

HOW HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS CONSTRUCT AND CONTEST THE IDENTITY OF "INVISIBLE" COLOMBIAN REFUGEES THROUGH VISUAL IMAGES

by

JILLIAN MARY SICO

(Under the Direction of Julie Velásquez Runk)

ABSTRACT

Academics, humanitarian organizations, and the media have used the word "invisible" in many ways to describe refugees. However, few studies have explored the connection between refugee invisibility and how visual images can conceal or reveal their subjects. In this research, I explore the concept of refugee "invisibility" as an analytical framework for discussing how the production and use of visual images might alter the political, social, or legal visibility of refugees. In order to do so, I use academic literature, semi-structured interviews with humanitarian workers, and analysis of images of refugees. I find that the political, social, and legal factors that make Colombian refugees "invisible" also motivate humanitarian organizations to challenge and contest how they make and use images of Colombian refugees. This study contributes to discussions about refugee "invisibility" among academics and humanitarian practitioners, broadening the use of the term by explicitly connecting it to visual studies.

INDEX WORDS: refugees; forced displacement; invisible; photography; visual media; Colombia; indigenous

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

People today are “chronically mobile and routinely displaced” (Malkki 1992:24). The world no longer looks like a grade-school map of differently colored, clearly outlined nation-states; instead, it is a watercolor wash of “fuzzy spaces” and “bleeding boundaries” that are constantly moving and changing (Malkki 1992:26). Many of us can claim only imaginary or remembered homelands, not actual physical spaces to which we can return (Malkki 1992). Although human mobility is nothing new, scholars have argued that today’s mobility is characteristic of a “new, postnational cartography” that challenges the idea of the territorially-bound nation-state (Appadurai 2003:342).

One of the key actors that has emerged in this "postnational" world is the person-in-motion: the migrant, the refugee, and the displaced person. Violent upheavals, civil wars, and guerilla warfare push displaced people to the outskirts of their countries and force refugees across borders, posing what many see as a humanitarian and security problem (JRS 2011; Nyers 2006). Although most refugees do not intentionally threaten the security of nations and borders, they sometimes flee from conflicts that governments would rather ignore, challenge border integrity by flowing back and forth unnoticed, and require state services and legal assistance without being citizens (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2012). Countries throughout the world, including Panama, France, the United States, and many others, have reacted with restrictive policies that make it difficult for some refugees to enter their territories and gain legal status (JRS 2011; Gottwald 2004; Nessel 2009; Brown 2010).

While nations struggle to maintain their national integrity and secure their borders, migrants and refugees undergo a parallel struggle of identity as they grapple not only with fear and loss, but also with bureaucratic definitions and social categories that are often restrictive, penalizing, and confusing (JRS 2011). In the face of red tape and lack of official attention, many refugees slip through the cracks. Some live in dispersed communities, integrate into cities, or live with extended family members (Gottwald 2004). Others fear deportation – often with good reason – and hide, move frequently, or find alternative, extra-legal economic and support networks (Malkki 1997). These individuals who evade or are overlooked by state and international authorities have been referred to variously as “invisible” refugees.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations are tasked with protecting all refugees, not only those who are most visible. But the most effective way for organizations to get financial, state, and public support for their efforts is to make refugee situations highly visible, raising red flags and casting refugees as victims of humanitarian emergencies (Nyers 2006). Framing refugees as problems in this way, argue Nyers (2006) and Malkki (1992:32, 1997) results in a pervasive public imagination of the “authentic” or “typical” refugee as a suffering victim – usually in a refugee camp – who needs outside help, is afraid, lives at the mercy of others, and lacks the ability to determine his or her own future. This imagination, claim Nyers and Sontag (1977, 2003), has largely been built up through emotionally-evocative images and text used by the media and organizations.

But "invisible" refugees do not fit neatly into this typical image (Andrews 2003; Harrell-Bond 2007; Polzer 2008). Because they may be integrated, not visibly suffering, or part of small groups instead of large-scale crises, they are often overlooked. But invisible refugees still deserve international protection and often require assistance. Therefore, UNHCR and

humanitarian organizations must find ways of challenging popular ideas of what a refugee looks like if they hope to protect these less-visible populations. Sometimes, they launch campaigns to make more visible issues related to invisible refugee populations. They create reports, publish articles, hire photographers and filmmakers, and send materials to donors to raise money and awareness. Almost all of these materials include visual images.

In this thesis, I explore how these visual images used by international organizations shape the identity and visibility of refugees. I use the concept of refugee “invisibility” as an analytical framework to discuss the following research questions:

1. How might the use of visual images of refugees alter the legal, political, or social visibility of refugees, and what is made visible or obscured?
2. How do considerations of the invisibility of refugees challenge or contest the ways that humanitarian organizations make and use images of refugees?

In addressing the second question, I also ask the following: a) Do humanitarian organizations maintain the public imagination of the “typical” refugee in their use of visual images; and b) Are organizations aware of issues of invisibility, and if so, do they use it to challenge the ways they visually represent refugees?

Visual images can have a real effect on how people view refugees – and not only donors or the general public, but also refugees' own neighbors, humanitarian workers, police officers, and government officials (Malkki 1992). As I explore throughout this thesis, public perceptions fueled by pejorative visual images can result in discrimination, xenophobia, exclusion from political communities, removal of voice or agency, and sometimes even legal consequences. Therefore, it is essential for humanitarian organizations to think deeply about how they represent

refugees and weigh the costs and benefits of supporting or challenging typical images that might invisibilize or exploit some refugees.

Throughout this paper I refer to a “refugee” as any person who has been forcibly displaced to a region outside his or her home country, regardless of whether he or she has been granted legal asylum. I chose this definition because most people who are displaced across borders do not yet have legal status as refugees. I refer to an “internally displaced person” as someone who has been forcibly displaced within his or her country’s borders. And I follow UNHCR in calling an “asylum seeker” someone who “says he or she is [legally] a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated” (UNHCR 2013d). I refer to members of all of these categories as “displaced” or “forcibly displaced” people.

What is Refugee Invisibility? An Introduction

Because refugee invisibility is an ambiguous and somewhat unfamiliar concept, I would like to clarify its use before moving on to more complicated arguments. Human beings are, by nature, visible. Clearly, the word “invisible” refers not to a natural state, but to a label that others have put upon refugees. Various interest groups, including the media, international organizations, and academics, have used the word “invisible” to refer to refugees in many different and overlapping ways.

In order to understand how the media, international organizations (including UNHCR), and academics have described refugee invisibility, I performed a conventional content analysis of phrases, words, and concepts that these three source types used when discussing refugee invisibility. Table 1.1 analyzes these usages, based on 12 reports each by international organizations, newspaper and magazine articles, and academic articles. I sampled these sources

Table 1.1: Refugee "invisibility" as used by UNHCR, NGOs, the media, and academics

Type of Invisibility		News Media (33%)	Organizations (33%)	Academics (33%)	TOTAL (N=36)
<i>Physical Invisibility</i>					
1.	integrated / indistinguishable	5	5	3	13 (36%)
2.	urban	6	4	1	10 (28%)
3.	not in camps	2	2	0	4 (11%)
4.	in hiding	2	1	1	4 (11%)
5.	highly mobile or dispersed	2	1	0	3 (8%)
6.	in remote areas	0	0	2	2 (6%)
7.	arrive little by little	1	1	0	2 (6%)
8.	educated / middle class	1	0	0	1 (3%)
<i>Legal Invisibility</i>					
1.	miscategorized as migrants	3	5	5	13 (36%)
2.	irregular/insecure legal status	3	3	3	9 (25%)
3.	lack of legal refugee status	3	1	3	7 (19%)
4.	overlapping statuses	1	0	1	2 (6%)
5.	stateless	1	1	0	2 (6%)
<i>Political Invisibility</i>					
1.	not politically prioritized	2	3	3	8 (22%)
2.	lack of state attention	1	1	3	5 (14%)
3.	kept quiet politically	0	0	4	4 (11%)
4.	do not appear in statistics	0	0	2	2 (6%)
5.	prevented from entering	0	0	1	1 (3%)
<i>Social / humanitarian Invisibility</i>					
6.	lack of public/international awareness	4	8	6	18 (50%)
7.	lack of humanitarian assistance	3	6	4	13 (36%)
8.	discrimination/xenophobia	4	3	3	10 (28%)
9.	women and children	4	2	1	7 (19%)
10.	lack of rights / abuse of rights	2	1	0	3 (8%)
11.	lack of voice/agency	0	0	3	3 (8%)
12.	skewed public perception	0	0	3	3 (8%)
13.	lack of academic attention	0	0	2	2 (6%)

Sources: News: Arevalo-Carpenter 2013; Batha 2011; Colgan 2013; Debusmann 2008; El-Rashidi 2012; English 2012; IRIN 2012; Jones 2009; Leutert 2012; Levine 2007; Powell 2011; Tavernise 2009.

Organizations: CARE 2012; HRIC 2013; JRS/AP 2011; JRS/USA 2013; KIN 2001; ODI 2010; RI 2009; UNHCR 2006; UNHCR 2007; UNHCR 2011; WRC 2009.

Academics: Feldman 2008; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2012; Gale 2008; Gottwald 2004; Hammond 2008; Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007; Korovkin 2008; Lubkemann 2008; Nessel 2009; Polzer 2008; Polzer and Hammond 2008; Valji et al 2008.

from searches on Google, Google Scholar, and Google News for the terms “refugee(s)” and “invisible,” choosing the highest, most relevant hits from a variety of geographical locations and dates. I organized these usages into subcategories under four main types of invisibility: physical, legal, political, and social invisibility.

By a wide margin, the most common way that humanitarian organizations, the media, and academics described refugee invisibility was as a *lack of awareness* by the public or in the media; 50% of sources mentioned this type of invisibility. The second most common types of invisibility were *lack of humanitarian assistance*; *integration* into cities and households, which makes it difficult to distinguish refugees from their neighbors; and *legal miscategorization*, usually as illegal, economically motivated migrants. 22-28% of sources also emphasized the invisibility of *urban* refugees, those with an *irregular or insecure legal status*, those who are *not politically prioritized* by their host country or international institutions, and those who suffer from *discrimination or xenophobia*.

Academics placed less emphasis on characteristics that physically hid people from view, such as integration or high levels of mobility, and more emphasis on political relationships and social categories. Humanitarian organizations and the media focused more on immediate and noticeable issues, such as urban integration, lack of awareness and assistance, legal problems, and discrimination. A common thread that ran through many of these articles was the *vulnerability* of invisible refugees. As Nyers (2006) and Malkki (1992, 1997) discuss, this focus on vulnerability highlights invisibility as a problem that is in urgent need of attention. But in some cases, invisibility is chosen and used strategically and may even be necessary for survival and protection (Scott 1998, 2010; Ellison 1992; Ellermann 2010). As I discuss in Chapters 2 and 5, one should not assume that refugee invisibility is always negative.

Research Site and Methods

In order to address my research questions, I focused on refugees and displaced people from Colombia and three of its neighboring countries, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama. The issue of refugee invisibility is particularly pertinent to this region, where the Colombian conflict between rebel groups, paramilitaries, and the state has been raging for almost 50 years, resulting in over 3.8 million internally displaced people and about 400,000 Colombian refugees in neighboring countries, many of them undocumented (UNHCR 2013a; JRS 2011). I describe this research site in more detail in Chapter 3.

I used four main methods in this research: content analysis of literature, interviews, content analysis of images, and demographic data analysis. Research was carried out in the U.S. and Panama from July 2012 to March 2013. All research was approved by University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board on June 29, 2012.

Content analysis of literature

From October 2012 through February 2013, I performed comprehensive searches of library databases, academic journals, and online search engines, collecting highly-cited and/or relevant literature on two key topics: refugee invisibility and images of refugees. In this chapter, I performed a conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) of words and phrases used by academics, organizations, and news media that related to refugee invisibility. I analyzed them into categories, as presented above. I also performed a second content analysis of words, phrases, and concepts in the works of key academics who have critiqued the representation of refugees in visual images and text. I analyzed these concepts into categories, which I present in Chapter 4 as characteristics of the "typical" refugee.

Interviews

Between July 2012 and February 2013, I performed two rounds of semi-structured and open-ended interviews, recorded by audio or pen-and-paper, each lasting approximately one hour. I found interviewees through purposive and snowball sampling. I chose these subjective methods in part because my intended sample size was so small, and in part because organizations and individuals that both work with invisible Colombian refugees and use images extensively online are limited. Because of the small sample size and highly-specific nature of this research, seven out of eight interviewees signed a document requesting me to use their true identities in this research; the other interviewee requested a pseudonym.

In July 2012, I traveled to Panama City to conduct interviews with three academics and representatives from humanitarian and legal aid organizations who have worked directly with Colombian refugees in Panama. During this first round of in-person interviews in Spanish, I asked interviewees a series of semi-structured questions intended to determine their perspectives on refugee invisibility, the political and humanitarian situation of indigenous refugees in Panama, and Colombian refugees' perspectives. I describe these three interviewees in more detail in Chapter 3.

I carried out a second round of interviews from November 2012 to February 2013 with five individuals associated with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) who have worked with images of Colombian refugees. During this second round of interviews in English, which I conducted either in person or by phone, I asked questions intended to reveal interviewees' views of refugee invisibility, their use of images of Colombian refugees, and their thoughts about their organization's creation and use of images. I describe these five interviewees in Chapter 5.

Content analysis of images

Between January and April 2013, I searched for all online images of Colombian refugees and displaced people from the Jesuit Refugee Service/USA (JRS/USA) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) main websites and from UNHCR's Flickr site. I analyzed these images for how they portrayed "typical" and "atypical" refugee characteristics, based on the characteristics of the typical refugee image I describe in Chapter 4 based on a content analysis of literature. I selected images that illustrated these concepts. I obtained permission to use all images from JRS/USA and UNHCR in April 2013.

Demographic data analysis

From July 2012 to February 2013, I collected census data on indigenous and refugee populations from the *Contraloría General de la República de Panamá* in Panama City as well as from their online database. I also collected population and other data online from the World Bank, the World Health Organization, Colombia's National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), the Consultation for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) in Colombia, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Statistical Online Population Database, and the Presidential Program for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (DIH) in Colombia. I analyzed the data in Excel spreadsheets and Microsoft Word for demographic trends relating to Colombian refugees and displaced persons.

Ethical Considerations and Broader Impacts

I did not speak directly with refugees, and no risks or negative outcomes are expected from this research, but any study related to conflict zones and refugees could have unexpected

negative consequences (Goodhand 2000). I would be remiss not to examine my own ethics while examining those of humanitarian organizations that work with refugees.

“Researchers,” writes Goodhand, “like aid agencies, need to be aware of how their interventions may...impact upon the coping strategies and safety of communities” (2000:12). Since I am researching refugee populations that live in precarious legal and social situations and often use invisibility as a “coping strategy,” I have taken measures to minimize risks by not revealing any refugee names or illegal practices that interviewees may have shared, unless they have previously been published. At their request, I also have maintained many of the true identities of the humanitarian workers I interviewed and obscured those who requested otherwise. I have attempted to represent their views as accurately as possible; though as Goodhand (2000) says, my choices “about which voices are heard and whose knowledge counts” might not be morally or politically neutral.

This study is not action, participatory, or activist research. I did not interview representatives from humanitarian organizations with the goal, for example, of influencing policy at those organizations. However, Hugman et al. (2011) assert that the principle of “do no harm” is not sufficient in refugee-related research; “there is a growing sense,” they write, “that research into human suffering ought only to be justifiable if it contributes to the ending of that suffering” (1272). With that in mind, in Chapter 5 I provide potentially-useful analyses of organizations’ current image use policies, and in Chapters 5 and 6 I offer concrete suggestions for future changes. These suggestions could positively influence organizational policy related to the representation of at-risk refugees.

Overview of Chapters

This thesis is composed of five additional chapters. In Chapter 2, I review literature on refugee “invisibility,” breaking it into three main categories: *legal*, *political*, and *social* invisibility. I begin by examining the legal definition of “refugee,” informed by Hathaway (1984, 1991) and Nyers (2006). Then I look at how this definition excludes and legally invisibilizes some refugees. Next, I investigate how refugees are made invisible politically, analyzing how the imagination of the territorial nation-state can politically invisibilize and problematize refugees (Malkki 1992, 1997; Nyers 2006; Appadurai 2003; Agamben 2005). I then discuss James Scott’s views of “legibility” (1985, 1986, 1998, 2010) as a form of political invisibility, investigating strategies and activities that allow people to evade state programs and statistics. Finally, I discuss social invisibility, focusing on what Polzer (2008) calls “categorical invisibility,” or the ways that social categories and discrimination obscure some aspects of refugee existence.

In Chapter 3, I use demographic data and interviews to zero in on a specific case of refugee invisibility among indigenous Colombian refugees living in Panama. After summarizing the history of the Colombian conflict, its geographical emphasis, and the refugee situation it has produced, I examine how indigenous refugees from Colombia are made legally, politically, and socially invisible in Panama, drawing from first-hand interviews with humanitarian and legal aid representatives.

In Chapter 4, I review literature on how visual images make refugees visible while at the same time rendering some aspects of their lives and issues invisible. First, using critiques by Sontag (1977, 2003) and Linfield (2010), I look at the ethical complexities related to photographs of suffering. Then, I discuss the power that humanitarian organizations have to

reveal or obscure people and issues through visual images (Foucault; Shapiro 1988; Jackall and Hirota 2000; Fassin 2012; Scarry 1999). At the end of the chapter, I give the results of a content analysis of academic literature to describe characteristics of the image of the “typical” refugee and how these characteristics can invisibilize refugees.

In Chapter 5, I examine how two international organizations, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), use images to represent Colombian refugees and how they negotiate issues of visibility and invisibility in their image use. I focus on how representatives and photographers from these organizations think about refugee invisibility and the ethics of image use. In the Discussion, I use literature previously discussed, including the characteristics of the typical refugee, to analyze JRS and UNHCR’s image use within the context of invisibility, and present concrete suggestions.

I conclude in Chapter 6 with some final thoughts on refugee invisibility and the representation, including additional suggestions for image use by humanitarian organizations. I then suggest paths for future research that might extend from this study.

CHAPTER 2

REFUGEE INVISIBILITY

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

(Ellison 1992 [1952])

We know of course there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard. (Roy 2004)

Invisibility is not an inherent property; one must wear a cloak, drink a potion, or suffer some accident or misfortune in order to be made invisible. The iconic, bandage-faced character in H.G. Wells' 1897 novel *The Invisible Man* – also the subject of a 1933 film – is a scientist who has taken a formula for invisibility but fails to discover its antidote. In J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, Harry and his friends regularly slip under an invisibility cloak to sneak around the castle at night. And ghosts, as we know from movies like "The Sixth Sense" (1999) and "Ghost" (1990), have been made into their present form by the murders or accidents that have left them with unfinished tasks in this world.

But ghosts, wizards, and mad scientists have not cornered the market on invisibility. As Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* reveals, real invisible people walk past us on the street every day. They are neither phantoms nor monsters, but living people born "of flesh and bone,"

made invisible only through the blindness of those who fail to see them (Ellison 1992:3).

Ellison's fictional protagonist is a young, nameless African-American man who eventually discovers his own invisibility in the insidious oppression that conceals the identity and voice of black people in early-20th-century America. Although this sort of real-world "invisibility" is not a cloak that can be put on or taken off with ease, it shares at least one attribute with magical invisibility: it is not an inborn quality, but is thrust upon people from the outside.

Wells' Invisible Man discovered a "scientific" formula for invisibility by studying the ways that light could be refracted and distorted around the human body, creating the illusion that nothing is there. Real-world invisibility arises from a similar illusion. Ellison writes:

Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything but me. (Ellison 1992:3)

Most forms of real-world invisibility arise from the use and abuse of categories as distorting "mirrors" that are used to simplify and universalize the legal, political, and social identity of people and groups (Polzer 2008). Any person who falls outside of clear-cut political categories, evades or hides from legal categorization, or whose identity is more complex than social categories allow him or her to be becomes invisible to state authorities, the international community, or even his or her own neighbors.

The consequences of invisibility can be harsh: some people may be denied membership and voice in a political community, be labeled as criminals or lowlives, or fail to qualify for humanitarian aid and public services. But invisibility can also be used as strategy. Like a ghost that moves things around or silently plots revenge on its killer, people who are made invisible

also have the agency to move things, influence politics, and dispute their own identities. By the end of *Invisible Man*, Ellison's protagonist has become a trickster of sorts who has adopted invisibility as strategy for survival, undermining and resisting the system of categories that has rendered him invisible (Szmanko 2008):

I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers. I learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it. (Ellison 1992:5)

In this chapter, I discuss how refugees are made invisible, the categories and agents that obscure them, and the ways in which they are obscured. For simplicity's sake, I divide refugee invisibility into three distinct types which are also intertwined: legal, political, and social invisibility. In each instance, I highlight the ways that refugees, much like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, can adopt and use invisibility as a strategy, and the potential consequences of doing so. This discussion provides a framework of refugee invisibility that is essential to understanding subsequent chapters.

What is a Refugee?

In order to understand what it means for a refugee to be invisible, it is important to know what a refugee is. To that end, in this section I discuss the international legal definition of "refugee" and its shortcomings and implications. I aim to show that the current definition is not an objective or universal description, but a politically and ideologically situated product of the period in which it was written.

