

Marginalized at the centre: How public narratives of suffering perpetuate perceptions of refugees' helplessness and dependency

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Abstract

This paper critiques the common practice of people from refugee backgrounds giving presentations and testimonials on their displacement experiences, in college, university, and similar institutional settings. While such speaking events may be framed as opportunities to centre refugee voices, this paper argues that the totality of the presentation environments, especially their focus on narratives of suffering, do in fact reinforce the marginal and powerless position with which refugees are associated. To counteract the marginalizing effects of such presentations, the paper suggests alternative ways of presentations that more meaningfully involve refugees in framing and directing such speaking events.

Keywords: Refugees; marginalization; public narratives; perceptions of suffering; dependency.

Introduction

Images and reports of individuals and families fleeing conflict have become quite common in popular news media in recent years. The ongoing conflict in Syria, for example, has led to the displacement of over five million individuals, two million of whom have crossed into neighboring countries (Aljazeera, 2013). Media reports depict deplorable conditions under which the displaced people live, either within their countries, or in countries in which they have sought refuge. As part of efforts to provide permanent asylum to refugees, the United States, among several other countries, resettle several thousand refugees annually (UNHCR, 2013b). Support for displaced persons is often provided by humanitarian organizations, which get their funding from governments and private organizations and individuals. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the largest organization providing refugee support globally, but there are several smaller groups that provide support at the national and local levels. In many cities across the United States and Canada where significant numbers of refugees are resettled, institutions of higher learning also

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lend their support to refugees resettled in those cities. Faith organizations also do the same.

Many of these organizations, in their appeal for funding from donors, use images and narratives of the helpless and suffering refugees, drawing on the sympathy and empathy of donors. In many instances also, organizations, including colleges and universities, invite refugees to provide testimonials of their displacement experiences to audiences who are potential sources of material, service, and financial support. The image of the suffering, helpless, and needy refugee has therefore become a fixture in refugee representation.

In this paper, I argue that, while these presentations may appear to give voice and agency to refugees in their countries of asylum, the refugee voices are channeled in ways that perpetuate their image of dependency and powerlessness. To provide a background to common refugee representations, I offer a brief review of the literature on these representations by humanitarian and development organizations, which shows a frequent pathologization of refugees. I follow with a discussion of the methodology, which comprised participant and non-participant observation in the data collection, and a mix of frameworks from Narrative Therapy and museum studies in the analysis. In the analysis section, I provide a comprehensive discussion of the problematics of the staging of presentations by speakers from refugee backgrounds in college and university settings, interrogating the effects of physical settings of such presentations, as well as the roles of audiences and event organizers. I also analyze the impacts of these presentations on the images of refugees. I conclude the article by offering suggestions on alternative ways of centering refugee voices.

Pathologizing refugees: A brief review of the literature

I begin this brief literature review by noting that the problems of refugee representations begin with the very term 'refugee.' Among other attributes, the term 'refugee' is often seen to denote suffering, deprivation, and powerlessness (Inhetveen, 2006: 7-9). In her review of the refugee literature, Malkki (1995: 510) notes that refugees have been commonly represented, by virtue of being refugees, as suffering from mental disorders. The medicalization of refugee experiences not only misrepresents the diversity of refugee experiences, but also help legitimize decision-making for refugees, since they are considered incapacitated to make their own decisions (Pupavac, 2006: 2, 19-20). Writing on the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in France, Fassin and d'Halluin (2005) contend that in the context of limited opportunities for asylum, those who have or can claim illness, psychological and physiological, are given asylum preferences. This reflects the move from viewing asylum from a rights perspective to compassion (which is apolitical) as the basis for granting refuge. In this instance, it is the sick refugee who is recognized, hence perpetuating the notion of the suffering refugee.

Many countries in the Global North have increasingly restricted the granting of asylum, where the legal-political discourse (often played out in the press)

portray asylum seekers as security threats, drains on local economies, and in many cases viewed as economic migrants masquerading as political asylees. Australia (UNHCR, 2013a) and Israel (Amnesty International), for example, have been in the news in recent years for their increasingly punitive and restrictive asylum policies and practices. An interesting irony that Fassin (2005) notes in his discussion of immigration policies in France is the fact that while the rights-based avenue for seeking asylum is restricted, humanitarianism and compassion for sick refugees (which requires that refugees demonstrate bodily ill-health) is the avenue increasingly promoted. It is important to note here therefore that the narratives of suffering, to the extent that these can be avenues to secure external support (and asylum in the case of France), become a form of agency for the refugees (Armstrong, 2008).

While the narratives of suffering may be seen as a form of agency, as Armstrong (2008) suggests, the refugee voice is limited to seeking humanitarian aid, and not the acquisition of political and legal rights. These narratives hence further buttress the hegemonic portrayal of refugees as suffering. If encoded in the term ‘refugee’ is the image of “dependency, helplessness, and misery” (Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 1992: 7), then the narratives of suffering confirm this.

