exemplify Canadian “humanitarian exceptionalism,” a belief that what sets the nation apart is its benevolence and magnanimity. The well-timed public pronouncement was a strategic and politically expedient response to the devolving political situation in the U.S. Trudeau draws on a tradition of defining Canadian liberal nationalism—qualities of benevolence, tolerance, and generosity—against our southern neighbor’s restrictive and regressive actions. The racist and xenophobic Order, which was met with widespread condemnation, became an opportunity for the Prime Minister to exalt Canada as an open and welcoming haven to the global public. At the moment of American humanitarian failure, Canada came into view as an exceptional leader in refugee humanitarianism. The subsequent trending of the hashtag #WelcomeToCanada on twitter highlights the ways that the narrative of Canadian exceptionalism proliferates in the present era.

We also see this narrative vividly illustrated in photographs of “irregular border crossers,” the men, women, and children who braved frigid temperatures to travel from the U.S. so as to claim refugee status in Canada in contravention of the Safe Third Country Act.
Press coverage of this phenomenon of irregular border crossers represents two contrasting scenes. In one, U.S. border agents chase a fleeing man; the overwrought composition stresses that the act is as cold as the snow that surrounds them. In the other photograph, an RCMP officer smiles as he lifts a girl from the snow, an embrace that provides warmth and shelter. Juxtaposed in this way, the ruthlessness of the U.S. agent throws into relief the kindness of the RCMP. As an icon of Canadian hospitality, the photograph of the RCMP officer’s embrace exposes the inhospitality of our American neighbors. Seldom do we see what happens next in Canada: the RCMP then arrests irregular border crossers, who are then held in detention centers. The narrative of humanitarian exceptionalism obscures actions and policies that are less than welcoming. While articulations of Canadian benevolence as expressed in Trudeau’s #WelcomeToCanada tweet and in visual melodramas like the border crossing photographs are not new, especially as a discourse of national identity, they merit special scrutiny given their resurgence at this historical juncture of rising fascism, border security, and war on terror. Humanitarian exceptionalism names the persistent narrative of Canadian benevolence and generosity towards refugees and migrants fleeing oppression, persecution, and unfreedom. (Indeed, despite receiving more than its fair share of press coverage for this benevolence, Canada is by no means a world leader when it comes to refugee intake—the tens of thousands of Syrian refugees who have come to Canada in the past few years does not come close to the millions hosted by Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.) And, as the photographs demonstrate, humanitarian exceptionalism operates in a melodramatic mode, which provides an affective structure that reifies such moral polarities as good and evil, tolerant and intolerant, human and alien, to name just a few. Though we associate melodrama with the excesses of soap opera fantasies, it also permeates everyday culture, according to cultural theorists Peter Brooks, Linda Williams, and Elizabeth Anker. When it comes to melodramas of refuge, a before/after framework underscores spatial and temporal progress from stateless dispossession to safe resettlement, and, as Peter Murray points out, from oppression to liberation. Moreover, refugees are often expected to reiterate this particular kind of story, simply to be legible as
refugees. Their claims depend on it. The melodrama also deploys stock characters, such as the heroic rescuer, despotic human rights abusers, and exemplars in the symbol of the successful, grateful, and indeed exceptional refugee. Some of the most accomplished of these exceptional refugees include: Ahmed Hussain, who as a teenager fled Somalia with his family, and after a distinguished career as community organizer and activist was appointed Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship; award-winning novelist Kim Thúy; Phan Thi Kim Phuc, who became an iconic emblem of wartime suffering in Nick Ut’s photograph of a napalm attack in Trang Bang, Vietnam who, after defecting, became an outspoken champion of human rights; prominent musician K’nana (Somali-born Keinan Abdi Warsame); and Michaelle Jean and Adrienne Clarkson, who were appointed to Governor General in 2005 and 1999 respectively, the British monarchy’s symbolic representative in Canada; and Peter C. Newman, the influential Czech-born publishing magnate, among many others. By no means comprehensive, this list attests to the popularity of the symbol of the exceptional refugee. Taken together, these narrative conventions form part and parcel of a carefully cultivated image of Canada as compassionate towards and tolerant of refugees from developing countries and as an international leader in human rights and democratic freedom.

This narrative and the image that it broadcasts endures despite ample evidence of Canada’s often less than hospitable stance. Though we understand the temptation to dispel this myth, we are more concerned with explaining its durability, whose strength and popularity persists instead of wanes in the face of facts. We are concerned, that is, with the function of this myth of humanitarian exceptionalism, particularly its capacity to overshadow and elide the nation’s unseemly record of exclusion, in the form of immigration laws that have discriminated on the grounds of race, sexuality, and ability, not to mention its shameful history of xenophobia and racism. Just as importantly, the narrative glosses over moments when, instead of welcoming, Canada turned away the strangers who arrived on its shores, including: Indian migrants aboard the Komagata Maru in 1914, displaced Jews in the 1930s and ‘40s, Chinese stowaways aboard a container ship in 2001 and 2017, and Sri Lankan Tamils seeking refuge on the MV Sun Sea in 2010, to list just a few examples.

