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Refugees and social theory: from the politics of "bare life" to refugees as political subjects

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This article explores theoretical literature on refugees, noting a significant distinction between an abstract body of work critiquing the politics of humanitarianism and an ethnographic literature focused on refugee subjects. As I argue, refugees should be seen not simply as "bare life" which has been removed from political life, but rather as political subjects whose subjectivities are shaped by the social environments in which they live. To illustrate this point, I draw on Liisa Malkki's *Purity and exile* and my own work on exile camps administered by the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) during Namibia's liberation struggle. Collectively, this and other ethnographic literature highlight limits to social theory which works with highly abstract notions of "the refugee" and suggests that more significant scholarly interventions are now to be made through carefully contextualised work, tracing political subjectivities, in particular refugee communities, and how these subjectivities have been abstracted.

Since the mid-twentieth century, nation-states and international organisations have developed an integrated system for governing people displaced from their countries of origin by social upheavals occurring there. This system became standardised in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War when the Allied powers created a constellation of refugee camps, government bureaucracies and legal/moral norms aimed at managing the throngs of people whom the war had displaced in Europe (Malkki 1995b). Among the incipient norms was refugee law, part of the broader field of human rights law emerging at this historical moment. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) not only compelled nation-states to intervene in the affairs of other sovereign countries committing genocide, but also to grant people "asylum from persecution" – an asylum that had often been denied to Holocaust victims (Nobel 1988, Malkki 1995b: 500-1). Although initially intended only for displaced Europeans in the post-World War II context, this "right" to asylum was later applied to asylum seekers universally. It, thereby, became the human rights framework for addressing mass displacement after decolonisation and the enduring "refugee problem" across much of the post-colonial world.

At the centre of this framework and problem stands "the refugee". With great consistency, human rights law and other bodies of knowledge have presented "the refugee" as a kind of victim – one who has been expelled from a national and natural "home". It follows that refugees' problems may be solved through proper management of the international system, including nation-states, United Nations (UN) bodies, humanitarian agencies and the sites where refugees live that they administer. The majority of academic work in the domain of "refugee studies" and its contributing disciplines reproduces this managerial and apolitical perspective (Malkki 1995b). Nevertheless, a substantial critical literature does exist, most of it shaped by the writings of a few influential scholars working at the threshold of philosophy and social theory. Notably, as early as 1948, Hannah Arendt argued that refugees, the very people whom the then new UDHR ought to protect, are people without rights, because they have been excluded from a nation-state. Without a sovereign government, through which to claim their rights, refugees are rendered "nothing but human" (Arendt [1951] 1973). More recently, Giorgio Agamben captured widespread scholarly attention for drawing connections between "the concentration camp" and "the refugee camp", both of which are inhabited by people who have been subjected to "biopolitics", a politics that excludes them from active participation in a political community and reduces them to "bare life" (Foucault 1975, 1978, Agamben 1997, 1998).

While acknowledging the importance of Arendt, Foucault and Agamben for defining critical questions about refugees, humanitarianism and human rights, this article frames the politics of refugees from a different perspective. As I argue,

refugees are not simply or primarily "bare life" which has been removed from political life. Rather, they are political subjects whose subjectivities are shaped by the often highly politicising social environments in which they live. To illustrate this point, I draw on Liisa Malkki's *Purity and exile* (1995) and other seminal work as well as my own research on exile camps administered by the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) during Namibia's liberation struggle. Collectively, this and other ethnographic literature highlight limits to social theory which works with highly abstract notions of "the refugee", and suggest that more significant scholarly interventions are now to be made through carefully contextualised research, tracing political subjectivities in particular refugee communities and how these subjectivities have been abstracted.

