


CHAPTER 8

What Happens to a Story?

En/countering Imaginative Humanitarian Ethnography in the Classroom

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This chapter develops a critical pedagogy specific to teaching refugee narratives. It coins the term ‘imaginative humanitarian ethnography’ to describe a reading practice that closes down the transformative teaching potential of stories. I counter this with a framework developed in conversation with Jo-Ann Archibald’s scholarship on ‘storywork’ and an interview with Sharmarke Dubow (conducted on 10 November 2018). Framing stories as gifts, mapping the relational matrix of reading, and casting readers as listeners can change the way we teach refugee narratives and support ethical encounters in the classroom. Popular claims about the importance of refugee storytelling in its various forms have focused on *what stories can do*. They may effect social change, create empathy, put a face to statistics, bring to light hidden experiences, or establish relations with strangers.¹ What is missed in celebrations of story is the reality that offering another person my story is a choice: to be vulnerable, to gift someone else with hard-earned wisdom and, in the transference of that gift, to make my story vulnerable too. What is missed is the immediate relationality of reading practices. When the listener or receiver of my story is not equally committed to the care and responsibility engendered by the gift, *what happens to the story?* This chapter considers how a critical pedagogy can introduce refugee narratives in the classroom, not as a catalyst for making readers feel responsible for global issues, nor as research data, but rather as an invitation to be responsible to the stories and their tellers.

From 2009 to 2017, I facilitated community education workshops for hundreds of people in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. The workshops screened multi-media representations of

refugee-ed people with the aim of challenging what could loosely be called humanitarian readings of forced displacement narratives. Using different forms of narrative media, produced variously by refugee, diaspora and settler storytellers, to spark discussion with community groups (church sponsorship groups, grassroots organisers, humanitarian workers, undergraduates and graduate students), I encountered patterns of interpreting refugee stories that spanned genres and reading communities. These patterns have coalesced in my thinking to constitute a reading practice I refer to as ‘imaginative humanitarian ethnography’. The next two sections unpack this term further, but briefly, I use the term ‘imaginative humanitarian ethnography’ to describe a way of engaging creative refugee narratives as if reading were a search for hidden knowledge of ‘the refugee experience’, a search that is motivated by and search results that are understood within humanitarian frames. It is a learning method in which the reader imagines themselves an amateur anthropologist who can ‘discover refugee culture’ in imaginative texts and turn it into actionable knowledge. Such readings quickly elicit the question, ‘what can be done?’ and induce emotional statements about privilege, difference and the importance of ‘humanising refugees’. In this chapter, ‘reading’ encompasses the interpretive processes applied to narrative in media and not only literature.

Narratives about refugee lives are often read in the classroom as a form of imaginative humanitarian ethnography rather than as inviting relational responsibility. It may seem routine to consider stories an ethnographic source, but in a variety of educational contexts I have observed a repeated dynamic where the ‘data’ of a story gets skewed precisely because the story is being read as humanitarian research data. What gets theorised by some students as ‘refugees being given a voice’, via academic attention, is in fact a particular story being overridden, even silenced, by reading practices that commodify stories. Uncritical reading practices may effectively silence the ability of those narratives to speak on their own terms and to establish relational responsibility. Uncritical pedagogy that allows humanitarian frames to predominate may deaden the potential for diversely positioned participants to contribute knowledge from multiple epistemes and to take the conversation in surprising directions. Often, in community workshops and graduate classrooms alike, I find that the question of what a narrative (and connectedly, a citizen reading and responding to a narrative) can do for and to a person who is seeking refugee protection remains stubbornly central. Even for those who are aware of this problem, it can be hard to imagine an alternative way of reading.

Yet, the stories that students read by people with refugee experience have already been lived or imagined by that person. The story *is* that person's action in the world; it is a gifting. Remembering this, the practice of reading can be understood as a relational event. Readers can ask then about their responsibility to the author and/or community, rather than what readers can do with their knowledge to benefit strangers. For students who are negotiating the question of if/how/when to share their own story of displacement with their class, this approach will be more intuitive. Valuing stories as gifts can lead reading communities to recognise both the way stories are given – as situated knowledge, connected to a community of people, inviting reciprocity – and also the different purposes communities might find in the practice of reading – close listening, an exploration of possibilities, gentle play, aesthetic wonder, and interdependency.

