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Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization

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Massive displacements of people due to political violence and the sight—on television and in newspapers—of refugees as a miserable “sea of humanity” have come to seem more and more common. If these displacements, and media representations of them, appear familiar, so too does the range of humanitarian interventions routinely activated by the movement of people. The purpose of this essay is to explore the forms typically taken by humanitarian interventions that focus on refugees as their object of knowledge, assistance, and management, and to trace the effects of these forms of intervention at several different levels.

One of the things that most immediately demands notice is that the forms of these humanitarian interventions appear to be so inevitable—as do the perennial impasses and systematic failures from which such interventions often suffer (Calhoun 1995:xii; Ferguson 1994). The contemporary crises of mass displacement—especially those of Rwanda and Burundi, which I discuss here—offer an almost laboratory-like, tragic clarity of view into the larger question of humanitarian intervention.

My argument grows out of anthropological field research conducted with Hutu refugees from Burundi living in Tanzania (mostly in three very large refugee camps) since the “selective genocide” of 1972 in Burundi.¹ It also addresses the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and its aftermath. The essay moves through a comparison of the social construction and uses of the refugee category in different social and institutional domains.

In the first section I discuss the social significance of the refugee category for the 1972 Hutu refugees themselves—that is, for persons who have long been legally recognized and documented as real, bona fide political refugees with a well-founded fear of persecution. I trace how the Hutu refugees in a particular context (many of whom still live in refugee camps) had come to appropriate the category as a vital, positive dimension of their collective identity in exile, and in

what sense refugee status was a *historicizing condition* that helped to produce a particular political subjectivity.

The second section examines how the staff of the international organizations administering the Hutu refugees in Tanzania conceptualized the term *refugee* in the course of their everyday discussions. While the legal claim to refugee status by the Hutu was acknowledged by these administrators, other, more elaborate normative expectations and definitions of “the refugee” lived—unstated but vigorous—in the shadow of the law. The net effect of the administrators’ views, I will argue, was to depoliticize the refugee category and to construct in that depoliticized space an ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject (Barthes 1980; Malkki 1995a:12–13 ff.).

In the third section the argument moves to a greater level of generality: the examination of the figure of the refugee as an object of concern and knowledge for the “international community,” and for a particular variety of humanism. This exploration will suggest that refugee issues are one privileged site for the study of humanitarian interventions through which “the international community” constitutes itself (Calhoun 1995; Ishay 1995; Malkki 1994; Rusciano and Fiske-Rusciano 1990). The central purpose here is to examine some of the specific effects of the contemporary dehistoricizing constitution of the refugee as a singular category of humanity within the international order of things.² Much as in the case of the local refugee administrators in Dar-es-Salaam, one important effect of the bureaucratized humanitarian interventions that are set in motion by large population displacements is to leach out the histories and the politics of specific refugees’ circumstances. Refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general: universal man, universal woman, universal child, and, taken together, universal family (Barthes 1980).³ Of course, refugee populations usually consist of people in urgent need who have been victimized in numerous ways. The problem is that the necessary delivery of relief and also long-term assistance is accompanied by a host of other, unannounced social processes and practices that are dehistoricizing. This dehistoricizing universalism creates a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply as mute victims. It can strip from them the authority to give credible narrative evidence or testimony about their own condition in politically and institutionally consequential forums (compare Balibar 1988:724, 1995).

That humanitarian interventions tend to be constituted as the opposite of political ones has, of course, a long history and complex reasons behind it (Loescher and Monahan 1989; Zolberg et al. 1989). But the purpose here is not to delve into that history; it is to emphasize the extent to which this opposition is taken for granted, and to ask what the effects of this conventionalized, depoliticizing, universalizing practice are. A vital part of the answer must be, as I will try to show, that in universalizing particular displaced people into “refugees”—in abstracting their predicaments from specific political, historical, cultural contexts—humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees.

A great deal of work has been done in recent years (in several disciplines) on the question of “voice” and representation, silencing and “ethnographic authority” (Clifford 1988:21 ff.). Some of this work has tended to move in heavily textualized domains where the potential political stakes in having or not having a voice have slipped beyond the immediate field of vision. It is in the horror of current events in Rwanda and Burundi, and in the massive displacements of people that have resulted (and that could well multiply in the near future), that the question of voice reveals its importance. There, the systematic disqualification of the refugees’ own inescapably political and historical assessments of their predicaments and their futures has been (between the summer of 1994 and now, in February 1996) forming into a contestation between life and death.

It is my hope that an examination of the contemporary political tragedies of the Great Lakes region of Africa will help to make the case that familiar forms of humanitarianism and humanism need careful, vigilant study, especially now—that they should no longer be left to lie in their accustomed circuits of international policy science, but rather should be studied by scholars in many fields. The intent here is not to dismiss humanitarian interventions as useless. The alternatives to humanitarianism that come most easily to mind—utter, uninformed indifference or repressive, undemocratic, mercenary logics—are clearly terrible. But precisely because international interventions (humanitarian and otherwise) are increasingly important, we should have better ways of conceptualizing, designing, and challenging them. This is why it is useful to examine the idea of a universal, ahistorical humanity that forms the basis of much of contemporary progressive politics. This liberal, progressive politics, with its vision of a universal humanity, is hard-wired into the history of anthropology. Perhaps anthropology is, therefore, an especially suitable site from which to begin questioning the workings and effects of these vital concepts and practices.⁴

Refugee Status as Lived by Hutu Refugees in Mishamo, Tanzania

The tens of thousands of Hutu refugees who fled the mass killings by the Tutsi-dominated army in Burundi in 1972 have, for the most part, been living in refugee camps ever since.⁵ A much smaller group of these 1972 refugees (some 20,000–30,000) settled spontaneously in and around Kigoma township, and have thus had no experience of prolonged residence inside a refugee camp.⁶ My fieldwork (1985–86) was divided between Mishamo, a refugee camp with a population of about 35,000 in western Tanzania’s Rukwa region, and the town and environs of Kigoma on Lake Tanganyika, next to the historical crossroads of Ujiji. The biographical and social circumstances of the people in these two settings, the “camp refugees” and the “town refugees,” were very different in exile, even though their lives in Burundi prior to 1972 appear to have differed much less. The most relevant contrast in the present context is that the social status of being a refugee had a very pronounced salience in the camp refugees’ life-worlds, while in town it generally did not. In Mishamo it was indispensable to understand something of the social and political meaning given collectively to refugeeness and to exile by the camp inhabitants. In contrast, for the people

I have called the town refugees, refugee status was generally not a collectively heroized or positively valued aspect of one's social person. Insofar as it was considered relevant at all, it was more often a liability than a protective or positive status.

I have examined this contrast at length elsewhere (Malkki 1995a). But even in its simplest outlines, the case suggests that the elaboration of legal refugee status into a social condition or a moral identity does not occur in an automatic or predictable way, and that even people who fled originally from the "same place" can, and often do, come to define the meaning of refugee status differently, depending on the specific lived circumstances of their exile. In what follows I will focus only on the camp refugees' social imagination of refugeeness because it was their definitions that most directly challenged the refugee administrators' visions of the same.

