

Humanizing Studies of Refuge and Displacement—Considering Complicity, Contingency and Compromise

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Humanizing Studies of Refuge and Displacement—Considering Complicity, Contingency, and Compromise

Christopher G. Anderson

Since the 1980s, the field of refugee and forced migration studies (hereafter, **the field**) has routinely been engaged and positioned through reflection on such inter-related features as its focus, goals, concepts, methods, consequences, and limitations (Black, 2001; Bloch, 2020; Chimni, 1998; Landau, 2012; Malkki, 1995; McGrath & Young, 2019; Scallettaris, 2007; Stein & Tomasi, 1981; Zetter, 1988). These efforts have, borrowing from Terpstra (2015, p. 8), not been so much “sequential but concentric in their relations one to the other [as n]ew interpretations more often absorb than overturn their predecessors.” The interventions on “Humanizing Studies of Refuge and Displacement?” presented in this issue of *Refuge* fit this form, confirming and conditioning while challenging core ideas and approaches.¹ Indeed, their exploration of humanization as a heuristic contributes to an ongoing and important conversation about the meaning and purpose of critical scholarship and its potential to reflect and improve the lives of refugees and other forced migration populations. For its part, this short com-

mentary aims to situate this initiative on humanizing within the field and, in doing so, explore features of complicity, contingency, and compromise contained in both initiative and field alike. These operate as constitutive factors and forces as scholars navigate between seeking change within the world that is and pursuing humanization through a more radical and transformative process of worldmaking.

A recognized obstacle in humanizing studies of refuge and displacement stems from the fact that the central notion of **humanizing** operates—appropriately but not without difficulty—at a broad and indicative level. For example, **Oliver Bakewell** proposes that it might involve “making our analysis more nuanced, more responsive to the reality of people’s experiences and contributing to more humane outcomes.” To humanize, **Jonathan Darling** offers, is “to recognize and respect the human qualities of those who are, after all, human.” As has been shown in studies of humanitarianism (e.g., Dauvergne, 2005; Fassin, 2012; Harrell-Bond, 2002), however, determining what it means

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¹Unless otherwise noted, the quotations included in this commentary are drawn from the contributions published in this special focus section of *Refuge*.

to be human(e) and acting upon it are often embedded in discriminatory and exploitative assumptions, processes, and structures that can perpetuate and perpetrate injustice and even violence against refugees and other forced migration populations. The concept and practice of humanizing is presented through the initiative, therefore, as “necessarily a partial and unfinished project—a series of openings rather than a definitive closure” (**Brankamp & Weima**). As such, it resists “a turn to humanity that overrides alterity ... [that] risks losing sight of the differential ways in which the category of the human has been claimed and inhabited” (**Darling**). In consequence, as it envisions “what more emancipatory scholarship might entail,” the initiative provides “a shorthand for the diverse, radical challenges to all sources of dehumanizing politics and scholarship” (**Brankamp & Weima**).

In pursuit of such an “emancipatory humanization” (**Brankamp & Weima**), the interventions included here push against discursive, policy, and political approaches that **dehumanize** refugees and other forced migration populations. While the centrality of dehumanization in the creation of refugees and as a precursor to other extreme forms of violence such as slavery and genocide has been studied for some time (**Smith, 2020**), its explicit role in societal and state responses to human displacement in contemporary liberal democracies is a relatively recent emphasis in the field.² Such dehumanization is now identified, **Darling** recounts,

[in] many forms, from patterns of representation and imagery in news coverage that focus on abstracted groups ...; to political rhetoric and language that

associates refugees with insects, natural disasters, and disease ...; to policies of securitization and militarization that expose refugees to violence and abuse at borders across the world.

For her part, **Yolanda Weima** traces how the prominent trend to conceptualize and address “refugees as resources” in an effort to humanize them in a world in which they are perceived as threatening can serve, instead, to dehumanize them by “rely[ing] on human/non-human distinctions to define commodities for the extraction of value [that are] bound up with racialized hierarchies fundamental to capitalism.”