By noting the limits of Canada’s beneficence, we wish neither to belabor the fallacy of humanitarian exceptionalism nor to refute its material basis, but instead emphasize how this narrative acquires discursive potency precisely by amplifying the exception as the norm. The most notable exception occurred when 60,000 Indochinese refugees were accepted in an 18-month period, a response that distinguished Canada as, per capita, the most welcoming of all nations at that time. In recognition of this generosity, the UN conferred the Nansen Medal to the Canadian people in 1986. This moment has been recalled, memorialized, reinvoked, and re-narrated as an ur-text that illuminates Canada’s core values and virtues, and as a model to which the nation and its people continue to aspire. Canonized as a national mythology, the narrative has taken a life of its own. The concept of humanitarian exceptionalism lays bare the ways in which Canada has relied on refugees and other categories of migrants to further its cultural and political agendas. Not only does Canada need the narrative of humanitarian exceptionalism, it also needs refugees in order to secure a cohesive sense of national identity and to attract international attention and admiration.
7. Indebtedness

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Working at the intersection of settler colonial studies, Asian North American studies, and critical refugee studies, I would like to offer up the concept of indebtedness: that is, indebtedness, rather than debt; the ongoing and endless state of being indebted to another agent rather than the notion of owing another being a repayable, quantifiable, and thus, terminal debt (i.e. if a debt relation ends once the debt has been repaid, indebtedness is more about that relation and state of being indebted to another). I suggest the concept of indebtedness rather than debt due to its enduring condition, its often intangible and unquantifiable nature. And there is something about indebtedness that captures the human aspects of an imbalance, a power differential. It turns away from the economics of financial obligation ever so slightly to focus instead on the relations that arise as a result of being indebted.

In his book on *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, David Graeber (2014) questions the assumption that debts have to be repaid. In his expansive survey of the origins of debt systems going back five millennia, he observes that the language of debt underpinning contemporary notions of moral exchange rests upon maintaining unjust structures of hierarchy in which the underclasses have always been forced to repay their debts, often under stark conditions of privation and suffering, an expectation that has not been equally applied to the privileged classes. This is the way in which indebtedness has always been theorized: to uphold and honour our debts is to abide by debt systems that justify relations of enduring inequality, exploitation, and violence (Atwood 2008, Graeber 2014, Lazzarato 2012, Nietzsche 2013, Ninh 2011, and Nguyen 2013). But what happens when we begin to conceive of indebtedness as a voluntary state or condition? What if refugees were to adopt this position of indebtedness and thus gratitude not only by force but also by choice? And what if this indebtedness was a debt that could never be repaid? At least not in any tangible or concrete way?

In thinking through the concept of indebtedness in critical refugee studies, Vinh Nguyen and Mimi Thi Nguyen have written insightfully on the ways in which gratitude becomes an enduring obligation placed upon the refugee figure by the state and host society that can become a burden or a potentiality. On the one hand, to be given the chance to start over in a new land, to be given the chance to live often becomes structured as a gift that can never be paid, particularly when the state’s liberal “gift of freedom,” according to Mimi Thi Nguyen (2012, 6-11), forever binds the refugee to the giver in an enduring economy of indebtedness, obligation, and recompense. But on the other hand, refugees remain indebted to not only the state but also all the agents who have made it possible for refugees to start over (in the Canadian context, these agents may be the sponsors, visa officers, donors, volunteers, neighbours, organization and/or community members, etc.). And they may be more than happy to express
this gratitude and be forever indebted and grateful to all of the agents who have made this second start at life possible. As Vinh Nguyen reminds us, refugee expressions of gratitude and celebrations of success “are integral to the intertwined processes of survival and subject formation for those who have experienced intense struggle, loss, and trauma”: they constitute necessary life-writing tools for regenerating refugee self-existence, livelihood, being, and identity out of ontological oblivion (Nguyen 2013, 18, 23-24).

So I ask that we include the concept of indebtedness as a keyword for critical refugee studies for all the refugee relations that it implies, the relations to community, the relations to history, the relations to state and institutional power, and last but not least, the relations to the land and its Indigenous peoples. This final set of relations is not one that has been prioritized enough in either Indigenous or critical refugee studies. This may be surprising or not surprising if one considers that our conceptual frameworks for understanding the place of racialized immigrants in the Canadian nation-state has been limited to “the filter of racialized categories rather than through the lens of immigrants’ relations to the [...] land” (Wong 2008, 164). Given that critical race studies and civil rights advocacy for the longest time (from the 1960s until the early 2000s) was framed under the state rights and equity lens, it was difficult for us to move past that view and understand how communities marginalized by intersecting structures of oppression (race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, ability, and statelessness) have also been implicated in the ongoing displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Understanding that refugee positionalities intersect in multiple ways makes room for relationalities that may not be as obvious or present, particularly in a settler nation that has had a long historical track record of rendering Indigenous absence or disappearance an inevitable and foregone conclusion.

And that is why I suggest the concept of indebtedness for critical refugee studies: that is, indebtedness as a practice of memory work, an approach to decolonize our epistemologies and relationalities. I realize it is careless to invoke decolonization these days lest it only becomes a metaphor for uplifting and achieving cognitive and ethical transcendence for the settler mind (Tuck and Yang 2012). But for me, indebtedness is more than a theoretical concept: it is both a practice and approach to build better relations through stories of indebtedness, through exchanging and archiving stories of refugee and Indigenous communities being indebted to one another and finding ways to express that indebtedness in ways that could never repay those debts, to be sure, for how could any settler, migrant, or refugee ever repay the original inhabitants of this land, particularly when the choice to “gift” this land (that is, territories ceded through treaties) was anything but a choice?

So I conclude with a story of refugee indebtedness reported recently in the news, in which Peace by Chocolate, a chocolatier founded by Syrian refugees in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, produces and names its first chocolate bar, Wantago’ti, the Mi’kmaq word for peace (Canadian Press). As Tareq Hadhad, the founder of the chocolatier, explains it, “Nothing is nobler than spreading our message in the mother tongue of this land we are one and we call home” (Canadian Press 2018, para. 3). I believe that there is a powerful social process that happens in the transmission and exchange of stories of refugee indebtedness. Do these stories repay or
right historical wrongs? Of course not. But they carry the potential to reorient and re-establish respectful relations between refugee and Indigenous communities.

