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“Livability” and “Ungratefulness”: A Refugee Critique of the Law and Humanitarianism

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Abstract

Critical refugee studies (CRS) conceptualizes refugees’ lived experience as a site of theory-making and knowledge production with and for refugees. As co-founders of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), and as scholars with refugee backgrounds, we theorize alongside our refugee partners to offer a refugee critique of refugee law and humanitarianism. Departing from the 1951 Refugee Convention definition of “refugee,” whose restrictive legal and historical framing cannot account for the complex conditions that displace human beings, we offer the concept of “livability” to name the mundane, creative, and fearless possibilities of living that undergird refugees’ claims to move audaciously. Furthermore, departing from humanitarian narratives that expect refugees to be forever thankful for having been rescued, we propose the concept of “ungratefulness” to describe refugee refusal to exhibit gratitude and deference for the space they have been allowed. Our critique emerged from sustained engagement with refugee partners through in-person and virtual gatherings organized by the CRSC. Together, we argue that livability and ungratefulness constitute examples of “epistemic disobedience” of the colonial and unilateral knowledge production about refugees, as they call attention to distinctly discernible refugee agency and epistemology that break with the historically appointed role of refugees as seen entirely through a lens of precarity and gratitude.

Keywords

critical refugee studies; livability; ungratefulness

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1. Introduction

For bell hooks, the interdependent nature of theory and practice is the vital link between critical thinking and practical wisdom because "when we create a world where there is union between theory and practice, we can freely engage with ideas" (hooks, 2010, p. 186). Following hooks (2010), we insist that theoretical work that is co-created with refugees and that emerges from their lived experiences has the potential to be liberatory and transformative. As co-founders of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), we move beyond the legal definition of refugees that is premised on "fear and persecution," and adopt instead a critical refugee studies (CRS) definition of "the refugee" as "all human beings forcibly displaced within or outside of their land of origin...regardless of their legal status" (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 72). In opposition to hegemonic ways of producing knowledge that is marked by positivism and abstract generalizations, we insist that theorizing alongside refugees as knowledge co-creators is a creative, collaborative, and critical practice that promotes "purposeful knowledge" for "thinking against the grain" (Vacchelli, 2018, p. 9). We depart from the asymmetrical representational apparatus that renders refugees both hypervisible and invisible, erasing their humanity, heterogeneity, and agency; instead, we conceptualize refugees' lived experience as a site of theory-making that demands and inspires critical reflection on and action for differently positioned and impacted individuals.

Wyborn et al. (2019) define knowledge co-creation as "processes that iteratively unite ways of knowing and acting—including ideas, norms, practices and discourses—leading to mutual reinforcement and reciprocal transformation of societal outcomes" (p. 320). Liberatory knowledge co-creation necessarily involves the practice of "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, 2008)—the refusal to adhere to the hegemonic rules of knowledge valuation and a commitment to theorizing from and between devalued knowledge systems to generate more critical ways of thinking about the world and envision social life (Meghji, 2023). These manifestations of "epistemic disobedience" emerge in diverse forms, ranging from narrated ethnographies in scholarly studies to creative production in the cultural sphere. Key to the practice of knowledge co-creation with those who have experienced displacement is the recognition and empowerment of these forced migrants as "knowledge holders" (O'Neill et al., 2019, p. vii) who engage in "knowledge-decolonizing" (Lenette, 2019, p. xiii). Adhering to these tenets, we approach the question of "refugee" from the knowledge point of the forcibly displaced—from the lived, embodied experiences, memories, and postmemories of refugees and their children who craft their lives in the ever-unfolding afterlife of multiple and overlapping forms of disaster and displacement.

As displaced peoples, refugees are apprehended in immigration law, essentialized in humanitarian discourse, and diminished in cultural (mis)representations. The promise of knowledge co-creation with refugees is the potential to incorporate emancipatory methods and practices that empower participants to co-generate research "data" that "*speak back* to regressive and at times cruel policy measures" (Lenette, 2019, p. xi, emphasis in original). Accordingly, theorizing as a liberatory practice entails knowledge co-making that prioritizes space sharing, informal conversations, storytelling, and creative practices with refugees—exchanges that are grounded not in rigid social science paradigms but in fluid counter-narratives and creative and social practices that imagine and produce new ways of theorizing about community and collective justice. Importantly, the emancipatory promise of knowledge co-creation with refugees is a commitment to approach theorizing as a conduit to social change—to balance and restore the power to describe, narrate, and emancipate (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 23).