Thus, the humanizing initiative operates as a conceptual, methodological, ethical, and political—indeed, epistemological—response to a dehumanization that engenders as it embodies a more constrained and selective empathy and receptivity, and even antipathy or outright hostility, towards refugees and other forced migration populations by and within liberal democracies, a trajectory traced in the field since at least the early 1980s.³

The humanizing initiative also builds on long-standing concerns about the detrimental effects for refugees of scholarly cooperation with and co-optation by powerful state and non-state actors, institutions, and interests within the humanitarian sector (**Bakewell, 2008; Harrell-Bond, 1986**). This is captured by **Hanno Brankamp**, who writes of the “humanitarian embrace” that researchers face, “this encroachment of institutional logics, values, discursive frames, solutions, and infrastructures on research engagements with/among refugees and forced migrants,” which can render aca-

² For one of the earliest published works on refugees with dehumanization in the title, see **Leach** (2003); since then, numerous works have appeared using this term/framework to explore liberal-democratic responses to population displacement.

³ For example, **Grahl-Madsen** (1983, p. 15) observed that “we can sense in country after country a tendency toward a more restrictive interpretation and application of important provisions [of refugee protection], sometimes even a disregard for rules of international law.” He nonetheless wrote that “humanism may be struggling, but compassion is not dead” (p. 12).

demics “complicit in legitimizing the containment and epistemic ring-fencing of racialized southern refugees in the geopolitical interests of Global North countries.” Dehumanization within the humanitarian sector itself, **Patricia Daley** recounts, is not new but extends from earlier (and at times overlooked) colonial and racial assumptions, practices, and processes that continue to shape the international refugee regime as it operates “to regulate and control bodies considered to be outside their ‘natural’ and national geographies.” It can also be fostered, **Estella Carpi** suggests, through academic institutional settings (including those dedicated to refugee studies) when they “fossilize around aprioristic categories of analysis, making research subjects instrumental” to scholarship and policy rather than the reverse.

Such complicity is explored further in the humanizing initiative, with the positioning of scholars themselves explicitly and intimately within the dehumanizing process. **Daley** observes, for example, that “the discourse of non-academic protagonists tends to be interrogated as to whether it inspires incitement to hatred and violence or othering, but that of the academic receives less attention.” This is problematic, **Brankamp and Weima** write, because “systems of marginalization and dehumanization are not just **external** objects for academic inquiry but are woven into the very ways in which we conceive, plan, conduct, experience, write, and present studies on displacement and (im)mobility.” Indeed, **Bakewell** questions whether it is even possible for scholars to avoid such dehumanization so much as “to politicize it, dehumanize differently, and provide alternative perspectives, so that we can resist the standard

scripts ... that frame so much research into forced migration.”⁴ It is therefore important, **Carpi** suggests, for academics to undertake “an intimate process of self-inquiry ... [with] substantial room for a form of self-criticism ... that we start ourselves, as well as others do,” which might ultimately “generate concrete possibilities for transformational research and our own humanization.”

Many of the core conceptual and methodological approaches and ideas proposed to counter dehumanization align readily with those found in the field aimed at improving how the lives of refugees and other forced migration populations are understood and how such knowledge is used to acknowledge and support their agency, interests, needs, and rights. For example, across these contributions, the humanizing initiative encourages such practices as reformulating or even transcending core conceptual categories (e.g., refugee, state, power); ensuring that dimensions such as race and gender are central analytical components through engagement with critical scholarship in other fields (e.g., critical race theory, decoloniality, feminism); displacing the privileged positions of northern knowledge production; opposing liberal individualist and market responses to displacement; incorporating historical perspective in addressing contemporary phenomena; embracing interdisciplinarity and intersectionality, and creating supportive institutional settings to this end; avoiding the exploitation of particular communities through over-research; working in a more direct and collaborative manner with displaced populations themselves; and decelerating scholarship to improve the quality of research and to ensure that it serves refugees and other forced migration populations rather than academic career advance-

⁴ Such alternative perspectives, **Bakewell** cautions, “are the product of a different political process, but it is not clear that they are necessarily any more of a ‘natural,’ ‘humanized’ set of categories than those we started with.”

ment and powerful actors, institutions, and interests. In keeping with ongoing developments in the field, then, the humanizing initiative highlights numerous possible ways and means for scholars to observe [Turton](#) 's (1996, p. 96) oft-quoted ethical injunction that there can be no "justification for conducting research into situations of extreme human suffering if one does not have the alleviation of suffering as an explicit objective of one's research."