References


8. Irregularity

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Academics and policy-makers speak of irregularity most commonly in relation to unauthorized forms of international migration. Here, the irregular migrant has come to signify both an identity and a category of governance. The irregular migrant is defined as a non-citizen who has crossed state borders or remained in a state’s territory without authorization by the host state. The academic and policy literature on irregular migration consistently frames the migrant in opposition to the ‘regular’ subjects of the states: that is, the citizen, the authorized immigrant, and (albeit increasingly less so) the refugee. As its name implies, the irregular migrant is the exception to the norm: an unsettling identity amongst the community of citizens where questions of belonging and identity are supposedly settled. Indeed, the very idea of ‘irregular migration’ is testimony to the centrality of the state in defining who does and does not belong to the political community. The laws and policies that punish and deter irregular migration reinforce a territorial account of political belonging that places the citizen as the normal subject of politics.

Irregularity can be seen as a predatory force, with an ever-increasing number of classifications of moving people being caught up its rationales, logics, and techniques of management and control. For example, as a result of the increased restrictions on claiming asylum, more and more refugees being spoken of as irregular migrants. So in addition to the unauthorized migrant, we see refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, temporary and permanent residents, and even citizens being subsumed within the discourse of irregularity. Just as many scholars have demonstrated that the irregular vs. regular migrant distinction is unsustainable, it seems that the irregular migrant vs. regular citizen distinction is on shaky ground as well. Who are these irregular figures that populate contemporary political struggles?

To study the figure of the ‘irregular’ requires one to first critically reflect on what it means to speak of the irregular (migrant, refugee, or citizen) as a figure. Thomas Nail (2105, 16) warns against approaching a figure in essentialist terms. The figure is neither a ‘fixed identity’ nor a ‘specific person’, but can be productively conceived as a ‘mobile social position’ that is occupied ‘to different degrees, at different times, and in different circumstances’. In this way, a figure is a kind of ‘social vector’. As Nail (2015, 16) explains: ‘Insofar as specific individuals take up a trajectory, they are figured by it’. To the extent that people are caught up in the vector of irregularity, they are figured as irregular migrants, refugees, or citizens. This process – ‘irregularization’ – is the kinetic force that makes and unmakes people into irregular subjects. When migrants, refugees, and citizens are said to have no right to the rights they are owed, then we can say that an act of irregularization has occurred.
The tropes, elements, and discourses of irregularity converge onto particular subjects and communities. Irregular is unevenly distributed and demands an intersectional approach attuned to the dynamics of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Irregularity ‘sticks’, to use Sara Ahmed’s (2004) term, to some people and slips off more easily for others. The irregular signifies persons who are out-of-place and out-of-sync with the dominant modes of belonging. The irregular is negatively understood as that which is unwanted, misshapen, and asymmetrical. Irregularities are, therefore, rarely the result of intentional planning, composition, or design. To be irregular is to be a rule-breaker. Irregularities are something to be managed, their numbers and effects minimized, hidden, or eliminated from sight. But this desire to manage, control, and eradicate irregularity is an impossible dream. It is the fantasy that underscores (and undercuts) all moves to purity. The pure necessarily involves the production of the impure. Containing irregularity, therefore, is a losing enterprise because the very act of making the regular (citizens, immigrant, refugee) also creates its irregular counterpart. Regular and irregular: each is caught up in the other’s production; they exist in an immanent field of action, what Martina Tazzioli (2015) evocatively calls a ‘strugglefield’.

The irregular has an indeterminate nature, making it a difficult candidate upon which to base a politics. And yet, the space of the irregular is nonetheless a space of politics. Irregularity both confirms and confounds sovereign accounts of the political. It is the singular and exceptional accident that exposes the general accident of the norm. Its subjects are the abandoned, discounted, and forsaken who are also the claim maker, the rights taker, and active subject. If the regular is that which is regulated, the anxiety over the irregular is due, in part, to its vitality, its evasiveness to regulation, management, and control.

There has been some creative critical reworking of the meaning of irregularity. Vicki Squire, for example, argues in favour of taking some ‘critical distance’ from the mainstream definitions of irregularity that are framed in relation to various forms of unauthorized migration. Arguing that irregularity involves a politics that goes well beyond the legal dynamics of unauthorized border crossings, Squire unpacks the concept of irregularity in relation to political dynamics that are counter to the dominant narrative of ‘illegality’. Irregularity, for Squire (2011, 5), is a multidimensional concept and can be theorized as a condition, a political stake, an ambivalent state, and an analytic.

In the first place, Squire challenges the assumption that irregularity is a ‘problem’ that somehow requires a normalized ‘solution’. She argues instead that irregularity is a condition that is produced through various processes of irregularization, securitization, and criminalization. The experience of irregularity is quite fluid. As a condition, it is not fixed but rather one that people can ‘flit in and out of’ (Squire 2011, 7). The task of the researcher, then, becomes one of investigating the conditions under which irregularity can emerge, flourish, and spread across the field of citizenship. Second, Squire identifies irregularity as not so much a problem, but as a key political stake in contemporary struggles around mobility, status, and belonging. In this way, irregularity can be ‘contested, resisted, appropriated and re-appropriated through a series of political struggles’ (5). Third, irregularity can best be described as an ambivalent condition that exists in tension with a politics of control and a politics of
freedom. Finally, irregularity can be mobilized as an *analytic frame* for ‘the analysis of borderzones as dispersed, multidimensional and contested sites of political struggle’ (6). Heather Johnson (2013, 84) concurs on this point, noting that ‘irregularity, understood as an experience and state of being from the perspective of the migrants themselves, enables such an assessment of multiple sites and spaces’.