This chapter explores encounters between imaginative humanitarian ethnographic reading practices and refugee narratives and offers an alternative way of envisaging the event of reading. First, I describe the limits of imaginative humanitarian framing, and then I examine the problems with applying ethnographic reading practices to creative refugee narratives. Each section offers an illustrative story about a teachable moment in a university classroom. In the final section, I offer an alternative way of conceptualising stories as gifts along with concrete pedagogical suggestions. Reading stories as gifts has the potential to shape a narrative pedagogy that honours the powerful vulnerability of stories and their communities.

Imaginative Humanitarian Framing

Lyndsey Stonebridge (2017) uses the term 'imaginative humanitarianism' to introduce the historical link between imaginative rights in literature and material rights in culture. Though she does not offer a definition of the term imaginative humanitarianism, she goes on to suggest that 'generous imaginings about others' becomes a replacement for action, recovering 'moral sentiments' through cultural production and asking literature 'to do [what] we cannot' (ibid.). This projection of the humanitarian impulse onto books is present in popular and scholarly readings of refugee fiction and has found its way into some of my earlier research as well. Stonebridge observes that imaginative humanitarianism does not necessarily lead to shared power; empathetic reading does not create material equity. Building on that observation, this chap-

ter notices in imaginative humanitarianism the tendency to ask refugee stories to do both more and less than they can do.

If humanitarian discourse establishes relations of care and empathy among strangers around the globe, then humanitarian communication is the tradition of making those relations legible and public through aesthetic and rhetorical forms. Lilie Chouliaraki (2010: 107) defines humanitarian communication as the ‘rhetorical practices of transnational actors that engage with universal ethical claims, such as common humanity or global civil society, to mobilize action on human suffering’. The mandates of humanitarian institutions are integral to understanding the meaning, language and context of humanitarian communication and discourse. Pooja Rangan (2017: 3) describes the institutional mandate shaping humanitarian communication in this way: it ‘demands action over thinking, ethics over aesthetics, and immediacy over analysis’. To extrapolate, the humanitarian mandate evaluates any given imaginative narrative by asking, ‘will this representation inspire viewers to contribute to humanitarian actions to alleviate the suffering of strangers?’ This question presupposes a lack of empathy or action as the problem of global displacement; it recommends consuming books or media and then donating; it finds a solution in the links that are established through cultural production; and it assumes causal relationships among representation and empathy, mediations of suffering and action. Humanitarian communication has been critiqued for emphasising urgent pragmatic action over reflective or deep change, but also for the way it establishes asymmetrical social relationships, for its prioritisation of impact over artistic integrity, and for its tendency to create heightened awareness and one-time donations rather than long-term sustained mobilisation.

Articulating the difficulty with reading and interpreting refugee culture, Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung (2016: 2) point to ‘a tension between the ethics and aesthetics of making refugee experience visible’ and advocate for ‘joining refugee ethics with refugee aesthetics’. Their call for cultural refugee studies is prompted by similar insights to those of critical humanitarianism:

Refugee aesthetics, whether produced by or about refugees, are bound up in an international discourse of refugee ethics in which refugees are objects of humanitarian concern and require immediate, pragmatic solutions. This frame of reference casts refugees as abject victims and downplays the particularities of refugee situations, including nation-states’ accountability and specific refugee histories and poli-

tics. Put differently, refugees' primary role in this aesthetic is to help establish a refugee ethics, eliciting the care of the international community, which in turn erases Euro-American production of refugees. (Nguyen and Fung 2016: 4)

This way of reading has been shaped by researchers, educators and NGOs alike, who posit imaginative narratives about refugees as an opportunity for citizens to increase empathy for strangers, remember 'the humanity' of refugees, or become global citizens (e.g. Nussbaum 2016; Temple 2017). For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on the impact of popularised humanitarian communication and discourse as I have seen it in the classroom.