The most unusual and prominent social fact about the camp of Mishamo was that the refugees who had lived within its confines for so many years were still in 1985–86 continually engaged in an urgent, collective process of constructing and reconstructing a true history of their trajectory as "a people." This was an oppositional process, setting itself against state-approved versions of the history of Burundi. The narrative production of this history in exile was sweeping. Beginning with what anthropologists and other students of mythology have called "myths of foundation," the Hutu refugees' narratives outlined the lost features of the "autochthonous," "original" Burundi nation and the primordial social harmony that was believed to have prevailed among the original inhabitants (the Twa and the Hutu). The narratives of the past then located the coming of the Tutsi in time and space: they were remembered as the pastoral "foreigners from the North" (sometimes as "the Hamites" or "the Nilotes") who came in search of new pastures for their cattle "only 400 years ago." There followed the progressive theft of power from the "natives" (Hutu and Twa) by Tutsi ruse and trickery, and the emergence of an extractive, oppressive social hierarchy. The refugees' historical narratives moved on to the colonial era, concentrating mainly on the period of Belgian administration, and defined the end of formal colonial rule as the defeat of the departing Belgians by Tutsi trickery. The culminating chapter in the refugees' historical narratives of the Burundian past amounted to a vast and painful documentation of the mass killings of people belonging to the Hutu category by Burundi's (mainly Tutsi) army—and, eventually, by Tutsi civilians—in 1972. So many years later, the historical and personal memory of the apocalyptic violence and terror of that era still had a sharp and shocking salience in people's everyday lives.

These historical narratives were ubiquitous in the camp, forming—as I have argued elsewhere with the benefit of more detailed evidence (Malkki 1995a)—an overarching historical trajectory that was fundamentally also a national history of the "rightful natives" of Burundi. The camp refugees saw themselves as a nation in exile. And they thought of exile as an era of moral trials and hardships that would enable them to reclaim the "homeland" in Burundi at some moment in the future.

People in Mishamo tended to see their refugee status, then, as a positive, productive status and as a profoundly meaningful historical identity. Far from being a “mere” legal technicality, or a disabling problem to be endured, refugeehood was clung to both as a protective legal status and as a special moral condition—for it was only by together passing through a period as refugees that the Hutu as “a people” could effect their return to their rightful homeland.

Such a positive light on refugee status should not be taken to mean that the people in question did not notice or suffer from the large and small difficulties of being in exile. Indeed, people in Mishamo were quite aware of their very considerable material and social hardships. But there were two important qualifications to this. First, legal refugee status and U.N.-issued refugee identity documents were seen as offering at least some protection against possibly even greater hardship. Second, and even more significant, many in the refugee camp were of the opinion that embracing instead of escaping hardships was wise as the knowledge of difficulties would teach and empower people, making them worthier and more able to reclaim the homeland. As one man put it in describing the Tanzanian camp administrators who were often seen as exploitative and oppressive: “They begin to educate us as refugees.”

Conversations about refugeehood and exile with people in Mishamo began to suggest, over time, that refugeehood was seen as a matter of *becoming*. They often explained that in the initial stages of exile, the Hutu were not yet true refugees, refugees properly speaking. What they had to say strongly suggested that, socially, there was such a thing as a novice refugee. True or mature refugeehood, then, entailed a cumulative process embedded in history and experience. It had to do, if I have understood correctly, with a certain level of self-knowledge, and the camp was a privileged site for the elaboration of such a knowledge.

Another indication that refugeehood had come to be interiorized as an aspect of people’s identities in Mishamo was that it was considered to be inherited from one generation to another as long as the Hutu lived in exile. To quote one person, “If I am a refugee here, of course my child is a refugee also—and so is his child, and his child, until we go back to our native country.” This vision, of course, fit well into the narratives of history and exile that were so central in the everyday life of the refugee camp, but it was quite different from the legal definition, and also from the ideal trajectory of refugeehood usually constructed by the staffs of the international aid organizations.⁷

Being a refugee also naturally suggested, even demanded, certain kinds of social conduct and moral stances, while precluding others. Thus, for example, many refugees in Mishamo, in the camp, were continually angered by the conduct of those among them who engaged in commerce—those who had become “merchant refugees.” (And, in fact, the most prominent Hutu merchant refugees mostly lived outside the camps, among the so-called spontaneously settling refugees in Kigoma and Ujiji, and in other towns). As one person exclaimed: “We have not come here to make commerce. We are refugees.” This sense of outrage was echoed by another man: “[The merchant refugees,] they became rich. They have cabarets, hotels, restaurants . . . *being refugees!*” As we will see

momentarily, the camp refugees and their administrators agreed on the point that a rich refugee was a contradiction in terms; but they came to this conclusion from different premises. The camp refugees recognized that wealth would likely root people in the here and now, making them forget that they were in exile, and thus properly rooted elsewhere. In a curious way, wealth and commerce made people “this-worldly”—while the “other world,” of course, was the homeland. And refugeeness, ideally, was an integral part of the process of a future return—just as it was inevitably linked to the past. It should be noted, too, that commerce put Hutu in the position of exploiting other Hutu, thus challenging their corporate solidarity.⁸

This brief account of the social construction and moral imagination of refugeeness in Mishamo has, perhaps, been sufficient to show in what sense refugee identity can be shaped by historical and political context. Why the Hutu had to flee, what the history of political struggle had been in Burundi, how the refugees expected to help bring about a new political order in Burundi: all these were issues inextricably tied to the social meaning of exile. It would therefore have been impossible for them to concentrate only on life within the confines of their camp, as if the camp were not itself deeply within history.

The Social Imagination of Refugee Status among Refugee Administrators in Tanzania

Throughout my field research in Tanzania I was offered crucially important assistance by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service (TCRS), that is, by the people who—along with officials of the Tanzanian Ministry of Home Affairs—were charged with administering and assisting the Hutu refugees.⁹ UNHCR funded the greatest part of the refugee projects, while TCRS was the principal implementing agency. Linked to the umbrella organization of the Lutheran World Federation, TCRS was (and is) an organization with long experience of refugee work in Tanzania and one of the most effective of such groups in carrying out its mandate.¹⁰

When I had completed one year of field research in rural western Tanzania in late 1986 and returned to Dar-es-Salaam in preparation for my departure from Tanzania, the TCRS director invited me to his home to speak to TCRS staff about my research. To comply was a very modest way of acknowledging my debt to TCRS and the other organizations that had ferried my mail, given me access to their wireless radios, permitted their mechanics to sell me gasoline and fix my car, opened their library to me, submitted to interviews, furnished valuable maps, and rendered so many other similar services.

At the evening gathering on the terrace of the director’s home, I gave an account of what I had heard and thought in the course of the short year in western Tanzania, knowing that numerous people in my audience had much longer experience of living in Tanzania than I. I spoke about the fact that the Hutu refugees in Mishamo saw exile in Tanzania first and foremost not as a tragedy, but as a useful, productive period of hardships that would teach and purify them, and

thereby help them to grow powerful enough to return to their homeland on their own terms. That the refugees considered they had undergone hardship in Tanzania was evident, and I tried to give an account of this also. I spoke about the antagonisms that had developed in Mishamo Refugee Settlement as a result of the very hierarchical social organization within it, about resentment over practices that were considered extractive of the refugees' agricultural labor power, about the control of movement through Leave Passes, about the scarcity of secondary and higher education for refugee children, and so on. The most important point I was trying to convey was that the experiential reality of the refugee camp was powerfully shaped by the narrative memory of relationships and antagonisms located in the past in Burundi, antagonisms between the Hutu peasant majority there and the minority Tutsi category that at the time predominated in the military and government. That is, the camp was a site of intense historicity, and to be a refugee was a historicizing and politicizing condition. To study this historicity, I said, had become one of my main activities during the fieldwork.