Taken together, these four ways of conceiving irregularity are at odds with the mainstream, objectivist, and taken-for-granted assumptions. The work of Squire and others demonstrates the creativity and inventiveness that comes about through experimenting with, as opposed to against, the concept of irregularity. A number of critical questions follow from this analysis of irregularity. What are the conditions of possibility for irregularity to be reified as an autonomous entity? What range of practices – institutional, material, and discursive – come together to enact the irregular? How does irregularity emerge in political discourse? At what point and where does irregularity emerge as a knowledge and an enactment of citizenship? What particular relations of domination but also of freedom are to be associated with irregularity? What kind of borderzones (Squire 2011), cracks (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013), ruptures (Balibar 2015), faces (Edkins 2015), zones (Walters 2008), and movements (Nyers and Rygiel 2012) are constituted through, between, and against the regular and irregular?

**References**


9. Migrants’ Agency & Right to the City

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I propose to discuss the relationship between migrants’ agency and ‘right to the city’ in order to understand and map out the patterns of inclusion and exclusion and of solidarity and contestations in the city. I argue that the active participation of migrants in urban space-making, based on the idea of the “right to the city,” challenges the exclusionary mechanisms of citizenship in urban areas and forces us to rethink our existing conceptual tools on migrant incorporation.

Inasmuch as studies on transnational migration focus on citizenship, the practice of citizenship across the nation-state and its boundaries—especially as regards space and the spatial complexity of migration—has generally been studied in terms of the overlapping of diverse communities in relation to ethnicity, gender, religion, citizenship status, employment, and housing. Among these diverse communities, the idea of transnationality creates a shift toward a relational, dynamic, and agonistic understanding of urban space, as is largely denoted by the metaphors of the “meeting point” or the “arena” (Arapoglou 2012, 228; Massey et al. 1999, 2). In this sense, Massey et al. describe cities as “bringing together different worlds in diverse and often surprising ways: through the constant and successive rhythms by which people move in and across one another, through the displays of indifference which pass for the negotiation of difference and, more pointedly, through the construction of high walls which serve both as a barrier between the different worlds and as a connecting link” (Massey et al. 1999, 89).

In this sense, Massey et al. describe cities as “bringing together different worlds in diverse and often surprising ways: through the constant and successive rhythms by which people move in and across one another, through the displays of indifference which pass for the negotiation of difference and, more pointedly, through the construction of high walls which serve both as a barrier between the different worlds and as a connecting link” (Massey et al. 1999, 89). Among the geographical scales where migrants experience various relations of belonging, the city and the neighborhood constitute highly controversial concepts in urban studies. They also reappear as important spaces in the everyday lives of diverse urban populations, with meanings that “go far beyond its spatial determinants and furnish it with a renewed significance, distanced from old identifications with community and locality” (Kalandides and Vaiou 2012, 225; Arapoglou 2012, 228). Therefore, in migration studies, cities “can serve as an important unit of analysis in exploring the interface between migrants’ pathways of incorporation and the materialization of broader neoliberal processes” (Schiller and Çağlar 2009, 179). At the same time, in addition to being the arenas of “tolerant encounters” and “incorporation,” cities are also denoted by processes of exclusion, segregation, and repression (Ruddick 1996; Schiller and Çağlar 2009).

Everyday life in the city and neighborhood is characterized by a space in which people struggle to claim their “right to the city” and sustain their positions by transforming the city or the spaces they live in. Here, Lefebvre links the idea of citizenship with “the right to the city” and reformulates the foundation of membership and participation in the political community by basing it on inhabitance. Unlike the liberal-democratic model, in which nation-state membership is the basis for citizenship, the “right to the city” is predicated on the idea that those who inhabit the city have a “right to the city,” a right that is developed so as to “gather the interests of the whole society [...] and firstly of all those who inhabit” (Lefebvre 1996, 158).
Thus, this right is acquired simply by living in the city. In this sense, everyday life is the core axis of the right to the city: those who are living in and creating urban space through their daily routines in the city are those who possess a legitimate right to the city. Furthermore, the right to the city is positioned toward participation in the production of urban space and decisions thereupon, but also in constructing “the rhythms of everyday life and in producing and reproducing the social relations that frame it” (Purcell 2003, 577). As such, cities are sites in which belonging is negotiated and rights are claimed and pursued that may be regarded as constitutive of meaning and the practice of citizenship (Isin 2000, 6; Kalandides and Vaiou 2012, 262).

Within this framework, neighborhoods, as everyday spaces of the city, are at stake in the struggle for the construction of belonging and for challenging the exclusionary mechanisms of citizenship imposed by the liberal-democratic model. In this sense, I propose to discuss the everyday life of migrants in their “host” neighborhoods in order to understand the migrant activism and their agency and delineate patterns of inclusion and exclusion and of solidarity and contestations in the city.

References


10. Refuge, Protection, and Hospitality

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If anyone of the disbelievers seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the word of Allah, and then escort him to where he will be secure.
- Qu’ran 9:6

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.
- Leviticus 19:33–34

One of the most critical, and arguably overlooked, dimensions of any refugee experiences is the character refuge. Scholars, activists and the general public regularly draw tenuous claims to refuge as it existed in Biblical times and in the Medieval Period with a view to legitimizing present-day conceptions of sanctuary, security and protection. Yet akin to the scholarship that has problematized the language of refugeehood, we need to delve into the evolving character and substance of refuge, rather than treat it as perpetual and unchanging. One way of doing this is to think about refuge in terms of rights and responsibilities. Another is to interrogate the genealogy of the term refuge and consider the relationship between hospitality (reception) and protection (shelter). This entangled relationship is especially important in terms of what it might reveal about the motives and implications of certain types of refuge, such as contemporary resettlement programs and sanctuary cities. This paper offers some preliminary thoughts on the historical evolution of refuge along these lines, before turning to a series of critical questions we might ask about the nature of refuge, particularly among white settler societies.