Defining “Refugee:” A Brief History

“Refugees,” write Arboleda and Roy (1993:68), “are not a phenomenon exclusive to our era. Both individual refugees and identifiable groups have been generated by societal intolerance since the remotest of epochs.” However, prior to 1920, no written, internationally-accepted definition of “refugee” existed.

In the beginning of the 20th century, influxes of refugees to and from Europe and the United States were relatively small and immigration was largely unrestricted (Hathaway 1984). But after World War I, large displaced groups, economic distress, and the rise of nationalism resulted in a need for a narrower, international understanding of the refugee (Hathaway 1984). The League of Nations, the forerunner to the United Nations, was established in 1919, and created an official office for refugee protection by the early 1930s, which went through several draft definitions of the term "refugee" (Marshall 2011).

In 1942, the United Nations was formed, and in 1945, fifty countries signed on to its Charter (UN 2013a). In 1951, The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established for the protection of refugees (UNHCR 2011 convention). Diplomats met in Geneva, Switzerland to adopt the “1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees” and crafted an official definition of "refugee" as someone who,

owing to **well-founded fear of being persecuted** for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UN General Assembly 1951, emphasis added).

This definition was at first limited to protecting Europeans after World War II, but in 1967, the United Nations amended the 1951 Convention with a Protocol that expanded its scope to all parts of the world (UN General Assembly 1967). Since 1967, UNHCR has added internally displaced people, people living in refugee-like situations, and stateless persons to its protection roster. Today, the 1951 Convention has been adopted by 148 out of 195 nations and continues to be upheld and enforced by UNHCR and the international community (UNHCR 2011 convention). The Convention contains international guidelines for the protection of refugee rights, the scope of which can be limited or expanded by state governments (UN General Assembly 1951). In order to qualify for legal asylum (or refugee status) in most countries, forcibly displaced people must still meet the criteria in the Convention definition of "refugee."

It is important to recognize that the 1951 Convention definition is "highly politicized" and historically situated, originally having been designed to help specific groups of Europeans after World War II, especially those fleeing from communist regimes (Nessel 2009:635). Many of the basic rights that the Convention gives refugees stem from principles elaborated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was written in 1948 in response to the atrocities of World War II. In *Rethinking Refugees* (2006), Nyers states that the Convention definition is an offshoot of refugee definitions stemming from post-war, individualist ideals and is "a classic example of Western liberal individualism" (Nyers 2006:49).

A Closer Look at the 1951 Convention Definition

The main clause of the 1951 Convention definition of "refugee" contains three components: "well-founded," "fear," and "persecution." These components require additional

explanation, as they contribute not only to the legal identity of the refugee but also to the popular imagination of the “authentic” or “typical” refugee, which becomes important in later chapters.

One component of the definition that has been heavily debated is “persecution.” Scholars such as Von Sternberg (1998), Grahl-Madsen (1966), Crawford and Hyndman (1989), and Hathaway (1991) claim that it has not been properly defined, and as a result, governments can use it to exclude certain categories of people. For example, since persecution “for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” often takes place in the public sphere, many women who work and socialize in the private sphere can claim fewer ‘legitimate’ grounds for being persecuted (Nyers 2006).

Second, Nyers (2006) argues that the inclusion criterion of “fear” in the 1951 definition divides the refugee into two parts: his or her reasoning capacity (“well-founded”) and emotional capacity (“fear”). Characterizing refugees as essentially emotionally-motivated contributes to a popular imagination that refugees are stuck in a helpless webs of fear and vulnerability (Nyers 2006). Fear is used to justify both legal claims and whether or not people qualify for international protection (Nyers 2006).

The third component of the 1951 definition is “well-founded.” What is defined as a “well-founded” reason for fear is not regulated internationally; therefore, its validation is often highly dependent on the political preferences of the applicant’s host country (UNHCR 2011 handbook). For example, refugees applying for asylum may be asked to justify their fear through remembered accounts of events. But Cameron (2010:510) argues that gaps or inconsistencies are common in the memories of traumatized asylum-seekers; as a result, the reasons behind an applicant’s fear can be legitimized or denied in court for trivial reasons that mask underlying biases: “an accused’s liberty,” she writes, “may depend on whether the car was red or blue.”

Legal Invisibility

Because of the subjective, political nature of the 1951 definition, many people who flee their countries of origin are excluded from the legal asylum process and are thereby made legally invisible as refugees.

First of all, the 1951 Convention's focus on individual persecution does not adequately address large-scale international movements of groups, including people who have fled from mass violence, intimidation, and threats (Arboleda and Hoy 1993). The definition also technically excludes persecution by unofficial, non-state groups, such as armed guerilla and rebel groups, despite the high occurrence of such armed groups globally since 1951 (Korovkin 2008).

People who flee from economic hardship also cannot be labeled as refugees under the current definition (Nyers 2006). But the difference between an economic migrant and a refugee is not always clear-cut; in some cases, it is difficult to determine a person's primary motivation for leaving his or her home country (Widgren and Martin 2002). For example, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2008) states that Palestinian and Sahrawi refugees who migrated to Libya for educational and economic opportunities have been "de-classified" as refugees because of their dual status as both legal migrants and refugees (274). The implication is that refugees who use their agency to improve their conditions, or who emphasize positive reasons for leaving their home country in spite of persecution, cannot qualify for the rights and protections afforded refugees (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2012). Environmental refugees, who are displaced by drought, flooding, or other environmental changes, are also excluded from consideration (Myers 2002).

Several regions of the world have recognized these problems with the 1951 Convention definition and have established regional instruments that expand and modernize the definition of "refugee." For example, the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention in Africa and the common asylum

system in the European Union both broaden the definition to include groups who have been displaced by generalized violence (UNHCR 2011 convention). The 1984 Cartagena Declaration of Latin America includes people who have fled because their “lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances seriously disturbing public order” (UNHCR 2011 convention; Silva 2012). But such attempts, however noble, continue to fall short. Since these regional instruments were created, many countries have failed to sign on to them or have backed out of previous commitments (UNHCR 2013f). And since the 1970s, many nations have increasingly seen refugees as a threat to security and stability (Arboleda and Hoy 1993). As a result, countries on all continents have tightened security at their borders and developed ways of offering refugees only temporary protection – such as refugee camps – rather than legal refugee status (Gibney 2000).

Consequences of Legal Invisibility

Legal invisibility can make a refugee’s life in a new country difficult and risky. In many cases, refugees who do not apply for asylum within a certain amount of time are not eligible for protection (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2012). But refugees who are considered illegal immigrants are not given the same comprehensive rights given to refugees under the 1951 Convention (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2012). Therefore, they can be deported at any time or detained like common criminals, especially if they apply for asylum but are rejected (JRS 2011). As a result, many hide their true identities and struggle to meet basic needs (Gottwald 2004; Leutert 2012).

Clearly, being legally identified as a refugee is not as simple (or as complicated) as proving a “well-founded fear of persecution.” The elephant in the room, perhaps, is the question

of why UNHCR and the international community continue to uphold an outdated definition of “refugee.” There is no easy answer to this question, though many have tried to address it (Nyers 2006; Von Sternberg 1998; Hyndman 1987, 2000; Marshall 2011; Arboleda and Hoy 1993). Even legal definitions that seem objective are politically and historically situated; refugee status is highly dependent upon the political stance of states and the international community.

Political Invisibility

Nation-states, Citizenship, and Refugees

This brings us to political invisibility. The international legal definition of “refugee” is symptomatic of a more general trend of restrictive national policies that exclude refugees from entering countries or securing legal status. The United States, for example, has literally built a fence on the U.S.-Mexico border that keeps out not only economic migrants, but also the refugees among them (Brown 2010). Such restrictions and exclusions can result in detention, deportation, or even more serious human rights abuses against refugees (JRS 2011).

Nyers (2006), Malkki (1992, 1997), and Appadurai (2003), among others, claim that the basic, political root of these restrictions is the assumption that the territorial nation-state and its citizen-noncitizen dichotomy are “normal,” while refugees are “aberrant” and a threat to national security. The image of refugees as aberrant, “uprooted,” and out-of-place, Malkki (1992) argues, comes from a collective imagination of a territorially-based national sovereignty in which citizens of national cultures are tied to fixed territorial spaces. Nyers (2006) claims that this collective imagination causes states and international instruments to fear and exclude refugees by casting them as problems, whether as threats to national security, burdens on resources, or humanitarian crises (Nyers 2006; Harrell-Bond 2007).

Appadurai (2003) and Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argue that this model of the territorial nation-state is imaginary and outdated; in today's world, decisions are made and people influenced by interconnected, non-territorial, transnational communities, such as international corporations. Other scholars, including Benhabib (2004) and Delaney (2005), counter that, as refugees experience every day, territorial borders are nevertheless strictly and often violently enforced, resulting in suffering and tangible human rights abuses. Because of these considerations, most scholars agree that although the idea of the territorial nation-state is imaginary and constructed, it nevertheless has real consequences for those who are excluded from enjoying its rights and privileges.

Because refugees are seen as aberrant problems or threats, some states go so far as to systematically deny the existence of refugees (Nyers 2006). For example, Nessel (2009) gives numerous examples of "interception activities" by the European Union and the United States, in which large-scale migrations of people arriving by boat from Africa and Haiti are regularly intercepted before reaching shore and detained and deported without due process (665). Because these policies are "insulated from either public comment or parliamentary control," the refugees that they make invisible are never accounted for (Nessel 2009:665).

Refugees who do successfully cross borders are excluded in other ways, especially by being prevented from attaining refugee status by difficult, lengthy bureaucratic procedures (Gottwald 2004; JRS 2011). For example, many states, such as South Africa and Panama, have a history of denying most asylum claims and/or automatically deporting refugees (Gottwald 2004; Polzer 2008). Because refugees in these countries have learned that legal routes will likely result in detention or deportation, many choose to live illegally and invisibly in cities or remote areas,

hiding or integrating into communities. They live “in constant fear of being returned,” detained, or attacked by those who pursue them (Gottwald 2004:517).

Finally, Agamben (2005) argues that because the peaceful, secure, territorial nation-state is considered “normal,” governments treat even refugees with legal status as “exceptional” cases. For refugees under a condition of asylum, protection is only meant to be temporary. As a result, they are governed under a “state of exception” that allows for lax or provisional human rights protections, such as refugee camps. But non-citizens under temporary protection regimes are excluded from voting or otherwise participating in national political communities that influence policy, and therefore lack partial ability to determine their own lives and futures (Agamben 2005; Nyers 2006). Benhabib (2004) argues that the exception of refugees from these political communities is a violation of their human rights, however temporary.

Of course, in today’s world, political communities are complicated. It is not clear that “citizen” is the only category for participation or that it even guarantees participation. For example, Appadurai (2003) describes ways in which transnational organizations and communities play at least as strong a role in determining economic and political outcomes as the governments of nation-states. As I describe later, refugees may still be able to find indirect ways of making their voices heard.

Legibility

Another way that nation-states protect their national integrity is by keeping track of all of their members and non-members. In *Seeing Like a State* (1998:4), James Scott calls this “administrative ordering of nature and society” “legibility.” States make people “legible” through surveys, censuses, language and name standardization, maps, and other forms of simplification.

“In each case,” writes Scott, “officials took exceptionally complex, illegible, and local social practices ... and created a standard grid whereby it could be centrally recorded and monitored”

(2). International organizations such as UNHCR also use censuses and legible statistics on refugees to target at-risk populations, justify expenditures, strategize distribution of aid, and predict future needs (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2008; Uehling 2004).

“The result of any census, one would think,” writes Polzer (2008), “is the very opposite of invisibility, since it records every individual living within a specified geographical space.” But legible forms of measurement often do not accurately record the existence or identity of some refugees. Statistics can place refugees in mistaken categories, such as “migrant,” or in the case of well-integrated refugees, can lump them into local households and communities (Polzer 2008). Numbers can also easily be manipulated; for example, a state might report that the numbers of asylum applications have fallen, when actually potential applicants have been bureaucratically shifted into other categories (Polzer and Hammond 2008).

Furthermore, in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott (2010) describes ways that the “Zomians” of Southeast Asia have periodically escaped from state oppression by using “illegible” activities as strategies. Many refugees deliberately or unintentionally engage in these illegible activities, evading censuses out of fear, participating in alternative activities that are difficult to measure, or living in remote areas that are not easily accessed (Gottwald 2004). As a result of these activities, their existence and identities are made partially or completely invisible to state and international institutions.

The first of these illegible activities, Scott says, is *frequent mobility*. By constantly shifting their position and structure, refugees can evade the eye of the state for many years. A second strategy is to *diaggregate* and break up into *small groups*; greater disaggregation means a

lesser likelihood of everyone being found. A third strategy is to flee to *remote*, inaccessible mountain, marsh, jungle, or desert regions (Scott 2010). And a fourth, very common strategy is *integration* (Scott 2010). Refugees who appear to have integrated into the households of family members, for example, are often overlooked by censuses or other statistics (Polzer 2008).

Fifth, because states rely on legible, sedentary agriculture to ensure population and resource stability, *alternative subsistence methods* such as foraging, hunting, swidden agriculture, and pastoralism are often overlooked. Finally, Scott argues that maps, which now make use of aerial satellite imagery, have been one of the main methods states use to make populations legible. People can evade these simplified versions of geography by, for instance, *migrating* regularly between two or more territories, *claiming membership in more than one geographical space*, or using land in alternative ways (Scott 1998, 2010; Runk 2009).

Sometimes, Scott argues, refugees deliberately employ these strategies and others as a form of resistance against state and international institutions (Scott 2010, 1986). Refugees and others in Southeast Asia also use “ordinary weapons” of resistance like “footdragging, dissimulation, false-compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage” that undermine policies imposed by state or local authorities (Scott 1986:6). Although refugees may not have a direct voice or political membership, they can use these “invisible” strategies to change some of the policies that affect their lives by rendering them unworkable.

Consequences of Political Invisibility

Being invisible to state governments and international institutions can nevertheless be problematic for many refugees. For example, strategic invisibility does not necessarily protect refugees against forced return or persecution by armed groups; in fact, people who live in remote

areas outside the reach of the state often share this territory with armed groups, putting them at increased risk of persecution (Gottwald 2004). Some invisible refugees, especially those in urban communities, also spend their days in fear of being discovered and returned to their home countries, and therefore do not seek legal, economic, and educational opportunities that would improve their lives (Gottwald 2004). Invisible refugees who live in remote areas or move frequently are often outside of the reach of basic services. As a result, they may suffer from increased health, nutritional, and educational deficiencies (PAHO 2008). Furthermore, invisible refugees may suffer from disproportionate levels of poverty in comparison to citizens and registered refugees (PAHO 2008). Finally, refugees that lack legal documentation as a result of political invisibility cannot fully exercise their “political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights,” including access to education and regular employment (Gottwald 2004:536).

Social Invisibility

Despite the clear humanitarian needs of some invisible refugee populations, the humanitarian approach has been critiqued extensively. Humanitarian organizations and the media, argue Nyers (2006) and Malkki (1992, 1997), have placed refugees within a "discourse of emergency" that frames refugees as humanitarian problems that require special, outside interventions. The result, says Malkki, is a popular imagination of the “typical” refugee as someone who is suffering, fearful, and in dire need of assistance (Malkki 1992:32). This imagination can victimize, universalize, and dehistoricize refugees, removing or distorting their voice and turning them into “mute victims” rather than “historical actors” (Malkki 1997:378). “It is a sad story,” writes Harrell-Bond, “to acknowledge that today the term ‘refugee’ signals a burden, a victim, and a threat” (295).

Categorical Invisibility

This negative image of the typical refugee is rooted in a type of invisibility that Polzer (2008) terms “categorical invisibility.” “The process of categorizing people into groups, by emphasizing certain characteristics over others and drawing boundaries,” writes Polzer, “inevitably makes particular people ‘invisible’” (2008:477). People who are made invisible through social categories and stereotypes are homogenized and bundled into labels. These categories are often confirmed or validated through the creation of “knowledge” or data that knowingly or unwittingly supports them. For example, the category “typical refugee” depends on an extensive data set that scientifically and statistically supports the suffering, poverty, and psychological vulnerability of refugees, validating humanitarian intervention (Malkki 1997).

In many parts of the world, people who are categorized as “refugees” may also suffer from severe discrimination and xenophobia, whether as frightened, helpless victims who lack the ability to help themselves, or as dangerous criminals or prostitutes, subject to severe distrust and xenophobia in their host communities (Andrews 2003:3; Nyers 2006; Gottwald 2004). Sadly, many people who are already discriminated against because of their race, class, or ethnicity, such as Haitians coming to the U.S., tend to be stereotyped more quickly as invaders or opportunistic migrants (Andrews 2003; Nessel 2009). These refugees are often overlooked amongst crowds of migrants and their asylum claims are denied in blocks (Nessel 2009).

Refugees who suffer from discrimination are also disproportionately categorized according to emotional attributes, such as fear (Nyers 2006). The perception of refugees as emotional beings can place undue emphasis on the body, turning them into animalistic or even monstrous presences in the eyes of others (Anderson 2000; Nyers 2006). For example, female, black, and indigenous people are often labeled as physical beings; therefore they may be seen as

having “base drives” and unpredictable, aggressive tendencies, sometimes literally being situated in separate “wild” spaces such as ghettos, reservations, or “primitive” jungle villages (Anderson 1995:302; Kusch 2010; Mills 1998). Since emotional states are often set in a binary opposition to reason, some refugees are also seen as ignorant and incapable of rational planning, making them invisible as rational actors (Malkki 1992).

W.E.B. Du Bois writes in *Dusk of Dawn* that stereotyped people can sometimes come to experience *themselves* as voiceless, reasonless victims, passed over with no more than an “ethnographic gaze:” “It gradually penetrates the minds of prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world” (Szmanko 2008:16). Similarly, refugees’ own accounts of themselves and their historical circumstances are often disregarded as “unreliable” and “prone to exaggeration,” Malkki says; instead, refugees must be “cared for and understood obliquely” through statistics and other more “objective” accounts (Malkki 1997:384; Zetter 1991).

Social Invisibility as a Strategy

However, refugees always have the agency to accept or deny the categories thrust upon them (Szmanko 2008). They can use different types of invisibility for their own purposes; for example, refugees integrated into cities can hide their refugee status to xenophobic neighbors and employers, while still benefitting from international protection and assistance (Andrews 2003; Polzer 2008; Zetter 1991). Polzer (2008) says that some Mozambican refugees fraudulently acquired ‘legal’ citizenship in South Africa because they knew that deportation of refugees was common. When the opportunity finally came to receive valid legal protection as refugees, most

of them chose not to accept it in order to keep their jobs, while still claiming local, social visibility as “former Mozambican refugees” (Polzer 2008).

In *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), Scott describes a Malaysian man named Razak, the poorest man in the village whose dishonest ways and decrepit household were the source of constant gossip. Even at his daughter’s funeral, he was treated like an invisible man: “the men who left shuffled around him as if he were a piece of furniture” (Scott 1985:3-4). But Razak knew he was invisible and took advantage of it; by displaying himself as a clown, he was able to trick people into giving him the essential resources that kept him alive. By the end of *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s protagonist also accepts his own invisibility. Literally living “underground” in a basement, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* strings the ceiling and walls with 1,369 light bulbs, the power for which he illegally saps from Monopolated Light and Power in New York (Ellison 1992).

The Consequences of Social Invisibility

However, people who are discriminated against often face problems with integration and are therefore at increased risk of falling into deep poverty or suffering human rights abuses (Andrews 2003). Another potential danger of self-imposed social invisibility is that people who self-define according to certain categories may be denied access to services that they sorely need. For example, in Guinea, West Africa, Andrews (2003) writes, local factors made it preferable for integrated refugees to self-identify as “returnees” rather than “refugees,” who were known to live in nearby refugee camps – but humanitarian agencies were not mandated to provide services to “returnees.”

Conclusion

Calling a person a “refugee” is a complex process wrapped up in numerous legal, political, and social categories, and invisibility, as I have tried to show, involves complex and overlapping categories that are not always mutually exclusive. In the next chapter, I present Panama as a specific case of refugee invisibility, focusing on indigenous Colombian refugees who have long remained under-the-radar in eastern Panama. The purpose of this detail on Colombia and Panama is not only to provide a concrete example of refugee invisibility, but also to set the stage for Chapter 5, which discusses how different forms of refugee “invisibility” inform and change how humanitarian organizations visually represent Colombian refugees.

CHAPTER 3

THE INVISIBILITY OF INDIGENOUS COLOMBIAN REFUGEES IN PANAMA

When arriving, they simply integrate. The communities welcome them, they are organized, and – well – it's 'one Indian more.' (Ana Alfaro, Jesuit Refugee Service)

The displacement of civilians caused by the conflict in Colombia has been called “the most persistent humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere” (JRS 2011). But the Colombian crisis, which has produced over 4 million refugees and displaced people to date, is largely hidden from view (UNHCR 2013d; UNHCR 2013a). The Colombian government “would like to make believe to the world that everything’s fine in Colombia,” said Boris Heger, a photojournalist with whom I spoke. “Uribe’s government worked very hard on that and pretty much succeeded. People still suffer from the idea that everything’s better in Colombia.” But as I was writing this thesis in the month of January 2013, over 900 Afro-descendent¹ and indigenous Wounaan people were violently displaced inside Chocó Department in Colombia, which shares a border with Panama, and even more probably fled unnoticed to Panama (Terra 2013; El Tiempo 2013).