Methodology

I relied primarily on participant and non-participant observation to gather information for this article. In my work as a college professor and volunteer with a number of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that provide service and material support to refugees in Western New York (USA) I have the opportunity to observe and in many cases assist in organizing lectures, workshops, and performances addressing refugee experiences.

Many universities and colleges in the United States have active civic engagement programs where students, staff, and faculty get to work with underserved populations in their neighborhoods, and sometimes in distant locations. In cities in which refugees are resettled, they tend to constitute part of the underserved population, especially those who are newly arrived. While engagement with refugees may be ongoing throughout the year, sometimes media stories about refugee crises in some parts of the world trigger intensified examination of refugee experiences, and more concerted efforts to solicit relief services for refugees in the city neighborhoods. Such crises also often prompt the invitation of refugee speakers to college and university campuses to share their experiences relative to the ongoing crises. It is from my participation in such presentations that I draw information for this reflection

For the analysis, I draw concepts and frameworks from the fields of Narrative Therapy and museum studies, both of which offer critical insights into how subjects and objects are presented, observed, and perceived, and the implications of these processes.

Listening to refugee voices: Hierarchies of power and the marginalization of refugees

For victims of trauma, the field of Narrative Therapy (NT) has demonstrated that the sharing of trauma experiences have therapeutic value (see Sliep et al., 2004). NT seeks to elevate the voices of the marginalized, and to challenge the privileged positions of those in centers of power (Sliep et al., 2004: 315). NT has been used with refugee communities, but the occasional public presentations by refugees in college and university campuses are not premised on these therapeutic approaches. It is such non-therapeutic refugee presentations that I address in this reflection.

Examples of such non-therapeutic refugee presentations abound and take a variety of forms. The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) states that its "Refugee Voices", program is important because "Hearing and reading the first-hand testimonies of those who had to flee from war and persecution does not only inform the rest of the world about the conditions refugees endure; it also empowers refugees to give voice to others and work together to rebuild peaceful, stable lives." In one of four audio-files posted on the USCRI website, a refugee from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Aida Ibisevk, now resettled in the United States, narrates her experiences living in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war, highlighting the atrocities around her at that time and the challenges she and her family went through. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), through its Global Consultations program, states that it invites refugee participation in their deliberations because refugee voices "provide a vital reality check to other stakeholders" (UNHCR, 2010). Citing an example of such efforts, UNHCR states: "At the June third track meeting in Geneva, Aischa, a young refugee woman, spoke of her experience in seeking asylum, including a period of detention. Her direct testimony ended with a ringing plea of "Action, please," on behalf of all refugees seeking asylum and a safe haven." (UNHCR, 2010).

While speaking events that feature refugee speakers provide audiences a chance to hear directly from refugees, I argue that the construction of these speaking environments, and the narratives from the refugee speakers, which may be projected as centering and elevating their voices, may accentuate their marginal positions.

The ethnographic display in the public presentations by refugee speakers

My first critique of these refugee presentations is the actual physical framing of the speaking events. In this critique, I draw some insights from museum studies. Museums, as we know, are in the business of displays and representations. I argue that in their presentations, refugee speakers, once positioned at the podium, become objects of display. Kuwayama (2003: 9) posits that in studies of ethnological museums, it is important to consider "the relationship between three parties – the displayer, the displayed, and the viewer." In the case

of refugee presentations in institutional settings, the “ethnographic triad” (Kuwayama, 2003: 9) of the organizer (the displayer), the refugee (the displayed) and the audience (the viewer) needs to be examined. In this analysis, I argue that these speaking engagements do little to empower refugees but instead reinforce the stereotypes of refugees as suffering and deprived.

The organizer: In his critique of Listening To the Displaced (LTD) program, an initiative of Oxfam (a global humanitarian organization) Rajaram (2002: 248, 255) argues that texts that result from the program don’t take into consideration the position of the authors. He claims that the authors provide a “veneer of objectivity and dislocation”, attempting to downplay their subjective position in the text. Borrowing Rajaram’s line of critique, I argue that organizers of the refugee forums in institutional settings also bring their own subjective positions and accompanying power and privileges that they may not clearly articulate and may even attempt to downplay. The attempts of such events to center refugee voices fail on two fronts. First, the physical centers in which the events are organized, at college and university campuses, for example, are operational bases for the event organizers. For college and university faculty and staff members, and students, the campus environment is home turf, with all the attendant privileges and power that accrues with membership and belonging. For the guest refugee speakers, these institutional spaces are not part of their everyday experiences, and since they don’t possess the social capital or privileges that the organizers have, the podium can be unnerving. Second, the ideological themes of the events reflect interests and power positions of the organizers, and hence even as the refugee speakers are physically centered, and their voices are listened to, their narratives are constrained, restricted, and channeled to conform to the expectations and interests of the organizers. Further, the topics of presentations are often chosen by the organizers.