1. Theorising "the refugee"

In critical scholarship on refugees and human rights, Arendt's "The decline of the nation-state and the end of the rights of man", published in *The origins of totalitarianism* ([1951] 1973), remains the touchstone. As Arendt argues, when "rights" first became law during the American and French Revolutions, the concept of "man" which they protected remained highly abstract and removed from any existing social order. Over the next century and a half the nation emerged as the legitimate unit of global political organisation and therefore, the sole basis of defining and protecting "the Rights of Man". Although the 1948 UDHR (completed shortly before the publication of the first edition of Arendt's book) declared its protection of rights regardless of national affiliation, no political community was capable of defending these "universal" rights, since power remained firmly vested in the nation-state. As Arendt emphasises, the full implications of this linkage between rights and nation have become evident in the plight of various "stateless people", above all refugees. Whereas for centuries people have been expelled from one polity to another, there was previously the possibility of incorporation into another political community. However, in the modern "family of nations," political belonging has come to be defined overwhelmingly in national terms. Thus, the growing number of people displaced from a national "home" has no political community in which to claim citizenship and exercise rights. They are left only with "human rights", the rights of those who are "nothing but human" (Arendt [1951] 1973: 300).

Arendt's argument has resonated with many scholars working on refugees and related issues, especially since the end of the Cold War when humanitarianism and human rights emerged as dominant discourses of global politics. The most influential scholar to engage and reframe Arendt's ideas about refugees in this post-Cold War context is almost certainly Giorgio Agamben. In *Homo sacer*

(1998), Agamben draws from his study of Nazi concentration camps and their place in modern history to highlight similarities between "the concentration camp" and "the refugee camp" – he collectively glosses these sites as "the camp". Agamben argues that "the camp" is a kind of space in which there is a radical disparity between a sovereign and those under its control. Camps not only reduce their inhabitants to "bare life", as Arendt ([1951] 1973) emphasises, but also erase the very distinction between "bare life" and "political life". They are, therefore, exemplary of what Michel Foucault first called "biopolitics" and should be understood alongside a range of disciplinary institutions which have often become instruments of biopolitical government during the modern era, including prisons, hospitals, school hostels and barracks (Foucault 1975 [2003]: 249-53, 1979). Moreover, Agamben posits that "the camp" is "a state of exception" which, while proclaimed as exceptional, has actually underpinned the entire Western (now global) social order since "the Rights of Man" were first proclaimed – an order in which being human has never and could never equate to being a citizen.

Arendt, Foucault and Agamben's work has clearly been enabling for scholars exposing the contradictions and hypocrisy of humanitarianism and human rights. In recent years, a vast range of scholarship has highlighted how humanitarian interventions, involving refugees and other similarly vulnerable categories of people, have become a means for powerful nation-states and global capital to advance political agendas.[1] All of this (and much more) literature works with Foucault's notion of "biopolitics" and Agamben's notion of "bare life", emphasising the extent to which the biopolitics of humanitarianism have become a common logic of global government and stripped its supposed beneficiaries of their capacity to act politically. Some of the literature also specifically addresses refugee camps, describing them in a manner that clearly resonates with Agamben. To mention two widely cited authors: In "Who is the subject of the rights of man?", philosopher Jacques Rancière draws attention to refugee camps as a space through which to understand a form of sovereignty which dominates powerless subjects in the name of protecting "human rights" (Rancière 2004). Similarly, in "Humanitarianism as an identity and its political effects: a note on camps and humanitarian government", anthropologist Michel Agier describes humanitarianism as a form of "totalitarianism", a "powerful and enduring apparatus [... which ...] desire[s] to control the non-Western world" (Agier 2010: 2-3). In turn, refugee camps are presented as models of totalitarian government and refugees as the quintessential victims of its biopolitical techniques.

1 See Bauman 2004, Rancière 2004, Weissman 2004, Redfield 2005, 2013, Calhoun 2006, Ticktin 2006, 2011, Agier 2008, 2010, Feldman 2008, Barnett 2010, Fassin & Pandolfi 2010, Bornstein & Redfield 2011, Fassin 2011.