I knew as I spoke that my findings were in some measure incommensurable with the language of project evaluations and "development" discourse in which refugee issues were so often framed (Ferguson 1994). The results of my research were listened to politely but were clearly not received as particularly useful information by the TCRS staff, who were my audience that evening. What I reported was not completely novel to them. Several among them—especially the Tanzanian staff—had previously heard aspects of the grand historical narrative of the Hutu as a people in exile. (In other organizations, too, there were individual staff members who were sometimes quite knowledgeable about the struggles over history in the region).¹¹ But this historical knowledge, this narrative evidence, was, to all intents and purposes, irrelevant and unusable by the organization. Moreover, when it did become relevant to daily operations, it was as a potential trouble factor threatening to complicate the administering of the projects.

My presentation in the director's garden provoked a spirited discussion of what a real refugee was, or ought to be—and whether the Hutu who had come to Tanzania in 1972 still fit the picture. One of the guests heard in my presentation evidence that the Hutu refugees were ungrateful recipients of international assistance, and was moved to challenge the refugee status of the Hutu on grounds of material, economic well-being:

Nowhere else in Africa do these people [refugees] receive their own land to cultivate. Not in Sudan, not in Somalia. They say that these people are refugees; they should not have all the same rights as citizens.

Another TCRS employee added, "In fact, their standard of living is *higher* than in the Tanzanian villages!" While both clearly were referring to complex questions regarding the distribution of poverty, there was also an evident moral intent to say that a real or proper refugee should not be well off. Later in the same discussion, the TCRS director himself commented:

I should show you a film the Norwegians made of the Burundi refugees when they first came. One was showing a bullet wound, someone else a cut, torn clothes, dirty. . . . They had *nothing*. . . . These people don't *look* like refugees anymore. If you go to Mishamo [refugee camp] as a visitor, you will think these are just ordinary villagers.

It was not uncommon to hear similar comments from other refugee administrators, whether of TCRS or UNHCR. There was a pronounced tendency to try to identify and fix the “real” refugee on extralegal grounds. And one key terrain where this took place was that of the *visual image* of the refugee, making it possible to claim that given people were not real refugees because they did not look (or conduct themselves) like real refugees. This suggests that refugee status was implicitly understood to involve a performative dimension. The symbolic, social significance of the Hutu refugees' early wounds and physical problems for their administrators emerged only gradually, in the course of numerous exchanges with TCRS and U.N. staff. It appeared that the staff—in an effort to do their jobs properly and to direct assistance where it might be needed most—were in some manner trying to identify *exemplary victims*.

Frantz Fanon has observed that for “the native,” “objectivity is always against him” (cited in McClintock 1992:97). For the refugee, much the same might be said. In his or her case, wounds speak louder than words. Wounds are accepted as objective evidence, as more reliable sources of knowledge than the words of the people on whose bodies those wounds are found. So the ideal construct, the “real refugee,” was imagined as a particular kind of person: a victim whose judgment and reason had been compromised by his or her experiences. This was a tragic, and sometimes repulsive, figure who could be deciphered and healed only by professionals, and who was opaque even (or perhaps especially) to himself or herself.

This set of expectations about the communicative efficacy (Tambiah 1985:123–166) of corporeal wounds—and of the presumed unreliability of the refugees' own narrative firsthand accounts of political violence—should be seen in relation to more general social expectations and interventions directed at refugees in Tanzania. What was conspicuously absent from all the documentary accumulation generated in the refugee camps was an official record of what the refugees themselves said about their own histories and their present predicament.

They were frequently regarded as simply unreliable informants. There was also a more general tendency among some (though by no means all) administrators to characterize the refugees as dishonest, prone to exaggeration, even crafty and untrustworthy. So, in a sense, they had to be cared for and understood obliquely, *despite themselves*. Their bodies were made to speak to doctors and other professionals, for the bodies could give a more reliable and relevant accounting than the refugees' “stories.” I often heard the Hutu refugees characterized as persons who were always “telling stories.”

Writing in the 1930s, Ernst Bloch defined “realism” as “the cult of the immediately ascertainable fact” (cited in Feldman 1994:406). This useful phrase

accurately describes how the figure of the refugee comes to be knowable: it is necessary to cut through “the stories” to get to “the bare facts.” It is here that physical, non-narrative evidence assumes such astonishing power. It has all the authority of an “immediately ascertainable fact.” In contrast, the political and moral history of displacement that most Hutu in Mishamo themselves insisted on constructing was generally rejected by their administrators as too messy, subjective, unmanageable, hysterical—as just “stories.” Set against an ostensibly knowable, visible medical history of injuries or illness, a political history snaking its way from Burundi to Tanzania, from the past to the here and now, weaving people into complex loyalties and unseen relations, presented itself as unstable and unknowable—and as ultimately, or, properly, irrelevant to the practical efforts to administer and care for large refugee populations.

In this manner history tended to get leached out of the figure of the refugee, as imagined by their administrators. This active process of dehistoricization was inevitably also a project of depoliticization. For to speak about the past, about the historical trajectory that had led the Hutu as refugees into the western Tanzanian countryside, was to speak about politics. This could not be encouraged by the camp administrators (whether the Ministry of Home Affairs, TCRS, or UNHCR); political activism and refugee status were mutually exclusive here, as in international refugee law more generally.

The conversation at the TCRS director’s home illustrates how the everyday language and practices of those very people who worked with the Hutu because of their refugee status continually acted to destabilize the solidity of the legal category, as documented in the refugees’ identity papers. This destabilization occurred along several different axes. On the one hand, there was a continual, informal monitoring of signs of decreasing refugeeeness. As the visible signs of one’s social refugeeeness faded, one’s worthiness as a recipient of material assistance was likely to decrease. But there was more to it than that. What emerges from this and other accounts is that the refugees were thought to be at their purest when they first arrived, and when their condition was visibly at its worst. So, instead of refugee status imagined as a state of being attained gradually (as the Hutu camp refugees themselves saw it) or as a legal status that one has or has not, the administrators tended to imagine refugee status as a processual condition that was at its purest and most recognizable early in exile, and was thereafter subject to gradual adulteration over time. All this added up, in a subtle way, to the barely noticeable but nevertheless powerful constitution of the real or true refugee—an ideal figure of which any actual refugees were always imperfect instantiations.

Refugees as Objects of Humanitarian Intervention

The case of Tanzania in the mid-1980s facilitates the effort of identifying (even if tentatively) certain key features in the constitution of the archetypal refugee at the more general level of humanitarian policy discourse. I take as a starting point the observation that there has emerged, in the post–World War II era, a substantially standardized way of talking about and handling “refugee

problems” among national governments, relief and refugee agencies, and other nongovernmental organizations (Malkki 1995b). I would also suggest that these standardizing discursive and representational forms (or, perhaps more precisely, tendencies) have made their way into journalism and all of the media that report on refugees. As a result, it is possible to discern transnational commonalities in both the textual and the visual representation of refugees. Such transnationally mobile representations are often very easily translated and shared across nation-state borders. And because they are shared among the institutions that locate, fund, and administer refugee projects, these representations can reasonably be expected to carry significant consequences. One of the most far-reaching, important consequences of these established representational practices is the systematic, even if unintended, silencing of persons who find themselves in the classificatory space of “refugee.” That is, refugees suffer from a peculiar kind of speechlessness in the face of the national and international organizations whose object of care and control they are. Their accounts are disqualified almost a priori, while the languages of refugee relief, policy science, and “development” claim the production of authoritative narratives about the refugees.¹² In what follows I attempt to look a little more closely at the systemic underpinnings of this form of silencing and speechlessness. I approach this phenomenon from several different directions, starting with a brief look at the complex effects of the visual representation of refugees, especially in the media of photography and documentary film.

