

The Cautious Politics of “Humanizing” Refugee Research

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Article abstract

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The Cautious Politics of “Humanizing” Refugee Research

Jonathan Darling

ABSTRACT

In this intervention, I reflect on what it may mean to ‘humanize’ refugee research. The assumption often made is that ‘humanizing’ can arise through a concern with the particularity of the individual, through drawing from ‘the mass’ the narrative of the singular and employing this as a means to identify, empathise, and potentially understand others. Yet such a move risks a reliance on creating relations of empathy and compassion that elide political responses to dehumanization and often relies on a universalist assumption of what constitutes the category of “the human,” an assumption that has been critically challenged by post-colonial writing.

KEYWORDS

humanization; refugee studies; refugee mobility; race

RESUMÉ

Dans cette intervention, je réfléchis à ce que pourrait signifier d’«humanizer» la recherche sur les réfugiés. On suppose souvent que l’«humanisation» peut émerger à travers une attention à la particularité de l’individu, en puisant dans «la masse» le récit singulier et en utilisant ceci comme moyen de s’identifier, de compatir et potentiellement de comprendre les autres. Cependant, par un tel geste on court le risque de miser sur le recours à la création de relations d’empathie et de compassion qui passe outre à une réponse politique à la déshumanisation et qui repose sur une présomption universaliste de ce qui constitue la catégorie de «l’humain», présomption qui a été remise en question par les écrits postcoloniaux.

What does it mean to “humanize” in the context of refugee studies? Humanization is an often-cited desire for activists, scholars, and journalists and is associated, in part, with an effort to challenge the presentation of refugees as abstract masses that threaten the sanctity and security of the nation-state (Hartley & Fleay, 2017; Kirkwood, 2017; Papastergiadis, 2009). Yet critical discussions rarely consider what this concern with humanization might entail in any

depth. In this short intervention, I outline the need to consider more fully, and more carefully, what to **humanize** might mean and to be mindful of the political and moral limits of such a drive. My concern is not to argue against humanization but to urge caution in seeking a turn to humanity that overrides alterity and that risks reducing the multiple, incomplete, and fragmented nature of refugee experience into a universalizing category in order to promote empathy and com-

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passion. In doing so, this intervention firstly considers processes of dehumanization and how recent journalism has sought to respond to such challenges through the foregrounding of stories of mobility, before discussing the limits—and dangers—of these framings of human commonality and connection.

In reflecting on what it means to humanize, we might start with its opposite, and far more readily analyzed, process: that of dehumanization. As noted across a range of work, the dehumanization of refugees takes many forms, from patterns of representation and imagery in news coverage that focus on abstracted groups (Bleiker et al., 2013; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017); to political rhetoric and language that associates refugees with insects, natural disasters, and disease (Dempsey & McDowell, 2019; Ibrahim & Howarth, 2015); to policies of securitization and militarization that expose refugees to violence and abuse at borders across the world (Jones, 2016). Critical to all these forms of dehumanization are two processes. First is the portrayal of refugees as lacking human qualities or character (Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014); second is the mobilization of such supposed human deficiencies to legitimate differences in treatment and understandings of moral worth within the boundaries of a given political or social community (Sales, 2002). Not only is the “deservingness” of refugees placed in question through the imagery, rhetoric, and policies of dehumanization, but such cultural formations legitimate, and indeed compel, the exclusion of refugees from a right to move. As Kirkwood (2017) argues, dehumanization produces defensive responses as it reduces the scope for empathy within a society while at the same time producing a desire to protect “us” from “them,” founding the conditions for exclusionary policies and politics (Bleiker et al., 2013).

Examples of dehumanization, and its corrosive and violent effects, are widespread in discussions of refugee mobility (Hartley & Fleay, 2017). For example, critical studies have explored the dehumanizing policies, representations, and politics of refugee reception at the borders of Europe through the so-called refugee crisis (Collyer & King, 2016; Crawley, 2016). Amid these discussions have been consistent calls to respond to the dehumanization of refugees through processes of humanization, read as an effort to encourage empathy and legitimize support through foregrounding common human qualities (Dempsey & McDowell, 2019; Trilling, 2018). In this sense, humanization refers to the discursive effort of “constructing people as belonging to a common moral community, of acting in ways that are understandable, and as deserving of support” (Kirkwood, 2017, p. 116). To humanize is to recognize and respect the human qualities of those who are, after all, human (Burrell & Hörschelmann, 2019). In a context of dehumanization, to humanize is a political process, and in the remainder of this intervention, I want to consider what challenges this presents.

One of the most pervasive responses to the “refugee crisis” in Europe has been the emergence of modes of journalism that seek, in varying ways, to challenge dehumanizing narratives. To take two examples from a far broader corpus, in Patrick Kingsley’s (2017) *The New Odyssey* and Daniel Trilling’s (2018) *Lights in the Distance*, we see a common concern with tracing the mobilities of refugees at the borders of Europe, detailing the decision-making processes that shape mobility and the political structures that condition and constrain choices. These texts exemplify a wider trend of long-form journalism and storytelling that relies on individual testimony to convey the multiple moti-

vations, experiences, and personalities of refugees as they traverse borders and confront governmental structures of control and care (McDonald-Gibson, 2016; Smith, 2016). In part, such work responds to both academic and advocacy-driven calls for journalism to further foreground the voices and narratives of refugees and to convey the complexities of refugees' experiences (Migrant Voice, 2014; Smith & Waite, 2019).