And yet, as Agier and some other scholars working with Agamben acknowledge, there is another side to the lives of refugees. Refugees are governed as if they were apolitical "bare life", but they remain political subjects. Moreover, the conditions in which refugees live – above all camps – are often exceptionally and uniquely politicising. The first scholar to draw sustained attention to the camp as a space that produces politics is Malkki in her groundbreaking ethnography, *Purity and exile*. Drawing from fieldwork among refugees who fled genocidal violence in Burundi in 1972, Malkki highlights how the circumstances in which these refugees were living at the time (1985-86) in western Tanzania shaped their understanding of nation and their consciousness of history. Refugees who lived in Mishamo, a camp, were set apart from other nationalities and governed through their status as people dislocated from a nation. In response, they developed a national history, constituting themselves as members of an exiled Hutu nation that had been denied its own state by rival Tutsis. In contrast, others of similar background and experiences who migrated to Kigoma, a town, were not governed on the basis of a national identity, and were more likely to improve their social status by integrating themselves into their new community. Consequently, they eschewed Hutu nationalism and the history through which it was advanced, adopting instead a "cosmopolitan" relation to difference.

Malkki's work has advantages over other literature as a starting-point for the critical study of refugees. Like Agamben, Malkki describes "the camp" as a highly unequal space in which people live under a sovereign with control over all resources necessary for maintaining human life. Moreover, Malkki describes camps as a "technology of power" resembling other disciplinary institutions (Malkki 1995a: 236-8) and, in later work, as a "state of exception" which upholds the global social order even though it produces social relations that consistently contradict normative discourses (Malkki 2002: 352-6). Unlike Agamben, however, who portrays camp inhabitants as people whose "bare life" has become inseparable from the biopolitics of nation-states, Malkki highlights new political subjectivities which form when people enter a camp organised around the principle that they have been forcibly displaced from a national home. This perspective opens Malkki to the insight that camps are not only products, but also producers, of new forms of politics. It allows her to associate the lived space of refugee camps with other locations that produce national ideologies across a range of contexts. And it opens the possibility that "the camp" is not merely the end of modern history, as Agamben suggests, but also one of its beginnings – a space where socially significant histories are produced and around which violent futures, like Rwanda's 1994 genocide, may unfold.[2]

2 Malkki draws connections between the communities of Burundian refugees, analysed in the

Since the publication of *Purity and exile*, ethnographic texts have emerged, highlighting how refugee camps and similar sites have shaped the political subjectivities of their inhabitants across context.[3] Collectively, this work engages the theories of Arendt, Foucault, and Agamben, contributing empirical evidence to support the general assertion that humanitarianism has become a unified logic for governing vulnerable people around the globe and that camps are significant instruments in advancing this form of government. Nevertheless, the most reflective scholarship acknowledges, implicitly or explicitly, that there are limitations to the critical social theory of refugees and that theoretical work done in the name of political analysis may easily reconstitute "the refugee" as a generic, ideal-type and therefore apolitical subject.[4] If abstract terms like "the refugee ,"the camp" and "bare life" are to be analytically productive and politically progressive, they must be drawn into a sustained conversation with particular refugee communities and the localised economies of knowledge which shape how their voices are and are not heard.

2. The political subjects of liberation movement camps

For the past decade, I have been conducting ethnographic and historical research with Namibians who, during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, fled South African apartheid rule and lived in camps in Tanzania, Zambia and Angola administered by the Namibian liberation movement SWAPO. As my doctoral thesis and several publications highlight, representations of these camps are caught in a powerful set of binary oppositions (Williams 2009, 2010, 2012, 2015). On the one hand, SWAPO and the organisations supporting it repeatedly portrayed the camps as sites where Namibians were transcending social barriers to create a nation of committed and unified citizens. Camp inhabitants were said to share work tasks according to their abilities and material items according to their needs, which were met with remarkable efficiency under difficult circumstances. Women were taking a leading role in running the camps and accessing levels of education that previously had only been available to men. Tribal divisions, through which colonialism and apartheid had divided Africans, had become insignificant, if they retained any meaning at all. There were also differences in how SWAPO described the camps, particularly as it played to some audiences who supported the military aims of SWAPO "freedom fighters" and others that were ambivalent about these

body of her book, and the genocide unfolding in Rwanda at the time of her book's publication in a postscript titled *Return to genocide* (1995: 259-97).

3 Hyndman 2000, Agier 2002, 2008, 2010, Ong 2003, Feldman 2008, Turner 2010, Dunn 2012.

4 See, in this instance, Malkki's critique of Agier's and Bauman's "typological approach" to the study of refugees, an approach which tends to place "the refugee" in a "social void" (2002: 356-9).

aims but accepted that Namibian exiles needed assistance as "refugees".[5] Nevertheless, SWAPO and its allies consistently presented the camps as sites where a new, healthy nation was developing under SWAPO's care.