I became acutely aware of the frame of humanitarian communication and wary of its power to obscure interpretations of specific stories the first time I taught Nadine Gordimer's 'The Ultimate Safari' (1989) in an introductory English course. Through the narrative voice of a young girl, Gordimer writes about the journey of a group of refugees fleeing Mozambique through Kruger Park. The group survives lions, starvation and Western ecotourists 'on safari', experiencing significant grief along the way, only to arrive in a refugee camp where they become the exotic attraction for humanitarian workers and Western journalists. One learning outcome for the class was opening a critical conversation about how humanitarianism, ecotourism, colonial history and contemporary journalism participate in and rely on a similar discourse entrenching hierarchical global relationships. In our introductory discussion, I asked students for their gut-level response to the story. The first student comment explicitly connected the story to humanitarian frames: 'It was really depressing. This is just like one of those World Vision infomercials – you know, with the little kid who doesn't have shoes and the fly on his face'. The explicitness of this feedback and its misreading of the text opened up a teachable moment. Many other students agreed this had been their reading, and so we spent the rest of that class responding to the frame that had obscured the text, unpacking how the story's form and its use of literary techniques was, in fact, producing a critique of humanitarian communication. By the end of the class, students could see that the detailed description of the children's shoes, the matter-of-fact narrator, the direct characterisation of humanitarian workers as condescending, the fly on the grandmother's face that the granddaughter finds frightening, a plot that ends with fantasising escape from the humanitarian gaze, and repeated images of humans as

animals, work together to fashion a strong counter-discourse to humanitarian frames for refugee lives.

Imaginative Humanitarianism as Ethnographic Research

In addition to framing fiction as humanitarian communication, imaginative humanitarianism as a learning method can devolve at times into a popular imitation of ethnographic research. A number of news articles have made a case for literature based on the way fiction allows the reader to stand in the shoes of a refugee-ed person. For example, a *Guardian* article by Gillian Cross (2015) entitled ‘Why Fiction Can Help Us Understand the Syrian Refugee Crisis’ makes the old but simple point that stories ‘help us to understand other people and empathise with them’. The reader of refugee narratives is here cast as a kind of amateur participant observer with humanitarian intentions. Cross’s *Guardian* article applies an ‘ethnography for empathy’ type reading practice to North American refugee narratives without any specificity around political, social and legal realities and without consideration of the way national discourses constrain both the types of narratives being told and published and also the possible range of actions in response to those stories. Tellingly, the distinction between authors with migration experience and authors without it is not addressed in her article or others like it.

James Buzard (2009), who analyses nineteenth-century British novels as auto-ethnography, helps to connect participant observation and imaginative ethnography at a methodological level:

Inasmuch as cultures have been so closely associated with different territories as to be representable as if they were places themselves . . . then a fieldworker’s physical traveling, necessary to get to that place on earth where an alien society was to be encountered, became very closely associated and virtually identified with the *mental* journey required to get the fieldworker ‘out’ of his own customary thought-world and into that of his subjects. (25)

Similarly, champions of refugee narratives have equated the emotional journey of reading a novel or watching a film to a kind of immersion in refugee cultures.

Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1983) provide us with an early description of ethnography, in which ethnographic researchers

as participant observers of the ‘variations in cultural patterns across and within societies’ are trying to better describe the subjects of their study and the interpretive lens of the subjects of their study (8). The ethnographer’s aim is to create ‘detailed descriptions of the concrete experience of life within a particular culture and of the social rules or patterns that constitute it’ (8). This kind of description inevitably involves a level of interpretation. Tim Ingold’s (2014) helpfully polemical intervention defines ethnography narrowly to avoid commodifying participant observation fieldwork. Arguing that ‘ethnographic’ is over-used as a loose qualifier for research methods, he separates fieldwork (in our case, participant observation) from ethnography, which he defines as ‘writing about the people’ (385). The collapse of participant observation and ethnography may undermine a researcher’s ability to learn *from* people, not learn *about* them because it implies that description and analysis are taking place at the same time as participant observation. ‘Participant observation’, he declares, ‘is absolutely *not* an undercover technique for gathering intelligence on people, on the pretext of learning from them . . . [It is an] ontological commitment’ (388). Such ‘rigorous . . . inquiry’ requires ‘long-term and open-ended commitment, generous attentiveness, relational depth, and sensitivity to context’ (384). In the classroom, readers may immerse in a creative narrative with the intent of gathering knowledge about refugee culture for class discussion or a term paper. However, Ingold’s critique suggests that the elision of immersing and describing may create superficial data points rather than an opportunity for the patient, deep reading that fiction is meant to offer.

My assessment of imaginative humanitarian ethnography addresses both the uncritical use of a participant observer model for reading to learn, and also the very possibility of ethnographies of refugee culture. Several problems with humanitarian ethnography present themselves: (1) There is no discrete, structured refugee culture;² (2) People who have sought refuge are culturally heterogenous; (3) The state (alongside NGOs, non-state fascists, citizen lobbies, research institutions and even sometimes corporations) is the primary perpetuator of the idea of ‘refugee culture’, and arguably no ‘refugee’ institutions or traditions exist apart from it; (4) People who have sought refuge are geographically dispersed; (5) People often want to shed the refugee label once they achieve permanent resident status, leaving an unrepresentative sample to speak on behalf of a non-discrete, heterogeneous population.