Colombian refugees like these do not fit into the popular imagination of the “typical” refugee. They do not live in camps or rely on food drops, they often arrive little by little, and they look the same as their neighbors; therefore, they remain largely unnoticed by the international community. Their difficulties are worsened by unwelcoming refugee policies in the

¹ “Afro-descendiente” of Afro-descendent is the official term used in the Colombian and Panamanian census to refer to people of African descent. The term is not derogatory. The term “indígena” or indigenous is used in favor of “indio” or Indian, which is generally considered derogatory.

countries surrounding Colombia. Because these countries prioritize national security and economic development, neighboring countries Panama, Venezuela, and Ecuador have instituted restrictive asylum procedures and policies that threaten the rights of refugees (Gottwald 2004; Sánchez Saavedra 2007; Korovkin 2008). As a result, many Colombian refugees have been made “invisible” to the state, international organizations, the public, and even to their own neighbors, and have had to “identify alternative mechanisms to ensure admission to neighboring countries’ territories and obtain some sort of protection” (Gottwald 2004:533, emphasis added).

In this chapter, I illustrate how indigenous Colombian refugees in Panama are made invisible legally, politically, and socially. I begin by discussing the Colombian conflict in general. Then, I present the results of interviews with humanitarian workers and academics in Panama who spoke to me about the “invisibility” of indigenous Colombian refugees. I also identify some of the “alternative mechanisms” or strategies that indigenous refugees use, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to remain “invisible.”

Interviews

I interviewed two current and former representatives of the international humanitarian organization Jesuit Refugee Service and one representative from a legal aid organization in Panama. Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is a non-profit, religious organization that provides services to refugees and displaced people in over 50 countries, including Panama. A more detailed description of JRS’s work appears in Chapter 5 (page 71). The interviewees, two of whom requested to maintain their real identities, are as follows:

Kevin Sánchez Saavedra, currently Professor of Anthropology at the University of Panama and an Anthropological Consultant, worked with Jesuit Refugee Service in Panama from

2005 to 2009. He has worked closely with indigenous and Afro-descendent refugee communities and has published academic papers on his work. *Ana Alfaro* is the Director of Jesuit Refugee Service in Panama. She has worked in close collaboration with indigenous Emberá refugees in Panama City and in the Darién communities of Jacqué and Puerto Piña. I also spoke to a lawyer who has worked with indigenous refugees in Panama. Because of confidentiality issues, he did not consent to use his real name. I will refer to him as *Arturo Díaz*.

History and Geography of the Colombian Conflict and Forced Displacement

The conflict in Colombia began in 1964 when two political parties, the liberals and the communists, converted into the peasant guerrilla groups the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) (Gottwald 2004). Counter-insurgency retaliation by the Colombian state resulted in civil war. In the 1980s, paramilitary forces emerged to protect land owners and drug barons from guerilla groups, partly armed and organized by the Colombian military and funded by the United States (Laverde and Tapia 2009). Although former President Álvaro Uribe's 2002-2010 administration boasted that it had disbanded paramilitary groups in 2006, "neo-paramilitary" groups quickly re-formed and have shifted to criminal activities such as kidnapping, drug trafficking, massacres, extortion, and other crimes (Beittel 2012). Meanwhile, despite President Santos's current attempts at peace negotiations with the FARC, frequent clashes between the FARC and ELN, neo-paramilitaries, and the Colombian armed forces continue to occur (Laverde and Tapia 2009; Beittel 2012).

Since the 1990s, the war in Colombia has become a dispersed struggle focused on gaining and defending territory, in part to support the illegal drug trade that funds armed groups (Gottwald 2004). This territorial focus has resulted in the widespread intimidation, forced

displacement, forced cooperation, and assassination of civilians who live in contested territories (Gottwald 2004; Laverde and Tapia 2009). Armed groups prefer to occupy remote, rural territories that are outside the reach of the state; as a result, they often clash with civilian communities in those areas (Gottwald 2004). By the mid-2000s, up to 75% of Colombian territory was “controlled or contested” by insurgents or paramilitaries (Gottwald 2004:525). As a consequence, over 4 million civilians have been displaced, including almost half a million refugees (JRS 2011; UNHCR 2013d; UNHCR 2013a). These numbers do not include the many invisible refugees who have not been counted.

Geography of the Conflict

Colombia shares its borders with five countries: Panama to the north, Ecuador and Peru to the south, and Venezuela and Brazil to the east, as Figure 3.1 shows. Because border regions are mostly remote jungle, mountain, and desert areas, they have been targeted for drug cultivation and arms trafficking, resulting in large displacements near the border (Gottwald 2004). The majority of cross-border displacement has been in relatively populated areas near Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama.

A series of maps published by the Presidential Program of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (2011) in Colombia show the geographical progress of the conflict from 1998 to 2011.² The maps reveal that the most intense actions in the late 1990s took place near the Venezuela border, in Antioquia in west-central Colombia, and in Putumayo on the Ecuador border. In the early 2000s, activity began to spread toward the Panama border and to the Pacific department of Nariño on the Ecuador border, and intensified near Venezuela. From 2007

² Because of space considerations I do not include all of these maps here, but they can be found online (in Spanish): <http://www.derechoshumanos.gov.co/Observatorio/Paginas/GeografiaConfrontacion.aspx>.

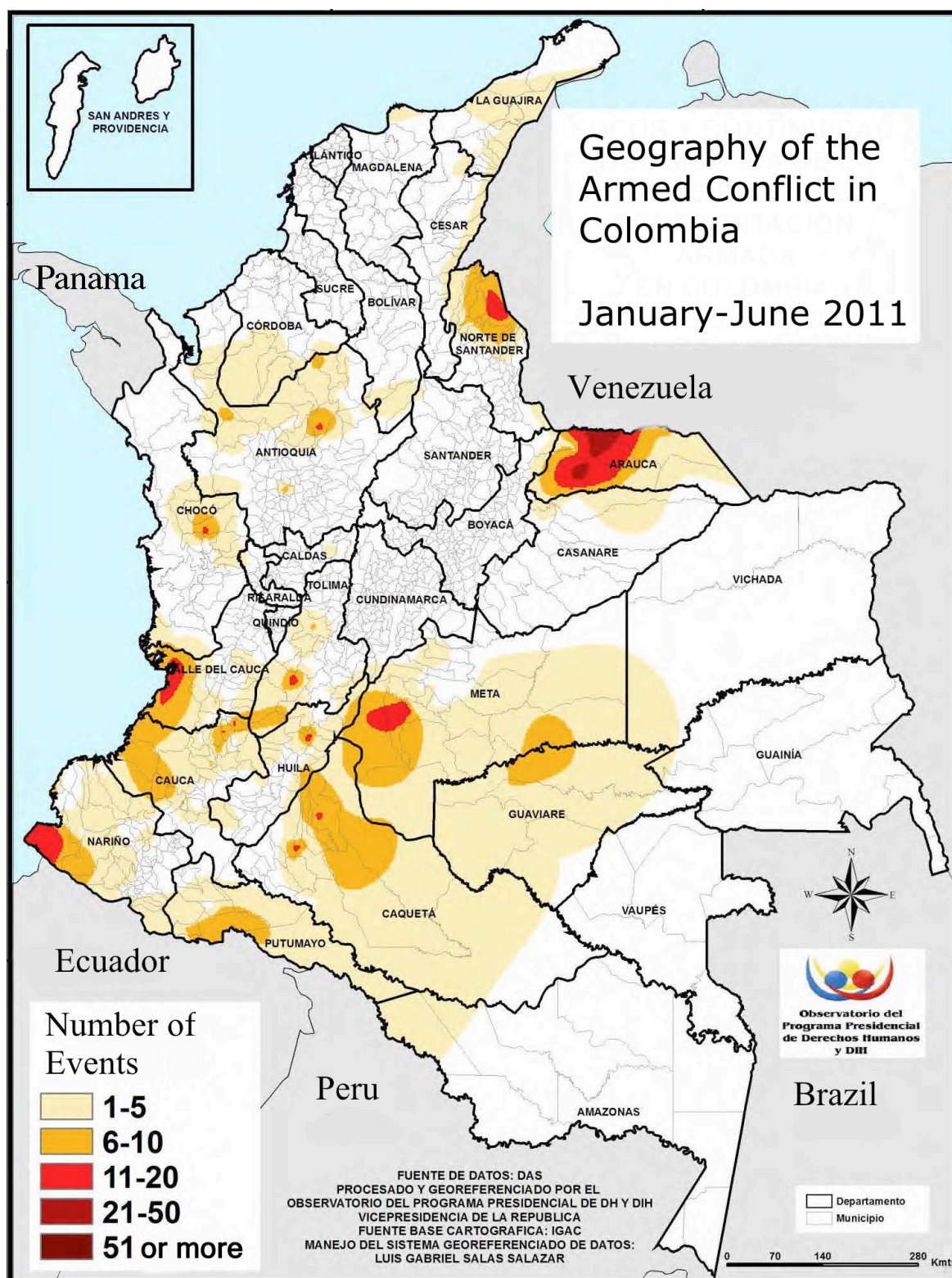


Figure 3.1: Geography of armed confrontations in Colombia, January-June 2011

Source: Adapted from Presidential Program of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law 2011

to 2011, actions in all regions diminished. But Figure 3.1 illustrates that in 2011, confrontations intensified in Nariño, along the Pacific coast, and on the Venezuela border. Smaller but still significant conflicts continue to occur in Chocó Department on the Panamanian border.

The Humanitarian and Political Situation

Several Colombian border regions are home to a higher-than-average proportion of indigenous and Afro-descendent residents, as Table 3.1 shows (DANE 2007). These rural areas have long been characterized by economic and social inequality and are less integrated with the economic and infrastructural system of the rest of the country (Laverde and Tapia 2009). Unfortunately, areas with poor infrastructure and scant state attention are also ideal environments for armed groups and illicit drug cultivation (Laverde and Tapia 2009). As a result, the armed conflict disproportionately affects Afro-descendent and indigenous people (PPDH 2012). As Table 3.1 illustrates, nearly one-third of all people internally displaced in Colombia in 2009 originated from border departments with a higher-than-average proportion of indigenous and Afro-descendent residents. Many Afro-descendent and indigenous refugees arrive in rural border communities and urban barrios in neighboring countries that are already poor, straining their resources (Silva 2012). High levels of discrimination and xenophobia against Colombians prevent many refugees and displaced people from getting and keeping jobs or fully integrating into these communities (JRS 2011; Silva 2012).

According to Gottwald (2004), neighboring states Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama have sought to invisibilize the impact of the Colombian conflict on their communities by systematically denying refugee “spill-over” from Colombia and putting in place informal

Table 3.1: Colombia indigenous and Afro-descendent population, 2005 vs. Internal displacements from Colombian border departments, 2008 and 2009

Department/ Location	% Indigenous	% Afro- descendent	2008 Displacements	%	2009 Displacements	%
<i>Colombia, total</i>	3.43	10.62	293,523	100	174,624	100
<i>Venezuela border:</i>						
Arauca	2.24	4.05	10,375	3.53	5,188	2.97
Cesar	5.15	12.12	8,360	2.85	2,848	1.63
La Guajira	44.94	14.82	4,261	1.45	3,247	1.86
Norte de Santander	0.61	1.85	7,899	2.69	4,400	2.52
TOTAL			30,895	10.53	15,683	8.98
<i>Panama border:</i>						
Chocó	12.67	82.12	9,616	3.28	6,023	3.45
<i>Ecuador border:</i>						
Nariño	10.79	18.8	33,211	11.31	26,568	15.21
Putumayo	20.94	5.47	13,107	4.47	6,955	3.98
TOTAL			46,318	15.78	33,523	19.2
<i>Border departments, 13.91 avg.</i>		<i>19.89 avg.</i>	86,829	29.58	55,229	31.63
<i>Other, near borders:</i>						
Antioquia	0.53	10.88	30,405	10.36	24,353	13.95
Córdoba	10.39	13.21	13,847	4.72	8,361	4.79
Cauca	21.55	22.2	20,319	6.92	13,190	7.55

Sources: DANE 2005; Programa Presidencial Para la Protección y Vigilancia de los Derechos Humanos y el Derecho Internacional Humanitario (DIH) 2013.

Note: I included 2008 and 2009 because of the difficulty of finding reliable and complete data for more recent years.

“deterrent measures” such as increased military presence, illegal deportation, and non-admission policies (Gottwald 2004). But despite these countries' denial, Table 3.2 shows that nearly 10% of the more than 4 million people displaced by the armed conflict are living as refugees outside of Colombia, about 80% of these in Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela (UNHCR 2013). These figures do not include the many refugees who trickle into neighboring countries unseen.

Table 3.2: Total cumulative people displaced by Colombian conflict, including registered refugees and people in a refugee-like situation

Country/type of displacement	2009	2011
Colombian refugees, Ecuador	115,745	122,587
Colombian refugees, Panama	15,299	15,598
Colombian refugees, Venezuela	201,467	201,941
Colombian refugees, Other	58,193	55,823
Colombian refugees, TOTAL:	395,495	395,949
Internally displaced Colombians	3,672,054	3,888,309
Colombian displaced, TOTAL:	4,067,549	4,284,258

Sources: UNHCR Statistical Online Population Database, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Data extracted: 2/13/2013

Indigenous Colombian Refugees in Panama: A Case Study of Invisibility

In order to illustrate more clearly how the Colombian conflict has resulted in the legal, political, and social invisibility of refugees, I turn now to a specific case of indigenous Colombian refugees in the neighboring state of Panama.

Indigenous Peoples in Darién Province, Panama: Background

The region of eastern Panama that shares its border with Colombia, Darién Province, is part of a Darién/Chocó biogeographic region characterized by lowland tropical moist forest with rich cultural and biodiversity (Runk et al. 2007). Aside from rivers, no transportation infrastructure connects it to the neighboring Chocó Department in Colombia; the Pan-American Highway stops at the "Darién Gap," a 159-kilometer area of rainforest between Panama and Colombia. A map of the region appears in Figure 3.2 (Laverde and Tapia 2009).



Figure 3.2: Geography of the Panama-Colombia border region
 Source: Sico, Jillian M. 2013 Geography of the Panama-Colombia Border Region.

Indigenous people represent 12.26% of the total population in Panama and 3.43% of the population in Colombia (Contraloría 2010; DANE 2005). Table 3.3 shows that these percentages are significantly higher in Colombian and Panamanian border departments: in Darién Province, indigenous people represent 32.43%, or about one-third, of the population, and in Chocó Department in Colombia, they represent almost four times the national average at 12.67%. The indigenous groups with the strongest presence on both sides of the Colombia-Panama border are the Emberá, Wounaan, and Kuna (Contraloría 2010).

Table 3.3: Indigenous population in Darién, Panama and Chocó, Colombia vs. Total population of Panama and Colombia, 2010 Panama and 2005 Colombia censuses

Province or Department	Total Population	Indigenous Population	%
Darién, Panama	48,378	15,693	32.43
TOTAL, Panama	3,405,813	417,559	12.26
Chocó, Colombia	388,476	44,127	12.67
TOTAL, Colombia	41,468,384	1,392,623	3.43

Sources: Contraloría General 2010; DANE 2005

For centuries, these indigenous groups have migrated freely by boat and foot between what are now Panama and Colombia (Runk 2011). However, development projects in the 1960s resulted in broad changes to indigenous traditional organization and economic strategies (Herlihy 2006; Runk et al 2007). Indigenous groups became more sedentary and were organized into weak traditional leadership bodies called *congresos* within a system of communally-owned, government-protected reservations called *comarcas* (Herlihy 2006; Runk et al 2007). Most Emberá, Wounaan, and Kuna now live on *comarcas* in Panama and *resguardos* (reservations) in Colombia or in collectively-owned territories, some of which are now being given collective land titles (Programa 2003; Runk 2012; CEPAL 2005). However, until recently, many still traveled frequently between Colombia and Panama.

Because Chocó Department in Colombia is, like Darién, a “jungle zone that is difficult to control and access,” “it has become a zone of refuge and training for illegal armed groups and for illicit crops,” as well as for arms and drug running (PPDH 2005; Runk et al 2007). Since the late 1990s, indigenous people from Colombia have been forced across the border due to threats, massacres, kidnappings, and other intimidation tactics related to territorial disputes (Laverde and

Tapia 2009). Furthermore, poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and infectious diseases already disproportionately affect Wounaan, Emberá, and Kuna populations in both Colombia and Panama (PAHO 2008). As a result of all of these factors, indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable to humanitarian and other problems related to displacement from the Colombian conflict (Laverde and Tapia 2009). Because indigenous peoples, especially in remote parts of Darién Province and in Panama City, are also more likely than other groups to experience discrimination and engage in non-legible activities, they are also more likely to become "invisibilized" as refugees.

Legal Invisibility

As Table 3.4 below shows, as of January 2012, UNHCR recognized 16,806 Colombian people living as refugees in Panama (UNHCR 2013d). These numbers may seem small in comparison with the number of internally displaced people in Colombia and the hundreds of thousands of refugees in Ecuador and Venezuela (see Table 3.2, page 38). But almost 17,000 refugees, in addition to those who have not been counted, is no small matter in a country of 3.4 million, especially since the majority are concentrated in the sparsely-populated border province of Darién and in Panama City (Contraloría 2010).

Table 3.4: Colombian refugees and asylum seekers in Panama

Type	2005	2008	2009	2011
Refugees	1,730	15,303	15,299	15,598
Asylum Seekers	12	176	187	1,208
Other	10,265	0	0	0
TOTAL:	12,007	15,479	15,486	16,806

Sources: UNHCR 2005; UNHCR 2013a

Since 1998, the legal asylum process in Panama has been extremely restrictive (Gottwald 2004). At first, in an attempt to invisibilize the refugee problem, Panama's unofficial policy was to deport refugees from Colombia immediately, declaring them "irregular migrants" (Gottwald 2004:530). Later, said Alfaro of Jesuit Refugee Service, the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR) was established to process asylum claims. However, Alfaro said that the office has high turnover, is understaffed and backlogged, and has little knowledge of refugee rights. "Asylum is a very slow process," she said. "This country is in development – the buildings, the grand projects, the economic situation. A refugee is not of interest."

Panama's "broken" asylum system only grants refugee status to an average of 2-3% of applicants each year, effectively invisibilizing the rest (JRS 2011). Panama signed on to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol in 1977, but it has not accepted the wider definition of "refugee" in the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, which includes people who have fled collectively from "generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights, or other circumstances seriously disturbing public order" (Silva 2012). Therefore, Alfaro said, refugees have to present documented proof of individual persecution, which can include physical evidence such as medical records or newspapers. As a result, some families have been divided when one family member receives asylum and another lacks the evidence to prove his or her persecution, said Alfaro. Díaz pointed out that since many indigenous refugees lack even basic birth certificates, let alone documentation of persecution, they are basically ineligible to apply for refugee status or naturalization. This, he claimed, constitutes a form of discrimination.

Panama's individualized process of asylum was not designed to deal with mass influxes of refugees. Therefore, when large groups of Colombians began arriving in Panama, the state had

to come up with a protection plan in compliance with international humanitarian standards. Instead of reforming its restrictive asylum procedures, in 2004 the government developed a solution in collaboration with UNHCR called “Temporary Humanitarian Protection” (THP). This “figure sui generis” in international refugee protection allows refugees who arrive in large groups to remain in a single town until it is safe for them to return to Colombia (Laverde and Tapia 2009:148; Gottwald 2004; UNHCR 2010). While THP may seem like a valid solution, as practiced it does not give refugees adequate protection. People under THP are not allowed to leave town unless granted special permission, even though health care and education options are severely limited. THP also prevents people from working, forcing them to be dependent on aid from UNHCR and humanitarian organizations (JRS 2011). The result is a humanitarian problem that Kevin Sánchez Saavedra argues violates international human rights (Sánchez Saavedra 2007; JRS 2011; Gottwald 2004).

While waiting to be repatriated, some people under THP, said Sánchez Saavedra, have repatriated themselves “*por cansancio*,” or because they were tired of waiting. Finally, in 2011, 863 people under THP in the Darién had their status changed, putting them on a path to permanent residency (UNHCR 2011d). But because violence has continued to rage in the Chocó department of Colombia, many of these refugees were waiting to be repatriated for fifteen long years (JRS 2011).

In contrast to Panama, Ecuador has instituted policies that some organizations and academics have lauded as “humanitarian” (Gottwald 2004:519). In 1992, Ecuador adopted the expanded definition of “refugee” in the 1984 Cartagena Declaration (Laverde and Tapia 2009; Gottwald 2004:512). Ecuador also supported a UNHCR-run “Enhanced Registration Project” in 2009-10, which registered about 30,000 Colombians as refugees (Silva 2012; Leutert 2012). But

due to economic and social pressures in border regions, Ecuador has more recently begun passing restrictive measures aimed at reducing numbers of refugees (Silva 2012). And in May 2012, Ecuador backed out of its commitment to the Cartagena Declaration (UNHCR 2013f). The effects of this change remain to be seen.