On the other hand, the camps were sharply criticised by those challenging SWAPO's authority to represent "the Namibian people". Predictably, the apartheid South African government issued statements that reduced SWAPO's camps to "military camps" run by a "terrorist organization" with close ties to the communist world. It was not only South African propaganda, however, which articulated alternative views. Already in the mid-1960s, Namibians living in Tanzania expressed discontent with how SWAPO was running affairs at Kongwa, the liberation movement's first camp. During the 1970s and 1980s, these and other criticisms became more widely spread, as those who had left SWAPO dispersed themselves abroad and as organizations interested in discrediting SWAPO circulated dissidents' stories. In 1985 the Internationalle Gesellschaft für Menschenrechte (IGFM), a West German human rights organisation, gained international attention when it issued a report challenging the idea that SWAPO was administering "refugee camps", referring to them instead as "detention camps", "breeding camps" and "concentration camps" (IGFM 1985).[6] People in these camps were said to suffer terribly from hunger and poor health. Women were forced to have sex with officials and bear children, who were taken from them shortly after birth and indoctrinated into the party. Conditions were especially bad for those who were falsely accused of being spies by leaders motivated by tribal interests and the pursuit of power.

To understand these oppositions and illuminate their significance, we might turn to Giorgio Agamben and others writing about "the camp". Indeed, the camps administered by SWAPO were enclosed spaces in which people lived under a sovereign with control over all resources necessary for maintaining human life. They were governed in ways broadly similar to a range of other disciplinary institutions employing biopolitical techniques of government, many of which have been central to the exercise of colonial and postcolonial power (Williams 2015). Moreover, they were spaces of exceptional contradiction between a global human rights discourse, which presented the camps as sites where Namibians were transforming themselves into rights-bearing citizens, and an everyday practice, which often reproduced and refracted apartheid divisions through violent internal conflicts (Williams 2011, 2013). Nevertheless, by rendering a

5 SWAPO also made efforts to reconcile these images, by defining "the Namibian refugee" as its own category, encompassing both qualities of "refugees" and "freedom fighters" (SWAPO 1988).

6 IGFM also had chapters in London and New York. These were known as the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR).

single theory of an abstract space, Agamben's work does not consider other kinds of politics that also form in and around camps. It cannot, therefore, pose crucially important questions about how camps are shaped by specific contexts in which they are located and how camp knowledge may be generated through former inhabitants' ongoing relationship to these sites.

In contrast, my research draws from the case of SWAPO to illuminate a unique set of connections between camp, nation and history in the Southern African region. Like post-colonies elsewhere, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa rely on narratives of colonial oppression and anti-colonial resistance to govern national communities. Important to any rendering of these national histories in the region are stories told about the years people spent in exile and the camps, where most of these exiles lived. Nevertheless, the social relations that formed in these camps constrain how camps are incorporated into national histories. When people fled from their country of origin for exile, they entered a space in which food, shelter, clothing, medicine and weapons – all resources necessary for their survival and for fighting a war – were accessed by virtue of their association with a national liberation movement. They also became targets of violence due to their physical presence in a space administered by a nationalist movement challenging colonial rule. Under the circumstances, liberation movement officials wielded extensive power over those under their care in camps and, not infrequently, abused this power as they asserted their authority and protected their interests *vis-à-vis* others in a national community. Following their nations' independence and their acquisition of state power, liberation movement officials propagated a narrative that affirms their status as leaders of a nation, while obscuring histories that might undermine this status – above all, histories of the camps wherein national hierarchies formed. Camp histories have become potent sites through which citizens contest this social order and seek to raise their position in it.