In thinking about how contemporary society might truly offer refuge to those most in need, French theorist Jacques Derrida (2001, 16) suggests a radical rethinking of the “ethics of hospitality.” Derrida distinguishes between hospitality as a duty and a right. He fortifies his position by drawing on Immanuel Kant’s (1795) sense of “universal hospitality” derived from the “virtue of (humanity’s) common right of possession on the surface of the earth on which, as it is a globe, we cannot be infinitely scattered.” As Derrida notes, there are two limits to Kant’s notion of universality: the first is that the right to be received is only temporary, one cannot insist upon full and permanent membership in any given society. Secondly, Kant insists upon the obligations of the state as host because hospitality is to be a public as well as a private virtue. Although Derrida does not dwell on the idea of reciprocity, Kant furthers the idea that guests and hosts both have responsibilities when it comes to hospitality. For instance, Kant recognized that Europeans in the Americas treated their hosts badly (and therefore should not
have expected any kind of hospitality) and suggests that Chinese and Japanese societies were correct to close their doors to European arrivals given the poor behaviour they evidenced.4

The notion of responsibility on both the part of a guest (however defined) and a host is one way of investigating the history of contemporary refuge, particularly among white settler societies where the history of Indigenous dispossession and displacement is intimately connected to the promotion of migration and settlement in the nineteenth century and the resettlement of refugees in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The growth in international humanitarian engagement particularly vis-à-vis refugee groups in the post-Second World War cannot, and should not, be divorced from the evolving relationship between settler societies, settler states and Indigenous peoples in the same period.5 Commitments to humanitarian activities have regularly served to soften critiques of cultural and physical genocide and the continued disregard of treaty obligations.

The question of what is at the root of any offer or act of refuge is therefore critical to unpacking the many ways in which the refugee subject is part of larger political, social and cultural landscapes. Hospitality and protection are two different though obviously very connected concepts. The term hospitality derives from the Latin hospes meaning guest or stranger. Protection on the other hand comes from the Late Latin protectionem, which refers to “a cover”. It is in many ways the combination of the two that results in the prevalent sense in the present of refuge as an act that implies only the sheltering of refugees.

Refuge can be offered and received publicly or privately, sanctioned by the state or undertaken by civil society actors for religious or secular purposes. A quick glance at the historical record reveals the multitude of ways in which offers of refuge have manifested themselves as well as the ways in which they have been woven into the very fabric of human life (aligning with the point about universality and the ethics of Kantian hospitality highlighted previously). One can look to ideas in Ancient Greece and Rome, to the Old and New Testament and a sense of obligations to strangers as well as the Islamic tradition of istijara (to be one’s neighbour), to Medieval practices of sanctuary designed to offer the guilty time to make amends, to refuge among Indigenous communities (17th century Iroquois Wars), to refuge for slaves via the Underground Railway and more recent state sanctioned offers of refuge (via resettlement programs) and semi-authorized refuge in the form of sanctuary cities as well as individual acts of sanctuary.

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4 “...compare the inhospitable actions of the civilized and especially of the commercial states of our part of the world. The injustice which they show to lands and peoples they visit (which is equivalent to conquering them) is carried by them to terrifying lengths. America, the lands inhabited by the Negro, the Spice Islands, the Cape, etc., were at the time of their discovery considered by these civilized intruders as lands without owners, for they counted the inhabitants as nothing” (Kant 1995).

5 Senate hearings on Canadian immigration policy in 1946 concluded “Canada, as a humane and Christian nation, should do her share toward the relief of refugees and displaced peoples” (Gilmour 2009). Particularly egregious aspects of the 1876 Indian Act were revised five years later.
This same overview points to continuity and change in how notions of refuge have evolved, specifically ideas about guilt, innocence and the related sense of responsibility. As such, there are critical questions that could be asked in thinking about the place of refuge in the context of any critical refugee study. A few come immediately to mind:

- With refuge, what is being sought? And relatedly, what is being offered or denied?
- In what ways might the offer of protection or hospitality be considered normative rather than exceptional?
- How are individuals or groups deemed worthy or meritorious of protection or hospitality?
- How has the relationship between hospitality and protection evolved over time? How do these two conditions operate in tandem? Where might we discern points of tension in the historical record?
- What is the relationship, assuming there is one, between religious and secular offers of refuge?

An exploration of each of these points will no doubt shed light on the manner in which individuals whether described as refugees, fugitives or migrants have shaped evolving notions of hospitality and protection over time and ideas about who was deserving of such assistance, reminding us of how important the study of refuge is to any critical refugee studies.

References


11. Responsibility

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I want to interrogate and situate the narratives of responsibility in the acts of migrant sea rescues in the Mediterranean. Within this context, dual notions of responsibility are performed by state actors, specifically the European Union Border agency, Frontex, in the discourse surrounding humanitarian intervention at sea. Responsibility in the act of migrant rescue at sea is situated as a double-move as it is both an acceptance and deferral of responsibility. This is evidenced by the acceptance of responsibility as a justification for further investment in border infrastructure, increased securitization and greater restrictions on migrant mobility. Whereas the deferral of responsibility becomes apparent in cases where migrants have died at sea. While the dual understanding of responsibility appears contradictory, it becomes a mutually reinforcing process which emboldens the claim for humanitarianism at sea. These same discourses of responsibility are enacted to secure the borders of Europe while signalling to the citizenry that the state takes their security seriously and the intervention in those spaces is dually warranted. This reflection serves not only a critique of the active state efforts to depoliticize the border but highlight how that effort enables shifting notions of responsibility that present a continually moving target, blurring the violence of border and the implication of state efforts to exclude. These efforts ensure the continuation of violent borders as the action of the state is dually tied to the notion of responsibility to migrants while obscuring the responsibility of EU border policy and current approaches to territoriality and state sovereignty.