Thus, a central problem with humanitarian ethnography as an approach to refugee stories is the question of culture and how it is delimit-

ited. If a course does not grapple with the question of what ‘refugee culture’ means when exploring refugee culture through imaginative narratives, a learning community may believe it is discovering generalisable data about authentic refugee experiences when in fact it is adding to the bureaucratic, political and humanitarian discourses about refugee experiences. This is in part because the term refugee is inextricably linked to discourse-specific concepts like the nation-state, sovereignty, citizenship, borders, humanitarianism and trauma. To put it differently, people who have sought refuge identify with diverse cultural heritages and tell stories from wide-ranging experiences. But what some readers may think of as ‘refugee culture’ in a text may in fact be the machinations of citizen or nation-state culture. Reading a refugee narrative as ethnography may erroneously locate refugee subjectivity in the identity of an individual character rather than in the categories of a legal system. The danger of a single story coming to represent a diverse group of individuals is also present. To be clear, my critique of imaginative ethnography is not that stories cannot teach anything about refugee realities. The point is that educators must help students to hedge what can be known through imaginative narratives about displacement. ‘What it is like to be a refugee’ is the blunt tool students arrive with to interpret stories; a sharper tool is needed.

Imaginative *humanitarian* ethnography is motivated by the belief in universal ethical claims that lead the reader to observe, describe and locate refugee experiences in imaginative texts as a discrete set of cultural patterns. This way of reading believes in the ability of fiction to host participant observers who can then create useful (empathetic) knowledge. Given the predetermination of humanitarian frames, the scholarly potential of this kind of reading remains limited. In the expectation that reading a refugee narrative will provide knowledge of refugee culture through intimate exposure to a character or set of characters, one witnesses the unintended effect of popular defences of literary study: citizens should read refugee stories to unlock the peculiarity of ‘refugee tribes’.

As an example, in a recent interdisciplinary graduate seminar course I taught on refugee narratives, the class was discussing Canadian author Lawrence Hill’s political thriller *The Illegal* (2015). One student bravely expressed confusion about why they did not like the book and why they could not connect with it. I pressed them on what ‘it’ stood for, and together we realised that ‘it’ was the main character, Keita, and that what the student desired was to hear an expression of emotion that reflected the impact of the trauma Keita was experiencing. Without that

emotional exposure, the student had a hard time connecting with what they considered to be the experience of forced displacement. As I tried to steer the conversation in the direction of the author's choice of genre rather than the theme of forced displacement, another student continued the line of thinking of the first student: they wondered whether the lack of emotional expression suggested Keita was too traumatised to express his trauma and so to heal. A year later in an undergraduate course where we studied the same book, one student tried to articulate an answer to whose story it was by saying, 'I thought it was Keita's at first, but he's not even there at the end of the novel. So, I'm confused'. Another student said they had felt disappointed by the second half of the book because it 'didn't feel real', specifically, the ending was too neat and the perspective kept changing. Another student's term paper argued that satire was an inappropriate genre for refugee storytelling, given the seriousness of the global 'refugee crisis'. I read the confusion, frustration, disappointment and hesitancy in these moments as thwarted expectations about the consumption of humanitarian stories. Their desires for the text are further complicated by the fact that, while Hill had a family connection to undocumented life, he does not have personal refugee experience.

Countering Imaginative Humanitarian Ethnography

Encountering imaginative humanitarian ethnography, I have turned often to the literary tradition of close reading to help balance ethical and aesthetic concerns.³ Yet even close readings can produce atomised interpretations that are susceptible to final papers with humanitarian conclusions. Towards what do educators and students of forced migration move when they want to escape humanitarian frames? What alternative reading practices respect the vulnerability of and care for the power of stories about displacement? In the face of globalised neoliberalism, how does one teach stories and employ storytelling so as to fundamentally shift the patterns of consumption and paternalism that undergird encounters between a learner (particularly those without refugee experience) and stories of forced migration?