Political Invisibility

The Emberá, Wounaan, and Kuna indigenous peoples share territory, language, and traditions across the Panama-Colombia border (Laverde and Tapia 2009). “Originally,” said Ana Alfaro of the Jesuit Refugee Service, “the border with Colombia was indigenous territory, as much Colombia as Panama. [It was] only one territory, without those border divisions that are made at desks with pen and paper.” For many indigenous peoples, political boundaries have historically been “permeable” and “imaginary;” people regularly passed back and forth by river boat or foot for marriage, work, and to visit family members (Sánchez Saavedra 2007). Indigenous cross-border movements are tolerated in both Colombia and Panama, giving indigenous people the freedom to move back and forth without legal consequences.³

Although freedom of cross-border movement is a huge advantage, it can also invisibilize other reasons for indigenous migration, such as flight from persecution. “At the same time that this right is guaranteed,” said Sánchez Saavedra, “refuge is also denied. The result is an invisibilization of refugee status for the indigenous population.” Around 1997, large groups of refugees from Colombia began arriving in Panama after having been displaced by the violence in

³ In Colombia, the indigenous right to free movement is inscribed in law through adoption of the International Labor Organization’s Convention 169 on Indigenous Peoples and Tribes in Independent Countries, 1989 (OIT 2007). Panama has not adopted this Convention, but Sánchez Saavedra said that indigenous free movement is allowed unofficially.

Colombia. Alfaro says that few organizations – including her own – initially recognized that indigenous people were among them.

But since the 1990s, Sánchez Saavedra (2007) argues, the majority of indigenous migrants have arrived because of the armed conflict in Colombia. In 2005, Sánchez Saavedra and the Jesuit Refugee Service performed a survey of seven Emberá and Wounaan communities between the rivers of Jaqué and Pavarando in Darién Province (Sánchez Saavedra 2007). His research team found that the migrant population in the communities surveyed was about 30%, all of them from Colombia (Sánchez Saavedra 2007). Among the families surveyed, the principal reason for migration stated was the protection of their families and communities from violence, threats, and destruction of land and villages (Sánchez Saavedra 2007).

In Chapter 2, I discussed how certain activities or strategies, including integration and dispersion, can make refugees less "legible," which I described as a form of political invisibility (Scott 1998, 2010; Polzer 2008). Indigenous Colombian refugees also employ many of these strategies, whether intentionally or not, making them invisible to the Panamanian government and often to UNHCR. For example, according to Sánchez Saavedra, most indigenous refugees never seek legal asylum; they either integrate into large towns and cities like Jaqué, Puerto Piña, and Panama City, or into the households of extended family members in small, remote communities along rivers or in the *comarcas*.

Most indigenous refugees also arrive "little by little, one family, two people, three people," said Sánchez Saavedra. Because the state has little presence in remote areas and because the displacements are small, many of these refugees go unnoticed. "It appears," said Sánchez Saavedra, "that the state and organizations only pay attention to those that arrive en masse, while those who have arrived little by little are made invisible." After arriving, many indigenous

refugees move frequently to avoid notice by armed groups and state officials. Indigenous refugees who are aware of the threat of deportation or persecution may also attempt to conceal their identities as Colombians, integrate more thoroughly, or move to remote places with a smaller state and police presence, such as the *comarcas*.

Indigenous refugees in the Darién who flee to remote areas reachable only by boat or foot often “do not appear in official statistics” as refugees. Surveys and other forms of documentation that states and organizations use to prioritize humanitarian assistance often target “known” neighborhoods of migrants or refugees, overlooking those who are integrated into other spaces (Polzer 2008). As a result, “official” numbers of refugees, such as those on the UNHCR website, are unable to account for many of the indigenous Colombian refugees living in Panama. These refugees have found alternative ways of protecting themselves outside of official channels (Gottwald 2004:534). For example, in Sánchez Saavedra's 2005 study, most indigenous migrant families surveyed worked ‘unofficially’ in cash markets outside of dominant economic systems, selling crafts, raising animals, and performing day labor (Sánchez Saavedra 2007).

Scott (1998, 2010) claims that people sometimes deliberately engage in the above activities to remain “illegible,” using integration, migration, remote locations, and under-the-table subsistence methods as strategies to avoid being noticed (Scott 1998, 2010). However, when asked if indigenous refugees are using these activities as strategies to resist state detection, Sánchez Saavedra cautioned that people who do not know they are refugees cannot make informed, strategic choices about whether or not to remain “invisible.” Some invisible refugees, he argued, may need and want assistance but do not even realize they are eligible.

Social Invisibility

In many cases, indigenous refugees prioritize their indigenous identity over their status as refugees. Living in an indigenous community "is not a situation of illegality" from their point of view, said Alfaro, because they consider themselves part of an indigenous nation that spans the border. "When arriving," she said, "they simply integrate. The communities welcome them, they are organized, and – well – it's 'one Indian more.' In the end, they are Emberá." This form of invisibility can sometimes result in positive social and economic integration.

However, Alfaro, Sánchez Saavedra, and Díaz were all firm in claiming that discrimination on the part of the Panamanian state and the general public also results in the forced invisibilization of indigenous people as refugees. According to Alfaro, discrimination against indigenous refugees partly arises from "a failure to decide to take the issue seriously" on the part of the state, "for thinking that 'Indians' are another thing, for thinking, 'ah, they come and go'." Throwing money at the "*indios*" and letting them manage their own affairs is often considered the easiest solution, she said. That this is discrimination is evidenced by the fact that "there is a lot of attention on the [non-indigenous] *campesinos*, but zero on the indigenous." Afro-descendent populations, she said – especially in large towns such as Jaqué – receive more attention, live in more developed areas with better infrastructure, and are more widely included in national economic systems and service networks. Meanwhile, indigenous communities continue to suffer from poverty, health problems, and nutritional and educational deficiencies that place their quality of life well below the national average.

The mixture of the low-status "indigenous" with "Colombian refugee" also results in a double invisibilization (Andrews 2003). Many Panamanians fear Colombians and discriminate against them, labeling women as prostitutes and men as dangerous criminals or drug traffickers.

Thus, refugees in Darién not only live in fear of persecution and deportation, but also of their own neighbors (Sánchez Saavedra 2007; Laverde and Tapia 2009). Even when attempting to integrate within the semi-autonomous *comarcas*, some indigenous refugees experience discrimination and social alienation. Private property does not technically exist within the *comarcas*, but families still occupy their own plots of land: "Each has his parcel, knows the limit of his land," said Sánchez Saavedra. As a result, refugee families may enter into conflicts with long-standing community members or end up with parcels far away from community centers, reinforcing economic difficulties and marginalizing refugees. Or, said Alfaro, indigenous authorities may refuse to accept refugees into their communities if they lack documentation from authorities in Colombia, on the basis that they could be associated with armed groups.

Discussion and Conclusion

In order to survive and thrive in Panama, many indigenous Colombian refugees avoid detection by engaging in "illegible" activities such as frequent mobility, disaggregation, living in remote areas, integration, and alternative subsistence methods, which render them invisible as refugees (Gottwald 2004; Sánchez Saavedra 2006). Sometimes, these activities might be used as strategies. But when employed out of fear or lack of knowledge, warned Sánchez Saavedra, these activities and the invisibility that results could cause humanitarian and economic problems and increased vulnerability to discrimination.

The Panamanian state recognizes that unregistered refugees are a problem in Darién Province, but it does not fund humanitarian aid projects, said Alfaro. The task of humanitarian assistance therefore falls upon UNHCR and international and local humanitarian organizations such as Jesuit Refugee Service. Part of the role of these organizations is to raise consciousness

and funds in order to support their efforts on the ground. This inevitably means bringing invisible refugees out of the shadows and into the consciousness of the international community. One of the key ways of doing this is by using visual images – especially images that touch the hearts of viewers and inspire them to help.

In the next two chapters, I switch gears slightly by looking at refugee invisibility through the lens of visual images. In chapter 4, I review literature on how visual images can render refugees socially and politically invisible at the same time that they literally make them "visible." In Chapter 5, I return to the case of Colombia, looking at how two international humanitarian organizations negotiate issues of visibility and invisibility when using images of Colombian refugees and displaced people.

CHAPTER 4

REFUGEE VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY THROUGH VISUAL IMAGES

By directing our gaze, we also avert our eyes.

(Polzer and Hammond 2008)

One random morning in January 2013, I did a search for “refugees” on Google news. The top result was an interview with an Afghan refugee who fled to Sweden in 1997, by Kevin Sieff of the *Washington Post*. The January 30 video interview is about the refugee's cousin, Javed, who died trying to leave Afghanistan, accompanied by a slideshow of evocative images: family members bearing a coffin; a woman crying over the dead body; a framed photograph of Javed held up to the sky; Javed’s father weeping.

The second hit, a January 31 article from the *International Herald Tribune*, was about Rohingya refugees from Burma living in Bangladesh. Below an image of a distraught woman behind a massive chain link fence, author Mashiur Rahaman writes: "Eight-year-old Shariful Alam has a growth in his neck and chest. Partially paralyzed, he has been unable to leave the makeshift shelter his eight-member family has called home for the last four months."

The next result from *Aljazeera* was a January 30 article by Chris Arsenault entitled “Scarce aid compounds Syria refugee crisis.” A video shows a half-naked Syrian girl crying while her 17-year-old mother gives her a bath outdoors, in the winter. In the article, the head of UNHCR in Jordan is quoted as saying: “We are dealing with a desperately vulnerable population that has been traumatised and suffered so much.”

The message that these news stories unanimously communicate is that refugees from Afghanistan, Burma, and Syria have at least one thing in common: they are suffering. Many stories like these have the same basic plot – poor people flee en masse from pointless, third-world violence, resulting in horrible humanitarian crises and overflowing refugee camps. In the face of this universalizing story, politics and the history of conflicts fall into the background, replaced by sick and crying children, death, loss, and personal hardship.

But because viewers are constantly bombarded with images of global refugee events, usually without having any personal experience of those events or places, sometimes, argue Jackall and Hirota, “the representations become the realities” (2000:208). Although these news articles and their accompanying images show only a small snippet of refugees' complex realities, people see these stories so often that they seem normal or “typical” (Malkki 1992:32). But this “typical” idea of refugees is by no means universal or given: it is constructed within a complex social and political narrative (Shapiro 1988; Jackall and Hirota 2000). By maintaining this normative image through photographs, videos, and news stories, the press, humanitarian organizations, and other institutions push into the background alternative truths, including the issues of invisible refugees who do not live in camps or are not visibly suffering (Malkki 1992; Polzer 2008). If they are not careful (and sometimes even if they are), these institutions may contribute to a public perception that not only further invisibilizes these refugees' situations, but also exposes them to discrimination, misunderstanding, miscategorization, human rights abuses, and even legal consequences.

In this chapter, I review literature on how photographers, the media, and humanitarian organizations produce and use visual images of refugees and how these images might affect the legal, political, or social visibility of refugees. At the end of the chapter, I draw from literature

reviewed here and in Chapter 2 to summarize some salient characteristics of the "typical" refugee image and how that image can reveal or obscure the identity of real-world refugees. I begin with a brief history of how refugees have been depicted through the medium of photography.

Refugees in Photography

According to Johnson (2011:1016), photographs of refugees first became common in the post-war period of the 1950s and 60s. Early images focused on the European “heroic, political individual,” usually fleeing from communism: “A defiant Soviet general. A graceful Russian dancer. A proud Polish family.” But in 1967, the UN amended the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees with a Protocol that included refugees from the global south. Almost immediately, international policy shifted to repatriation instead of resettlement to third countries, and photography of refugees began to depict racialized “third-world” refugees, mostly from Africa (Johnson 2011). The refugee was thus constructed for the first time as an apolitical, poverty-stricken victim, a body participating in massive movements, and a threat to national security (Johnson 2011).

In the 1970s and 80s, photographers began to frame refugees as authentic, innocent victims, especially women and children, in order to distinguish them from opportunistic migrants, who many nations felt were flooding their cities and towns and causing economic and social strain (Johnson 2011). With the rise of feminism in the 1990s, more images also highlighted women's issues, which often depicted refugee women as victims of rape or other abuses. These images of innocent, suffering, and dependent refugee victims have become pervasive in the public imagination (Johnson 2011).

Since the early 2000s, many photographs of refugees have continued to favor images of suffering and victimhood (Johnson 2011). However, photojournalists are increasingly taking on the challenge of photographing refugees who do not fit the usual image, including refugees from places like Colombia. Nevertheless, many concerns that theorists have raised about refugee photography since the 1970s remain valid, especially given today's landscape of rapid consumption. In a world where "likes" on Facebook determine the success of an image, it is as important as ever to reevaluate how refugees are imagined through photographs.

The Medium of Photography

Since the invention of photography in 1826, many have believed that photographic images depict "reality." After all, before the digital age a photograph was quite literally a "trace," a material imprint created at some historical moment by the interaction of film and light (Berger 2002:51). Anthropologists such as Margaret Mead believed that photographs could provide a more trustworthy and analyzable account of reality than an ethnographer's descriptions (Mead and Bateson 2002).

But in 1964, Marshall McLuhan famously coined the phrase "the medium is the message." His argument highlights the importance of recognizing how the medium through which information is communicated, and not just its content, alters the way we think, judge, and associate (McLuhan 2002). Shapiro (1988) claims that because photography makes it easy for people to confuse representations with reality, it can be difficult to recognize the complex context underlying photographs. Looking at a painting is much easier: did the artist choose a certain symbolic gesture to show the sitter's power or piety? Was the turn of the head a political

choice, a social norm, or a naturalistic depiction? Even though it may seem counterintuitive, choices of how to represent people in a photograph are also strategic (Shapiro 1988).

In order to interpret the meaning of photographs, viewers often look to information beyond the image, such as captions or stories (Berger 2002; Sontag 1977). Adding words can create a powerful effect, sometimes endowing photographs with a sense of certainty or even of “dogmatic assertion,” as in those used for propaganda in Nazi Germany (Berger 2002:50; Jackall and Hirota 2000). The question then becomes, in making an event visible through photographs and captions, what is meanwhile being made invisible? How should we understand what and whose reality is depicted in photographs, and what and who are concealed?

In *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag critiques photography’s role in documenting the effects of war, arguing that photography does not show us “the truth” but rather a visual image of our own biases. Her main critique is the visceral affective quality of images of suffering, which she compares to pornography (Sontag 1977). Sontag urges her readers to be suspicious of a medium that purports to display “the truth.” Photography, she says, always involves invisible acts of artistic choice and political interpretation. Photographers actively participate in the creation of their images by making choices about what to shoot, how to frame and crop a photo, etc., which inevitably render some truths more visible and others less so (Sontag 1977, 2003; Berger 2002). Further levels of interpretation occur during the editing process, which is managed by those who have the power to make editorial choices, not by photographic subjects themselves.

Sontag claims that the aesthetic quality of a photo is also an important aspect of the “reality” it communicates. Some photojournalists, she says, are disdainful of “art” photography, equating it with “insincerity or mere contrivance” and accusing photographers of removing or

altering the context of their images (Sontag 2003:26). But photojournalism, Sontag and Sekula (1978) argue, also involves aesthetic choices, and art photography is never a mere field of lines, colors, and forms. Therefore, neither an “art” photograph nor a “documentary” photograph can show us simply what is “real;” both are dependent on multiple levels of interpretation and context (Sontag 1977, 2003; Sekula 1978). Yet because photojournalists present their work as truth, viewers often blindly accept their images and captions as “reality” without engaging with them as critically as they would a work of art (Sontag 1977).

Since Sontag’s *On Photography* was published in 1977, many books and articles have been written about the victimization of suffering people through photography. More recently, theorists such as Linfield (2010) have critiqued Sontag, claiming that photographs of suffering can also be useful and thought-provoking. In her book *The Cruel Radiance*, Linfield (2010) argues that rather than taking the “reality” of documentary photographs at face value, viewers can use them as emotional pathways to understanding events and conflicts more deeply. Photographs, she says, are ambiguous by nature. “By refusing to tell us what to feel, and allowing us to feel things we don’t quite understand,” Linfield writes, “they make us dig, and even think, a little deeper” (Linfield 2010: 29). Linfield argues that photographs of suffering can also stand as “documents of protest.” Because they communicate both “This is so” and “This must not be,” they urge us to fight (at least in our minds) against violence and injustice (Linfield 2010:33).

The Production and Use of Images

The production and interpretation of the "reality" that viewers perceive through images rests largely on the shoulders of advertisers, the press, organizations, and other institutions. I look now at how these institutions, especially the media and humanitarian organizations, produce and use images to represent refugees, and the ethical complications of doing so.

Representation and Power

Power relationships are inherent in any visual discourse. Foucault argues that every society has mechanisms for controlling how texts (and, by extension, images) are distributed and who sees them, especially by means of exclusion and prohibition (Barker 1998). Some individuals and institutions, Foucault claims, manage to establish the "exclusive right to speak about a particular subject" and thus claim the power to support and define societal practices and beliefs about what is "true" or real and what is not (Barker 1998:6). Representing minority or underserved groups in photographs is especially problematic, since power often lies in the hands of relatively well-to-do majority groups (Shapiro 1988; Jackall and Hirota 2000).

To some extent, viewers are complicit in these power relationships. Shapiro (1988) and Sekula (1978:866) argue that documentary photographs are part of an "extended narrative structure" or discourse between viewers, photographers, media representatives, and policy makers. This discourse "is forged over a period of time by the social, administrative, political, and other processes through which various interpretive practices become canonical, customary, and so thoroughly entangled with the very act of viewing that they cease to be recognized as practices" (Shapiro 1988:135). Because viewers are immersed in, understand, and participate in this discourse, they tend to view a visual representation as "unproblematic" as long as it "accords

with the familiar and already known” (Shapiro 1988:150). For example, the U.S. Farm Security Administration (FSA)’s photography in the 1930s supported and created racial categories such as “the Black Victim” and “the Noble Primitive.” Although many people today find these images offensive, at the time they seemed “naturalistic” because they fell in line with contemporary perceptions of the minority poor (Blair 2005:60).

As consumers and viewers, we especially allow the media a great deal of power to construct a public imagination of what is normal or "naturalistic" in the case of refugees. According to Jackall and Hirota, journalists are professional experts “skilled in the creation and propagation of symbols” whose job it is “to fashion accessible tales out of the extraordinarily complex realities” of people’s lives (2000:5,128). Messages on television are shown briefly with flashes of images as a “quick way of apprehending” complex issues and crises (Sontag 2003:22). Images on Twitter or Facebook are popular for only a few hours or days, making it important to post interesting, attention-grabbing images. And many articles and images tell attention-getting stories of individual refugees as “exemplary” cases to stand for an entire conflict, as observed in the news stories at the beginning of this chapter (Boltanski 1999:12).

But journalists enter ethically sticky territory when they present "interesting" material at the expense of more accurate or extensive information. The media have a documented effect on public opinion, public action, and sometimes political agendas. Studies have shown that long-term media bias against a certain group can change public opinion of that group over time (Kaye 2001). And while one media event will generally not significantly alter public opinion, a single event or series of events could be the trigger that sets off action after a long build-up, as is arguably the case in the “Arab Spring” that began in December 2010 (Khondker 2011; Hargreaves 2001). This phenomenon of media provoking protest and action in response to global

events has sometimes been called the “CNN effect” (Robinson 1999), though today, it might more accurately be called the “Twitter effect” (Snow 2010).

Recognizing the media’s strong effect on public opinion, state governments and other powerful institutions have often strategically used or restricted the media in order to influence public opinion. For example, the U.S. government has consistently used advertising and news media for ideological purposes, beginning with Woodrow Wilson’s Committee on Public Information during World War I and continuing today with government-influenced agencies such as the Ad Council – creator of Rosie the Riveter, Smoky the Bear, and the Crying Indian (Jackall and Hirota 2000). During the Arab Spring, governments in Egypt and other countries attempted to shut down and restrict access to social media in order to quell rebellion (Khondker 2011). And North Korea has an official YouTube channel that publishes aggressive videos of United States cities being destroyed, aimed less at provoking its own citizens (most of whom cannot access the internet) than viewers in the rest of the world (Taylor 2012).

Perhaps understandably, then, the news media often gets blamed for producing skewed versions of reality and spreading misinformation. But humanitarian organizations have arguably played just as great a role in the production of a universalized or "typical" refugee image that often emphasizes negative qualities.

Humanitarian Organizations

Redfield (2006) claims that today's humanitarian organizations, beginning with the Red Cross, emerged in part to bear witness to perceived crimes against humanity in the post-World War II era. Organizations like Doctors Without Borders viewed themselves as groups of intellectuals who "trumpet truth" by maintaining "moral integrity" and promoting the "dignity" of

fellow human beings (Redfield 2006:6). But humanitarian efforts to "establish truth in the wake of human suffering" became increasingly political in the second half of the 20th century, causing organizations to establish a greater public presence and strategically garner public and private support for their causes (Redfield 2006).