Centering refugee lifeworlds, the CRSC conceptualizes refugee displacement not as a problem for the nation-state but as a site of theory-making—a generative site of inquiry and activism and social and political critique (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 22). The CRSC mounts a humanistic approach to forced migration by centering refugee stories and experiences as a mode of analysis and a paradigm, documenting the world-repairing role of culture, memory, and imagination in the difficult work of resettlement. In so doing, we want to produce not only new knowledge but also new ways of knowledge-making—to regard theorizing as a communal practice that centers on how refugee actors name and address their own understanding of and need for safety, dignity, and beauty. To illustrate refugee agency and epistemology, we offer below a refugee critique of refugee law and humanitarianism by tracing the intentions and actions of the CRSC and its refugee partners as they worked toward formations of refugee livability and ungratefulness that break with the historically appointed role of refugees as seen entirely through the lens of precarity and gratitude. Together, these concepts denounce the discourse and politics of trauma that erases the structural violence of displacement and reduces refugees to victim status, in need of rescue. They also simultaneously uplift refugees' political subjectivity: Livability centers what refugees want for their lives and ungratefulness demands space for defiant refugee subjectivities (Marshall, 2013). Ungratefulness is how refugees enact livability, to live their lives with humanity and dignity.

2. The CRSC

2.1. Intentions and Actions

We approach the practice of knowledge co-creation with forced migrants as scholars with refugee backgrounds and as co-founders of the CRSC. Founded in 2016, the CRSC is a group of US-based interdisciplinary scholars who advocate for and envision a world where refugee rights are human rights. Committed to community-engaged scholarship, we chart and build the field of CRS by centering refugee lives—and the creative and critical potentiality that such lives offer. Collective members not only study refugees, but many are also refugees themselves with long and deep ties to their respective communities.

The formation of the CRSC is premised on a mode of critical collaboration—both amongst members of the Collective and between CRSC members and the larger refugee communities—that operates as both strategy and method, the results of which have yielded formative imaginings and conversations within and beyond academia. We ground our work in feminist idea(l)s and politics of collectivity and prioritize collaboration as a tool and a practice—an intellectual and political mode of being. In this, we draw from the deep well of power that comes from collaborative acts, which upends the individualistic and neoliberal ethos that undergirds dominant notions of knowledge production in the academy. In all our work, CRSC members aim to produce not only new knowledge but also new forms of communal knowledge-making alongside our refugee partners.

The CRSC views public engagement, community collaboration, and mutual respect as central to our intellectual endeavor and critical intervention. We are intentional about creating spaces where relationships with refugee subjects can be built organically: through conferences and symposia that spur genuine conversations amongst researchers, students, performers, and community members; through graduate student writing retreats that model collaborative knowledge-making for the next generation of CRS scholars; through grant giving that seeds innovative projects by undergraduate and graduate students, community organizations, and artists; and through the CRSC website (https://criticalrefugeestudies.com) that both

disseminates and archives refugee stories, which is the focus of this article. The CRSC considers relationship-making practices a form of feminist praxis and methodology enacted through emotional labor. Building relationships is how CRSC members theorize and forge actions through and beside refugee partners. In all our activities, we ask:

> What are the desires—and not only the needs—of the forcibly displaced as they create improvised, fluid, and alternative homemaking and healing strategies on the run? How do scholars bring about refugee policies that align with refugees' rights of movement, livelihood, and dignity?

Conversations are key to how we engage in theorizing with and for each other. Conversations are ephemeral moments of grounded thinking as we respond to each other's perspectives and deepen our understanding of what it means to value refugee lives and stories. Conversations allow us to build relationships and maintain interconnectedness with each other. Abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba explains that "everything worthwhile is done with other people," a lesson she learned from her parents who emphasize that we are interconnected and need each other (Kaba, 2021, pp. 176–186). Kaba's insights illuminate the CRSC's multifaceted efforts to create spaces, both in-person and virtual, where we build and renew connections to different refugee communities, whether they are researchers, community members, artists, teachers, or students.

The community-based conferences and public talks that CRSC hosted make visible the layered refugee lives and experiences that are different but interrelated. Co-theorizing with our refugee partners occurs through these conversations in these spaces as we participate in the organic process of refining our ideas about refugee storytelling and archiving. We learned that refugee storytelling is not about pinpointing the real refugee stories and lives but about showing how they overlap and make visible other forms of violence and injustice. These are the questions that we ask each other: How can we understand refugees' experiences when they are embedded in the narratives and languages of the landscapes and geopolitics of the resettlement countries? How are the processes of global displacement linked to war as well as neoliberal policies in globalization? Moreover, even as we acknowledge refugees' traumatic and transformative life experiences, we also know that "even as we're crossing, we are more than sadness, more than the trauma" (Zamora, 2020). These organic conversations, which we consider to be co-research practices grounded in the lived experiences of refugee partners, make room for mistakes in our perceptions and language and for corrections and apologies to happen in real-time. We can participate in what activist and writer Sunni Patterson describes as a radical notion of forgiveness and community, in which forgiveness is to admit and accept that we may not know everything in order to build community (Patterson, 2024). Radical living that insists on refugee humanity and dignity is foregrounded in all our activities, both in person and in virtual spaces, that are inspired by refugee work and words.