Reframing notions of responsibility is enabled through producing the sea as an ‘apolitical’ space of humanitarianism. I suggest that the sea is produced by state actors as an ideal, supposedly apolitical humanitarian space defined by the acuteness of saving lives in situations of grievous distress as a result of the perceived imminence of death. The violent and untamed nature of the sea demands state intervention. It is well documented that refugees can and often do live for years, decades, if not, generations in refugee camps (Loescher and Milner 2005; Hyndman 2013). The sea however, presents an entirely different challenge as the ability to survive at sea may be limited to a matter of hours, if not minutes. While the invocations of humanitarianism can occur with migrants in the deserts of Arizona, New Mexico and California, there is something unique about the sea and the ability to reassign meaning to that space which renders it supposedly apolitical and exceptional. Invoking the discourse of humanitarianism and crisis in the context of sea rescue operations, blurs the politics and violence of borders while situating rescue operations within an apolitical space. The treacherous nature of the sea alone is not necessarily enough to warrant state intervention in those spaces. Constructing the sea as

6 I want to say thank you to sasha kovalchuk for the thoughtful and insightful comments on an earlier draft of this reflection.
an apolitical humanitarian space allows state actors to preside over the life and death of individuals at sea while depoliticizing the governance and control of the border. In many ways the acceptance of responsibility for migrant lives enables the injection of state presence in the ‘ungoverned’ spaces of the sea. The moral imperative to save is utilized to frame the intervention in those spaces within a positive, humanitarian light and to save ‘the other’ from suffering. Characterizing the actions of border officials at sea as a ‘humanitarian’ responsibility in times of ‘crisis’ is an important discursive and material shift to examine in the depoliticization of border violence and sea rescue enabled through the production of Mediterranean as an apolitical humanitarian space. Simultaneously, the deferral of responsibility is also enabled as the sea is enlisted as a passive form of border control, providing a ‘moral alibi’ (Doty 2011) not only in affording state officials the ability to explain away the deaths of irregular migrants, but also in the justification for intervention in the sea as a humanitarian response. Through this dissociative logic, it is not the violent practice of bordering that has killed thousands of migrants seeking entry into Europe; it is the sea. For the EU, the sea is effectively positioned as the central explanation for migrant deaths but also a justification and responsibility for the involvement in life-saving, humanitarian intervention into the neglected spaces of state reach. In the creation of the sea as an ideal humanitarian space, the act of rescue is central to taming the frontiers of exclusion through establishing order in the lawless spaces at the literal and figurative margins of state reach.

Similarly, the depoliticization of the border is coupled with notions of saving migrants from unscrupulous smugglers and traffickers. The deferral of responsibility in this particular framing of humanitarian intervention is also shifted to the smugglers and traffickers of excluded migrant populations (Pallister-Wilkins 2017). In part, traffickers and smugglers are commonly presented in Frontex narratives as responsible for forcing individuals into unseaworthy vessels and sending them out to their death. When situated in the Central Mediterranean, Frontex border officials are understood as merely policing the ‘bad things’ such as smuggling and exploitation while saving helpless victims enabled through the narratives of ‘crisis’ through framing the policy as a form of anti-politics (Walters 2008) without questioning why those services must exist in the first place. These acts of policing however, are also direct efforts to make populations both legible and governable to the state (Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Scott 1998). There is also an active acceptance of responsibility embedded within the security narratives presented in which it is the responsibility of the state to secure from potential threats to the territorial sovereignty of the EU. Utilizing the presence and at times, exploitative practices of smugglers serves as a means of simultaneously depoliticizing border control efforts. Vilifying smugglers in the border narrative, blurs state responsibility in producing increasingly restrictive and militarized borders, in which paradoxically, smugglers become a necessity in order to circumvent state-led border control efforts. Viewing this narrative of both care and control (Agier 2011; Aradau 2004; Pallister-Wilkins 2015) within the broader trends of migration governance, anti-migration policies have coincided with increasingly restrictive and violent border regimes, limiting the ability for individuals to move across borders while reaffirming and ontologizing borders in modern statecraft.
The deferral of responsibility extends beyond the exploitative practices of smugglers or the inhospitable environment but to the structures of the international state system. There are glaring omissions in the state-led discourse on responsibility as it pertains to humanitarian sea rescue. When addressing responsibility, we are not talking of the responsibility of northern states and the colonial legacies that shape the so called sending states which have produced a continued environment of insecurity for the individuals of the global south. Furthermore, we are not talking about the responsibility of the state in (re)producing exclusionary border practices that ensure the production of violent borders and violent exclusion. These omissions speak clearly to the inequality of the international system. The sea is evidently not an apolitical space as Frontex narratives may suggest, but one that serves as a natural physical barrier which enables the continuation of violent exclusion.

References


12. Sexual Based Violence

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On August 3rd, 2014 ISIS organized and executed an attack on Sinjar City and surrounding towns and villages, forcing Yazidis to seek refuge on Mount Sinjar. The atrocities committed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) towards Yazidis included but were not limited to kidnappings, rape, massacres, torture, burning, selling, buying and the enslavement of women (Amnesty International, 2014). These acts of violence soon became issues that dominated media coverage and other public discussions. Yazidi women’s stories were reported, focusing on their enslavement and they were described as ‘sex slaves’ in the broader context of the conflict taking place in Iraq at that time. Many narratives focused on women’s abductions and the experiences of escaped survivors.