Since the 1990s, argues Ticktin (2006), humanitarianism has become an important, highly-visible global political force. Fassin (2012) terms this humanitarian trend the "politics of compassion." A key strategy of this "politics of compassion" is the production of media, including images, that supports humanitarian goals (Redfield 2006). This morally-driven humanitarian "industry," argue Jackall and Hirota (2000:158), includes an "informal consortium" of government agencies, private foundations, academics, and others. International humanitarian organizations today have media, fundraising, and advocacy branches that manage their public image, often adopting practices from news media and advertising (Redfield 2006; Jackall and Hirota 2000). Like the news media, they focus on flashy, "interesting" events and human interest stories in order to maintain viewers' attention and often use emotive, attention-getting images (Jackall and Hirota 2000).

Redfield (2006:13) says: "The work of an international NGO ... parallels anthropology in the degree to which moments of direct experience in 'the field' constitute the perceived basis of discursive authority." But the humanitarian worker, Redfield argues, "has never simply remained a gentleman scientist, removed from affairs of the world" (2006:17). Humanitarian organizations do not use photographs to produce a scientific version of "truth," as Mead intended to do (Mead and Bateson 2002). Instead, they choose morally and politically charged images, text, and data based on how well they represent "humanitarian imperatives" (Redfield 2006:17). Ticktin (2006) says that this humanitarian selection of images constitutes a form of exclusion. Though "often

enacted through a moral imperative of compassion," she says, humanitarian organizations give more attention to those who are visibly and obviously suffering, and thus offer only "a limited version of what it means to be human" (Ticktin 2006:34). Humanitarian organizations thus share at least partial responsibility for creating and publicizing a "typical" image of the refugee that emphasizes suffering, vulnerability, and dependence.

Imagining the "Typical" Refugee: How Images Can Make Refugees Invisible

In order to understand more thoroughly the "typical" refugee image that humanitarian organizations have helped, in part, to produce, I examined key texts that critique visual images and text about refugees and victims of war, including Nyers (2006), Sontag (1977, 2003), Malkki (1992, 1997), Linfield (2010), Pupavac (2008), Polzer (2008), Ticktin (2006), Redfield (2006), Riaño-Alcalá (2008), Jackall and Hirota (2000), Moeller (2002), Fair and Parks (2001), Faris (2002), and Johnson (2011). By reading and analyzing the content of these texts, I discovered several pejorative characteristics of the "typical" image of the refugee that academics have critiqued as exploitative or otherwise problematic. In this section, I discuss these characteristics and examine how they reveal and obscure aspects of refugee identity, invisibilizing some refugees and raising others into public consciousness.

Characteristics of the Image of the "Typical" Refugee

1. The refugee is a problem, a crisis, and an anomaly.

As discussed in Chapter 2, institutions and the public tend to view refugees as non-normative, irregular "problems" in contrast to citizens of nation-states (Malkki 1992; Nyers 2006; Agamben 2005). This perception of refugees as problems is a form of political invisibility

that contributes to governments' unwillingness to accept or support refugees, and a form of social invisibility that can exclude refugees from integrating into their new communities (Nyers 2006). Nyers argues that invisibility through problematization is due in part to the conviction that refugees “do not possess the ‘proper’ political subjectivity (i.e., state citizenship)” and therefore do not have the privilege to participate in the political communities that control their lives (Nyers 2006:16).

In *Rethinking Refugees*, Nyers (2006) gives a brief analysis of images on UNHCR’s web site, concluding that the majority of images portray refugees as problems by emphasizing their lack of citizenship and place and absence of a ‘normal,’ everyday, happy life. Some "problematizing" images of refugees show unhappy or suffering refugees, people in rags (or less), and scenes that indicate loss or absence. Captions highlight words like "crisis" and "emergency" and emphasize what refugees lack, including death, loss, and misfortune. For example, a 2009 series of photos by Christoph Bangert shows a refugee camp in Chad, highlighting problems like overcrowding, long lines, and makeshift shelters (http://www.newyorker.com/online/2009/01/05/slideshow_090105_chad#slide=1).

2. The refugee is suffering.

In her 1997 study of refugees in Tanzania, Malkki notes that staff from UNHCR and a local NGO tended to use images of refugees who had undergone physical or mental trauma. For them, a “real refugee” was “a victim whose judgment and reason had been compromised by his or her experiences;” a “tragic, and sometimes repulsive, figure who could be deciphered and healed only by professionals” (Malkki 1997:383). Pupavac (2008:280) calls this pervasive image of suffering the “sick role.” “Typical” or “legitimate” refugees, say Pupavac and

Ticktin, are viewed as having serious physical needs and traumatic pasts, and being devastatingly poor without economic prospects. As a result, their perceived ability to help themselves is compromised (Pupavac 2008; Ticktin 2006). For example, in images such as Colin Finlay's photographs from a refugee camp in Darfur, the extreme horror of images of gaunt, starving refugees sets off sirens in our brains, alerting us to the presence of severe, grotesque suffering that makes us feel pity for these apparently helpless victims (<http://www.treehugger.com/culture/th-interview-colin-finlay-world-renowned-photographer-and-environmental-activist.html>).

Emphasizing the category of "suffering" as a key aspect of refugee identity is a social, categorical invisibilization (Polzer 2008). Although Linfield (2010) believes that images of suffering can open viewers' eyes to injustice, Sontag (1977, 2003) argues that they are often needlessly voyeuristic. A preponderance of images of suffering might create the perception that only refugees who are "exemplary victims" merit assistance or donors' attention (Malkki 1997:384; Redfield 2006). In some places, refugees who are less than "exemplary" may be ignored, scoffed at, denied aid, and even denied legal asylum (Malkki 1997).

3. The refugee is fearful.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the legal definition of "refugee" requires applicants to prove that they are afraid. However, Nyers (2006) points out that fear is not only an emotion; it is also a tool of power and exclusion. Refugees are first displaced from their homes because of fear and intimidation. But after they flee to a new country, fear is present in their lives in other ways: as xenophobia and human rights abuses that prevent them from integrating, as policies that cause them to live insecurely, or as events that governments use as criteria for deciding their legal

futures (Riaño-Alcalá 2008). It is a mistake to think that fear is simply an emotion that can be seen in a facial expression.

Furthermore, not all refugees want to emphasize their fear; invisible or integrated refugees may put their fear behind them in order to blend in with their neighbors. For example, for Hutu refugees living in a town in Tanzania, said Malkki (1997:384), “refugee status was generally not a collectively heroized or positively valued aspect of one's social person. Insofar as it was considered relevant at all, it was more often a liability than a protective or positive status.” But failing to seem or appear afraid can make some people invisible as refugees, preventing them from access to certain services and rights (Andrews 2003).

Photographs of fear can also be ambiguous or misleading. For example, this photo of a Somali refugee in Kenya by Phil Moore has a nondescript caption, but it communicates an apparent expression of fear or sadness (<http://en.starafrika.com/news/kenya-orders-all-refugees-back-to-camps.html>). However, it is impossible to know if the boy was actually afraid or if, for instance, he was simply tired of waiting.

4. The refugee is an innocent, helpless, or trapped victim.

Images of refugee children and women are extremely pervasive in the media and on humanitarian websites. Children playing or crying, children starving, mothers holding or bathing children, and wide-eyed, poverty-stricken young women appear everywhere. “The Red Cross,” write Jackall and Hirota, “does not simply appeal for blood; instead, it portrays a little girl and her brother wandering downtown streets asking passers-by to donate blood for their sick sibling” (2000:132). These images, argue Malkki (1997), Moeller (2002), Linfield (2010), and Johnson (2011), are intended to represent “pure” victimhood. “By the 1980s,” states Johnson,

“the image of a ‘Third World’ mother and child became emblematic of ‘the refugee’” (2011:1030). For example, in Sebastiao Salgado’s famous 1984 portrait of a mother and child at Korem refugee camp in Ethiopia, the subject is framed almost like a Renaissance madonna. The mother looks wistful, beautiful, and innocent, while a faceless child cries into her breast (http://www.masters-of-photography.com/S/salgado/salgado_ethiopia_full.html).

Children are “the moral referent,” says Moeller, the basis by which we judge one’s capacity to care about other human beings (Moeller 2002:38). “Children present us,” Linfield writes, “or at least are supposed to present us, with an absolute demand for protection” (Linfield 2010:127). The rise of feminism, Johnson (2011) argues, also produced increased demand for attention on women’s issues, resulting in more images of women refugees in vulnerable situations (Johnson 2011). Meanwhile, refugee men and women who demonstrate agency have been relatively hidden from sight (Johnson 2011:1032).

Any image search for refugees also shows a disproportionate number of people behind barbed wire or chain-link fences. This image symbolizes a trapped, dependent condition, causing viewers to “expect refugees to be passive, nobly resigned to their lot in life, not actively engaged in reformulating their political, cultural, and historical identities” (Fair and Parks 2001:41). For example, an award-winning 1999 photo by Carol Guzy shows a two-year-old Kosovar refugee being passed through a barbed wire fence (<http://uptenlist.com/travel-2/top-10-shocking-photos-that-changed-the-world/>).

Many theorists have argued that portraying refugees as “pure,” dependent victims invisibilizes their historical and political context and removes agency (Malkki 1997; Sontag 1977, 2003; Linfield 2010; Fair and Parks 2001). Refugees’ views of history are often deleted from these images and replaced with a universalizing story like the one I described at the

beginning of this chapter (Malkki 1997; Johnson 2011). But refugees who are categorized as victims probably do not view themselves as ahistorical or helpless victims. For example, many refugees today are consumers of media and can participate in the social and political dialogue that molds their identities, if only to a limited extent (Horst 2006; Brees 2010).

5. Refugees are anonymous, speechless masses OR apolitical, ahistorical, individual bodies.

The most common types of refugee representation also fall on either of two extremes: personal, up-close images; or depersonalizing, aerial images (Fair and Parks 2001). We are all familiar with individual, up-close images that are meant to represent an entire refugee crisis, such as Steve McCurry's iconic green-eyed Afghan girl from the cover of National Geographic (<http://photography.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photographers/afghan-girl-cover.html>). On the other extreme, refugees have often been visualized as a “sea of humanity” or a “vast and throbbing mass,” similar to a force of nature (Malkki 1997:387). Sometimes they are shown from above, appearing as anonymous dots in a large crowd (Fair and Parks 2001). For example, Luca Turi’s 1991 photo of Albanian refugees in Italy illustrates well the “sea of humanity” concept (<http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/07/04/albanian-refugees/>). In the photo, a huge crowd of refugee “boat people” fleeing Albania symbolizes the physical force of refugee crises, like an ocean wave that cannot be contained.

Focusing only on up-close or aerial images of refugees, argue Fair and Parks (2001:37), tends to skip over the “middle scale” of “politics, social organization, and history.” For example, many Americans and Europeans in 1996 did not recognize that the tragic conflict in Rwanda was a genocide; they simply assumed that the wide-eyed refugees they saw were part of yet another

awful humanitarian emergency (Fair and Parks 2001). Lack of attention to political and historical context can cause images to remain as the only enduring historical information about an event or group of people. In James Faris's analysis of photographs of the Navajo, he observes that local historical narratives and genealogies were not recorded along with photographs taken of the Navajo in the mid-20th century. Therefore, those narratives did not stand the test of time. What we are left with half a century later is only their physical appearance: "nothing more than exotic props, colorful contrivances to Western projects" (Faris 2002:83; Zetter 1991).

Images that emphasize refugees' physical presence also emphasize their lack of voice or reason, a form of social invisibility (Nyers 2006; Feldman 1994). Malkki defines "voice" as "the ability to establish narrative authority over one's own circumstances and future, and, also, the ability to claim an audience" (1997:393). Bodies without reason and speech are like animals in a zoo; we can gaze on them with an almost perverse interest and listen to 'informative' news clips about what they eat and how they live, but we cannot speak with them intelligently. Because refugees in dehistoricizing images and stories do not have much power to claim their *own* audience, they remain "mute victims" rather than "historical actors," says Malkki (1997:378).

Solutions for the Ethical Representation of Refugees

The ethical responsibilities inherent in using visual media are especially daunting and confusing today, given the 'quick-hit' nature of social media such as Twitter and Facebook (German 2011). In "The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons," Scarry (1999) warns that a humanitarian focus on viewers' imaginations of suffering people may be unreliable, pushing true justice into the background. And Sontag warns that daily consumption of humanitarian images might produce an "anesthesia" or "compassion fatigue" that makes it increasingly difficult for

consumers to imagine and sympathize with sufferers (Sontag 1977). However, literature suggests several practices that could promote more sensitive and responsible representation of refugees.

Many humanitarian organizations have responded to critiques by Sontag and others by institutionalizing ethical policies and standards for image production and use, such as attaining full consent of photographic subjects, involvement of local people in decision-making processes, and anti-discrimination trainings (Harris 2000). Hargreaves (2001:32) also suggests providing more balanced content, hiring more media professionals recruited from under- or misrepresented groups, and institutionalizing ethical “codes of practice.” Methods like these, however simple, have proved useful for U.K. newspapers in improving racist and xenophobic public perceptions of refugees (Hargreaves 2001).

Humanitarian organizations have also attempted to fight the removal of refugee voice through projects that allow refugee involvement in decision-making processes. One attempt in the 1990s was the “Listening to the Displaced” project performed in Sri Lanka refugee camps by Oxfam GB. From 1996 to 1998, three “Listening” surveys were conducted that allowed refugees autonomy in setting the agenda for decisions about humanitarian assistance (Harris 2000). The project did strengthen community self-advocacy and inspired a shift toward long-term solutions. However, the voice of the refugees was filtered through the overall agenda of the project, which was to give refugees greater authority over their humanitarian treatment, while their political concerns and internal power dynamics were largely disregarded (Rajaram 2002).

Several other attempts to address problems of power and representation have also come to light, including empowering the “citizen journalist” (Faris 2002) and giving refugees cameras (Nakamura 2008). Citizen journalism, especially through social media, can encourage self-representation and civic engagement (German 2011; Horst 2006). However, because it is much

more difficult to regulate the use and spread of images, new ethical considerations might emerge (Rheingold 2007; German 2011). Giving informants cameras is an anthropological method in which an ethnographer leaves cameras with informants for some amount of time, then returns to collect them. According to Nakamura (2008:20), "the resulting photos are later displayed, analyzed or exhibited as examples of a particularly internal, private or emic view of the world." This method, when paired with collaborative research, can allow "alternative discourses" to emerge (Faris 2002). But Nakamura argues that it can be ethically problematic if, for example, photos are "used as a proxy for long-term participant-observation or fieldwork" (20) or if the researcher claims intellectual property over the images without collaborating with informants. However, if used by organizations that work on long-term, collaborative projects with refugee communities, giving people cameras could still allow for interesting and informative results.

Conclusion: The Ethics of Being a Viewer

People-watching is a favorite pastime. Sitting on a park bench or waiting in the airport, people are always trying to discover or invent connections between themselves and others. Documentary photography makes global 'people-watching' easier. However, our ethical role as viewers comes into question when we look at what Sontag (2003:41) calls "shock- pictures" from our comfortable, safe, first-world homes. Sontag claims that viewers have a visceral "appetite" for photos of suffering that borders on the pornographic (Sontag 2003:41). In that case, do viewers have a right to look at images of other people's personal difficulties in privacy, even though the sufferer's own privacy has been violated? What can we do to be ethical viewers?

Sontag writes: "For a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war" (Sontag

2003:14). Surely, one would be a “moral monster” not to be moved by certain images (Sontag 2003:8). But morality requires more than just sympathy. “Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it,” Sontag writes. “But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks” (Sontag 1977:23).

Although gut sympathy has a role in one’s moral education, ethical viewing also entails understanding the political and historical context behind images. In order to develop a “relevant political consciousness,” we can do research and read beyond the captions (Sontag 1977:19).

This means, for example, not allowing ourselves to be so moved by images of suffering that we fail to inquire into the circumstances of “invisible” refugees who are not as visually stunning.

Meanwhile, the pressure is on for humanitarian organizations to question more seriously the normative image of refugees that has been propagated since the 1960s. The key, as Polzer and Hammond (2008) point out, is for policy makers and humanitarian organizations to understand “costs and benefits” and to “try to frame their categories in ways that minimize people’s vulnerability in the face of unequal power relations” (424). In some cases, maintaining invisibility by reproducing the typical image of the refugee may be the best way to provide refugees with support from state governments. But in many situations, humanitarian organizations might marginally improve conditions by presenting their audience with images that provoke thought and encourage the production of alternative and diverse narratives.

In the next chapter, I analyze how two international organizations produce and use images of Colombian refugees. Ultimately, I ask how these images and their accompanying text take into account the complex situation of Colombian refugees and internally displaced people. How do they address legal, political, and social issues related to invisibility? Do their images conform to the typical image of refugees, or do they challenge it in any way?

CHAPTER 5

TWO INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR USE OF IMAGES OF COLOMBIAN REFUGEES

*I'm not an academic, but let's look. When was the last time columns of refugees
came neatly crossing over a border?* (Susan Hopper, UNHCR)

In November 2013, I spoke with Christian Fuchs and Mary Small of Jesuit Refugee Service/USA in a joint phone interview. After giving them a run-down of my project, I began by asking about their roles in the organization. But before we could get much further, Small stopped me. "In some ways," she said, "the way that you framed your opening question, the underlying assumption is that invisibility is bad. And there's some truth to that, but it's a little more complicated." She gave the example of Colombian refugees in Panama, who often cannot apply for asylum because the risk of being detained or deported is so high. "So in that particular case," she continued, "the baseline assumption that's kind of embedded in your question, that invisibility is bad for refugees, doesn't really hold."

I was impressed. Small had anticipated my questions and immediately refuted what she saw as harmful misinformation. She was rightly wary, perhaps, of the anti-humanitarian bias on the part of many academics. It is easy to get tangled in a theoretical, highly critical web without stopping to recognize that real-world use of images is a complicated and sometimes tricky balance between ethical and practical considerations. But the worlds of theory and practice are not as separate as they may sometimes seem. Many people who work in organizations have

advanced degrees, and many academics have worked for government organizations or NGOs (including myself). In fact, more than half of anthropologists today work outside of universities (AAA 2013). The world of practice has its own set of theoretical concerns and priorities, but they intersect and combine with academic reflections in interesting and often enlightening ways.

This chapter presents and analyzes the results of six interviews I conducted with representatives from two international organizations that work with Colombian refugees: Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Humanitarian organizations that work with Colombian refugees and displaced people face the challenge of visually representing populations that are little-known, integrated, and often difficult to access. Having a strong understanding of refugee invisibility is a prerequisite for knowing how to use images of Colombian refugees sensitively and ethically. Therefore, while presenting interviewees' thoughts about their organizations' use of images, I also discuss the ways that they understand Colombian refugee invisibility.

In the Discussion section, I assess how JRS and UNHCR's considerations of the invisibility of Colombian refugees has challenged or contested the way they make and use images. In order to do so, I return to the characteristics of the "typical" refugee discussed in Chapter 4, asking whether JRS and UNHCR maintain this image when using photographs of Colombian refugees and displaced people.

Background, Interviews, and Image Use

I spoke with representatives from two very different types of international organizations. The first, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), is a private international NGO that works closely with refugee communities on long-term, region-specific projects. The second, the United Nations

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), is the UN agency responsible for protecting all refugees and upholding international standards of refugee rights.

When conducting interviews, I asked semi-structured interview questions to understand how interviewees understood refugee "invisibility." I then asked questions about their creation and use of photographs and ethical guidelines regarding image use. I also asked more pointed questions, including: a) how they portray refugees who are invisible or wish to remain invisible; b) how they make refugee situations visible through photographs; and c) how they understand and contest the image of the "typical" refugee, especially images of suffering.

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)

I spoke with three representatives at Jesuit Refugee Service, two from JRS/USA and one from JRS in Panama. All three requested to maintain their true identities. *Christian Fuchs* is Communications Director at JRS/USA in Washington, D.C. A former newspaper photographer, he now manages internal and external communications, including (among other things) website, photo and video, and social media. He has photographed JRS sites in Ecuador, Colombia, and Panama. *Mary Small* is Assistant Director for Policy at JRS/USA. She speaks with U.S. government and international officials to advocate for refugee rights, with a focus on Central and South America. *Ana Alfaro* is Director of JRS in Panama. She works with Colombian refugee communities in Panama to identify needs and work toward long-term solutions.⁴

⁴ I did not speak with Alfaro about the use of images, but I describe her views on refugee invisibility here and in Chapter 3.

JRS Background

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) provides educational, health, social, and other services to refugees and displaced people in over 50 countries (JRS/USA 2013). Its mission is "to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons" (JRS/USA 2013). Although it is a religious organization, JRS serves people of all faiths and follows a "non-proselytizing model" (JRS/USA 2013). According to the JRS International website, over 1,400 people work for JRS internationally, many "on a voluntary basis," not including "the large number of refugees recruited to take part in the programmes as teachers, health workers and others" (JRS/I 2013).

JRS/USA and JRS/Latin America and the Caribbean (JRS/LAC) are two of the organization's ten geographic regions. The Director of JRS in Panama, Ana Alfaro, said that JRS's goal in the region is to achieve "durable solutions" through integration, repatriation, or resettlement. JRS works on long-term goals, like reforming Panama's asylum system, as well as smaller, locally-appropriate projects. In the United States, JRS/USA advocates for Colombian refugees by speaking with U.S. and UN officials who influence policy decisions. JRS/USA also helps to secure U.S. funding for projects in Latin America.