While it is possible that the refugee presenters may define the specifics of their presentations, the broad themes are chosen by the organizers to match particular agendas. Sometimes a theme is chosen to highlight the challenges faced by immigrants, or is part of a program related to civic engagement to get the audience interested in working or providing services to refugees. Often, the refugees are not expected to provide any theoretical or ideological framing of their presentation, or even to provide any comprehensive historical background of their displacement. In this dehistoricized setup, background is assumed to be known, or assumed to not be critical. The refugees’ roles are largely to provide the suffering narrative, which are often decontextualized relative to the refugees’ life trajectories, but contextualized within the agenda of the event organizers. In addition to the narrative of suffering, the refugees’ presentations also often include extensive expressions of gratitude to aid workers (in pre- and post-settlement), for whom they may feel they have to constantly display such gratitude in order to continue to secure material and other humanitarian resources.

The moderation of the presentations is also by the organizers. The limited time of the presentation means that the refugee speakers are restricted in their narratives. The moderators may control the line of questions, limit the number of questions, and request specific responses by the refugee speakers. In many ways, the moderator's power is obvious, as is the vulnerability and lack of power of the refugee presenters. Further, the audience asks questions, but the refugee speakers rarely have the chance to pose questions, even though some of their displacement and resettlement challenges implicate (politically) the dominant group, of which the audience is a part.

Additionally, refugee narratives in such presentations are rarely focused on analysis of refugee policies. In cases where refugees are invited to speak on policy issues, they may be invited to narrate their suffering, while the dominant group (organizers, policy experts, and audience) interpret the narratives to fit the dominant refugee policy frameworks. In three of the refugee presentations I have attended, there were animated post-presentation discussions between the organizers, the panel of experts (but not the refugee presenter), and the audience. While these discussions were going on, the refugee speaker sat silently at the podium, more like a museum object, observed, talked about and talked over. When the presentation events are deemed successful, kudos from the presentation often flow in predictable directions. The audience will remember the suffering of the refugees, and empathize with them. On the other hand, the audience will remember the skills of the moderators or the organizers as the expert interpreters who were able to take the refugee narratives and interpret and contextualize them from a policy perspective. The names of refugee speakers are likely to be forgotten, more so given that the names may be ones that are uncommon, and hence the refugees are once again reduced to nameless victims, only sometimes remembered by their countries of origin. The moderator will likely be remembered by name and reputation, more so because they are often already known in the institution, and even if not, they can leave behind institutional contacts that make them easily reachable. Their names are common, and they have titles that command authority.

The audience: The audience is the second part of Kuwayama's "ethnographic triad." Often, the audiences have had little or no prior knowledge of forced migration or population displacement, especially if the presentations are open to the public and the general university body. For many in the audience, the presentations by the refugees may constitute a first encounter with such a topic, only building on some fleeting glimpses of news about refugees fleeing places of conflict around the world. From my observations of some of the events in which refugee speakers have been invited to give testimonies of their displacement experiences, a part of the motivation for hosting such events has been media reports of refugee conditions in some parts of the world outside of the U.S. The media reports often focus on the refugees' difficult living conditions, with short quotes of refugees lamenting these conditions. For example, a CNN (2013) online news report tells the story of the plight of Syrian refugee

children, "As we chat their mother arrives, her face etched with pain, eyes weary." My eldest, her husband died recently too. They had three kids, "she says, her heart so broken she seems numb to it all. As for so many other Syrians, hardship and pain are the norm."

The refugees' presentations, focused as they are on experiences of suffering, then confirm the desperation that the audience has associated with refugees, as portrayed in the news media. Laurence Kirmayer (2003: 171), in his discussion of refugee narratives, captures this scenario very well, stating that "to follow another person's account, we need to make certain that the worlds and their furnishings invoked by the speaker contain sufficient elements familiar to the listener. Most communication is not the transmission of packets of completely new information, but the evocation of the already known to build new configurations." Hence the refugee speakers, as positioned by the organizers, construct narratives that build upon the audiences' glimpses of media portrayals of the suffering of refugees.

The refugee: In presentations in university settings and conferences, there is typically one or two refugee presenters. The refugee presenter, as the displayed in the ethnographic triad, is the object of the voyeuristic gaze for a number of reasons. As Ibrahim (2009: 260) points out in her study of refugees in Sierra Leone, such narratives place the presenters in positions of otherness. The refugee may be dressed differently and may have a different physical appearance, accentuating the difference with the audience. Such difference might become the subject of curiosity for the audience.