In order to reach the field's potential to do so more fully, scholars need to—**Brankamp** and **Weima** suggest—"practise and advance a radical scholarship that is grounded in political solidarity for social and racial justice." This requires, **Daley** writes, the pursuit of "an anti-racist agenda with counter-hegemonic critiques ... and new terminologies emphasizing alternative ways of belonging, a common humanity, and mutuality." For their part, **Brankamp** and **Weima** propose that "radical change can only be sought through political solidarity and protest, as well as substantive critiques of global capitalism, epistemic violence, structural exclusion, and racialized control." This will require, **Brankamp** concludes, "disobedient methodologies" to disrupt "the enduring coloniality, racism, and epistemic erasures of academic practices."

A commitment to such "genuine radical endeavours" (**Carpi**) operates within familiar boundaries of discussions in the field concerning the "dual imperative" of research scholarship and policy influence (**Jacobsen & Landau, 2003**) and, by extension, the determination and navigation of the boundaries

between academic and activist work.⁵ It goes further, however, in encouraging an emphasis not just on alleviating suffering but on a larger political project of dedicated world-making.⁶ This direction is indicated, for example, when **Brankamp** and **Weima** raise the prospect—quoting [Ibeanu](#) (1990, p. 60)—that

until the dominant interests in the world become those that guarantee justice, equity and freedom, not only in legal and political life, but in the totality of human existence, resolving the crisis of refugees and other displaced populations will remain a fleeting illusion.⁷

Alongside the various approaches and ideas recounted above, then, the undertaking of such a making of the world is understood to require more radical outlooks and sites of scholarship.

For example, on an epistemological front, **Hashem Abushama** proposes scholars can humanize their work by studying the "particularly subversive potential" of the lives lived in refugee camps, thereby moving beyond state-centred approaches that "are unquestionably seen as universally applicable, despite being Eurocentric and ethno-specific in their analysis." Thus, in his critique of [Agamben](#)'s notion of "bare life"—which, he argues, distorts our understanding of the world as it leaves refugees "stripped off of their politics, existing outside the political sphere"—**Abushama** proposes that camps instead be approached not as

a passive space onto which geographies of control and management are simply enacted [but] ... also [as] a space constantly produced and reproduced by

⁵ For example, more than 30 years ago, [Robinson](#) (1990, p. 13) wrote of the need to address "the balance between becoming involved in advocacy and action-oriented research on the one hand and undertaking 'objective' scientific research on the other."

⁶ [Getachew](#) (2019, p. 2) employs the term worldmaking in reference to the process of decolonization, "a project of reordering the world that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian international order ... to overcome the legal and material manifestations of unequal [global political and economic] integration and inaugurate a postimperial world."

⁷ To similar effect, **Brankamp** and **Weima** quote [Sithole](#) (2020, p. 75), who writes that "there cannot be humanism in the colonial condition. This condition is nothing but dehumanization."

those living within its alleys, whose meanings, stories, narratives, images, poetics, music, dance moves, murals, wounds, and wedding circles ... make it hard to tell one unified story.

"To humanize in this sense," **Darling** writes, is "to focus on human experience as fragmentary, incoherent, and resistant to clear categorization, pushing back against the 'categorical fetishism' argued to pervade discussions of refuge." Similarly, **Carpi** emphasizes the need for "delving into the multi-faceted significance of particular human processes." This accentuation of the specific and granular is offered for its potential to move beyond the injustices fostered "in a world shaped by European colonialism and its legacies" by "attend[ing] to the interrelations, interconnections, and mutuality existing beyond the white and northern humanitarian gaze" (**Daley**).