In this article, we focus on the CRSC website, designed and maintained by CRSC co-founder Lan Duong, as our site of analysis, as it represents a form of cultural labor that pronounces the importance of refugee enactments in terms of stories and histories, and of art and the archive. Debuting in 2017, the website concretizes the kinds of interventions, communities, and conversations we want to create with one another and with refugee communities at large in both actual and online spaces. Designed to be informative, collaborative, and interactive, it extends our dialogues with refugee activists, academics, and artists locally and globally as we populate the website with refugees' art, music, poetry, and testimonials. On this virtual canvas, we put our theories into practice, showing how the figure of the refugee is a social actor and

theorist, one who has always imagined other worlds, other possibilities, through creative expression. With the CRSC website, we intend to bring together communities here and elsewhere to strive for collective liberation and social justice for the globally displaced (Espiritu et al., 2022). Below, through an analysis of the CRSC website, we show how our critiques of the law and humanitarianism are grounded in and fueled by refugees' lived experiences and creative endeavors.

3. Toward Refugee Livability

Departing from the 1951 Refugee Convention definition of refugee that is based on "fear," and in an ongoing conversation with refugee allies, we offer the concept of "refugee livability" to name the mundane, creative, and fearless possibilities of living embedded in refugees' claims of the right to return, to stay, and to move audaciously—to be present everywhere. While we acknowledge the power of law to constitute reality, we look to refugees' meaning-making practices to craft our understanding of livability, where life is dignified. Livability names the capacious and bountiful ways of refugee living and lifeworlds. At the core of livability is the quality of life expressed through storytelling and other self-produced narratives. It is an insistence on a better life that is not centered on fear but on humanity, dignity, and futurity—the truth of the possible, if not the actual (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 2). By continuing to show up, refugees demonstrate that the law is not a totalizing force in their lives, thereby exposing the law's limitations as they engage, critique, and even evade the law.

4. A Critique of the Law and Fear

The legal mandate of the 1951 Refugee Convention definition of the refugee—someone who has a "well-founded fear of persecution"—emerged from the specificities of the geopolitical context of Europe and the historical conditions of World War II. The centrality of Europe in the humanitarian agenda, as Chimni (2009) explains, maintains continuity between the colonial era to the present because humanitarianism legitimizes imperialism and advances the goals of hegemonic states. Furthermore, the knowledge produced from humanitarian efforts carried out in the Global North, as in the counting of internally displaced persons, turns into knowledge and social categories that engender "legal norms for behavior" (Chimni, 2009, p. 18). Humanitarianism continues to be intertwined with colonialism because "forced migration issues have today become *part of a western project of global dominance* and that Forced Migration Studies is implicated in it" (Chimni, 2009, p. 20, emphasis in original). Along with our refugee partners, we insist that today's complex contexts and conditions for displacement cannot be adjudicated on the basis of fear and persecution that was stipulated in the Convention. The spatial and temporal limits of the international refugee law shaped a restricted idea of fear for which only certain kinds of fear can be recognized and certain spaces where "fearful" people can go (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 1). The Convention framework does not make room for the multiplicity and complexity of refugee claims. This limitation produces the uneven adjudication of fear across different groups seeking asylum.

In addition, nation-states play a big role in interpreting and implementing international law, which typically positions the refugee as a threat. Indeed, state power as persecution and the withholding or failure of state protection from persecution has traditionally been the site through which refugees as a legal category are produced. It is also the nation-states that claim to be fearful of refugees who will allegedly breach the security of their borders and threaten the safety of their citizenry. As such, fear operates as a double-edged sword for

refugees and asylum seekers who must be able to articulate a "well-founded fear of persecution" but who also are simultaneously constructed by the state to threaten national security. Concerns about national security have produced further restrictions on refugee migration and entry. Australia, for example, intercepts asylum seekers at sea to reroute them to its detention centers in Nauru on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island and across Indonesia (Mountz, 2020). This process of offshoring borders and externalizing enforcement is not unique to Australia (National Immigrant Justice Center, 2021). The US response to Central American asylum seekers since 2014 was to detain them in centers within its own borders, push them to make-shift camps on the Mexican side of the US–Mexico border, or separate families so that children become "unaccompanied minors." The children are placed in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement where they live in overcrowded shelters and may be released to relatives or foster families.