For example, Trilling's (2018) text is structured around encounters with a series of characters as they traverse the borders of "fortress Europe." Of these interlocutors, he writes,

Most though, are neither innocents nor villains, but people trying to retain control over their lives and making complex decisions about what risks to take, what rules to flout, what lies to tell. Like the rest of us, they are constantly making and remaking stories that explain their place in the world.

Trilling, 2018, p. 262

Similarly, Kingsley's investigation is framed through the close recounting of one refugees' journey:

Every other chapter (or thereabouts) is about Hashem's quest for safety. His very personal narrative is juxtaposed with the narrative of the wider crisis, allowing us to cycle between the journey of an individual and that of the continent he passes through. Why Hashem in particular? He's no freedom fighter or superhero. He's just an ordinary Syrian. But that's why I want to tell his story. It's the story of an everyman, in whose footsteps any of us could one day tread.

Kingsley, 2017, p. 11

The promise of such journalism is in displaying the "human reality" of refugee mobility as this strand of writing focuses on the personal struggles of the "refugee crisis." We see here a focus on the individual lives of people who are "like the rest of us," as means both to foreground human connections with

refugee narratives and to produce a sense of what it means to be human, what it means to be "an everyman," as Kingsley puts it. The ordinariness of the individual is brought to the fore in these narratives, which position the stories of refugees as at once both complex and prosaic, as narratives that might be identified with from the perspective of a shared or common sense of constrained decisions, hopes, and vulnerabilities.

The value that is attached to these efforts at humanization is notable in the reception these texts received. In a review for the *New Statesman*, George (2018) argues that in portraying "the reality of life" (para. 2) for refugees, Trilling has "done us a great service by turning masses and numbers into people whom we like, who we can see are like us" (para. 16), while the journalist Jon Snow argues that Kingsley's writing "dis-entangles the individual from the mass" within popular narratives of a "refugee crisis" (cited in Kingsley, 2017, p. iii). Critically though, this turn to centring refugee journeys as a means of responding to the dehumanization of refugees is one that foregrounds the individual and risks relying on a measure of sameness rather than difference. In doing so, there is a risk of obscuring alternative accounts of how the human, as a political category, has been constructed within structures of power and privilege. In the remainder of this intervention, I want to consider what power relations are reproduced through a focus on the human as an individual that is "like us." In particular, I draw out three concerns for how we think about humanization.

First is the assumption that humanizing can arise through a concern with the particularity of the individual, through drawing from "the mass" the narrative of the singular and employing this as a means to

identify, empathize, and potentially understand. This is, I would argue, a relatively common assumption in much advocacy work, articulating a desire to make coherent and to suggest that exposure to details, particularities, and individual human experience may change or, at the very least, affect people's thinking (Smith, 2016). Humanization seeks to counter the abstractions of dehumanization through a concern with "individual lives," and in this turn to the individual, humanization finds common human characteristics. For example, in discussing the transition from a rescue operation vessel into the waiting arms of Frontex officials at the Italian coast, Kingsley (2017) writes that after "a couple of days in which the refugees have been treated like humans, they're about to become mere statistics again" (p. 151). On the boat, he argues, refugees were seen and treated "as people with a story" rather than being "just seen as a statistic" (p. 152).

The human is at once both a singular and a multitude in such an imaginary. However, when such commonality becomes a normative basis for shaping how the human is understood, this poses political challenges. If we return to George's (2018) discussion of Trilling's book, we see these dangers in the argument that this book turns "masses and numbers into people whom we like" (para. 16). To humanize is thus, in part, to "turn numbers into people," but whether "we" like these people or not should not be a concern for a politics of refuge—social and spatial justice should not be a politics of preference.

The normative dimensions of humanization are twofold in these examples. On the one hand, there is a concern with identifying, valorizing, and making visible attributes held in common as a means to foster compassionate responses (George, 2018; Smith, 2016). On the other hand, we see a

linked, and problematic, desire to humanize through incorporation into a given framing of the human. Humanization as a normative project can thus be an effort to compel empathy towards refugees in public opinion and to bridge distances between decision-makers and migrants (Gill, 2016, 2018). However, relying on empathy or compassion is not without risks. Just as discussions of the cultural politics of welcome have highlighted how welcoming can be divisive in its reproduction of power relations of hospitality and ownership, and in its fragility to being co-opted for exclusive political purposes (Darling, 2014, 2018; Gill, 2018), so, too, a focus on empathy as the basis for addressing the violence of borders does little to subvert the power relations underpinning such regimes. Indeed, as Gill (2016) argues, while compassion may be valuable as a starting point, it should be seen as a politics of last resort that requires critical questioning over who has the capacity to be compassionate and for what purposes. At their least critical, moral gestures of empathy, compassion, hospitality, and tolerance may sustain structures of power and privilege (Wilson, 2014). A focus on empathy as a positive outcome of humanizing refugees leaves open the question of what power structures are reproduced through this turn to the universalizing category of the human.