In highlighting these connections between camp, nation and history, my work is clearly influenced by Malkki's *Purity and exile* and other ethnographic studies that highlight relationships between the living conditions of refugees and the social construction of national identity. Nevertheless, the distinctive features of Southern Africa's liberation movement camps – features that distinguish them from the camps which Malkki and other anthropologists have studied – must be examined if one hopes to unravel contradictory images of these sites. Importantly, inhabitants of liberation movement camps not only fled political violence in their country of origin, but also joined an organisation leading a liberation war. As a result, they often identified themselves as "freedom fighters" irrespective of whether they had trained as guerrillas, or intended to take up arms to liberate their nation. Moreover, distinctions between camps intended for combatants and

non-combatants were inevitably blurred. Those camps created by the liberation movements to offer health and educational services to non-combatants routinely harboured military units affiliated with a given movement's army and responsible for camp defence. Likewise, camps designed to train and deploy guerrillas often accommodated non-combatants, including children, women and elderly people fleeing into exile or travelling between sites administered by a liberation movement. Even those camps where liberation movements imprisoned members accused of spying were sometimes the same sites where guerrillas received training and children attended school, and they were always integral to a broader constellation of camps under a movement's control. Thus, while there was some division of labour within liberation movement camps, labels such as "refugee", "military" and "detention" are less reflective of distinct kinds of camps than they are of the global context in which international legal categories for camps have been established and contested.

One feature that does define liberation movement camps as a whole and distinguishes them from most refugee camps is the role of exiles in governing them. Whereas refugee camps are usually administered directly by a host nation and/or transnational humanitarian agency, Southern Africa's liberation movement camps were governed directly by exiles affiliated with a liberation movement, often with little oversight from hosts and donors. This difference in the structure of camps seems to have impacted on the different social relations that have emerged at these sites. Whereas Malkki and other ethnographers of refugee camps focus primarily on hierarchical relations forming between governed refugees and governing foreigners, my work highlights steep hierarchies that formed within an exile/refugee community.[7] These hierarchies reflect not only the relative position of liberation movement leaders, camp commanders and others in governing the everyday lives of exiles, but also other social categories whose status in a national community has been mediated through this camp order. It is critically important to understand such hierarchies for analysing representations of liberation movement camps, because they structure how inhabitants at various positions in these hierarchies have experienced and represented camps

7 Mention of social differentiation among refugee communities is not entirely absent from the ethnographic literature. As Ilana Feldman (2008) argues, services delivered to refugees and others "in crisis" are, by nature, hierarchical, strengthening the authority not only of the governing body responsible for administering aid, but also of the social networks through which aid is administered. Agier and Ong consider how such networks form in the particular camps which they study, noting how various groups of refugees access sources of capital from outside the camp and privileges from administrators within it (Agier 2002: 329-32, 2008: 53-7, Ong 2003: 53-5). Nevertheless, these and other ethnographic studies do not focus on the hierarchies that form among camp populations.

differently. Moreover, they begin to explain how differences in camps over time and place have been effaced by homogenising claims about "the camps" – claims articulated by national elites who are able to speak about camps on a nation's behalf.

Finally, the relationship between Southern Africa's liberation movement camps and the region's post-colonial governments has a unique effect on the social production of camp histories. As former exiles seek recognition for their bravery and suffering during the liberation struggle, they often render histories of the camps where they, as exiles, once lived. These histories tend to affirm an official narrative articulated by liberation movements upon whom citizens now rely for resources in a post-colonial nation. Nevertheless, as former exiles attempt to gain leverage over the recognition that they are granted, they sometimes include details of their own unique experiences in camps. In so doing, they present historical knowledge which extends beyond the boundaries of an accepted national narrative and of any competing narrative that opposes it. In recent years, as Southern Africa has moved further from its liberation struggle past, the forces drawing such knowledge to the surface of social life have intensified. Most former exiles, like the majority of Southern Africa's people, continue to live in precarious economic circumstances in nations marked by the extreme disparity of wealth between their ordinary and elite citizens. The threat of colonial rule, which bound people together in the past against a common enemy, has become less tangible than it once was. New forms of technology and sociality have opened opportunities for people to circulate their views on the past outside their government's direct observation. Under such circumstances, camp histories are not "silent" as is frequently assumed. Rather, they are highly vocal, for they are a primary medium through which citizens negotiate their relations with other members of a national community.