Finally, much of the scholarship and public discourse on refugees is framed from the perspective, logic, and needs of the nation-states and humanitarian organizations. As such, most academic theorizing on refugees adopts a state-driven approach that views refugees through the security lens as a crisis and a source of threat (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 2). While the power of the law is vast, refugee critiques show that the law is not a totalizing force in refugees' lives. We assert that refugees are cognizant of the law's restrictive impact, and they constantly negotiate between their own fear of the law and the nation-state's fear of them.

5. Colonial Mapping and Counter Mapping

Given that the UN Convention on Refugee Status was geopolitically specific to Europe and that the applications of the law have privileged nation-states' border security imperatives, mapping refugee flows has been inseparable from colonial cartography. In fact, conventional refugee mapping projects by the UNHCR or research organizations typically superimpose abstract dots and lines to visualize migration flows that are unidirectional from the Global South to Global North countries. This form of colonial and humanitarian mapping reproduces geopolitical inequities that mark forced migrants as peripheral subjects who invade the Global North. Indeed, the dots on the maps appear as targets that turn the visualization of displacement into visibility that produces vulnerability for refugees. In the context of fabricated fears about refugee (and immigrant) populations as national security threats, the dots on the map that string their path of migration from the place of displacement to the place of refuge come to represent refugee invasion. As such, these visual representations that map the refugee paths and their population size do the work of enhancing the threat and fears of displaced migrants. The conventional use of flow lines is problematic because it (mis)represents border crossing as an effortless journey. These lines erase the personal hardships, dangerous treks, and legal hurdles that are linked to border crossings (Kelly, 2019, p. 34). Kelly (2019) explains that such conventional borders lack dimension through their simplification into lines on a map such that "continuous lines are convenient symbols for borders because of their perceived permanence and uncontested fixity; they appear static, essential, and inexperienced" (pp. 35–36). They record and provide information rather than tell life stories. As Smith (1999) reminds us, colonial mapping practices dispossess Indigenous peoples of land and establish settler-colonial states.

Cognizant of how cartography, the art and science of making and remaking maps, is linked to the spatial sedimentations of power, the CRSC created a Story Maps page on their website (https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/story-maps) to visualize how place is experienced, understood, and practiced differently by refugees. In making refugee social life central to the understanding of place, the story map project

co-creates understanding of place with refugees, relying on their stories and images to show how refugees make spaces meaningful. We thus engage in the process of community mapping, which invites refugees in the diaspora to "map places and locations that matter to them, in whichever language or symbols is most meaningful to them" (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014, p. 91). This process thus centers the refugee as a mapmaker and emphasizes the "integrity of the knowledge producer or mapmaker" (Kelly, 2019, p. 38).

Community mapping draws on counter-mapping as an approach to underscore how "refugee movement" exposes the interconnectedness of lives and landscape. Boatcă (2021) explains that counter-mapping works as a form of "global solidarity between and across cores, peripheries, and semiperipheries in the global system" (p. 260). Indeed, the work of traditional map-making to create uniformity and sameness reinforces differential power and negates opportunities for visualizing overlaps and solidarities in human experiences. Instead of highlighting differences, counter-mapping attends to the similarities among asylum seekers. Counter-mapping that privileges feminist perspectives recognizes "differentiated bodies and affective experiences as instrumental to visualization" (Kelly, 2019, p. 37). It allows for bodies, which are non-traditional spaces and non-traditional borders, to be brought into the maps to tell stories (Kelly, 2019, p. 41). As artist Tiffany Chung explains: "For me, maps represent life. If there is no life, no society, no culture, no people, there would be no maps…maps not only define borders, they are also about people" (Critical Refugee Studies Collective [CRSC], n.d.). We draw inspiration from Chung's claim that "maps represent life" to conceptualize the refugee story maps hosted on the CRSC website. As CRSC co-founder Lan Duong explains:

> We endeavor to reconstruct maps about refugees to tell a different story *by* refugees; that is, how they came from a history of militarism; how they have rebuilt their communities; and how they continue to survive and thrive, telling stories, rewriting history, and making art, literature, poetry, and films along the way. (Critical Refugee Studies Collective [CRSC], n.d.)

In August 2023, Chung created a map installation on the US National Mall and adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. titled *For the Living*. The installation opened from August to September 2023 and featured a map of the world that "traces the global routes of Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees from the Vietnam War" (Monument Lab, 2023). Based on the routes of exile, the installation invited visitors to "reimagine" how the paths contributed to the "story of US geography and belonging" (Monument Lab, 2023). Indeed, viewers experience the effect of the war on a human scale providing a glimpse of the forced migration process. Chung further explains the work of map making in her artistic installation:

> Creating maps…is an act of countering the colonial legacy of mapping from above. So, I think by bringing the map into the landscape, it is a kind of a reverse process for people to go through that landscape and going through that process of mapping and understanding how subjective it could be. (Trust for the National Mall, 2023)

We draw on Chung's dictum to create alternative maps and feature some of her maps on the CRSC website to frame our own refugee story maps.