One of the challenges with reading refugee narratives differently is that imaginative humanitarian ethnography needs to be unearthed and examined before it can be critiqued. The bandwidth required to undo a particular reading practice may mean there is only space to prove the damage and not the regenerative potential found in self-representative media. This chapter might be such an example. In some discussions I

have facilitated, we engage in a critical deconstruction of humanitarian communication only to return to the very principles just deconstructed. For example, we may get to the point in a discussion where we recognise the limits of empathy within a humanitarian frame, but then final papers or reflections call for empathy as a solution to the humanitarian frame. As Eve Tuck (Unangax) (2009) has famously observed about what she calls ‘damage-centred’ research on Indigenous communities, ‘the paradox of damage: to refute it, we need to say it out loud’ and repeating the damage aloud reiterates and confirms it, sometimes as more primary than the wisdom and hope of communities who experience damage yet carry on (417). Yet ‘even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that – so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression’ (416). Can the wisdom and hope of a community shape reading practices? Is there a relational way of understanding interpretation that can undo reading practices that feel like an act of aggression?

In the introduction to *Countering Displacements*, my co-authors and I use the term ‘counter’ to describe the coming together of regeneration and critique:

To counter a force is both to meet it in strength and also to strategically undermine it, to prepare for a future onslaught and to question injustice in the very moment of displacement . . . More than simply encountering displacement, countering encompasses the varying activities of creative and strategic agents. (Coleman et al. 2012: xxx)

Similarly, the work of countering imaginative humanitarian ethnography invites a different conceptualisation of reading that can shift the focus, unearthing what happens to a narrative when it is read and asking what kind of learning practices might respect the narrative’s vulnerability. As the introduction to this chapter suggested, one way to counter imaginative humanitarian ethnography is to recast stories as gifts or to consider the exchange of stories as part of the gift economy rather than only the knowledge or information economy. The following section describes stories as gifts that are received by learners, providing a relational description of the event of reading.

Stories as Gifts

In the classroom, explicitly framing refugee stories as gifts is a way of supporting and valuing the participation of students with refugee backgrounds. It also establishes the relational nature of writing and reading

stories and, by extension, invites readers to consider their reading a form of relational listening. References to story as gift can be found in Indigenous studies and spiritual traditions (Simpson and Strong 2013; Kuokkanen 2007), in media studies (Dovey 2014; Romele and Severo 2016), in narrative medicine (Spencer 2016; Small 2005), in literary studies (Coleman 2009; McCall 2011), in religious studies (Atkinson 1995; Griesenger and Eaton 2006), and in stories themselves. Different cultural understandings of gift establish specific and varied significances for the conceptualisation of stories as gifts. Rauna Kuokkanen's (Ohcejohka/Utsjoki) (2007) research on storytelling as gift describes the 'logic of the gift' as engendering a relationship 'characterized by reciprocity and by a call for responsibility to the "other"' (2, 23). The kind of recognition that is required by a gift is 'knowledge as well as commitment, action, and reciprocity' (3). Education professor Jo-Ann Archibald's (Stó:lō) (2008) research on the Stó:lō practice of storywork extends the four Rs of ethical Indigenous education – respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility (Kirkness and Barnhardt 1981) – to include 'holism, interrelatedness, and synergy' (Archibald 2008: 2). She writes: 'I coined the term [storywork] because I needed a term that signified that our stories and storytelling were to be taken seriously [. . . as] cultural work' (3–4). While Archibald does not explicitly theorise stories as gifts, the language of gift runs through her work as she describes the stories that were 'given' to her by elders during her research. She extends her analysis to stories that have been recorded and written down. Her approach to story as gift highlights the relational nature of narratives and of reading: 'in Stó:lō and Coast Salish cultures the power of storywork to make meaning derives from the synergy between the story, the context in which the story is used, the way that the story is told, and how one listens to the story' (84). Learning from Archibald's research for our discussion of refugee narratives in education, we might surface the relationality existing among the narrative, the context of reading communities, the way texts are written, and the way communities read. The time educators take to participate in local communities and their material struggles enlivens this knowledge.