3. Beyond "Speechless emissaries"

In her essay "Speechless emissaries" (1996), Malkki consolidates many of her observations about the social construction of "refugees", highlighting their significance for developing a new approach to humanitarianism and human rights. She argues:

> 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 [...] 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 [...] In abstracting their predicaments from specific political, historical, cultural contexts – humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees (Malkki 1996: 378).

Nevertheless, as Malkki (1996: 398) emphasises in her conclusion, it is "neither logically nor practically necessary" that humanitarianism "dehistoricize[s] or depoliticize[s]". Rather, one can imagine an approach to refugees and similar categories of people "that insists on acknowledging not only human suffering but also narrative authority, historical agency and political memory" – i.e. defining qualities of political subjects (Malkki 1996: 398). Such an approach need not rely on "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" (Malkki 1996: 398).

This article echoes Malkki's powerful and eloquent words, applying them to critique not only prevailing forms of humanitarian government, but also a body of theoretical literature, which, in the name of criticising humanitarianism, presents refugees as "bare life". Just as the international system administering refugees "can leach out the histories and politics of particular refugees' circumstances", so too can social theory when it presents refugees as if they were beyond the pale of politics, foreclosing inquiry into how bare life and political life recombine at sites where refugees live. Far from removing refugees from the political system of nation-states wherein rights reside, these sites place inhabitants in certain relationships to that system, often compelling people whose capacity to exercise rights is precarious to imbue their experiences of exile with national political meanings. And yet, these meanings often remain silent for politicians and humanitarian workers drafting refugee policy, for social scientists working in "refugee studies", and for critical social theorists theorising "the refugee" (Malkki 1995b: 504-12, 1996: 356-62).

At the same time, there is a sense in which refugees remain far from silent. Even as people tend to approach refugees as if they were "mute victims", reducing them to "speechless emissaries" of decontextualised suffering, refugees voice their histories to other people who can and do hear. My focus on voicing and hearing among members of an exile/refugee community reflects, to some extent, the context of post-colonial Southern Africa – a region now characterised by the proliferation of exile histories among citizens seeking recognition and resources in post-colonial nations. Nevertheless, the production of camp histories which I describe should be seen as a reflection not merely of a specific social context, but also of a different approach to camp ethnography that could be applied

to other work. As Mia Green notes in her review of *Purity and exile* and Simon Turner in his recent ethnography of Burundian Hutus living in western Tanzania, Malkki focuses on a dominant history which refugees articulated at Mishamo and which humanitarian workers in and around that camp could not hear. She does not consider, however, how a certain Hutu national narrative came to dominate in that camp at the expense of other competing histories, which are also likely to have been articulated there (Green 1998, Turner 2010). Similarly, one might question the extent to which "the camp" is able to silence different voices – if not at Mishamo, then at other sites where displaced people live. As Elizabeth Dunn (2012: 2) argues, drawing from research on internally displaced people settlements in the Republic of Georgia, "new regimes based on humanitarianism are much more limited in their reach than their ambitions might suggest". Far from totalitarian, such regimes are characterised by "negotiations, slippages and deviations from the plan" as humanitarian interventions move between abstract ideals, logistical problems and material forms (Dunn 2012: 5-6, see also Redfield 2005, Ticktin 2006, Feldman 2008).

It follows that seeing refugees as more than "speechless emissaries" requires listening to voices which are often difficult to hear, but which nevertheless emerge audibly in and around spaces of humanitarian government. For Malkki, like most anthropologists who have worked on refugees, it was possible to physically enter a camp and listen to inhabitants articulate their experiences – experiences obscured through discourses which constituted camp inhabitants as depoliticised victims who had lost their belonging to a nation-state. For me, it involved moving with former camp inhabitants across social spaces with different relationships to the nation and comparing how, in various contexts, these persons represented the camps where they had lived in relation to a sanitised national narrative. In all instances, ethnographic listening requires attending to how others narrate themselves *vis-à-vis* powerful discourses and reflecting on tensions that exist between how interlocutors articulate their experiences and how scholars draw from them to build theoretical knowledge. By listening, we may pull against the tendency to critique the politics of "bare life" even while reducing those whose life is supposedly bare to that very subject position. And we may contribute to the process of excavating refugees' voices from their "ever-deeper historical layers of silencing and bitter, complicated regional struggles over history and truth".

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