The visual representation of refugees appears to have become a singularly translatable and mobile mode of knowledge about them. Indeed, it is not far-fetched to say that a vigorous, transnational, largely philanthropic traffic in images and visual signs of refugeeeness has gradually emerged in the last half-century. Pictures of refugees are now a key vehicle in the elaboration of a transnational social imagination of refugeeeness. The visual representation of displacement occurs in many arenas: among refugee administrators (as we have seen), in applied and other academic scholarship (Forbes Martin 1992), among journalists (Drakulič 1993; Kismaric 1989), in the publications of humanitarian and international organizations (UNHCR’s *Refugees* magazine), in television fund-raising drives, and even in fashion advertising (I once saw a fashion spread in a Finnish women’s weekly magazine, *Anna*, entitled “The Refugee Look”). This global visual field of often quite standardized representational practices is surprisingly important in its effects, for it is connected at many points to the de facto inability of particular refugees to represent themselves authoritatively in the inter- and transnational institutional domains where funds and resources circulate.

The first thing to be noted about the mutual relationship between image and narrative, spectacle and self-representation, is that photographs and other visual representations of refugees are far more common than is the reproduction in print of what particular refugees have said. There are more established institutional contexts, uses, and conventions for pictures of refugees than for displaced

persons' own narrative accounts of exile. Indeed, some of these visual conventions seem to speed up the evaporation of history and narrativity.¹³

Mass displacements are often captured as a “sea” or “blur of humanity” (e.g., Lamb 1994:H5)¹⁴ or as a “vast and throbbing mass” (e.g., Warrick 1994:E1), especially in Africa, as Figure 1 illustrates.¹⁵ Black bodies are pressed together impossibly close in a confusing, frantic mass. An utter human uniformity is hammered into the viewer's retina. This is a spectacle of “raw,” “bare” humanity. It in no way helps one to realize that each of the persons in the photograph has a name, opinions, relatives, and histories, or that each has reasons for



Figure 1

Refugees in Zambia, 1977. The photograph is taken from the front cover of a card designed for correspondence. Photograph by Peter Marlow; © P. Marlowe and Magnum Photos.

being where he is now: inside the frame of this photograph. (And this is no ordinary news photograph; it has been made into an “art card” offset printed in Lombreuil, France.)

Feldman’s recent essay on “cultural anesthesia” explores these kinds of mass images:

Generalities of bodies—dead, wounded, starving, diseased, and homeless—are pressed against the television screen as mass articles. In their pervasive depersonalization, this *anonymous corporeality* functions as an allegory of the elephantine, “archaic,” and violent histories of external and internal subalterns. [1994:407; emphasis added]

This “anonymous corporeality” is a precise characterization of what happens to refugees in the regimes of representation under discussion here. No names, no funny faces, no distinguishing marks, no esoteric details of personal style enter, as a rule, into the frame of pictures of refugees when they are being imagined as a sea of humanity.

Of course, this anonymous corporeality is not necessarily just a feature of mass scenes; it is equally visible in another conventionalized image of refugees: women and children. This sentimentalized, composite figure—at once feminine and maternal, childlike and innocent—is an image that we use to cut across cultural and political difference, when our intent is to address the very heart of our humanity.

Elsewhere I have also suggested that the visual prominence of women and children as embodiments of refugeeeness has to do not just with the fact that most refugees are women and children, but with the institutional, international expectation of a certain kind of *helplessness* as a refugee characteristic (Malkki 1995a:11). In an article entitled “The Refugee Experience: Defining the Parameters of a Field of Study,” Barry Stein notes that “refugees are helped because they are helpless; they must display their need and helplessness” (1981:327). This vision of helplessness is vitally linked to the constitution of speechlessness among refugees: helpless victims need protection, need someone to speak for them. In a sense, the imagined sea of humanity assumes a similar helplessness and speechlessness.

The bodies and faces of refugees that flicker onto our television screens and the glossy refugee portraiture in news magazines and wall calendars constitute spectacles that preclude the “involved” narratives and historical or political details that originate among refugees. It becomes difficult to trace a connection between me/us—the consumers of images—and them—the sea of humanity (compare Calhoun 1995:xiii).¹⁶ Or, more precisely, it becomes difficult to trace a connection, a relationship, other than that of a bare, “mere,” common underlying humanity: “We are all human, after all.” “As a parent, my heart breaks when I see those dazed Rwandan orphans.” These are very human and very decent reactions. One cannot help but feel horror and profound sadness, I think, in the face of such images or in the knowledge that such social circumstances do exist. But it is also possible and, indeed, useful to notice that in their overpowering

philanthropic universalism, in their insistence on the secondariness and unknowability of *details* of specific histories and specific cultural or political contexts, such forms of representation deny the very particulars that make of people something other than anonymous bodies, merely human beings.

At first it is difficult to see what might be so problematic in seeing the suffering of people with the eyes of “humanitarian concern” and “human compassion.” It is surely better than having no compassion or simply looking the other way. But this is not the issue. The issue is that the established practices of humanitarian representation and intervention are not timeless, unchangeable, or in any way absolute. On the contrary, these practices are embedded in long and complicated histories of their own—histories of charity and philanthropy, histories of international law, peacekeeping, and diplomacy, histories of banishment and legal protection, histories of empires and colonial rule, histories of civilizational and emancipatory discourses and missionary work, histories of World Bank and other development initiatives in Africa, and much more. These humanitarian representational practices and the standardized interventions that go with them have the effect, as they currently stand, of producing anonymous corporeality and speechlessness. That is, these practices tend actively to displace, muffle, and pulverize history in the sense that the Hutu refugees in Mishamo understood history. And they tend to hide the political, or political-economic, connections that link television viewers’ own history with that of “those poor people over there” (compare Calhoun 1995; Ferguson 1995, in press).

These processes were in grotesque evidence when the most recent large refugee movements from Burundi began to be photographed in the world’s newspapers. In the October 25, 1993, issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, on what the paper calls its “Second Front Page,” there was a large photograph of women and children laden with bundles. Underneath was a slim caption:

Hutu tribe refugees cross the border near Rwanda after walking more than 37 miles from Burundi. Tribal violence is believed to have flared up between the Tutsi and Hutu after a Burundi military coup overthrew and killed President Melchior Ndadaye on Thursday. On Sunday, 4,000 people marched through the streets of Bujumbura, the capital, calling for the release of the bodies of the president and of others killed in the coup. [*Los Angeles Times* 1993:A3]

The photo was a very large one, but there was no story to go with it.¹⁷ It was as if this grouping of people—women clothed in colorful cotton wraps, children in ragged T-shirts and shorts, walking barefoot out of Burundi—had just become generic refugees and generic Africans in whose societies tribal violence periodically flares up. It was as if this was all the context that might be required. Whoever got close enough to this cluster of people to take that photograph could have asked them to explain (if not in Kirundi, perhaps in French, or certainly through an interpreter) what had happened to them and what they had witnessed. Instead, there was almost no news from Burundi at all—only this large Asso-

ciated Press photograph.¹⁸ And this small group of speechless emissaries was allowed to go on its way.