6. Mapping Our Stories: About Livability

We created the story map feature on the CRSC website as a departure from the digital forms of representing human displacement through dots and lines that are devoid of life and life-making. We curate our story maps to have the capacity to hold the dynamics of life-making. We use the existing infrastructure of mapping, the ArcGIS platform of story mapping to embed refugee stories in an accessible way for users to navigate and visualize. Story mapping uses Google Maps to coordinate and embed story points onto the platform. Users can interact with the stories by navigating the different locations on the map. We explored different platforms and found ArcGIS to be navigable for the user due to widespread familiarity with Google Maps. Refugees were already using different technologies whether it was navigation apps or social media to facilitate their migration across borders to locate resources and communities and to tell their stories.

Our version of story mapping is intended for refugees to literally put their community on the map and to tell stories about refugee living that are happening everywhere. On these pages, we take our cue from Chung that "maps represent life." We endeavor to reconstruct maps about refugees to tell a different story by refugees; that is, how they came from a history of militarism; how they have rebuilt their communities; and how they continue to survive and thrive, telling stories, rewriting history, and making art, literature, poetry, and films along the way. Together, the story maps mark the refugee world spatially—in the US, Argentine, Belize, Scotland, Israel, Malaysia, Guam, Malawi, and more—where refugees experience displacement, create makeshift homes in refugee camps, get resettled; these places are where living happens. Many of the story points highlight festivals and exhibits of refugee art and culture. The story maps show that wherever refugees settle, they build communities where life is bountiful and live with dignity despite the persistence of fear. In this way, our story maps tell refugee stories, created by refugees themselves, in an effort to flood the world with refugee humanity.

As an example, the set of stories mapped to California's Central Valley (Figure 1) represent dynamic forms of life-making among the different refugee groups who have settled in the region since the late 1970s.

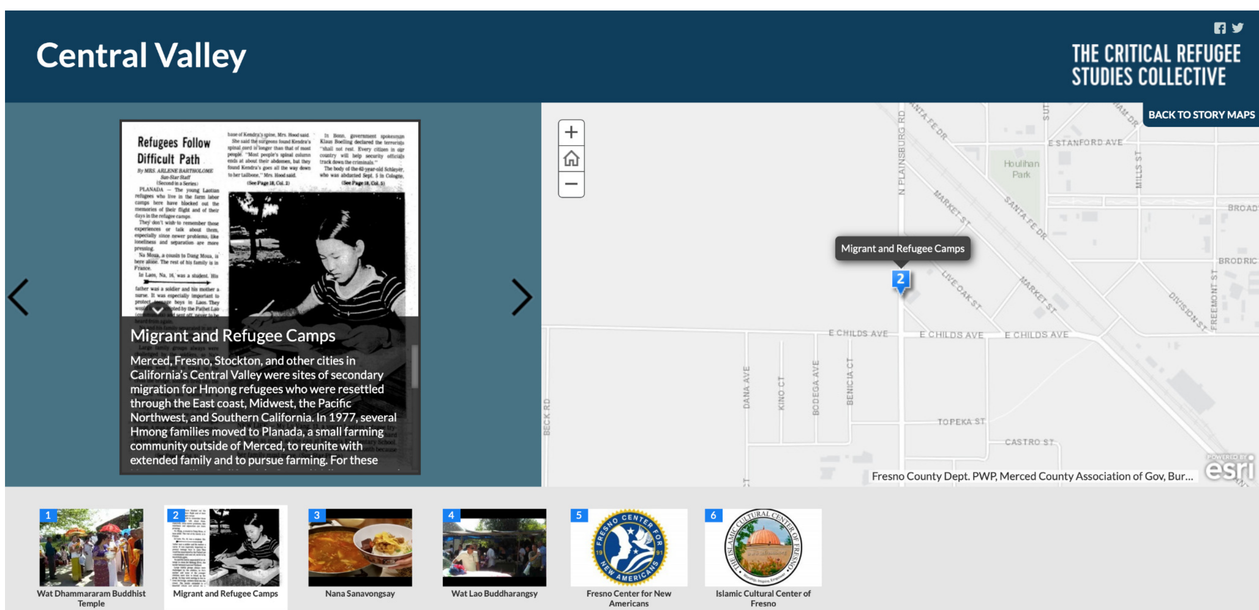

Figure 1. Story map of refugee stories in California's Central Valley.