JRS Use of Images

According to Fuchs, JRS/USA and JRS/LAC regularly share images, videos, and news stories between offices.⁵ JRS's most extensive use of images and its "primary means of communication with basically everyone" is on its website, Fuchs said. When I visited the JRS/USA website in March 2013, I found that photographs were displayed prominently in page

⁵ I focus on JRS/USA because when I conducted the interview with Alfaro from JRS in Panama, I had not yet decided to focus on visual images.

headers, on links to its various campaigns, and in news articles about regional issues. Colombia had its own web page with a header photo and relevant news articles. Figure 5.1 is a screenshot from an October 2012 article featured on JRS/USA's Colombia web page. JRS also uses images on their social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and a Wordpress blog (JRS/USA 2013a). Figure 5.2 shows two posts about Colombian refugees and displaced people from the JRS/USA Facebook page.

Facing adversity on the Colombia-Venezuela frontier



In the first phase of the project partnerships were strengthened with various protection organizations for children and adolescents. (Jesuit Refugee Service Venezuela)

(Bogota) October 11, 2012 — Last month the **Jesuit Refugee Service Latin America & Caribbean** regional office began the project *Prevention of violence and restoration of rights of displaced persons and refugees on the Colombian-Venezuelan border*; the project is supported by the Alboan Foundation and the Basque government of Spain.

This project aims to continue the work done previously by JRS in the border towns of Barrancabermeja, San Pablo and Cucuta, in Colombia, and Ureña and El Nula, in Venezuela. In these areas, JRS provides comprehensive accompaniment and support, from a bi-national perspective, to thousands of displaced or refugee women, men, boys, girls and adolescents.

According to the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES), the actual number of people who have been internally displaced by the Colombian conflict since the mid-1980s surpasses five million. In addition, more than 600,000 people have crossed the border into neighboring countries as refugees.

According to figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 54,965 refugees, mostly from Colombia, live in Ecuador. In Panama, there are 15,000 people in need of international protection. In Brazil, the number has grown by 300% in the last two years, and in

Campaign Focus

Colombian refugees are the frequently forgotten victims of a 50-year-long conflict between paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the Colombian military and security forces.



According to the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement, the actual number of people who have been internally displaced by the Colombian conflict since the mid-1980s surpasses five million. In addition, more than 600,000 people have crossed the border into neighboring countries as refugees. (JRS Venezuela)

Figure 5.1: JRS/USA, Screenshot from "Facing Adversity on the Colombia-Venezuela frontier" (JRS/USA 2013d)

Welcome to the Jesuit Refugee Service/USA newsletter. Here you

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Jesuit Refugee Service/USA shared a link. 21 February

InterAction News Release

U.S. NGOs urge administration and Congress to increase humanitarian funding
jrsusa.wordpress.com

WASHINGTON (Feb. 21, 2013) – Current funding levels for Fiscal

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Jesuit Refugee Service/USA shared Jesuit Refugee Service's photo. 19 February

a note from Nawras Sammour S.J., JRS Middle East Regional Director

Although there seems to be little reason to hold on to hope in the midst of escalating violence, I assure you there is still hope in Syria. We see it every day amongst ordinary people who work tirelessly to assist those in desperate need. J...See more

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Colombia: Seeking A Peaceful Future (PHOTOS)
www.huffingtonpost.com

Colombian refugees and internally displaced people are the frequently forgotten victims of a 50-year-long

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Jesuit Refugee Service/USA shared a link. 20 February

Colombian refugees and internally displaced people are the frequently forgotten victims of a 50-year-long conflict between paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the Colombian military and security forces. Jesuit Refugee Service supports a negotiated resolution of the armed conflict in Colombia and advocates for policies that will lead to a just and sustainable peace.

Jesuit Refugee Service | USA | The Refugee Voice from Jesuit Refugee Service/USA
www.jrsusa.org

The Refugee Voice is a series of occasional papers describing forced

Like · Comment · Share 6 1

Figure 5.2: JRS/USA, Facebook posts February 20 and 22, 2013 (JRS/USA 2013e)

JRS also uses photos for advocacy, such as in presentations to congresspersons or the U.S. State Department: "Particularly in budget discussions it can all get very technical and very not attached to real human beings," said Small. "And so one of the things I use images [and stories for]... is to remind some of our allies and push some of our opponents on the people that are behind these things that they're discussing very cavalierly at times."

Finally, JRS uses images for fundraising and to inform and educate donors. For example, after the earthquake in Haiti, JRS/USA sent out postcards with images to raise funds for school building projects. After the schools had been built, they sent out another round of postcards with images of the completed project and the children who had been affected.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

I interviewed two people who work for UNHCR and one photographer who has been contracted by UNHCR, all of whom requested to maintain their identities. *Francesca Fontanini* is External Relations Officer at UNHCR's office in Colombia. She is the public spokesperson for UNHCR's work in the Andean region and works with photography, video, and social media. *Susan Hopper* is Photo Editor at UNHCR's headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. She works with international images and public information. *Boris Heger* is a Swiss-French freelance photographer who has done short-term consultancies for UNHCR over the years. Heger is not an employee, so his views should not be considered representative of UNHCR.

UNHCR Background

UNHCR was established on December 14, 1950 by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Its mandate is to "lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees

and resolve refugee problems worldwide" in order to "safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees" (UNHCR 2013g). Its ultimate goal is to find long-term, durable solutions, including legal asylum, integration, voluntary repatriation, or resettlement. UNHCR provides short-term emergency response and ongoing humanitarian assistance, coordinates with governments and humanitarian organizations, and oversees general operations in key areas, including the Colombian region (UNHCR 2013g). UNHCR is led by a High Commissioner, António Guterres, and has a total staff of about 7,600 people in over 125 countries (UNHCR 2013g).

UNHCR has regional offices throughout Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Panama (UNHCR 2013e). In Colombia and neighboring countries, UNHCR services refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), stateless persons, and other "populations of concern," including undocumented people living in "refugee-like situations" (UNHCR 2013e).

UNHCR Use of Images

UNHCR's headquarters has large database of images that are used for both internal and external purposes and are shared with regional offices. One of the most extensive uses of images is on UNHCR's website. In March 2013, UNHCR.org featured a rotating slideshow and photos with links to videos and news stories. News articles featured at least one photo, with links to related stories, photo galleries, and relevant information. Figure 5.3 shows a screenshot of a news article about refugees in Ecuador. Each region where UNHCR works also has its own web page, as shown in Figure 5.4. UNHCR also uses photos in social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and Pinterest. Hopper said that UNHCR has over a million followers on its Twitter account and more than 200,000 on Facebook. It also has an extensive Flickr page, including "sets" and "tags" to help visitors find photos easily.

Another important use of images for UNHCR, said Hopper, is for fundraising, including UNHCR's annual Global Report, which targets government donors. Like JRS, UNHCR also uses photos for advocacy. Their biannual donor report to governments, "The Global Appeal," is packed with images that help 'humanize' the dense information, charts, and graphs presented. In the past, UNHCR has also mounted photo exhibitions that are meant to bring a human face to complicated legal issues being debated by decision-makers.

Sometimes, UNHCR also provides images to the media. For example, in 2009, Time Magazine published UNHCR photographs of Colombian refugees and displaced people by photographer Zalmai in a photo essay called "The Urbanization of the World's Refugees" (Time Magazine 2009).

Jesuit Refugee Service: Invisibility, Ethics, and Image Use

JRS Core Principles of Image Use: Dignity, Voice, and Relevance

Small and Fuchs highlighted several core principles that govern JRS's use of images: *dignity, voice, and relevance*. "We're not going to exploit someone," said Fuchs. "We're very careful to preserve the dignity of the people that we're photographing." For example, JRS's photo guidelines require that staff work closely with refugees and always ask permission to photograph. When publishing images, JRS also changes names to protect people's identities. Another way that JRS shows refugees with *dignity* is by emphasizing their abilities. "I'm sure that we don't pull this off with 100% success," said Small, "but when we talk about the difficult situations that refugees are in, we talk about it in terms of, these are the hardships that they've overcome, and talk about their strengths and capacities rather than focusing on them as passive

victims. Because one of the things that we really want to push for is their abilities to contribute to the new communities that they're now living in."

Fuchs and Small also said that JRS emphasizes refugee *voice*. For example, JRS's mostly-in-house photographers, like Fuchs, interview refugees and use their quotes and stories in news articles. "I find it better," Fuchs said, "to have the refugee tell their story, or the displaced person tell their story... And then I'll get images of them or where they live and the situation that they're in to use when I write a story." Fuchs said that JRS staff members often work in communities for long periods of time and know photographic subjects personally. "These are people that we're going to be with until we don't have to be with them anymore, basically," he said.

As a former newspaper photographer, Fuchs also aims to provide accurate, *relevant* context for images and to shoot the "reality" that he sees instead of setting up shots or bringing a "shot list." He always pairs images and quotes with appropriate, descriptive text, and in accordance with JRS's photo guidelines, does not manipulate photographs in Photoshop.

One medium that JRS/USA uses to show refugees with dignity and voice is their online and print newsletter, "The Refugee Voice." I examined articles from "The Refugee Voice" since March 2013 and found that photographs of Colombian displaced people and refugees were indeed accompanied by relevant stories and quotes to give them "voice," as in the March 2013 article in Figure 5.5.⁶ JRS also tried to highlight dignity by focusing on strengths and capacities. For example, the February 2013 issue includes a section on neighborhood organizing by displaced people in Soacha, Colombia (JRS/USA 2013). Other of JRS's photographs, captions, and articles on its website and in "The Refugee Voice" still referred to refugees as vulnerable victims, as shown in Figure 5.6. However, the images themselves did not emphasize victimhood.

⁶ All JRS images reproduced with permission from Christian Fuchs, JRS/USA.

International Women's Day: Colombian refugee in Ecuador

Friday, March 08, 2013

(Quito) March 8 2013 — Life of refugee women is doubly difficult. The testimony of this Colombian refugee woman demonstrates the multiple difficulties that a mother of four children has to face, fleeing various kinds of violence at home, and now crisscrossing Quito trying to avoid the local police in an effort to make ends meet selling her craftwork.

Despite all her hard work under the sun on the streets of Quito and the constant surveillance of the local police whose job it is to prevent people from selling on the streets without a permit, she confesses, "I love life and want to live until I'm 100." Instead of just telling us her life story, she sings it. "What gives me most strength is seeing my children grow up, they are my reason to live..."

My name is Cristina*, I'm a 34 year-old mother of four children, who eat like horses.



"I'm happy in Ecuador at the moment, here you can live a quiet life, in peace: here there is no war," said a Colombian refugee, despite facing the daily hardships of supporting her family in Quito. (Jesuit Refugee Service Ecuador)

Figure 5.5: JRS/USA, Screenshot from "International Women's Day" (JRS/USA 2013f)



Refugee children in Ecuador, like this girl in Lago Agrio, experience acute vulnerabilities, particularly in the border provinces. UNHCR reports that refugee children in border provinces have few opportunities to pursue secondary education. (Shaina Aber — JRS/USA)

Figure 5.6: JRS/ Shaina Aber, Photo from "The Refugee Voice," March 2011 (JRS/Aber 2011)

Choosing and Editing Images

While adhering strictly to their core principles, Small and Fuchs said that "on the back end," JRS employees do adjust "reality" by making editorial choices. For example, when taking photographs, Fuchs has certain ideas in mind: "I'll know that I'll want verticals for that or I'll want horizontals for that, or I'll want to show different aspects of the project." Or back in the office, Small said, "[Fuchs] comes back with a ton of photos, and I say, I really want a photo from this community that is hopeful or joyful. Do we have a photo of some kids laughing?"

But for Fuchs, it is important to strike a balance between editorial choices and relevance. Obviously, he said, "I'm not going to use a photograph that's got nothing to do with the story." But "nine times out of ten I want to make it a good, interesting image that tells a story just by the image alone." For example, when choosing a photo for the cover of JRS/USA's 2011 Annual Report, he wanted a compelling image that also showed "a project that was education related," and he needed to put text over the image. Fuchs looked through the year's images and chose one that met his requirements. Figure 5.7 shows the cover photo he chose.

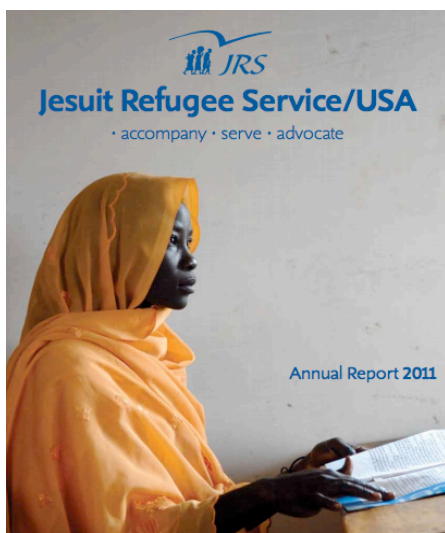


Figure 5.7: JRS/Christian Fuchs, JRS/USA Annual Report 2011 (JRS/Fuchs 2011)

Refugee Invisibility and Visual Images

The headline on the JRS/USA web page about Colombia, "Invisible and Forgotten: Colombian Refugees," demonstrates JRS's commitment to addressing issues of invisible refugees (JRS/USA 2013b). Alfaro, Fuchs, and Small of JRS all responded to questions about refugee invisibility with breadth and depth of knowledge.

In terms of *legal* refugee invisibility, Alfaro and Small discussed the miscategorization of Colombian refugees as undocumented migrants, lack of legal recognition, problems with the current definition of "refugee," and the difficulty of working with restrictive governments. Types of *political* invisibility that Alfaro, Small, and Fuchs discussed were similar to what I describe as "illegible" activities (Scott 1998, 2010) in Chapter 2, including integration into cities and communities, "blending in" with larger migratory flows, and living in remote locations, all of which allow refugees to live 'under-the-radar,' especially in urban areas. Other forms of political invisibility discussed were governments' deprioritization of refugee issues and the imaginary nature of borders and territory. Small and Alfaro also said that xenophobia and discrimination can invisibilize refugees *socially* "by hyper-emphasizing other dynamics" such as ethnicity, nationality, or alleged criminal backgrounds. Alfaro said that discrimination can result in the political negligence of certain groups, such as indigenous peoples.

Figures 5.8 and 5.9 show two of JRS's attempts to visually depict the issues of invisible Colombian refugees and displaced people. The first photo shows the hardships of an urban, internally displaced family, which would not be visible without entering their home. The second shows a refugee in Ecuador who has integrated economically, communicating hope in the face of loss and hardship. Both photos emphasize invisibility by concealing the faces of their subjects.



Left: Striving for a brighter future in Colombia: A styrofoam cooler serves as a refrigerator for a displaced family in Buenaventura.

Right: Colombia: Peace negotiations shine a ray of hope for refugees and displaced people. A Colombian refugee living in Ecuador pauses to look out over the Pacific ocean May 16, 2013. Forced to flee his homeland, he now makes a meager living as a fisherman near Esmeraldas.

Figure 5.8: JRS/ Christian Fuchs, "A styrofoam cooler" (JRS/Fuchs 2013a)

Figure 5.9: JRS/ Christian Fuchs, "A Colombian refugee looks out over the ocean" (JRS/Fuchs 2013b)

Challenging Mental Maps: The Stereotype of the "Typical" Refugee

Fuchs and Small said that the public perception of refugees is often skewed, especially in the case of Colombians. "I think folks tend to be very oriented toward whatever the big refugee crisis of the day is," said Small. "So, for example, a ton of folks are focused on Syria right now. And rightfully so. But at times, to the detriment of longer-term refugee crises. And so the idea that there's millions of refugees living on the edges of these big cities is a little hard, at times." One of JRS's campaigns is to raise awareness about urban refugees and displaced people, as in this photo of Buenaventura, Colombia in Figure 5.10, part of an informative, multi-page article that focuses on urban displaced people.



On the coast: Buenaventura has received massive numbers of displaced Colombians in recent years, fleeing violent displacement by armed groups. Buenaventura also has one of the highest rates of intra-urban displacement, and struggles with a 60% unemployment rate.

Figure 5.10: JRS/ Christian Fuchs, "On the Coast" (JRS/Fuchs 2013c)

Although images can sometimes contribute to the public's imbalanced or flawed perception of refugees, Small said that they can also challenge people's "mental maps." "I think a lot of times if you just talk to people with words, it's very easy for them to take your words and put them onto the mental maps they already have about camps or dark-skinned refugees or whatever the case may be. But if you show them a photo that challenges their mental structure... it really challenges them rather than just reinforcing the thing they think they already know."

For example, JRS deliberately challenged "mental maps" related to refugee race and ethnicity by making two copies of their organizational brochure. The first version has two dark-skinned Darfuri girls on the front. When printing a second version, shown in Figure 5.11, Fuchs intentionally changed the image to a Colombian girl "who essentially reads as white." The March 2011 issue of "The Refugee Voice" also has several photos that challenge stereotypes, including this photo of "invisible" indigenous refugees living in Panama with a man holding a baby instead

of a woman, shown in Figure 5.12. "It's something we have to work really hard about," said Small, "is not unintentionally 'othering' refugees."



Figure 5.11 (right): JRS/USA, Organizational brochure (JRS/USA 2013i)

Figure 5.12 (left): JRS/ Sergi Camera, Photo from "Quiet Crisis: Colombian Refugees in Panama and Ecuador" (JRS/Camera 2011)

Invisibility as a Strategy: Maintaining Control Over Images

JRS maintains strict control of who does and does not see their photos. "In Colombia but also in the border regions of Ecuador and Panama," said Small, "as the armed conflict deepens into those territories, there's a fair number of refugee community leaders who are being pursued by the armed groups. ...So on one hand we use their images to do awareness work and outreach and communication and advocacy. But at the same time maintaining the invisibility of specific refugees is an important part of keeping them safe."

Fuchs told one story of JRS's selective use of images: "In Ecuador last year, I took photos of a Colombian refugee...whose [family was] still in a tenuous position. ...I wanted people to see the images of the situation down there, but I didn't want to draw attention to her within Ecuador itself, where she might find her status suddenly revoked or she would suddenly be deported. So I didn't want to put it on the website. But...earlier this year for World Refugee Day, we had a photo exhibit where we invited people in Washington to come and see photos of our work around the world, and those images were included in that. So people in the advocacy community were able to see and learn more about what was going on down there."

In the case of a xenophobic public or unsympathetic government, as in Ecuador and Panama, Small said, "sometimes it can be a more effective [short-term] strategy to talk quietly to allies and not stir up opponents," said Small. "What that really means in practice is maintaining the invisibility of refugees in terms of people who are not supportive of them."

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: Invisibility, Ethics, and Image Use

UNHCR Core Ethical Principles and Guidelines: Dignity, Honesty, and Voice

UNHCR has written guidelines on "photographing and publishing images of refugees and asylum seekers," written in 2010 (UNHCR 2010b). Although the document claims that getting "official consent" is not always realistic, it says that "it is important to put measures into place to ensure that people of concern to UNHCR who are being photographed are treated respectfully and portrayed *honestly* and with *dignity*" (UNHCR 2010b; emphasis added). These tenets – honesty and dignity – seem to be the core principles guiding image use at UNHCR. Hopper said that a third priority of UNHCR is emphasizing refugee *voice*.

UNHCR's photo guidelines say that images may not be taken or published of people who express "verbally or physically" that they do not want their image taken or used. Victims of kidnapping, rape, sexual abuse, those living with HIV/AIDS, and those who "might be in danger of reprisals" must have their faces hidden or their names removed (UNHCR 2010b). "If they don't want to be photographed," said Fontanini, "we take a profile or behind, or we take no picture," as in Figure 5.13 of a Colombian refugee with HIV.⁷ In addition, Fontanini said, "a person with a low level of education may not realize the danger that is going to expose himself being in a photograph or video. We talk a lot about the protection of these."

As part of their core principle of *dignity*, UNHCR's photo guidelines encourage showing refugees as "regular people who have survived extraordinary circumstances." "You want to show people disenfranchised, because so many people are," Hopper explained, "but you also want to show them with dignity and the fact that they have, in many cases, achieved something amazing even to survive." For example, Figure 5.14 shows Colombian refugees in Panama making bricks of *panela* (raw, unrefined cane sugar) as part of a UNHCR microcredit project.



Ecuador / Lucilda, a young mother of two, recently discovered that her husband had infected her with HIV. He recently died and the Colombian refugee finds herself alone in an area where people living with HIV or AIDS are stigmatized.

Figure 5.13: UNHCR/ V. Rodas, "Lucilda" (UNHCR/Rodas 2010)

⁷ All UNHCR photos reproduced with permission of UNHCR.



Panama / refugees from Colombia / Arrevachi, on the Rio Chico, near the village of Yaviza / Refugees produce bricks, which are called "panela," from sugar cane as part of a UNHCR-funded micro credit project. The cane bricks, commonly used for building in this area, are sold at the market. The project, which is run by a community of refugees, is overseen by a partner agency.

Figure 5.14: UNHCR/ Boris Heger, "UNHCR-funded micro credit project" (UNHCR/Heger 2006b)

Hopper also said, "I think it's also only fair" to give refugees *voice*. "I think that if you can't take a picture that tells the story instantly, like people crossing over the border at night, or columns of refugees fleeing into a country," she said, "I think the next best thing is to get a group of people who are saying something in their own words, and get a really talented photographer to shoot it. I think that's our only hope in conveying the human drama." In March 2013, articles on UNHCR's website frequently used stories and direct quotes from refugees. For example, Figure 5.15 shows a photograph of a Colombian refugee in Venezuela. The caption and article below the picture provide details of the woman's story, context, and direct quotes.