This newspaper photograph helps us to see how “the refugee” is commonly constituted as a figure who is thought to “speak” to us in a particular way: wordlessly. Just the refugee’s physical presence is “telling” of his or her immediate history of violence. So we tend to assume, at any rate.

But it is not just that photographs displace narrative testimony. When there is testimony about refugees, it mostly does what the photographs do: it silences the refugees. For it tends to be testimony by “refugee experts” and “relief officials” (or even by those ever ready “well-placed Western diplomatic sources”), not by refugees themselves. How often have we seen the media image of a (usually white) U.N. official standing in a dusty landscape, perhaps in Africa, surrounded by milling crowds of black people peering into the camera, and benevolently, efficiently, giving a rundown on their numbers, their diseases, their nutritional needs, their crops, and their birth and mortality rates? This mode of what may be called a “clinical humanitarianism” looks for all the world like an exhaustive report on the displaced masses; and the official is surely trying to be informative, as well as to balance honesty and diplomacy. And yet the scene and the expert voice operate precisely to erase knowledge. In constructing a raw humanity and a pure helplessness, this spectacle all but blocks the possibility of persons stepping forward from the milling crowds, asking for the microphone, and addressing the glassy eye of the camera: “Now, if I may, Sir/Madam, there are numerous things that you have not considered, many details about our history and political circumstances that might assist you in helping us.” Such details easily appear as mere quibbles, fine points, and posturing in the face of the other, very powerful narrative of emergency relief, humanitarian intervention, and “raw” human needs.

The visual conventions for representing refugees and the language of raw human needs both have the effect of constructing refugees as a bare humanity—even as a merely biological or demographic presence. This mode of humanitarianism acts to trivialize and silence history and politics—a silencing that can legitimately be described as dehumanizing in most contexts. And yet the mechanisms involved here are more complex than that. For one might argue that what these representational practices do is not strictly to dehumanize, but to humanize in a particular mode. A mere, bare, naked, or minimal humanity is set up. This is a vision of humanity that repels elements that fail to fit into the logic of its framework.

The Stakes in the Humanitarian Interventions in Rwanda, Burundi, and Beyond

The vast displacements of people that occurred in the wake of the fighting and the genocide of 1994 in Rwanda are a good example of what is at stake in the constitution of refugees as such passive objects of humanitarian intervention. This short section will specifically address the effects of the disqualifica-

tion of refugee knowledge in the matter of their repatriation to Rwanda from Zaire.

It would be impossible to give, especially in a single essay, a thorough account of the complicated history that has culminated in the genocidal massacres of over half a million Rwandan citizens, overwhelmingly Tutsi, and the displacement of several million other Rwandan citizens, mostly Hutu, since April 1994. Important work on the genocide and its aftermath in Rwanda, as well as the contemporary political situation in Burundi, has been done by Reyntjens (1994), Prunier (1995), Lemarchand (1994a, 1994b), Newbury and Newbury (1994, 1995), African Rights (1994), Mbonimpa (1993), Pottier (1994), Jefremovas (n.d.), Guichaoua (1995), Destexhe (1994), and others. The bare outlines, however, are as follows.

Whereas in Burundi the minority Tutsi category controls the military and, effectively, the government, in Rwanda it is the Hutu majority that had been in power for all of its postcolonial history until the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) victory of 1994. The Hutu-led 1961 revolution that crumbled the monarchical system in Rwanda was violent; it resulted in the deaths of some 20,000 (mostly Tutsi) people and produced a sizable presence of exiled Tutsi in Uganda (and elsewhere). It is largely from the ranks of these refugees and their descendants in Uganda that the RPF grew. In October 1990 the RPF attacked Rwanda from Uganda. "Following the attack," Amnesty International reports, "some 7,000 people were arrested, most of them Tutsi; virtually all were subjected to severe beatings and some were killed" (1993:1). Fighting between the RPF and the Rwandan government forces continued intermittently from 1990 to 1993. On April 6, 1994, the presidents of both Burundi and Rwanda were killed in a plane crash for which responsibility is still being debated. This touched off a nightmarish campaign of mass killings in Rwanda, a campaign made the more appalling because it involved planning and premeditation (Lemarchand 1994a:1; Newbury and Newbury 1995:2; Prunier 1995). In the days following the crash there were "death squads" that systematically eliminated political opponents of the hard-line faction of the Rwandan government (including both Tutsi and moderate Hutu). Then civilian militias were apparently given "a free hand to just kill every Tutsi in sight" (Lemarchand 1994a:10). From Kigali, the killing spread to other regions of Rwanda. Eventually, many Hutu civilians began to kill their Tutsi neighbors (Smith 1994, cited in Lemarchand 1994a:11). In just a few months, hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Tutsi, were massacred. Most estimates of the death toll fall between 500,000 and 800,000. As RPF forces made advances inside Rwanda, Hutu civilian communities took flight into neighboring countries for fear of retaliation. When the Rwandan army finally collapsed, over a million people moved in the space of a few days into Zaire (and also into Tanzania and elsewhere). The highest number reported for the Rwandan refugee population in the region was 2.2 million. These people have since become objects of world attention as the most awe-inspiring refugee population in the memory of the aid organizations and media working there.

The hundreds of thousands of people living and dying in awful conditions in the Rwanda-Zaire borderlands know better than anyone else on the scene what they have done, what has happened to them, why, and what they can hope for if they return to Rwanda. If anyone is an expert on the apocalyptic Rwandan political situation now, it is they. And yet curious things are happening to their voices. Either they are not heard at all and not quoted in earnest as real, reliable sources by the journalists visiting the Zairean camps, or their words are quoted in ways they never intended (as symptoms of hysteria, evidence of brainwashing, and echoes of superstitious, gullible Africa). They are being rendered speechless in much the same way that the October 1993 refugees from Burundi's killings were.

This silence is the phenomenon to be understood. It is actually quite a riddle when we consider how much time, effort, and resources refugee agencies and other aid organizations, journalists, politicians, U.N. peacekeepers, the French and U.S. forces, and countless other expert agencies have had to expend in order to learn anything at all about the setting in which many of them have been deliberating over consequential interventions. One of the most consequential of these interventions still centers on the issue of the repatriation of the refugees from Zaire to Rwanda, a question that has been heatedly discussed ever since 1994.

But before considering the specific question of repatriation, it is worthwhile to try to identify the discursive forms and modes of knowledge that displaced local knowledge and understandings during the genocide and in the months after. At least three discursive registers were readily evident from that early media coverage.

The first register of coverage (dating from the period when massive population displacements had already occurred) emphasized the bodily, physical evidence of violence and atrocity in Rwanda. A colleague has commented, cynically but accurately, that this was the period of "blood and gore." Photographic evidence of almost unimaginable violence flooded print media and television. Rivers swelling with bodies distended and bleached by death; crying, disoriented toddlers clinging to the bodies of their dying parents; people with limbs cut off or infected panga slashes over their noses: this flood of terrifying images will not be soon forgotten.¹⁹

One particularly clear illustration of the place of photographic images in this crisis is to be found in a *Life* magazine special feature called "Eyewitness Rwanda" (1994:74–80). A short opening paragraph introduces six pages of full-color photographs, six pages that seem almost like a religious gesture of mourning. The paragraph ends: "What persists are images—a handful of pictures from among the thousands that have raced before our eyes on videotape or stared out from our daily newspapers. They require no elaboration. In their silence, they tell the story of Rwanda, 1994" (1994:74).