The stories emphasize food, communal and spiritual celebrations, community organizations, and migrant camps as anchors for living with dignity. The featured organizations, the Fresno Center for New Americans (FCFN) and the Islamic Cultural Center of Fresno (ICCF) provide services for Southeast Asian refugees and Syrian refugees, respectively. They provide education, social services, employment, immigration support, mental health, housing, and other important needs that newly arrived refugees struggle to access once their initial resettlement assistance program concludes. In addition, the early wave of Hmong refugees who resettled in Merced, CA, between 1977 and 1980, lived in migrant camps alongside Mexican-American migrant farmworkers where they worked together in the area's agricultural fields, with Hmong refugees crediting the migrant farmworkers for helping to ease their initial resettlement process. Together, these story maps depict refugee living that necessitates collaboration, cohabitation, and mutual assistance among different community groups. They map refugee relationships forged through necessity in the absence of or very limited support for resettlement from the US state.

In sum, our story maps illuminate refugee livability—refugees' insistence to live with humanity and dignity in mundane and creative ways and to tell their stories of fear but also of joy—by spotlighting how refugee stories are intertwined with place and persist in solidarity with the people and stories from those places.

7. Toward Refugee Ungratefulness

The articulation of humanitarian aid as a *gift* to refugees generates narratives about refugees that are largely restricted to crises, suffering, and fear. From the perspective of the refugees, this unequal relationship is most evident in rescue narratives in which humanitarian agencies and agents expect a display of gratitude from those whom they have "rescued." As subjects of humanitarianism, refugees are hyper-aware that performing the role of the grateful refugee, which removes their agency and dignity, is often the unspoken condition to acceptance, hospitality, and friendship (Nayeri, 2019). In this context, the concept of ungratefulness—the willfulness to define one's humanity and subjectivity beyond the limits of the savior tropes—constitutes a site of refugee agency. As Nayeri (2020) asserts, refugees should not have to "spend the rest of our days in grateful ecstasy, atoning for our need." In rejecting and refusing idealized notions of restoration and resettlement, the "ungrateful refugee" (Nayeri, 2019, 2020) advances a refugee critique of humanitarian-centered rescue narratives that uphold purported liberal ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality. Even when refugees appear to display gratitude, this practice is often strategic and performative; that is, refugees are self-aware as they playact the relationships and affects required of them to survive, and even to thrive. These calculated performances of (in)gratitude constitute a refugee tactic that ensures survival and prosperity in a sponsorship-based economy, and an example of "epistemic disobedience" that exposes the colonial and unilateral production of refugees as seen entirely through a lens of precarity and gratitude (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 3).

8. A Refugee Critique of Humanitarianism

The contemporary critique of humanitarianism can be traced to Hannah Arendt's work on totalitarianism. In her 1951 book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt, writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, articulates the tensions that statelessness posed to human rights and humanitarianism—the stipulation that to enjoy civil, political, or social rights, individuals must first be a member of a political community. Since the right to be a citizen constitutes a juridico-political precondition for protection of other human rights, Arendt (1951)

pushes for a "reimagining of global justice beyond humanitarianism" (Howard, 2017, p. 98)—for the principle of the "right to have rights" that moves beyond the right to belong to a state. In other words, everyone should be allowed to belong somewhere. According to Arendt (1963), the practice of humanitarianism is depoliticized as it builds on a politics of pity and compassion, replaces rights with charity, and differentiates between those who can help and those who need help. As such, the "right to have rights" creates possibilities for the stateless to "negotiate the line between being an abject subject of compassion and administrative logic versus being a legal person as well as a political activist claiming the recognition of his or her international rights" (Benhabib, 2018, p. 121).

Building on Arendt's insights, refugee studies scholars have established that humanitarian discourses and practices of benevolence uphold patriarchal and neocolonial relations of power and systems of meaning and representation, which bolster the unequal relationship between refugees and the humanitarians who claim to save them (Hyndman, 2000; Rajaram, 2002). Humanitarian narratives often depict refugee lives only in terms of losses and their resettlement in Western countries only in terms of gains: "The trauma discourse and the pathologization of refugees is the most common reaction to the presence of refugees in Western arrival countries" (Blazan & Hatton, 2016, p. 98). In most instances, refugees' eligibility for assistance and resettlement hinges on their ability to demonstrate their defenselessness and neediness rather than on the specificities of their histories of dislocation. As such, humanitarian assistance is often based on the language of pity and suffering rather than on the language of justice and reparation, thereby dispossessing refugees of their own agency. Within this privatized structure of refuge, the refugee subject is belittled and isolated, forever indebted and grateful to the resettlement state and its citizens for the bestowed "gift of freedom" (Nguyen, 2012). Moreover, humanitarian interventions are often practices that recuperate state sovereignty by eliding the fact that contemporary refugee crises are largely the result of the Western world's historical, sustained, and ongoing patterns of imperial and colonial violence and economic, social, and racial stratification (Espiritu, 2014).