Alongside such an epistemological reorientation, the humanizing initiative encourages particular situational practices aimed at producing a more just world. For example, if scholars continue to work with powerful actors, institutions, and interests in the humanitarian sector, **Brankamp** proposes, then they should not focus on co-operation and collaboration—which, given the force of the "humanitarian embrace," is not "likely to benefit the long-term welfare and life goals of displaced people and others living under the humanitarian regime"—but should pursue a "politics of infiltration." This involves researchers exploiting their "privileged access to the corridors of power" to undertake "stealthy, playful, and disobedient forms of research that excavate and register dynamics of power as well as performatively disrupting them" (**Brankamp**). In this way, scholars can use their privilege "to subvert these very structures and ultimately work towards their undoing" (**Brankamp**).

Alternatively, academics can seek to escape the constraints and dehumanizing effects of their institutional affiliations and traditions by engaging in accompaniment with refugees and other forced migration populations on the ground, which entails "an ongoing and, ultimately, uncertain effort to combine research with political action and world-making as it enacts the very relationships that it seeks to build" (**Brankamp**). Although distortionary effects of power differentials between "researchers" and "researched" would remain, **Brankamp** proposes that such "deliberate acts of togetherness, solidarity, listening, and mutual recognition" could nonetheless help to break the domination enacted in the humanitarian embrace and generate the "potential for emancipatory change."

While the humanizing initiative recognizes it embodies "the inherent fragility, uncertainty, and polysemy" that defines its pursuit, and while the interventions included vary in the encouraged "precise strategies, political alliances, and discourses necessary for this endeavour" (**Brankamp & Weima**), as a collection, it contributes to an ongoing and important conversation about the meaning and purpose of critical scholarship and its potential to reflect and improve the lives of refugees and other forced migration populations. Thus, although the following thoughts on complicity, contingency, and compromise are prompted by the interventions included here, they extend from and relate to broader discussions within the field and indeed beyond to the social sciences on the relative merits and techniques of pursuing change within the world that is and seeking a more radical and transformative process of worldmaking.

As noted earlier, the recognition of **complicity** is central to the humanizing initiative, and it has long been a matter of concern

within critical scholarship. As **Brankamp and Weima** observe, efforts to humanize studies of refuge and displacement require “grappling with, and situating ourselves and our scholarly institutions within, abiding structures of violence and erasure.” **Darling**, for his part, warns of the “political and moral limits” to the process of humanizing, while **Bakewell** cautions that efforts to humanize research will involve “dehumaniz[ing] differently.” Meanwhile, **Daley** suggests in the case of **Malkki**, and **Abushama** proposes with respect to Agamben, that even the work of critical scholars itself can be rendered complicit in processes of dehumanization—by fellow critical scholars, never mind policymakers—regardless of an author’s intent.⁸ The notion of complicity can be extended further, however. For example, it can also arise as a matter of effect for critical scholars, when important findings and insights exist between the two worlds defined, respectively, by the present confines of the humanitarian embrace and a future ideal of a post-colonial order. This can serve to entrench and extend dehumanization insofar as challenges to imperial and colonial power remain more matters of analysis and discourse about rather than influence on decisions and outcomes.⁹ In such ways, then, complicity remains an under-analyzed and complex set of relations that transcend evident intentionality (**Kapoor, 2005**), and to the extent to which it is downplayed or overlooked, it may leave scholars “implicated in the production of harm” (**Daley**) through the creation of “a new hegemony of concepts and categories that are imbued with a sense of authenticity and moral superiority” (**Bakewell**).

One way to grapple with complicity is to appreciate how closely it is shaped by **contingency**, whereby anticipated and perceived options and results are reliant on circumstance but in a manner and of a nature that is often unpredictable and to degrees unknowable. Such contingency weighs against certainty in determining present and future conditions and alternatives (it offers greater degrees of certainty, however, when considering the past), which temper the identification and accumulation of knowledge and related efforts to promote change within or a remaking of the world. An obvious approach to contingency, of course, is for scholars to integrate greater historical perspective into their work—a practice found, however, to be too rare in the field (**Kushner, 2006; Marfleet, 2007**). By “excavating silenced histories” of colonized peoples, for example, it may be possible to understand better and begin to unravel “the legacy of the racialized and ethnicized colonial categorization of humanity” (**Daley**) that continues to affect scholarship and policy. Like complicity, however, contingency arises in various complex and consequential, if unsettled, forms in studies of refuge and displacement.