The heavily visual documentation of violence was subsequently joined by the second register: accounts of human tragedy, or what are perhaps most accurately called human interest stories. There were especially many accounts of

children in terrible circumstances. Again, the relevant historical and political contexts were missing.

The third register consisted of technical and heroic narratives. Here, the international aid effort had got underway among the Hutu refugees, and the papers were suddenly filled with detailed technical profiles of cholera, of the working principles of the water purification plants being flown in, of oral rehydration techniques, of the construction of airfields, and of the makes and capacities of the military transport planes and other heavy equipment involved in the relief operation centered in Goma. All three of these discursive registers share the feature that they do not require any sustained narrative inputs, any testimonial evidence, from the refugees on whose behalf all the activity was, and still is, being carried out. The refugees were relevant principally as the tragic mass of humanity that needed to be helped first and foremost not to die of cholera, dysentery, or other diseases, to be treated and fed. Epidemics had to be contained, clean drinking water had to be provided, orphans needed to be taken care of, the dead had to be buried (McGreal 1994). The relief workers, medical and other, have understandably been overwhelmed by the enormity of the tragedy in Rwanda and of their mandate in the refugee camps. The genocide left over half a million people dead and untold others wounded, orphaned, widowed, or alone; and the cholera epidemic in the camps in Zaire killed 40,000–50,000 people in little more than a month.²⁰

In the face of these terrible epidemics and the sheer mass of the refugee presence, most of the international organizations assisting them, the national governments sending in relief supplies, and even the journalists on site who were mostly echoing all of their policy statements concluded early on that the only solution was to get people to go back into Rwanda. (It is difficult to determine how much agreement there really was among the relief workers, but the dominant stance being reported was—and is—one favoring quick repatriation).²¹ The refugees have in many cases been told they would be safer there than in Zaire. Yet they have consistently expressed grave misgivings about returning. “Expert knowledge” has been terribly at odds with the principals’—the refugees’—knowledge of the situation, and it is clear that the latter has been almost automatically disqualified. For what reasons has this disqualification been considered rational or practically necessary? A vital part of the answer to this riddle is bound up with contemporary forms of humanitarianism. The speechlessness of the newest emissaries of suffering—the refugees from Rwanda—becomes intelligible in this light.

This is where the question of voice—the ability to establish narrative authority over one’s own circumstances and future, and, also, the ability to claim an audience²²—begins to show its teeth, then. Evidence suggests that the overwhelming majority of the Hutu refugees have never considered repatriation wise. They continue to fear retaliation from the new RPF-led government and from ordinary people for crimes for which, they know, the Hutu as a categorical collectivity are thought by many to bear responsibility. And they probably fear the specter of returning to the devastation that their surviving Tutsi neighbors

have witnessed. The Rwandan Hutu in Zaire are being urged to go “home,” but a question of great practical importance has not been seriously addressed: can the places from which these people fled still serve as their homes (Warner 1994)? The physical sites might be there, even intact, but as social environments they are likely to be alien and terrifying to many. In addition to other considerations, people know that many of their houses and fields are likely to have been occupied by Tutsi repatriating from Uganda after decades in exile there. As Raymond Bonner, one of the few well-informed, seriously engaged journalists covering the Great Lakes region now, reported in November 1994:

Since the war ended in July [1994], a dual repatriation problem has engulfed the tiny war-torn country. Tens of thousands of Tutsi have returned to Rwanda, as many as 300,000 by unofficial counts. They are not among the refugees who fled after the massacres erupted in April, but refugees from ethnic violence of 20 and 30 years ago. Their return is creating demographic and political changes that are potentially explosive. [1994:A3]

While officials of the new RPF government have stated publicly that “squatters must get out of houses when former owners return” from Zaire, the government lacks the means to enforce this; and “sometimes the new occupants have the real owner killed or picked up and taken away, often paying a soldier to do the dirty work” (Bonner 1994:A3). One need only accuse the returnee of complicity in the genocide.

Journalists have mostly echoed the position of the United Nations and several other relief agencies: it is necessary and desirable that the refugees should be repatriated. That the refugees have in general refused to return to Rwanda has been widely attributed, by the United Nations and several other humanitarian agencies and by the international press, to their vulnerability to rumormongering and manipulations by the exiled and defeated remnants of the Rwandan armed forces. There is good evidence that the refugee populations in Zaire are being intimidated by political leaders who wish to keep them in exile (compare Newbury and Newbury 1995; Prunier 1995). But to assume that they are all passive puppets moving mindlessly to the manipulations of a handful of callous politicians of the exiled Rwandan government may be unwise. In the early 1994 coverage of the crisis, the refugees were rendered as superstitious and hysterical, while Rwanda was painted for them as a safe and secure horn of plenty. Of the many news reports along these lines, it is sufficient to quote one:

Aid officials say the estimated 1.2 million Rwandan refugees now facing the agony of Zaire’s border camps have about two weeks to go home and harvest the bursting fields of corn, beans and other crops that carpet the lush country. . . . Yet the hungry refugees are fed a steady diet of fear and propaganda by former Hutu government officials and their minions, who insist they will be tortured and killed if they return to Rwanda. They claim that the estimated 30,000 refugees who have crossed the border since Sunday are dead, although journalists and other witnesses have seen them walking home safely. . . . So rumors and threats circulate daily from members of the former regime’s murderous militias and the Interahamwe, the armed youth wing of the government party. . . . Their *propaganda machine* is

in full swing again. Many refugees insist, for example, that the Tutsi caused the cholera epidemic by poisoning the water. And nearly all are convinced they will be mutilated or killed by the new regime if they go home. "We've heard all the refugees [who went back] have no eyes anymore," 28-year-old Primitiv Mukandemzo warned. . . . Frediana Mukamunana, 54, using her finger to slash in the air as she spoke, shouted: "They cut out the heart, the eyes, the intestines! And they put people in cars and burn them!" "They will put us in houses and burn us," whispered 18-year-old Faustin Ntanshuti. . . . Educated Rwandans are just as terrified. "They will kill all the intellectuals," said Alphonse Harerimana, a physician working at the Doctors Without Borders tent hospital for cholera cases. [Drogin 1994:A3, A11, emphasis added]

Such reports paint the refugees' refusal to comply with the repatriation policy as a symptom of their hysterical, superstitious, overdramatic frame of mind. What fails to be mentioned is that violence such as that described above has repeatedly occurred in the region; there are numerous historical precedents for all these forms of atrocity, as any student of the area knows (African Rights 1994; Malkki 1995a; Prunier 1995). That the refugees talk about such terrifying violence is not a psychological fact but a historical one.