9. Refugee Archives: "The Personal Is a Form of Critique"

The archive is a power-laden space where those in power produce meaning by determining what gets archived (Foucault, 1972; Trouillot, 1995). Attentive to the challenges of archival representation, scholars, librarians, and community organizers have heralded the practice of assembling refugee-produced documentation of their own lives. These bottom-up approaches to the subjectivities and lifeworlds of refugees, which have been largely elided or obscured in official archives, center "refugees as knowing and speaking subjects rather than as objects of knowledge" (Phu & Nguyen, 2019, p. 10). As an example, in their study of Burmese refugee exodus in 1942, Joseph and Balakrishnan (2022) relay how refugees "become agents of change" (p. 739) through their narratives that create a space of appearance for themselves. Refugee archives, which empower refugees to become the custodians and articulators of their own experiences (Hynes, 2003), thus have the potential to document not only displacement but also emplacement that amplifies refugee personhood.

In their discussion of archives and methods for CRS, Phu and Nguyen (2019) insist that "the personal is a form of critique" (p. 7). Accordingly, to co-theorize with refugees is to ground theory on refugees in refugee stories and struggles. The CRSC recognizes the need for refugees not only to create their own stories, but also to have a space to archive and share these stories. Toward these goals, we created the Refugee Archives page on the CRSC website (https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/archives) to serve as a digital storage space for stories,

histories, ephemeral items, artwork, images, writing, music, and media that have been generated by and for refugees. Users from anywhere in the world can upload their materials by themselves onto the CRSC website; they can also manage these items once they are up, adding to, deleting, and editing their work as they see fit. The CRSC holds no ownership of the works and has no selection process; we simply created a digital space so that they may be stored and accessed virtually. In offering a virtual space for refugee stories that is free, open, and interactive, we conceptualize refugee communities as critical partners in replacing and reversing the dehumanization of refugees within colonialist gazes and frames, sensational stories, savior narratives, big data, and spectator scholarship. Our intention is to celebrate refugees' creative acts as profoundly agentive and imaginative, and to fashion the new critical communities to work toward social justice for the globally displaced. In short, the Refugee Archives is our effort to ground the process of co-theorizing refugee lives in concrete refugee struggles, tending always to the specific histories and contexts that shape their stories (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 3).

10. Archiving Our Stories: Toward Ungratefulness

We envision the materials uploaded by our users to the CRSC's Refugee Archives as refugee critiques and theories that take the forms of poetry, art, film, music, and other genres. Collectively, these small stories radiate refugee agency and imagination, constituting an antidote to the objectifying capture of refugees in Western media as the dead, wounded, starving that elicit pity and sympathy, but not discernment and assessment. Constructed for Western consumption, these spectacular(ized) images are also masculinist, rendering invisible and inaudible the everyday and out-of-sight struggles as well as the triumphs of the displaced as they manage war's impact on their lives (Espiritu & Duong, 2018). As a counterpoint, the CRSC's Refugee Archives take seriously the knowledge point of the forcibly displaced, both the hidden and overt injuries but also the joy and survival practices that play out in the domain of the everyday. As such, the Refugee Archives present the forcibly displaced not as objects of analysis but as sites of knowledge production that contribute to the emergence of critical theory from the Global South.

As of this writing, the Refugee Archives has over 30 entries that recount refugee stories through creative forms seldom found in traditional archives: artwork, poetry, podcast, music, dance, video, essay, zine, and memoir. The storytellers share slices of the life of refugees who hailed from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Haiti, Uganda, and Nigeria; some entries include non-translated words or excerpts in Hmong, Vietnamese, Khmer, Spanish, and Dari. Together, the entries chronicle the hardship of refugee plight but also the more mundane, routine, and open-ended dimensions of refugee life: A woman tells of her struggle with sexual violence in Eastern Uganda; a Hmong man narrates his family's escape by foot from Laos to the Thai border in 1975; a third-generation Salvadoran recounts her grandmother and father's language mishap while shopping at Smart & Final for the first time; and a Vietnamese daughter shares the mental health implications of being a child of war refugees. This cacophony of sounds, images, and tales disables the collapsing of the multifaceted and overlapping refugee stories into a "single story." As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us, "the consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult " (Adichie, 2009).

Attentive to the practice of refugee refusal, we share below our analyses of four Refugee Archives entries to illustrate how they help us theorize the concept of "ungratefulness."