Hopper was also enthusiastic about emphasizing refugee voice by having refugees tell their own stories through social media or other forms of online journalism. "CNN has the citizen journalist," she said. "Eventually UNHCR, I'm sure, will have the refugee journalist. I think that that's inevitable."



UNHCR News Story: Dreams do come true: advancing local integration in Venezuela

Twenty years after Celina Gelvez was first driven from her home in Colombia, she has been given a house for her family by the government of Venezuela.
FUGU/Javier Jara/ August 2012

Dreams do come true: advancing local integration in Venezuela

GUASDUALITO, Venezuela, 14 August (UNHCR) – Celina Gelvez was celebrating with a house warming party, joined by refugee friends, neighbours, government officials and UNHCR staff. The parish priest of the Guasdualito Cathedral was also there on the patio to bless the new three-bedroom house she had received from the Venezuelan government.

Figure 5.15: UNHCR/ Javier Jara, "Dreams do come true" (UNHCR/Jara 2012)

Producing Images for UNHCR: "Honesty" and its Complications

One of UNHCR's core principles is show refugees as *honestly* as possible. As a UNHCR photographer, Heger said that when he arrives in a place, "I set up straight away my position, I do not hide my cameras at all." When working for organizations such as UNHCR, he said, he does not go to a site with preconceived "shot lists." However, once he arrives, Heger keeps an eye out for good opportunities. "If I arrive inside a house," he said, "and there is a nice ray of sun passing through a small opening in the roof, and there is a scene below, but it doesn't happen right in the place where the light ray comes down, I will not ask people to move location and go

there. But of course I will have that photo in mind, and I will wait and I will always keep looking if the action moves in this place." Figure 5.16 shows the light nicely illuminating a woman in one of Heger's photos.



Struggling with the threat of extinction

Tule women prepare the family meal.
UNHCR / B. Heger / May 2010

Figure 5.16: UNHCR/ Boris Heger, "A young Tule girl prepares the woodfire" (UNHCR/Heger 2010a)

Before sending photographers like Heger into the field, Hopper and her staff prepare short briefing documents with background information on regions and refugee situations. Hopper does not give photographers "shot lists" or specific emotions to photograph. She said, "I don't think you can tell people what emotions to look for. I think you want authenticity, and I think that's the bottom line. Because the last thing we want to do is to say how people should be." Of course, in some cases, UNHCR may require certain shots, such as UNHCR representatives assisting refugees. In order to get the shot, Heger might assign the representatives a place to stand or sit, as was probably the case in Figure 5.17, which shows a UNHCR officer standing

next to a family of internally displaced Colombians. "In this case," Heger said, "we are selling the product. It's not advertisement either, it's reality, but let's say I just make the realities useable."



Barrio 'Altos de la Florida'. IDP family living in a small hut in dire conditions. UNHCR staff talk with IDPs about their situation and how to start up with registration by the authorities and get help from the state.

Figure 5.17: UNHCR/ Boris Heger, "IDP family living in a small hut" (UNHCR/Heger 2008)

The Editing and Production Process: Choosing What to Show and Conceal

Hopper said she always asks photographers to provide detailed, relevant background text with their photos. Snapping photos out of context without asking refugees questions or getting their stories is considered unacceptable. But after Heger gives UNHCR his photos, the process of selecting and editing them for publication is out of his hands. UNHCR "prohibits the digital manipulation of its images beyond cleaning, cropping and color adjustment" (UNHCR 2010b). However, Heger said, "you never can have the same views as the person who edits." Therefore, the possibility of misrepresentation, he said, is "the eternal question."

But Hopper explained that UNHCR tries to do more image editing on the "front end" than the "back end." For example, Hopper explained, offices might get together at the beginning of the year and say, "ok, so next year we want to do a campaign to draw attention to families and the issues they face." Hopper then does research and talks to people throughout UNHCR to "explore every possibility of what a family could be, what it looks like, what they could be doing together." She shares these ideas with the photographer before he or she goes into the field. For example, recently, Hopper said, "UNHCR really needed to show that people in Jordan were cold. So we had to explore all the different ways that you could show that people were cold. So we talked about huddling together with another person, a blanket, ...fire, around a source of warmth. ...And one of them was just a look of unhappiness." Figures 5.18 and 5.19 show two images from this news story.



Left: A Syrian woman comforts her grandson in the arrivals area at Za'atri refugee camps. In recent weeks there has been a rise in the number of relatively wealthy Syrians fleeing to Jordan and more female-headed households have been making the journey.

Right: A Syrian refugee carries insulated sleeping pads to his family's tent in Za'atri refugee camp.

Figure 5.18 (left): UNHCR/ B. Sokol, "A Syrian woman comforts her grandson" (UNHCR/Sokol 2013a)

Figure 5.19 (right): UNHCR/ B. Sokol, "A Syrian refugee carries insulated sleeping pads" (UNHCR/Sokol 2013b)

Refugee Invisibility and Visual Images

Interviewees Fontanini and Hopper from UNHCR and photographer Heger were all knowledgeable about issues of refugee invisibility. Fontanini said that *legal* invisibility can result from lack of legal status, legal miscategorization, and restrictive, narrow definitions. Similar to JRS, Hopper, Fontanini, and Heger described *political* invisibility in terms of what Scott (1998, 2010) calls "illegible" activities, including "clandestine" flight across borders in small groups, integration, living in remote locations, and frequent mobility. Interviewees' views on *social* invisibility due to discrimination and xenophobia were mixed. Hopper and Heger said that discrimination can invisibilize refugees due to misunderstanding and mislabeling. Fontanini, on the other hand, attributed discrimination to the *hyper*-visibility of Colombian refugees.

All three interviewees strongly agreed that invisibility arises from a lack of media and humanitarian attention. The Colombian conflict, said Fontanini, Hopper, and Heger, is protracted and not well-known; people are tired of hearing about it. "It's two deaths here that day, three there that day, five that day," said Heger. "You don't have this ambience of the destroyed city." Hopper also said that the Colombian refugee situation is invisible because it is difficult to capture on film. She said: "If you want to show what urban refugees in some countries look like," said Hopper, "...take a photo of an apartment building where all the curtains are drawn. Because they're all inside, they're all hiding. Urban refugees are often wary of going outside and risking detection." Heger agreed: "The problem of displacement in Colombia," he said, "is image-wise, graphically-wise, invisible... Displaced people just look like other people. There is nothing visually which differentiates them."

Figures 5.20 and 5.21 show two UNHCR photographers' creative attempts to represent displacement in images. Figure 5.20 shows an internally displaced Colombian woman who has

arrived at a bus terminal in Bogota, Colombia, indistinguishable except for her piles of belongings. Figure 5.21 shows an ordinary-looking, newly displaced woman in Colombia holding up a refugee visa provided through a UNHCR registration program.



Figure 5.20 (left): UNHCR/ Boris Heger, "Most IDPs arrive by bus in the capital" (UNHCR/Heger 2006a)

Figure 5.21 (right): UNHCR/ P. Smith, "Mobile registration unit/ Ciudad Bolivar" (UNHCR/Smith 2002)

Challenging or Maintaining Stereotypes; "Typical" Images

"This epoch of the poor malnourished child from Africa, this stereotype, is definitely over," said Heger. "But in the frame of Colombia, would you want to do this kind of stuff, it would be difficult. Because it's not there." Hopper agreed. "I think now, especially if you read the news part of our website, you will see that we try really hard to show images that challenge viewers' stereotypes." For example, Figure 5.22 and Figure 5.23 show two UNHCR photos that

challenge the clichéd image of the refugee: in the first, two Colombian refugees who read as "white" are helped by a UNHCR worker; and in the second, displaced urban men get ready to sell coffee near the city of Cartagena, Colombia.

But even in the case of Colombia, Hopper said that UNHCR is always trying to find the most "interesting" images and stories to draw in viewers. And this is "the touchy point," said Heger. "Of course you can't express a situation with something weak." Figures 5.24 and 5.25 are two images of Colombian displaced people and refugees that show 'interesting' or emotional scenes that evoke sympathy in the viewer. In Figure 5.24, frightened children eat dinner at a home for internally displaced children. In Figure 5.25, the photographer has caught a rare 'action' scene of Colombian refugees arriving in Ecuador after having crossed the border.



Colombia: A struggle for rights

Grimaldo Hernandez, 41, and his wife and two children fled into the hills surrounding their home town, El Salado, after dozens of people were killed there in February 2000 by paramilitaries. A former butcher and tobacco farmer, Grimaldo now sells coffee on the streets of a shantytown on the outskirts of Cartagena. In a good month he can make US\$150, which is enough to cover his bills.
Photo: UNHCR/ Zalmai

Left: Panama / Rio Tuira, Village of Yape. Visit to a refugee family's home. Despite their refugee status, which should grant them the same rights as Panamanian citizens, these Colombian refugees are prevented by the police from leaving their villages. A UNHCR staff member visits this family to discuss their problems, rights, resources, and the eventual intervention of UNHCR.

Right: Grimaldo Hernandez, 41, and his wife and two children fled into the hills surrounding their home town, El Salado, after dozens of people were killed there in February 2000 by paramilitaries. A former butcher and tobacco farmer, Grimaldo now sells coffee on the streets of a shantytown on the outskirts of Cartagena.

Figure 5.22: UNHCR/ Boris Heger, "Visit to a refugee family's home" (UNHCR/Heger 2006c)

Figure 5.23: UNHCR/ Zalmai, Screenshot from "Colombia: A struggle for rights" (UNHCR/ Zalmai 2009a)



Left: This day home for Internally Displaced children in Chigorodo, Urabá, is run by UNHCR's local partner, Compartir. Here vulnerable IDP children receive psychological counselling, basic education and hot meals.
Right: Ecuador / Colombian refugees arriving in Chical. Only a narrow bridge separates the two countries in this part of the border.

Figure 5.24 (left): UNHCR/ P. Smith, "IDPs/ Mutata, Uraba" (UNHCR/Smith 2002)

Figure 5.25 (right): UNHCR/ M. H. Verney, "Colombian refugees arriving in Chical" (UNHCR/Verney 2007)

Like many photographers of refugees, Heger has received criticism for showing images of suffering. For example, two years ago his work was featured in an exposition by The International Red Cross, and "one of the photos showed a child crying." This image, he said, was "completely taken out of context." "Of course some people accused me of using others' misery to attract attention," he said. "And I can understand that. But again, that was one out of hundreds. And I'm there, I'm paid for that, and if something happens, I snap it. Especially working for an organization. And I don't really wonder if I should do it or not. ...It's happening, it's the reality of that day, I take it. But it's just one thing among so many others."

Although Hopper was aware of criticisms of images of suffering, she said that she believes in showing the whole truth. "Sometimes you see people in refugee camps who smile and laugh and look extremely happy," said Hopper, "and photos of this are sometimes appropriate. You don't want to only show people suffering. That being said," she continued, "sometimes people suffer and are traumatized and depressed. If they agree, I think it is also good to

photograph these people. You don't want to pretend everything is happy - many of these people have lost everything, and so that's reality." Figure 5.26 shows a displaced Colombian woman sadly holding up a news article about her brother's death, in contrast to Figure 5.27, a photograph of a Colombian child with an expression of joy.



Left: Yenise's suffering did not end after she fled the massacre in her home town of El Salado nine years ago. A year after the killings, one of her brothers, who had also escaped and was living and working in another town, was killed.

Right: Colombia / Ciudad Bolivar, Bogota. The situation looks quiet, but as soon as the day goes away, armed groups roam the streets.

Figure 5.26 (left): UNHCR/ Zalmaï, Screenshot 2 from "Colombia: A struggle for rights" (UNHCR/Zalmaï 2009b)

Figure 5.27 (right): UNHCR/ Boris Heger, "The situation looks quiet" (UNHCR/Heger 2006)

Nevertheless, in some cases, Hopper said, "the fundraising people" still want to show clichéd, heart-wrenching images of sad children or UNHCR helping sick, poverty-stricken refugees. For example, Figure 5.28 shows two evocative images that appeared on the front page of the UNHCR website in March and April of 2013: in both images, a frightened child greets visitors with the text "Scared and exhausted / Fleeing for their lives. DONATE NOW."

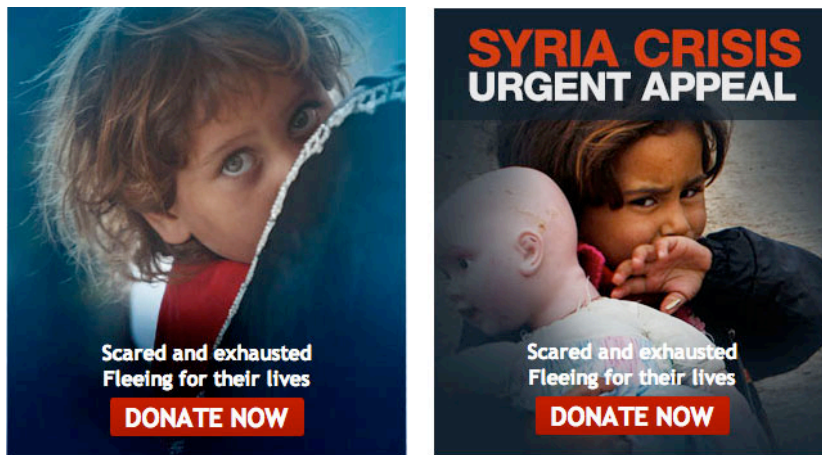


Figure 5.28: UNHCR, Two fundraising images from UNHCR.org (UNHCR 2013j)

Fundraisers at UNHCR study the public's reaction to certain types of images and seek images that people will identify with, Hopper said. Fundraising campaigns are often "tailor-made" for their audience: "In France, they care more about Mali. ...The Americans really care about Syria," she said. Or, for example: "When the weather gets cold," Hopper said, "one of the things that the general public responds to is thinking, well you know, you have a nice warm coat and your house is nice and warm, but there's a lot of people who have to go sit inside a tent."

But sometimes UNHCR's photo unit, Hopper said, is in disagreement with what fundraising wants: "we don't want to see any wide-eyed children looking pathetic; we want to show the whole story." As a general rule, Hopper said, she and her staff actively try to fight against stereotyped images. "Instead of hiring the photographer who wants to go out and give you the classic portfolio of African people in distress," she said, "we want someone to go in and interview a wide array of people – leaders, people on the fringe, young people, women, elderly – and get a good representation of the issues and experiences." UNHCR is also careful to "cover situations that are protracted and not that 'sexy' to the media," she said.

Discussion

In Chapter 4, I described several widely-critiqued characteristics of the image of the "typical" refugee, using literature from chapters 2 and 4. In order to evaluate how JRS and UNHCR interviewees' understandings and uses of images reinforce or challenge qualities that can result in stereotypes and negative forms of invisibilization, I return now to these categories.

1. The refugee is a problem, a crisis, and an anomaly.

According to Nyers (2006) and Malkki (1997), viewing refugees as a problem that requires correction, or speaking of refugee situations as emergencies or crises, could remove refugees' voice and agency from the public eye or place them in a cycle of dependence. When I examined photographs of Colombian refugees and displaced people on the JRS and UNHCR websites in February and March 2013, the text accompanying photos often described refugee situations as crises or emergencies, and emphasized poverty, loss, and lack of 'normal' conditions. For example, Figure 5.29 from JRS and Figure 5.30 from UNHCR both emphasize poverty, loss, lack of comfort, and lack of permanence.



Striving for a brighter future in Colombia: In Buenaventura, many displaced people live in the La Playita neighborhood. Homes are little more than shacks placed on stilts above the shoreline, subject to flooding and contamination from polluted water.

Figure 5.29: JRS/ Christian Fuchs, "Displaced in La Playita" (JRS/Fuchs 2013d)



Colombia: A struggle for rights

Yenis and Grimaldo still miss the home they were forced to flee in El Salado, northern Colombia, in 2000. "Now there is nothing in that place, only vegetation," Grimaldo says. Here in Cartagena they rent three rooms, and one son has to sleep in a hammock because they can't afford a bed.
Photo: UNHCR/ Zalmai

Colombia: A struggle for rights. Yenis and Grimaldo still miss the home they were forced to flee in El Salado, northern Colombia, in 2000. "Now there is nothing in that place, only vegetation," Grimaldo says. Here in Cartagena they rent three rooms, and one son has to sleep in a hammock because they can't afford a bed.

Figure 5.30: UNHCR/ Zalmai, Screenshot 3 from "Colombia: A struggle for rights" (UNHCR/ Zalmai 2009c)

UNHCR interviewee Hopper argued that organizations sometimes need to show loss and absence to raise awareness: "We could not exclude the fact that they are poor and disenfranchised, otherwise, why would we create a media and advocacy campaign to push for their rights?" For example, the photo in Figure 5.30 was part of a photo essay and traveling exhibition meant to highlight the difficulties of urban refugees. Hopper of UNHCR and Fuchs and Small of JRS said that they try to balance these negative photos with images that emphasize agency and abilities. Figure 5.31, for instance, shows a UNHCR image of a woman who started the League of Displaced Women. The photo blends the subject's skills and agency with loss, describing the reality of her situation while also emphasizing her attempts to solve problems. Figure 5.32 from JRS shows a mural painted by Faces and Footprints, a group of Afro-Colombian artists, musicians, and poets in Buenaventura, Colombia who have launched a campaign to resist displacement, violence, and forced recruitment of children into armed groups.



International Women's Day 2013

After fleeing massacres in her village in northern Colombia, Doris founded The League of Displaced Women to denounce human rights abuses and support women's rights. Doris, who now lives in Bogota, has received death threats ever since starting the group. Her family has suffered too – her younger son was killed in 2009 when he returned to their village to check on the family house. Doris continues the struggle in the hope that her grandchildren will live in a peaceful Colombia.
 UNHCR / B. Heger / February 2011

Figure 5.31: UNHCR/ Boris Heger, "Doris Berrio" (UNHCR/Heger 2011)



Figure 5.32: JRS/ Christian Fuchs, "Faces and Footprints" (JRS/Fuchs 2013e)

In order to continue upholding their core principles, UNHCR and JRS could both publish more images that emphasize how Colombian refugees' abilities, skills, and agency help them through crises, rather than highlighting their vulnerability to these difficult situations.

2. The refugee is suffering.

Sontag (1977, 2003) argues that images of suffering people are voyeuristic at best and pornographic at worst. Interviewees from both JRS and UNHCR were aware of the potential ethical problems with using evocative images of suffering. Both organizations said that they try to show refugees with dignity, balance, and relevant information, while also showing refugees' full experiences, which sometimes includes suffering.

UNHCR interviewees Hopper and Heger were sensitive and even apologetic about showing images of suffering. But when I looked through UNHCR's Flickr gallery in March 2013, I found that most images of Colombian displaced people and refugees showed a range of situations and did not noticeably favor images of suffering or distress. I found the same to be true on JRS's website. For example, Fuchs's photograph in Figure 5.33 is a portrait of an internally displaced Colombian boy looking healthy and wearing a big smile. The caption emphasizes the prevention of future problems rather than the treatment of dire present conditions. This emphasis on healthy, ordinary-looking refugees and displaced people in Colombia and neighboring countries, Heger said, is partly because emotionally-evocative portraits of highly-visible suffering are simply not available in those regions. Photographers and humanitarian organizations are therefore forced to find ways of visually representing Colombian refugees without relying on "typical" images.



Colombia: JRS efforts for peace & reconciliation. One area where JRS works is with young people; attempting to prevent the recruitment of youth into armed groups is key to ending the cycle of violence.

Figure 5.33: JRS/ Christian Fuchs, "JRS efforts for peace & reconciliation" (JRS/Fuchs 2012)

3. The refugee is fearful.

Nyers (2006) and Riaño-Alcalá (2008) argue that presenting refugees as visibly fearful can misrepresent refugees' complex realities and support the perception that refugees are essentially emotional or irrational beings, contributing to xenophobia and discrimination. When I looked at JRS and UNHCR's websites and social media sites, I saw a mixture of images and emotions, including many happy or hopeful refugees. UNHCR's photo guidelines even suggest that negative depictions should be avoided when possible. However, in some cases, Heger and Hopper of UNHCR argued that fear and unhappiness are part of the everyday lives of Colombian refugees and displaced people and should be shown. For example, UNHCR's photo of displaced children in Figure 5.24 (page 96) look surprised, unhappy, or afraid.