Yet this chapter has critiqued action-oriented interpretive frames. A brief word of clarification is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between the responsibilities of stories as gifts and the responsibilities of stories as humanitarian communication. More often than not, humanitarian communication is produced by people without refugee experience and urges action on behalf of generalisable 'objects of rescue' (Espiritu 2006). Humanitarian discourse simulates emotional connection between read-

ers and refugee cultures to stimulate a material relationship between readers and humanitarian action. I view this as a separation of the story from the agency of the individual person who has lived it. By way of contrast, stories offered by people with refugee experience and received as gifts among relations remain attached to the persons who lived or tell it. To be responsible to such a gift is to engage in living inquiry: joining a community that is already in action and embedding in relationships with a particular refugee community. Reciprocity and responsibility may look more like supporting, elevating, following and sharing power with those who have navigated the asylum system.

Reading as Listening

Once we acknowledge that the practice of reading takes place within a relational matrix, it makes sense to use the metaphor of conversation to reconceive reading as listening. Given the ‘subtle shifts in acoustical agency’ implied by ‘different senses of the term “listening”’, determining what kind of listening a learner aims for is also important (Rice 2015: 100). Working from an oral tradition, Archibald refers to storywork as ‘story listening’ (2008: 7); she reminds her readers that ‘patience and trust are essential for preparing to listen to stories’ (8). Her use of the phrase ‘listen to’ is a significant distinction from the arguably more common instruction in the classroom to ‘listen for’. Where ‘listening to’ may imply receptive, open-ended, relational attention aimed at learning from the storyteller, ‘listening for’ references the search for particular predetermined knowledge (for example, humanitarian calls to action) in the story.

In my postdoctoral research on refugee stories and dialogue, ‘Digital Storytelling as a Method for Refugee Dialogue in Canada’ (2017–2019), the importance of ‘listening to’ emerged as well. I had conducted cross-sector interviews on the ordinary words of asylum discourse, and reading through the transcripts I noticed ‘listening’ as a keyword. One interviewee, Sharmarke Dubow, who is a former refugee now living in Canada, is an elected city councillor in Victoria, British Columbia. Before our interview, Dubow asked me to tell him my story to make clear my personal intentions, even though he had read my research protocol and we had clarified the research goals. I spoke for a long time and answered all his questions. By ‘listening for’ something in my story, he subtly switched the agency of the exchange. When he was satisfied that my research intentions had come out of a good story, we began an interview that lasted no longer than my introductory story.

‘Stories are listening’, he explained. ‘We are in a moment that we observe information quickly, and we want sound bites.’ Claiming agency at the start of the interview was a brilliant move to protect his own story by first ‘listening for’ paternalistic patterns of interview listening in me. Describing the significance of listening, Dubow said that listening ‘comes out of a good intention, not gaining something . . . it’s not [a] transaction. It’s curiosity, it’s non-judgement, and sometimes you don’t gain anything. And you respect that’. Listening to learn needs to be wrested away from abstracted, decontextualised commodity logic and returned to the relationality of gift logic. I offered my gratitude, saying, ‘I feel protective of people’s stories . . . I always think it’s a gift, but I know it’s a gift that you can choose to give or not. And I appreciate that you choose to [share your stories with others]’. Dubow’s response pushed back slightly: ‘It’s part of me’. He continued, ‘I personally see it as a responsibility [rather than a choice] now that I am Canadian’. In this way Dubow discerns story as indistinguishable from the person whose story it is, and frames storytelling, and by extension story listening, as a relational responsibility without expectation of profit. My task as I edited the video footage was to find a form that might instil an ethic of reciprocity in the viewers/listeners of his words.

Pedagogical Suggestions

How do educators shift the patterns of consumption and paternalism that undergird every encounter between a learner (particularly, but not exclusively, those without refugee experience) and stories of forced migration? How does one teach stories to support learners across difference to remain curious and empowered? Some ideas include: (1) building relationships of trust and mutuality with local communities; (2) inviting guest speakers to comment on the broader culture based on their refugee experiences; (3) getting students into the community through experiential learning appropriate to their level; (4) facilitating rigorous interpretations of each narrative’s aesthetic and rhetoric through close readings; (5) assigning refugee authors, theorists and media-makers; (6) studying inequity in international systems and national cultures from the perspective of refugee narratives; (7) assigning materials that benefit displaced communities financially.