In the aftermath of US wars in Southeast Asia, the centering of refugee rescue and resettlement obscures the violence and racism of US military actions in the region that led to the displacement in the first place (Espiritu, 2014). In the entry *Militarized Silence* (Figure 2), Ryan Nguyen disrupts this narrative of rescue by inserting his *ông nội*'s (paternal grandfather) story into the archive. A former Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldier, his grandfather's war duty of cannon firing has permanently damaged his hearing. Nguyen likened his grandfather's injury to "the birth defects, disabilities, and other toxic effects caused by Agent Orange" suffered by millions of other Vietnamese. His photo art superimposes the images of the cannon, the spraying of Agent Orange, and the Republic of Vietnam's flag onto his grandfather's photo. Nguyen's entry thus refutes the US narrative of rescue, emphasizing instead the ongoing costs of the war, both physical and psychological, borne by Vietnamese in the diaspora.

In another indictment of the US wars in Southeast Asia, Cambodian American performing artist and scholar Tiffany Lytle performed the song *Justice* that she composed in reaction to the 2018 ruling by a UN-backed tribunal that officially categorized the mass killings in Cambodia a genocide, forty years after the fact. With

Figure 2. *Militarized Silence*.

the refrain—"Why doesn't this feel like justice?"—Lytle scrutinizes the US's military culpability in Cambodia and its failure "to categorize Cambodia as a genocide." Together, these entries mark Southeast Asian refugee ungratefulness as they make visible the past, present, and future of US militarism in Southeast Asia that has been masked by the US resettlement of refugees from that region.

Refugee Archives entries also underscore the persistence of dissettlement for racialized refugees, even after resettlement. Following the 9/11 attacks, refugees from Arab and Muslim countries residing in the US became targets of government racial profiling practices and were subject to mass surveillance. In his video *I would Rather Be Free*, Abdul M. Saleem recounted his father's experience with racial profiling. A refugee from Afghanistan who came to the US in the late 1980s, Saleem's father was placed on a "no fly list" in 2010, thirty years after his resettlement, which caused him to miss his brother's wedding in Afghanistan. Refugee displacement also persists into the lives of the second generation. In her artwork, *Hamara Ghar (Our Home)* (Figure 3), Zahra Masood deftly illustrates the pervasive state surveillance of Muslim young people by inviting Muslim college students to superimpose their fingerprints—as fingerprinting is a national security measure targeting Arabs and Muslims—on a depiction of a mosque, which Masood understands to be not only a space of worship but also "our home, our *ghar*." These entries also exhibit refugee ungratefulness as they underline the ongoing surveillance experienced by refugees and their children, even long after resettlement.

In centering and prioritizing refugee experiences and epistemologies that mix personal reflection with historical recollection, the Refugee Archives entries constitute examples of refugee refusal that reframes the narrative and public discourse surrounding their community; its intent is "to stop a story that is always being told" (Simpson, 2014, p. 177). Collectively, the Refugee Archives entries counter the humanitarian narrative that turns refugees into dehistoricized objects of rescue; they name instead the cycle of violence and displacement that take place long before and after resettlement (Tang, 2015).

Figure 3. *Hamara Ghar (Our Home).*

11. Conclusion

The premise of our article is that refugee lives constitute a site of theory-making and knowledge co-production. To grasp refugee agency and epistemology, we offer a refugee critique of the law and humanitarianism by moving resolutely toward formations of refugee "livability" and "ungratefulness." Both of these key terms emerged from the CRSC website projects that elevate refugees' interests, desires, and needs as primary considerations. They offer a space for refugees and their children to speak in the language of aural, visual, and written poetry and to record and preserve the joys, sorrows, memories, and desires that border their lived realities. Our efforts are thus directed toward constructing the communities with whom we want to be in conversation. We advocate not only for the continual injection and flooding of refugee stories in all areas of cultural and political life but also for a careful mode of looking and listening that centers refugee agency, imagination, and knowledge. These refugee stories enable us to co-theorize the terms "livability" and "ungratefulness" with refugees as new analytics that engage in "epistemic disobedience" of the colonial and unilateral knowledge production about refugees.

We center these refugee stories in our critique of the law and humanitarianism to mark the ways that refugees (re)present themselves not in grateful deference to the host countries but always in relation to their own need for livability, safety, and dignity. While the power of the law is vast, it is not a totalizing force in refugees' lives. Attentive to the ways that refugees speak back to the law to insist on their humanity, we recognize the capacities and limits of state power and track refugees' capacity for extralegal agency and insistence on quality living and life (re)making. Along the same lines, we develop a refugee critique of humanitarianism that delineates how humanitarianism originates from and reproduces unequal power relationships and how refugees experience and subvert this power differential. In doing so, this article shows how refugees' lived experience, as a site of theory-making, allows for new forms of knowledge to be co-produced. We offer the concepts of refugee "livability" and "ungratefulness" as points of access to distinctly discernible refugee agency and epistemology that break with the historically appointed role of refugees as seen entirely through the lens of crisis, precarity, and gratitude.

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