In a past event at a college in the northeastern United States, the speaker was a recently resettled refugee of Kachin ethnicity from Burma. He was dressed in a brightly colored Kachin shirt, with a woven bag slung across his shoulder. With an audience of mostly white college students and faculty, this speaker was markedly an outsider. The speaker, whose name the organizer struggled to pronounce, spoke English with limited fluency and a heavy accent, and spent the majority of his presentation narrating the horrors he encountered fleeing his home and his life in a refugee camp in Thailand.

If refugees, as the literature suggests, are "othered" and presented as deprived and suffering, this Kachin speaker fit that bill. His presentation did not project him at all in a position of authority. His narrative confirmed his suffering, and his plea to the audience for help at the end further reinforced his marginal position.

Refugee speakers may also lack the authority to negotiate the frameworks of their presentations. Often times they are not in positions of authority or power in the larger local community, and are also likely to be recipients of aid, rather than leaders in organizations that provide aid. Because of this lack of authority, the refugee presenters often have their narratives interpreted and reworded for the audience by organizers, who then assume this position of au-

thority. Sometimes the refugee presenters struggle with English, which exacerbates their marginality, and further provides opportunities for organizers to assume more authority.

Timing of presentations

Another important factor is that the amount of time allotted for these presentations rarely exceed one hour. Such events are often organized in-between other events. For such difficult topics, with refugees expected to bare their souls, and narrate difficult and painful experiences, it seems that one hour is hardly sufficient. That amount of time also does not provide a sufficient opportunity for critical follow-up discussions. Also, given the time constraints, the presenters are forced to narrow their presentations to the expected narrative of suffering, having little to no room for other experiences that may deviate from that expectation. The time constraint then only allows for “thin description” as opposed to “thick description” (Sliep et al., 2004: 316), which I elaborate on below. It is commonplace as well for the audience, in college and university settings particularly, to wander in and out of the presentation venue. Leaving in the middle of the presentation indicates a lack of interest, or lack of priority, on the part of the audience, further marginalizing the value of the presentations. Sometimes the departure of members of the audience can be dramatic, especially when the time for the next event strikes, and for the refugee presenter unfamiliar with the schedule of the institution, this can be unsettling.

Alternative ways to center refugee voices

What are possible alternative ways of centering refugee voices? Rather than broad presentations on refugee displacement experiences, the focus can be narrowed to specific topics that connect to emerging or ongoing policy or pedagogical discussions. An example is an event organized by a college professor where a group of high school students from refugee backgrounds were invited to discuss their perceptions and experiences with teachers in their schools, and to share with the audience what they thought made strong teachers, and weak ones. The event generated critical discussions with the audience comprised mostly of college students training to be teachers, and their faculty. Rather than a general accounting of their suffering, these students from refugee backgrounds were being called upon to provide critical insights that would help teachers connect better with students from refugee backgrounds. Sliep et al, (2004: 316), in discussing Narrative Therapy in a refugee camp in Northern Uganda, suggest that narrative sessions should be moved from thin to thick descriptions, where the former is a narrow presentation of problems and the latter is focused on strengths and abilities of refugees. In this event with high school students from refugee backgrounds, they were offered an opportunity to share their skills that would be translated into effective teaching strategies.

Another possibility of centering refugee voices is to switch the staging of such forums. Rather than have refugee speakers come to the campuses, students and faculty are invited to attend forums organized and run by the refugees

themselves, in their own spaces, and on topics of their own choosing. This would likely shift the power positions, placing “the powerful in marginalized position so that they can experience the effects of power from a position of powerlessness” (Sliep et al., 2004: 315), and eliminate the display and objectification that may come with bringing a refugee speaker to give a presentation at a university campus. In a past event in which I was involved, students were brought to a film screening organized by refugees from Burma. The refugees chose the venue, which was a church near where most of them lived, and they also picked the film, and the time of the event. As hosts, the refugee provided food, and guided the post-screening discussions.

Conclusion

Providing forums to listen to refugee experiences is laudable and necessary. If organized appropriately, such opportunities may help to counter the totalizing and essentializing notions of refugees, as traumatized, dependent, and suffering people. While we cannot discount and ignore the real challenges that refugees face in their life trajectories, speaking engagements that singularly focus on suffering perpetuate the marginal position in which refugees find themselves in their countries of asylum. It is imperative that such speaking platforms include critical discussions that appropriately implicate the dominant society in the challenges that refugees face, and that also engage in advocacy that seek to change conditions that lead to forced migration. It is also vitally important, as I have argued, that refugees be involved in framing the discussions to address issues that are pertinent to their experiences and aspirations. And lastly, to the extent feasible, such discussion forums should be held in spaces in which refugees are not further marginalized.

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