In the face of the refugees' resistance, many tactics and arguments have been used to persuade and cajole the refugees since 1994. U.N. officials on the scene have on several occasions issued statements emphasizing the safety of returnees in spite of the fact that the United Nations has had no adequate staff of mobile observers on site within Rwanda, and no good way of knowing what has become of those who actually returned. The following was reported on July 27, 1994:

Wilkinson of the U.N. refugee agency said not a single returnee is known to have been injured or killed by soldiers of the new regime. "All the indications we've got is things are very stable there and the people who have gone back have had absolutely no problems," he said. [Drogin 1994:A11]

The same news report stated that "a reporter who explained to several old women that it was safe to return" was shouted down by angry young refugee men. "'You're telling lies!' they shouted angrily. 'It is not possible. Those who went back yesterday were all killed yesterday!'" (Drogin 1994:A11). On July 31, 1994, it was further reported that "U.S. Special Forces psychological warfare teams would bring in radio equipment to help the new government encourage more than a million refugees in neighboring Zaire to return home. The Tutsi-led government has assured Hutu refugees that there will be no reprisals for the massacres of Tutsis" (*Los Angeles Times* 1994:A7). Along the same lines, a August 6, 1994, report in the *Economist* states:

The U.N. hopes to persuade more to return by setting up counter-propaganda. It is establishing a "Blue Beret" radio station and is giving technical help to Radio Rwanda, now under RPF control, so that it can broadcast to the refugee camps. It also hopes to coax refugees back by deploying more peacekeepers in Rwanda and offering refugees food, water, and medical care at way-stations along the route home. [1994:35]

But how were these early assurances of safety to be reconciled with other, contradictory reports documenting the growing incidence of reprisals against returnees, seizures of land, disappearances, and other disturbing practices? *Le Monde's* Langellier already reported on August 7, 1994, that "more and more people have been 'disappearing'" in Kigali, that homes and lands abandoned by the people fleeing into Zaire have been reallocated by the RPF, and that "arbitrary seizures, accompanied in rural areas by the large-scale displacement of communities, amounts to a de facto ban on their rightful occupants' return" (Langellier 1994:16). Some days later, on August 16, 1994, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted a "veteran relief agency leader," who declined to be identified, as saying that the RPF army in Rwanda "has never shown any interest in keeping this [Hutu] population. Rwanda was overpopulated. Now they have an abundance of fields" (Balzar 1994c:A4; compare Bonner 1994).

If reports of reprisals against the few Hutu returnees have convinced the refugees of the danger of repatriation, so, too, has the incarceration of some 58,000–60,000 people accused of participation in the genocide in Rwandan prisons. The criminal lawyer Adam Stapleton reports for the *Human Rights Tribune*:

The single most pressing concern was the arbitrary arrest and detention of hundreds of people each week. Suspects were detained on the say-so of anyone, particularly if the suspect was Hutu and the accuser Tutsi, and charged with genocide. . . . The army arrested and detained people unchecked (by March [1994] the average weekly rate was estimated to be 1,300) and the displaced persons and refugees refused to move out of their camps arguing . . . that it was not safe to return home. The appalling conditions and increasing daily death toll from dysentery and diseases associated with chronic overcrowding make the prisons a time-bomb. [1995:15]

The refugees' fears were further exacerbated in April 1995, when hundreds (by some accounts thousands)²³ of Hutu were killed by the RPF-led Rwandan forces in the displaced persons camp of Kibeho in southwestern Rwanda. Before people fled the camp in panic, 70,000–100,000 were living there. The government forces stated that the camp and others like it were "filled with armed militias" and had to be disbanded (Lorch 1995a:A1, A4).

It is plain to see that the repatriation question is very complex. It is problematic for many reasons to have hundreds of thousands of people living in exile outside of Rwanda; it is no less problematic to push them back into Rwanda. This essay does not presume to propose a solution to the crisis. So much said, it was a terrible responsibility that the international organizations assumed in urging the refugees to go back "home," for this has been the predominant argument throughout, despite the fact that the United Nations has more recently expressed concern over the dangers of repatriation, and has publicly objected to Zaire's recent announcements about closing the camps one by one.

How could anyone guarantee that no retaliatory violence would erupt, when anyone familiar with the region's history (and with the social struggles over history there) would be forced to recognize that such violence would be, at

best, unsurprising? How could anyone think that in the wake of a genocide the political situation in Rwanda is “stable”? What questions, what considerations, override these in importance?

There is every reason to suppose that the violence that has so shocked the world has similarly shocked those who were its Rwandan victims and witnesses. This is a scale and kind of violence that is not often seen in the world. It is, literally, extraordinary. And because of this, it must have forced people in the region to rethink the universe of what is possible and thinkable—just as genocidal violence in recent European history has reconfigured social universes there. In the wake of the past two years, anything would seem to be possible. Politically, intellectually, conceptually, affectively—in all these ways it would seem wise and realistic to acknowledge the horror of what has happened by not forcing, cajoling, or tricking people to return to the still very dangerous sites of their shame and tragedy.

Time must be allowed to pass so that the refugees waiting and watching in Zaire can make a reasonable, well-founded assessment of their alternatives. Time is also required from the humanitarian agencies involved. Surely they would not wish to have to acknowledge that they have marched people to their deaths in their desire to do away with a refugee crisis.

Time must be given to the tasks of witnessing and testimony, on both sides of the Rwanda-Zaire border, among Tutsi and Hutu. Beresford has rightly observed that

there is . . . a forgetfulness in the world’s fixation with the relief disaster that is Goma. The story of Rwanda is not that of a cholera epidemic, terrible though it may be; cholera is the consequence of the central horror of the last few months—genocide. . . . Genocide invites a Nuremberg. [1994:6]

For any kind of accounting or public justice to become a real possibility, all the parties concerned (national, regional, and international) would have to consent to become an audience to the “involved” stories that the inhabitants of this terrorized region have to tell. The obstacles to such accounting at all levels have become very clear in the funding and other difficulties that the U.N.-organized war crimes tribunal has faced.

The genocide in Rwanda has already happened; it is not possible to go back and change interventions or omissions of the past. But the dangerous effects of silencing are still all too salient in currently unfolding events in the region. The Hutu refugees from Rwanda are still in Zaire, Tanzania, and elsewhere, and, as of this writing (February 1996), refusing repatriation, still the objects of concerted efforts from the Zairean government, the United Nations, and various other agencies to push them back where they “belong.” The effects of such silencing are detectable in neighboring Burundi, also. By ignoring the continual political persecution, intimidation, and killings occurring in that country, the “international community” risks coming face to face with another Rwanda-like period of terror there and finding that nothing that could have been done has been done (Balzar 1994b).

But preventive measures do not come easily in the conventional logic of the “humanitarian operation.” For humanitarian help to be mobilized, the disaster usually must have happened already. When refugees and orphans have been produced, then the site for intervention is visible. Otherwise, the matter is “political” (or a “domestic” issue in a sovereign state) and thus beyond the realm of humanitarian intervention (Waal 1994:10).

Conclusion

It is obviously neither logically nor practically necessary that humanitarian intervention in and of itself dehistoricize or depoliticize. And I would like to make perfectly clear that by studying certain of the transnationally shared aspects of humanitarian intervention in refugee issues, I am not thereby seeking to belittle the importance of the moral, ethical, and political motivations that are clearly at the core of humanitarian interventions.²⁴ It is necessary to state that these forms and practices of humanitarianism do not represent the best of all possible worlds, and that it is politically and intellectually possible to try to come up with something better. Especially in the face of the political crisis in Rwanda, and the very real possibility that the political situation in Burundi will soon become much worse than it already is, it is necessary to do better. Perhaps a part (a crucial part) of the improvement is to be found in a radically “historicizing humanism” that insists on acknowledging not only human suffering but also narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory. Barthes’s call for a progressive humanism (1980:101) addressed this very issue, as do Foucault’s later writings; he suggested why it is more useful to seek to connect people through history and historicity than through a human essence (or “human nature”). This is not to make a simple, romantic argument about “giving the people a voice”; for one would find underneath the silence not a voice waiting to be liberated but ever deeper historical layers of silencing and bitter, complicated regional struggles over history and truth.