I propose to link sexual based violence to displacement to broaden our understanding of the implications of sexual based violence on women and their communities during times of war. While, sexual based violence against women has been a fundamental issue for both feminist movements and feminist scholars, I argue that it is a important notion for refugee studies. I use the case of the Yazidi communities experience in Iraq under the attack of ISIS to draw links between sexual based violence and displacement.

Sexual based violence is often portrayed by both feminist academics and policy-makers in a particular way, narrowly punctuated within the parameters of sex itself: sexual slavery, prosecution, rape, honour based killings, etc. (Alinia 2013). While, sexual based acts of violence have long been strategies used in times of war and in state making the implications of such violences can vary in relation to targeted groups and communities. I aim to expand our thinking of what is sexual based violence to encompass issues of land, displacement and social reproduction—the mental, manual, and emotional labour involved in maintaining existing and future life—as a necessary, integrated process (Laslett and Bernner 1989). Prior to doing so, I turn to feminist scholars critical work on sexual violence in the context of Iraq to reflect on what it means in relation to Iraqi women’s history. Nadje Al-Ali (2016) warns against approaching Yazidi women’s recent experiences in separation from Iraq’s historical use of sexual based violence, arguing that although Yazidi women’s experience are horrific, does not arise in a vacuum and is not in itself unique. Al-Ali understands sexual violence, in the form of rape, and prostitution, as playing a role in familial relations such as honour based killings and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). At the same time she pays attention to the various ways that

7The Yazidi community is one of the oldest communities in the MENA region and in today’s Iraq. They number less than 1.5 million, living mainly in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Armenia. Yazidis practice an ancient religion that contains elements of zoroastrianism. The Yazidi community has historically been vulnerable in Iraq on the bases of their religious and ethnic background, often referred to as devil worshippers amongst other factors.
sexual violence has been instrumentalized by a range of relevant constituencies and political actors. She goes on to illustrate how sexual violence against both men and women were used during both the Bathi’st regime and the various wars Iraqi peoples have borne to witness (Al-Ali 2016). During periods of war, women became, at once both the breadwinners of the family, and victims of gender based violence inflicted by the state and militarization of the society. This shows how economic necessity made women vulnerable to sexual violence rather than the violence being solely extra economic. I echo her analysis of sexual violence having become systemic and institutionalized within Iraq. This was particularly pronounced in the 1990s when both the Gulf war and the U.S. sanctions exacerbated these issues as prostitution, and commodification of women social reproductive skills due to economic and political pressures on societal configurations.

Minoo Alinia (2013) has given an in-depth analysis of the honour-based crimes in Iraqi Kurdistan. Her perspective give us an insight into the power-relations that take place in providing a ‘hegemonic honour discourse’. While other feminists have analysed gender based and sexual violence - giving reference to patriarchal structures, tribal culture, nationalism, and islamism. They all shed light on the way external factors have a material effect on women’s lives and gender relations within societies. They also focus on the way sexual violence has been instrumentalized by various political actors to gain power or presume it (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009, Kandiyoti 2007, Mojab 2001).

While, I echo their analysis in locating sexual based violence across Iraq and the impact it has on women as a whole. I think it is also useful to situate Yazidi women’s experiences of sexual violence not only in the broader analysis of sexual violence in Iraq, but in relation to their own history and the implications it has on their community. This unfold a set of unanswered questions: what is sexual violence? And what is it for Yazidi women? Although I concur with Al-Ali’s concerns of not exceptionalizing the communities experience, I call for a better understanding of and attendance to their experiences and argue for the importance to attend to the violences taken place against Yazidi women in particular. In attending to these violences, it allows to further complicate our understanding of sexual based violence as a tool or war and displacement.

The sexual based violence endured by Yazidi women has a devastating and lasting affect on women’s livelihoods as individuals. However, it has a wider implication on the community as a whole. Women play a crucial role in reproducing the community in their reproductive role and social reproduction as workers on the land. The physical and psychological impacts of the violence’s are profound and cannot be understood within a rape narrative of the individual. Many of them women who were able to escape have returned to find their communities destroyed. Their families have been displaced or killed under ISIS, often the women are finding themselves returning to camps without their immediate families to turn to for support. Extended families have taken up roles of parents and guardians. Reports show that women do not speak about their traumatic experiences.
The displacement of the community means that they have to reshape and reorganize their daily lives and their community. As an integral part of the social reproduction of the community, Yazidi women’s experiences under ISIS, cannot be separated from the communities new battle to re-establish and refine family ties, community, identity, and land. Many Yazidi men were killed, displaced and others were left witnessing the violences executed towards their wives, daughters and sisters.

Taking this into consideration, how can feminist and critical refugee scholars approach sexual based violence committed by ISIS to Yazidi women? I argue that our understanding cannot be separated from their experiences of uprooting, and displacement - this concept needs to be integrated further to fully grasp the implications of said violences.

References:


Sovereignty: The historical homelessness of refugees

Refugees report feeling as if they stand outside of regular time when waiting, assimilating, and/or migrating. Their state-imposed irregular legal status results in them unable to plan for the future (Johnson, 2014, p. 106). Such an experience extends beyond refugee camps or detention centers and are also felt by urban migrants and asylum seekers (Bagelman, 2016). Citizenship grants individuals, people, and nations agency in terms of time; of being with regular and consistent temporal existence, to be in time, to live in a temporal habitus. The home which refugees and precarious migrants are denied is a sovereign locale within history. Sovereignty as a political concept enables citizenry to participate in history, in directing their communities in time (a.k.a. ‘historical feats’), accordingly the ‘refugee’ beckons from an imagined pre-historical place from where polities claim to emerge. Citizens pursuing their ‘good life’ within city walls require a temporal border between primordial and political time, before and after their community came to be a polity. The walls refugees encounter are also a sovereign’s demand for historical recognition as encoded in the laws of citizenship. Sovereignty represent the practice for historical-agency and such a practice produces/performs the power to demand to abandon/discard behaviors deemed primordial. Writing history, making record, and official narrative then behaves as a speech-act of claiming sovereignty in terms of temporal agency. Such power, to demand one abnegate the past, and recognize another historical order, is nowhere more present than during a refugee’s path to citizenship requiring temporal conformity. Governmental asylum processes requiring documentation (like a claimants’ testimony or residency records, both needed to qualify for citizenship) is in effect history behaving as speech-act to domesticate refugees into regularized time defined by sovereignty.