Reframing refugee narratives differently from imaginative humanitarian ethnography requires educators to re-evaluate what is most important to learn from a refugee narrative, what is considered common sense about the characters’ experiences, what requires explanation, what de-

tails can be ignored, and even the book's capabilities and limitations for effecting change in the world. Reframing can occur in all aspects of teaching: assigned reading questions, the course's thematic focus, lecture material and class discussions. The work of reframing refugee narratives may involve redefining the problem or issue as something other than the search for refuge (perhaps something more complex like ethnonationalism, American imperialism, global arms sales, fundamentalism, capitalism, or something else altogether), and it may ask learners to give the authority for answering 'how best to solve the problem' back to those in search of refuge, whether imagined or otherwise. In imaginative narratives, reframing refugee stories could look like asking students to clearly articulate what the problem is *according to the text* and how the *characters* suggest solving that problem, in addition to asking what relationship this may or may not have with *the author's* perspective.

To return to Nguyen and Fung (2016), in social sciences, policy and ethnography, refugees have become 'objects of investigation . . . [but] refugees [are] active participants that use rhetorical and aesthetic means to inform, push against, and redefine the mechanisms that construct them as subjects' (6). In the classroom, resisting simplified interpretations of refugee culture via imaginative ethnography requires an explicit articulation of the object of study as the narrative and not refugee culture (which may result in less discussion of migration themes); it means attending to the ways refugee authors, as co-educators, are interrupting popular cultural narratives or the way refugee theorists are interpreting narratives; and it cautions against the language of authenticity or generalisations about refugee culture as a unitary subject. Positively, it means contextualising each new story within in its own cultural, political, historical and national environment, discovering the particular political vision of each storyteller, and asking the text to offer unexpected knowledge. Concretely, this could take the shape of experiential learning that reminds students of the active role of refugee communities in creating culture and that raises questions about the relationship between cultural production and material gains or losses for refugee communities. Assigning interdisciplinary or cross-cutting scholarship can draw out the relevance of a cultural text and relate it to similar experiences of disenfranchisement, such as that of temporary foreign workers.

Conclusion

What happens to a refugee story in the classroom? A learning process undertaken by students based on their expectations for reading a refu-

gee story. Many students arrive in a classroom already primed to commit humanitarian ethnography against stories. In addition to overriding the lifeworld of the story, this can be an alienating and diminishing experience for students with correlative experiences. Reading refugee stories as imaginative humanitarian ethnography layers the complexity of global politics, onto a personal sense of responsibility to strangers, onto the emotional impact of reading about violence, onto assumptions about human rights and equality, onto a growing knowledge of migration in unmanageable scope. Discussions then about what should be done can turn to despair and short circuit more nuanced analysis. I see the role of the instructor as unmasking and denaturalising this reading process, while simultaneously practising different learning approaches that allow students' readings of narratives to serve as jumping-off points for further relational inquiry.

How to study refugee literature ethically within its relational matrix remains an open question. When developing research methodology, I hold myself accountable to my ancestral story of displacement, to my friendships with people who formerly carried the status of 'refugee', and to refugee claimant communities in my city. In the classroom, my pedagogy resists pragmatic and utilitarian humanitarian readings of cultural texts by highlighting unequal access to the category of 'human', interrogating the language of humanising that often frames refugee storytelling, analysing the social inequity established by commercial representations of refugees, and delaying urgent questions about action by slowly unpacking the aesthetic construction of the text. These pedagogical shifts have proven helpful in resisting a way of reading refugee narratives that joins the frame of humanitarian communication with an ethnographic reading practice. Yet as a settler scholar with a nomadic childhood, an educator in the humanities with a love of story and training in anti-colonial theories and literatures, I still wonder, at an existential level, from what ground I read and teach refugee literature. I make missteps and continue to search for transformative pedagogy and mentors that can help me, as a learner, to be self-aware about the relations engendered in reading.

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Notes

1. See, for example, <https://enoughproject.org/blog/world-refugee-day-importance-refugee-stories>; <https://wowlit.org/blog/2016/12/05/sharing-immigrant-and-refugee-stories/>; https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_children_need_to_hear_refugee_stories; <https://www.msf.org/refugees-around-world-stories-survival-world-refugee-day>; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/23/refugee-tales-migration-books-ungrateful-refugee-our-city-dina-nayeri-jon-bloomfield-jonathan-portes>; <https://academic.oup.com/jrs/article-abstract/21/1/117/1513055?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.
2. Anthropologist Liisa Malkki's critique in the 1990s of the tendency of refugee research to treat refugee subjects as belonging to a unitary culture is often referenced to make this point.
3. For a practical introduction to close reading, see <http://canlitguides.ca/chapter-categories/research-skills/>. Or, for a critical history of the close reading method, see Herrnstein Smith (2016).

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