It is a historicizing (and politicizing) humanism that would require us, politically and analytically, to examine our cherished notions of mankind and the human community, humanitarianism and humanitarian “crises,” human rights and international justice. For if humanism can only constitute itself on the bodies of dehistoricized, archetypal refugees and other similarly styled victims—if clinical and philanthropic modes of humanitarianism are the only options—then citizenship in this human community itself remains curiously, indecently, outside of history.

Notes

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the international workshop “Finding a Place and Space for Culture,” Institute of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, December 1–3, 1993; the Department of Anthropology colloquium at McGill University in 1995; the University of California conference “Censorship and Silencing” in 1995; the Center for African Studies and the Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1996; and the Department of Anthropology colloquium at Princeton University in 1996.

1. The term “selective genocide” is from Lemarchand and Martin 1974 and was widely used.

2. Compare Rée 1992 and Malkki 1994, 1995b.

3. I would like to thank Daniel Segal for pointing out the presence of the universal family in this imagery. The universal figures of man, woman, and child are, of course, often (but not always) constitutive of that other abstraction, “the family,” as Barthes’s classic essay “The Great Family of Man” showed (1980:100–102; Segal, personal communication, March 8, 1996).

4. Humanitarian interventions take place largely within an internationalist institutional and conceptual framework; that is, they depend on the concept of an “international community” (compare Malkki 1994). Thus, the concept of internationalism is an integral part of any discussion of international community and international responsibility. In a longer essay it would be productive to combine the critical study of humanitarianism with long-standing debates about internationalism. For the present, this larger set of questions may be indicated by Craig Calhoun’s particularly clear-sighted discussion of internationalism in the context of Rwanda and Bosnia in his foreword to Micheline Ishay’s *Internationalism and Its Betrayal*:

In both cases [Bosnia and Rwanda], the problem of internationalism does not just arise with questions about universal human rights and possible humanitarian interventions, but is constitutive of the very crises themselves in ways not unrelated to the blind spots of liberal individualism.

The problem is not just that international diplomats and multilateral agencies mishandled the two specific situations [Bosnia and Rwanda]: the entire international framework for understanding nationalism and related conflicts is deeply flawed. Among other things, it systematically obscures such international influences on the production of domestic, putatively entirely ethnic, struggles. It also leaves well-intentioned international actors with no good way of grasping their connection to the genocides and nationalist wars that have marred—but systematically marked—the twentieth century. Not only do these appear often as premodern inheritances, and therefore disconnected from genuinely modern and even contemporary sources, but they appear as fundamentally separate from the institutions and discourse of the respectable international community. Diplomats and analysts fail to see the connection between the structuring of the international community as a world system of putative nation-states, of making adaptation to the rhetoric of nationalism a condition for entrance into the United Nations, and the pernicious forms of nationalism they decry. Not only they but many of the rest of us fail to reflect on the ironic nationalism reproduced in asking whether intervention in genocidal wars is or is not a part of the compelling national interest of the United States or any other country. [Calhoun 1995:xiii]

5. The official designation of these camps by the Tanzanian Ministry for Home Affairs as well as TCRS and UNHCR was “refugee settlement”; however, the refugee residents of Mishamo always referred to it as a camp. Their reasons are discussed in Malkki 1995a.

6. It is not known how many people returned from the Hutu refugee camps in Tanzania to Burundi when the first democratic elections in that country brought a Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, to power in 1993 (compare Lemarchand 1994b).

7. This discussion also appears in Malkki 1995a.

8. I would like to thank Referee 1 for helping me to think further about this issue. Referee 1 remarks: “Antagonism against commercial classes is especially strong during periods of significant inflation as occurred with the economic policies of ‘liberalization’ followed by the Tanzanian [government] over these years. The idea that a ‘fellow refugee’ could raise prices and create hardship for those of his or her own group was a contradiction to the norm of refugee culture.”

9. The officials of the Ministry of Home Affairs of the United Republic of Tanzania were also very generous in their assistance, but their relationship to the refugees was quite different from that of the nongovernmental organizations, as I have shown elsewhere (Malkki 1995a).

10. I would like to thank Referee 1 for suggestions on this section.

11. Individual persons in UNHCR and TCRS have also engaged very seriously with my research in the Hutu refugee communities in Tanzania and have given me valuable critical feedback.

12. Referee 1 comments here: “From my experience, for example, in the Rwandan camps, it was astounding how the aid communities have selected texts that correspond with their image; having no other access to a wider range of discourse, and often dependent on their own interpreters for their impressions, they simply end up magnifying the very oppositions they claim to oppose—in a process that amount[s] to an excellent example of creating alterity.”

13. Ortner’s 1991 essay has helped me to think through issues of narrativity and historical agency.

14. Another news photograph of a tightly packed group of children with cups in their hands has the caption “A drop in the ocean of misery. . . . Rwandan children wait for water at Kibumba camp near Goma, Zaire” (Trequesser 1994:4).

15. I would like to thank my student Ghada Masri for giving me this photograph.

16. Compare Debord: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (1983:2).

17. Other pictures with short captions but without stories appeared in the *New York Times* (1995a:A5, 1995b:E2); compare *Life* (1994:74–80).

18. This should be seen in the more general context of the gross underreporting of the violence that started in Burundi in October 1993.

19. In a theme issue on Africa, *Granta*, a literary magazine, published 22 pages of black-and-white photographs of the dead and wounded in the Rwanda genocide. The photographs were taken by Gilles Peress.

20. Estimates vary. The figure of 50,000 cholera victims is cited in Lorch 1995b:A1; compare Balzar 1994d:A23.

21. And, of course, “voluntary repatriation” is inscribed in the operating code of the UNHCR as the primary, and ideal, “durable solution” to displacement. See Warner’s reflections on the implications of this ideal and its relation to the social imagination of “home” by refugee organizations (1994:1 ff.).

22. Compare Balibar on citizenship: he contrasts “citizenship understood in its strict sense as the full exercise of political rights and in its broad sense as cultural initiative or effective presence in the public space (the capacity to be ‘listened to’ there)” (1988:724). It is in this broad sense that the international citizenship of the refugees from Burundi and Rwanda has been denied in the arena commonly named “the international community” (compare Foucault, as cited in Macey 1993:437–438).

23. Estimates vary. See, for example, Lorch 1995a:A1, A4.

24. I also do not wish to imply that all relief, aid, refugee, and humanitarian agencies espouse the same philosophy; I am only attempting to identify a dominant tendency. There are, happily, dissonant voices in the ranks of these agencies, as in the following case:

“If the U.N. doesn’t learn from this, God help the next poor souls of the world who need help,” said John O’Shea of the Irish relief agency GOAL, which has been active here [in Rwanda] since the beginning of the crisis. Using bitter profanities, O’Shea said the United Nations has failed to meet the refugees’ needs and has made no serious effort to make them feel safe going home. [cited in Balzar 1994a:A6]

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