Second, we might consider how refugee studies can resist a humanization that imposes a universalizing, and normative, account of the human. One provisional response is to draw on Jazeel's (2019) decolonial discussion of the possibilities of the singular. The accounts noted earlier all point to the particularities of refugee lives as an aspect of journalistic narrative, but in humanizing, these accounts return to a coherent overview of refugee mobility and its policy implications. Jazeel's critique advocates

resisting this urge and remaining with the singular as a means to open new avenues of thought. One approach, he argues, is to focus on the fragments that run through research. In Jazeel's words,

We might think about fragments as those traces found in field or archival work; a scrap of speech, a tract of text, a narrative, a material thing found or alluded to by a research participant perhaps. Fragments rarely make sense to our well-trained ethnographic eye or historical gaze. The fragment is thus evidence of some other whole thing, but evidence of what exactly we can rarely be sure. ... The fragment in this analysis, is a lure, an invitation to pause and stay with difference.

Jazeel, 2019, p. 14

This practice of pausing is where we might find critical purchase for new ways of thinking through refugee mobility. Those fragments that never add up to a whole may reflect many aspects of refugee politics, far more so than a desire to make the whole come into view, to cohere for a policy, story, or programme of study. A question to consider going forward is thus what a concern with incomplete and incoherent stories may mean for how we think about refugee mobility.

Refugee studies might thus begin to consider how aspects of incoherence and the juxtaposition of singular cases offer forms of humanization that avoid reduction to a singular, normative account of the human. To humanize in this sense would be 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 (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). At the same time, staying with the fragmentary in this manner draws further attention to the failures of the category of the refugee and its

inability to protect human rights when situated outside the humanizing role of the citizen (Arendt, 1958).

Finally, staying with a singularity that avoids reductionism is significant for one further reason—that, as a number of recent critical discussions have foregrounded, the very category of "the human" and the forms of rights ascribed to this category have served to sustain a series of political, and epistemological, closures (Esposito, 2012; Weheliye, 2014). If humanization offers a universalizing gesture that may promote empathy (Kirkwood, 2017), then that universality risks losing sight of the differential ways in which the category of the human has been claimed and inhabited. Indeed, the entangled nature of dehumanization and attempts to humanize require further critical scrutiny and consideration, not least because both draw upon assumptions that the category of "the human" or "humanity" offers a stable whole into which individuals may be assimilated. Yet, as Weheliye (2014, p. 4) argues, the prospective inclusivity of being "human" is a fiction. Race has historically operated as a "set of socio-political processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans," and as such, racial assemblages constitute "the visual modalities in which dehumanization is practiced and lived" (Weheliye, 2014, p. 6). The process of humanization, and the desire "to humanize," therefore takes on a different resonance when the historical violences of the category of "the human" are brought to the fore. Reading the human in these terms—as a product of racial capitalism, biopolitics, and forms of border oppression—poses questions for how humanization might focus attention on the violent closures that have shaped how the human has come to be understood. To humanize in these terms requires careful

and critical work to resist totalizing universalisms that occlude the violence of citizenship regimes, borders, and racial hierarchies that have sustained the exclusion of those seeking refuge and have produced the dehumanization of migrant bodies.

To conclude, in this brief intervention, I have sought to present a series of questions over the normative desire to humanize refugee mobility in the face of prevalent forms of dehumanization. In doing so, I have reflected on some of the limits of a turn to humanization that relies on reducing the particularity of the individual to a universal feature of humanity and that employs this universality as a wellspring for compassion and empathy. This is not to argue that more assertive forms of migrant rights may not fold out from humanization; indeed, this may be a critical prerequisite for recognizing refugees as legitimate bearers of, and claimants to, rights (Nyers, 2006; Trilling, 2018). Rather, I argue that humanization alone does not achieve this. Importantly, this is because the category of the human upon which humanization rests has itself been a product of racialized ordering, such that the category of the fully human has rarely been open to all (Weheliye, 2014).

To return to the context of Europe's refugee "crisis" that I opened with, El-Enany (2016) argues that in the midst of popular drives to welcome refugees, a selective practice of empathy was in evidence, one that revealed implicit sets of racial biases (Forgiarini et al., 2011), as drives to humanize refugees focused on certain racialized bodies at the expense of others. Absent from such efforts to humanize, El-Enany, (2016, p. 14) argues, was an understanding or account of the colonial histories and present imperial violence that have determined the very uneven ground on which this selective humanization takes place. Such absences,

and their violent effects, are why humanizing refuge and displacement requires crucial, but careful, work that is open to multiple ways of understanding what it means to be human.

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