Domestic and international time

State territory, in which a refugee seeks entry or would be granted permanent stay, embodies sovereignty having converted time into a definable space. Such an abstract formulation recapitulates Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt’s understanding of law and state. Hobbes (1982) stated in rationalistic terms how humans are scared and uncertain in nature, unable to anticipate neighbourly aggression. For Hobbes, people rationally require bonding together to create an absolute sovereign (an unquestionable decision-making body) who standardizes sure
facts when interpreting and instituting consistent laws. Hobbes imagines insecurity originates and resembles a chaotic past where individuals rely on their own judgement to secure their future being in time (i.e. self-preservation). If, however, multiple judgements clash, violence ensues, hence the need for a singular judge, the sovereign, to interpret facts and the law (as opposed a plurality of religions doing the same). Wherever sovereignty reigns, it is considered state territory (sovereign dominium). Schmitt (1985) describes the sovereign as he who determines when states of emergency have occurred and demands exceptions made to laws. Sovereignty exists wherever state agents can judge which times constitute an emergency. These observations then characterize the traditional manner of understanding how sovereignty distinguishes the domestic internal space of states (where a sovereign judgement extends) and the international where no single sovereign judgement reigns and therefore inter-state relations remains tenuous and anarchic (Walker, 1992, pp. 165–166).

Refugees’ bodies, as an entity opposite to sovereign, represent the foundation upon which history must be written via their assimilation. Both the refugee and the bureaucrat write history understood as sovereign time-keeping rendered into stable narratives (e.g. the ‘deserving refugee’ or ‘security threats’). Literature confirms how refugees will tailor testimony to match how immigration officials imagine migrants (Johnson, 2014, pp.47-48). Granting asylum confirms host state notions of resolving what they determine a legitimate crisis and emergency from which refugees flee; also deeming those locales of needing reforms (pp.39-46). Refugees status is a subjective category resulting from judging what constitutes extraordinary times to characterize territory from which refuge originate. Judgement then becomes an action determining the territory of time where individuals dwell.

‘Doing time’
Conflating history and sovereignty further reveals a theological struggle projected over refugee bodies. Both the sovereign and historian remain invisible and the divine source in their texts, both inside and outside of law and history respectively. Schmitt observed how sovereignty poses a paradox where the sovereign only exists through codified law, however, must transcend law when ruling exceptionally to maintain order. Political theology refers to the study of the political organization of space-time as related to metaphysical and/or godly bases (Scott & Cavanaugh, 2008, p. 2). Historical periods, like sovereignty, require an author who both resides inside the history they render yet transcend historicity by being capable of writing from the vantage of ‘now’ (breaking from the mistaken past views). In other words, historians determine the boundary between non-history (typified as mysticism or legend) as opposed to record (Davis, 2012, p. 18). The symbiosis of history and sovereignty intersect at state borders and upon those who cross them. International politics considered as ‘outside’ and domestic politics as ‘inside’ represent a process wherein history-making is spatially confined within sovereign states and their worldwide spread corresponds to the rise of modernity. On the other hand, stateless places are considered in a ‘state of nature’ or war (i.e. anarchic chaos) (Walker, 2015, pp. 247–248). The empirical manifestation of such a process is the securitization of migration involving the speech-acts of officials that designate migrants either as threats or fleeing legitimate crises in order for the state to treat them as exceptional cases or subject to routine institutional management (Bourbeau, 2017, p. 110; Watson, 2011). Every repetition of
such premises serves to reinscribe the structure it supports. In performing such repetition, social institutions take shape, such as of assigned gender roles (Butler, 2011), or of imagined national and state identities through foreign policy (Campbell, 1998). The refugee body then must repeat and perform the state theology demanded by its authors. As it stands, asylum laws testify to the politico-theological concept of the modern secular state.

Refugees’ relationship to sovereignty reveals how history and time reside within country walls. Writing history becomes the manner in which one claims to a sovereign home and becomes a being in time as prescribed by contemporary political theology, confining polities to state politics. The ‘home’, beyond merely a physical area (like a house or residence), is more of a relationship where individuals perform and thereby construct a “socio-emotional artifact” where a preferred, or judged, locale grants them security, familiarity, and autonomy/control (Boccagni, 2016, pp. 4–9). Home and its outside/other/opposite emulates the fundamental dichotomy through which sovereignty defines history and subsequently subjects and laws. Notions of order/disorder, clean/dirty, safe/dangerous, proximate/faraway, us/them, and native/alien, anchor upon a ‘home’ signifier (p.11). Domestic politics, being in a country, etymologically rest on the Latin root or domos linked to the Greek idea of governing the home affairs (oikenomia) and show sovereignty’s prerogative over domesticating the “life processes” relationships within house walls (Owens, 2015, pp. 1–3). Refugees remain historically homeless, wherein their sovereign agency and spaces appear as primordial and bare just as their spatial claims on the grounds of their humanity. Camps, detention centres, jails, and irregular legal status are locales wherein state sovereign performances domesticate temporal agency to make a historic home for citizens whose space, of the nation-state, is considered political theologically holy.

References