For example, contingency is divergently implicated in contrasting epistemological and methodological approaches promoted through the interventions included in the humanizing initiative. On the one hand, the call to engage in a more radical specificity, to “insist on the importance of miniscule movements, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of full human life” (**Abushama**, quoting **Weheliye, 2014, p. 12**), privileges the exceptional in an

⁸ As **Chimni** (2009, p. 14) observes, once produced, “knowledge is mostly dual use [and] can be deployed by social forces of both dominance and emancipation.”

⁹ Concerns over critical scholarship’s lack of influence on policy decisions and policy outcomes have long been flagged in the field (see, e.g., **Robinson, 1990**).

effort to reflect more accurately the particular lives lived of refugees and other forced migration populations, and thereby subvert approaches that reinforce and extend colonial power. On the other hand, **Bakewell** locates scholarship within a broader social science imperative of “seeking to make some generalizations: we aspire to take our knowledge from one setting to build up our understanding of another setting” through “models and simplifications that amplify some aspects and play down others” in an effort “to make sense of the world and to generate new insights” while challenging narratives and categories that dehumanize to produce harm. Whether encouraging specificity (“staying with a singularity that avoids reductionism” [**Darling**]) or generality (being “reductive in a somewhat ordered way” [**Bakewell**]), each approach downplays by design aspects of its own contingency in order to speak meaningfully about the world.

If scholarly work is to some inextricable and significant extent complicit in the production of harm under conditions of uncertainty produced by contingency, then the role of compromise in scholarly work is an important question—especially with respect to policy-makers. On the one hand, at the more radical end of the humanizing initiative, there is an emphasis on turning away from co-operation and collaboration with organizations understood to embody the “humanitarian embrace.” Similarly, at an ideational level, greater emphasis is placed on strategies that move away from prominent concepts and methods, as well as academic institutional settings, to replace them with new ones. On the other hand, the initiative also contains **Bakewell’s** proposition

(in keeping with Zetter (1991, 2007) that although the categorization (and labelling) practices of powerful actors, institutions, and interests are deeply problematic, “scholars need to work constructively with these parties and manage the multiple compromises this entails, which includes engaging with the categories they impose.”¹⁰ Indeed, he writes that “it seems inevitable that we must use them if we are to communicate and have any impact in the world.”

While the humanizing initiative does not aim to resolve such divergences of approach, it reinforces the idea that we do not, as scholars, escape being compromised to some degree in the pursuit of our work, and that it is important—individually and collectively as a field of study—to acknowledge and address this as well as we can in the face of considerable uncertainty. In their introduction, for example, **Brankamp and Weima** identify a number of pressing questions concerning the humanizing initiative itself, including whether “‘humanizing’ [is] at all viable or desirable” or if “we need to fundamentally rethink what research can achieve.” Although these questions are purposefully left unanswered, the interventions included here suggest that none of the contributors has given up on the potential for their research to generate positive change in or of the world, even as they confront the constraints and limitations within which they operate. In doing so, the authors remind us of the importance not just of identifying and challenging the complicity of the work of others but perhaps more importantly—yet with greater difficulty—of our own work in seeking “to undo persistent indignity, marginalization, and vio-

¹⁰ In making this point, **Bakewell** draws an important distinction between the categories themselves and the politicization of the categories by state actors, and offers a reminder that “formal, public criteria for determining action introduces some element of accountability for states and prevents the most egregious bias. At minimum, it makes it possible for deviations from the criteria to be noticed and challenged.”

lence towards refugees, as well as to people affected by both displacement and involuntary immobilities beyond this category” (Brankamp and Weima).

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