4. The refugee is an innocent, helpless, or trapped victim.

Linfield (2010) and Moeller (2002) say that favoring images of refugee women and children may be problematic, since they emphasize helplessness instead of agency and ability. Interviewees from JRS and UNHCR did not seem aware of this potential issue. In March



Figure 5.34: JRS/USA, Screenshot from "Invisible and Forgotten: Colombian Refugees" (JRS/USA 2013g)

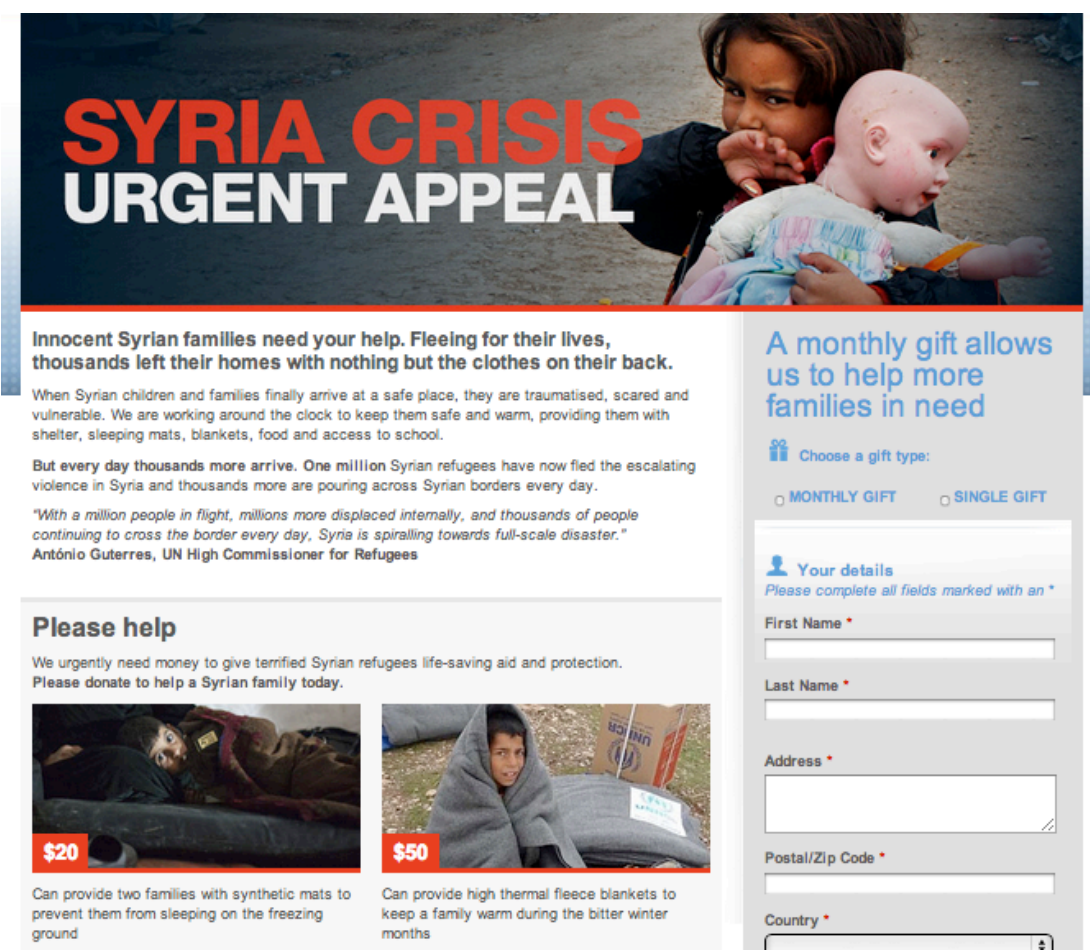


Figure 5.35: UNHCR, Screenshot of Syria "Donate" webpage (UNHCR 2013k)

2013, header images on the JRS and UNHCR websites – especially fundraising pages – focused heavily on images of children, as shown in Figures 5.34 and 5.35 (JRS 2013; UNHCR 2013).

Although Hopper of UNHCR expressed the need to balance women's and children's issues with men's issues, she also said that UNHCR sometimes deliberately uses images of women and children to evoke sympathy. However, in some photos, such as Figure 5.18 (page 92) of a Syrian woman and her grandson, captions give reasons for showing images of women or children. JRS interviewees did not mention a need for gender or age balance, but many of their photos describe educational projects, such as Figure 5.36 of a woman taking literacy classes in Burundi. Providing context and facts can help viewers understand why photos of women and children are being used.



A young mother during the literacy classes in the JRS agricultural school in Kibimba, Burundi (Danilo Giannese/JRS)

Figure 5.36: JRS/ Danilo Giannese, "Women: advocates of community solidarity" (JRS/Giannese 2012)

5. Refugees are anonymous, speechless masses OR
apolitical, ahistorical, individual bodies.

Malkki (1997) and Fair and Parks (2001) warn that visually representing refugees as anonymous, voiceless bodies, forces of nature, or up-close individuals may delete the "middle ground" of historical and political context and voice. The situation in Colombia and in neighboring countries makes images of mass flight and anonymous crowds of refugees impossible to capture visually. However, the removal of refugees' voice and political context is still an issue that image makers and users must consciously address.

Hopper and Fontanini of UNHCR and Small and Fuchs of JRS all discussed their organizations' deliberate efforts to give refugees voice, especially by engaging directly with refugees and presenting refugees' personal stories in their own words. Both websites also publish articles with details of projects that empower refugees. But Fair and Parks (2001) says that personal stories can still obscure refugee voice by ignoring the wider historical and political context surrounding those individuals.

In March 2013, I did find articles and information on both JRS and UNHCR's websites that gave historical and political information about conflicts and refugee situations. For instance, a February 20, 2013 article on the JRS website entitled "Striving for a brighter future in Colombia" provides a range of images, including landscapes and a map, and a history of the Colombia refugee situation, while also zooming in on specific communities and people. UNHCR's website also contains detailed web pages for each geographical region that include photo galleries, statistics, reports, history, articles, and more (see Figure 5.4, page 77). UNHCR's Flickr page also provides maps with each photo showing the location where the photo was taken.

However, although detailed historical and political information are readily available on the UNHCR and JRS websites, some stories and photos focused on individual stories and current problems without providing detailed information about their political and historical context. Simply making it a priority always to connect images and text with broader, supplementary information – for example, through hyperlinks – would do a great deal to give better political and historical context to images of individuals or crowds.

Potential Areas of Concern

After speaking with interviewees from JRS and UNHCR and viewing images online, I found that both organizations consciously try to provide context with their photos, give refugees voice, and show a range of experiences. However, I observed several areas of concern that could support stereotypes or emphasize negative aspects of refugee invisibility.

First, following Malkki (1992, 1997), I consider it an *ethical* consideration to provide viewers access to sufficient information about the historical and political background of refugee situations. Both JRS and UNHCR provide detailed explanatory text on their websites, but interviewees did not state that linking visual images to broad historical and political context was an ethical requirement. Some articles and images that I viewed on both websites only briefly discussed the larger context of refugee situations, and some images were shown out of context. This concern could largely be addressed simply by providing links to additional information whenever images are presented.

Second, when I looked at JRS and UNHCR's fundraising web pages, I noticed that many fundraising images seem to buck ethical trends that the organizations have worked to put in place, especially in the case of UNHCR. Figure 5.37 shows the header for JRS's "Donate" web

page, which features exclusively dark-skinned children, despite JRS's otherwise excellent effort to show a variety of people. And Figure 5.38, a screenshot of UNHCR's main fundraising webpage, shows unhappy, sick-looking refugee children in the header. Images below the header illustrating how particular donation amounts will help refugees target only refugees in camps.

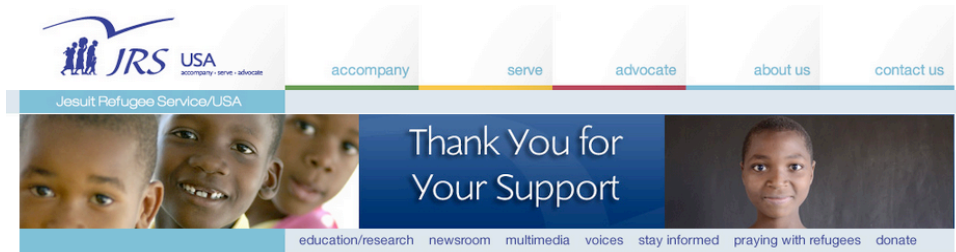


Figure 5.37: JRS/USA, Screenshot from "Donate" webpage (JRS/USA 2013h)

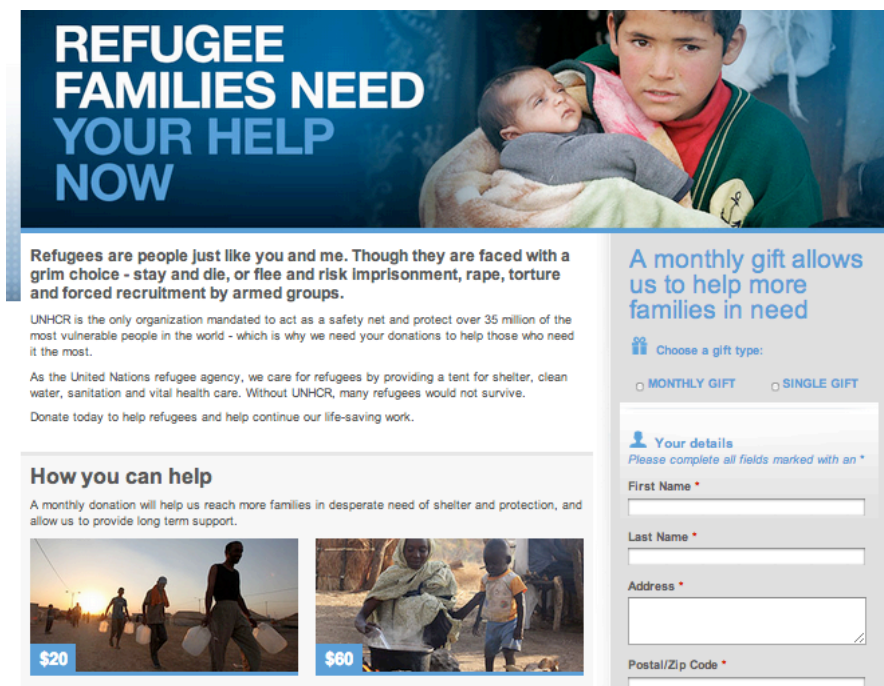


Figure 5.38: UNHCR, Screenshot from "Donate" webpage (UNHCR 2013l)

UNHCR fundraising images like these display nearly all of the characteristics of the "typical" refugee: they are "purely" innocent, suffering, afraid, victims of loss, anonymous bodies in massive emergencies, and voiceless, apolitical, dependent victims. As Jackall and Hirota (2000) suggest, such images imply that in order to make money, fundraising offices must disregard the ethical standards to which their colleagues adhere. I also noted that these images did not include the less-visual situations of Colombian refugees and displaced people. UNHCR's fundraising images therefore misrepresent and invisibilize UNHCR's work in Colombia and neighboring countries, one of the worst regions of the world for forced displacement.

Why do these images persist in spite of organizations' professed attempts to counteract them? Shapiro (1988), Sekula (1978:866), and Sontag (1977) propose that viewers share some of the responsibility for these negative portrayals. Heger voiced a similar concern. "I mean, ok, the press and the editors and the international organizations do have a responsibility in somehow educating the public and making them sensitive to the response," he said. "But in the end, it's a market, no? And there is a demand, and there is an offer. And like in politics, very often the offer is made in consequence of the demands. If you want to hook the most important number of people, you give them what they ask for."

As viewers, we can develop a deeper political consciousness by educating ourselves about refugee issues and reading beyond the captions (Sontag 2003). We can also consciously engage with humanitarian organizations and the images they publish, making our demands heard. Because our actions toward refugees are filtered through institutions like UNHCR and JRS, Boltanski (1999) says that the ordinary citizen basically has two options for engaging on refugee issues: paying, or speaking. Donating money to organizations is often the more attractive option. It feels like action, its results are calculable, and it immediately relieves one of the burden

of guilt (Boltanski 1999). However, donors are often anxious about how their money is being spent, which puts pressure on organizations to show images of "pure" or "authentic" suffering in order to appease donors. Boltanski urges us to consider more seriously the second option: speech. Speech, or the expression of public opinion in dialogue with humanitarian and political institutions, may not be the easiest or quickest way to address our concerns. But Boltanski claims that it is morally necessary to speak against injustice when we are aware of it. Asking questions about the images we see, Linfield (2010) argues, can be a starting point for a thoughtful dialogue about refugees – both "visible" and "invisible" – and their legal, political, and social conditions.

Finally, a third area of concern hinges on the question of "reality." In the previous chapter, I discussed Sontag's and Linfield's understanding of photographic "reality" and how this reality is constantly changed and created through photographers' and editors' choices. As I discussed in Chapter 4, people in positions of power are always constructing the "truths" that viewers see by making and choosing certain images over others. These choices inevitably result in the invisibilization of some aspects of refugees' lives. JRS and UNHCR interviewees were aware that their editorial choices can change or reinterpret reality. But Hopper of UNHCR and Fuchs and Small of JRS nevertheless believed that they are able to represent "reality" through their images. However, it is important to remember that the medium of photography, especially when paired with text, can endow an image with a sense of certainty that conceals other aspects of the subject's identity or life. JRS and UNHCR might avoid using photographs in overtly manipulative ways, but the only "reality" that a photograph can show is a momentary appearance; the rest is interpretation.

Organizations can recognize the powerful role they play in constructing a certain version of "reality" by establishing clearer, more objective protocols for presenting *balanced* content. For

example, by emphasizing images of children, JRS and UNHCR could unwittingly maintain the perception that refugees are vulnerable and in need of paternalistic help, rather than agents who play an active role in their own pasts and futures. Presenting balanced visual material that is also accurate involves tricky editorial choices; but objective criteria for content balance could help to challenge "typical" representations that invisibilize some refugees in destructive ways.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have only examined images of Colombian refugees and displaced people. Because Colombian refugees are less "visible" and defy easy categorization, organizations like JRS and UNHCR have to work harder to portray their situations accurately and make them interesting to viewers. The resulting images do not clearly and easily fall in line with what people imagine; therefore, as Small described, they challenge viewers' "mental maps." Organizations' and photographers' ways of 'making it interesting' in a relatively-invisible landscape allows them to contest ideas of what a refugee is, push boundaries, and force viewers to see Colombian refugees as more than just victims. These more subtle images of refugees invite further thought, even if they are not as immediately striking as some other images.

By using what they have learned from creating and using photographs of "invisible" displaced people and refugees like those from Colombia, humanitarian organizations can work to challenge mental maps in other parts of the world where it is easier to create images that closely resemble the typical image of refugees. But even in these highly-visible regions, the reality of refugees' lives is much deeper, broader, and in many ways more interesting, than "typical" depictions allow.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

*The ideas that exist about refugees in the end have a clear effect
on the reality of their daily lives. (Horst 2006)*

“Invisible” refugees are nothing new: people have fled from persecution at least since the beginning of written history (Arboleda and Roy 1993) and as Scott (2010) argues, they have frequently done so beneath state notice. But relatively recent changes in transportation and communication, along with population growth, have made people more mobile than ever before, resulting in complex categories of displacement and multiple layers of refugee “invisibility” that many consider a problem (Malkki 1992; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Polzer 2008). But treating refugees and invisibility as a “crisis” (Nyers 2006) or an “exception” to the norm (Agamben 2005) will not stem the flow of refugees or lend clarity to complex, ever-changing categories. Horst (2006:52) argues that calling refugee situations crises “obscures the fact that insecurity is the normal state of affairs for many, and people have found their own ways of dealing with it.”

The question of how refugee identity is shaped in the public imagination is also one that will be with us for many years to come. In this thesis, I have explored that public imagination in depth. I discussed how making and using visual images can affect refugees' political, social, and legal visibility by examining the image of the “typical” refugee in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I sought to understand how humanitarian organizations' understandings of refugee invisibility challenge or contest the ways that they make and use images. When organizations make and use

photographs of invisible Colombian refugees, I concluded, they are, indeed, forced to challenge the pervasive, public imagination of the "typical" refugee.

But Shapiro (1988), Jackall and Hirota (2000), and Foucault argue that people in a position of relative power, such as workers at humanitarian organizations, are constantly making strategic choices about how to represent the less-powerful people they assist. These choices inevitably result in the production of a nuanced reality and identity that refugees themselves are often powerless to contest (Barker 1998). As a result, even humanitarian organizations that represent refugees sensitively and challenge pejorative stereotypes cannot help but contribute to a public image that universalizes and obscures the complex realities of refugees' lives.

However, in a world where quick, easy communication supports the growth of diasporas and other transnational communities, many refugees themselves can play a role in challenging and contesting the ways they are imagined. Refugees who are made invisible by forces beyond their control can not only participate politically and solicit aid outside of official channels, but they can also challenge those who represent them pejoratively by forging their own public identities (Brees 2010; Horst 2006).

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer some closing thoughts and suggestions on relevant issues that have come to mind while writing this thesis, including how new forms of media might contribute to a reconstruction of the humanitarian production of images. I finish by offering ideas for new directions in research that could build on this study. But first, I take a step back from visual images to discuss a pressing concern that highlights often-unseen power struggles that shape the ways that public images are made and maintained: the international definition of "refugee."

Changing Categories and the 1951 Convention Definition of “Refugee”

In Chapter 2, I mentioned that “the elephant in the room” is the question of why the UN still upholds an outdated definition of “refugee” that was written in 1951. Even the High Commissioner of UNHCR, António Guterres, has recognized “the emergence of a number of complex and interconnected global mega-trends” in the contemporary world that the 1951 Convention does not address, including “population growth, urbanization, food and energy insecurity, water scarcity, and climate change” (UN 2013b). These “mega-trends” result in new categories of displaced people, including “invisible,” urban, environmental, and other forcibly displaced people who lack or are ineligible for protection (UN 2013b).

Partly because of population growth and demographic changes, contemporary conflicts result in unprecedented numbers of refugees. In Syria, a mere two years of violence have resulted in over a million refugees and several million internally displaced people (UNHCR 2013b). Many are protected in highly-visible refugee camps, but in Jordan, about 70% live in urban areas or other host communities and may have difficulty gaining protection (UNHCR 2013c). Furthermore, the increasing occurrence of violent, non-state actors like guerilla groups, whose massacres and intimidation tactics are not considered “persecution” under the 1951 Convention, has resulted in growing numbers of people living under insecure and irregular migration statuses (Korovkin 2008; Arboleda and Hoy 1993). This discordance between the official definition and reality results in frequent miscategorization and fuzzy, confused distinctions between displaced people, refugees, and other types of migrants.

Furthermore, people displaced by natural disasters, or environmental refugees, are not entitled to protection under the 1951 Convention definition or any regional instruments (Docherty and Giannini 2009). But environmental refugees have become increasingly common

since the 1990s (Myers 2002). “Climate change,” write Docherty and Giannini (2009:349), “will force millions of people to flee their homes over the coming century” due to rising sea levels, desertification, storms, and other disasters. In fact, the total number of environmental refugees in coming years may be even greater than the number of “traditional” refugees who are protected under the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol: studies predict between 50 and 200 million environmental refugees by the year 2100 (Docherty and Giannini 2009). Many may come from places like Bangladesh, 80% of which is at risk of permanent flooding from rising sea levels, and which has the eighth-largest population in the world (CIA 2013). Currently, no international legal instrument exists to deal with environmentally displaced people (Myers 2002).

Despite the UN’s recognition of these changes in the refugee landscape, the only real attempts to broaden the definition of “refugee” on an international scale have been regional instruments, such as the 1984 Cartagena Declaration. But national governments are not internationally obligated to adopt these broader definitions, and it seems unlikely that they will accept refugees in non-traditional categories out of goodwill. Perhaps the UN should more seriously consider a change to the 1951 Convention definition or, as Docherty and Giannini (2009) suggest, hold a new Convention to address emerging categories of displaced people such as environmental refugees.

Who Is Responsible for Representing Refugees?

The 1951 Convention definition of “refugee” is just one symptom of a broader problem of restrictive, xenophobic policies that mold a public perception that refugees are a “problem,” claim Nyers (2006) and Malkki (1997). Governments everywhere are putting up walls, crafting stricter policies, and committing human rights abuses toward refugees (Arboleda and Hoy 1993;

Gibney 2000; Brown 2010; Nessel 2009). Even if organizations and the media work together to change the way they represent refugees to the public, as many are now trying to do, they will still have to work within a powerful system in which refugees are problematized and marginalized (Nyers 2006; Jackall and Hirota 2000). Because of this hegemonic discourse of exclusion and intolerance, it may be extremely difficult to completely avoid images that stereotype and invisibilize many refugees.

However, I would like to suggest that given today's new media landscape, refugees might be able to partially challenge and undermine these power relationships, not only through the sorts of under-the-table, invisible strategies that Scott (2010) suggests, but also through self-representation (Horst 2006). More refugees today are living in urban areas, and more rural communities have some access to internet and phone services (UN 2013; Gottwald 2004). Therefore, Brees (2010) and Horst (2006) argue that refugees are increasingly likely to form diasporas and participate in active, well-connected transnational communities. Participation in these transnational communities can allow refugees to self-determine their social and political identities through online forms of communication such as blogs, e-mail, and social media (Brees 2010). Active involvement in transnational communities can also enable refugees to take better control over their economic situations through cross-border businesses, remittances, and assistance of fellow community members, decreasing their reliance on external aid (Brees 2010). These forms of organization and self-representation may challenge and deconstruct the ways that humanitarian organizations interact with refugees.

Humanitarian organizations can respond by challenging themselves to break down old patterns of paternalistic assistance and shift their role to fostering and encouraging refugee self-

representation. By doing so, they can heed Malkki's (1997:398) call for a more “historicizing humanism” that gives refugees “narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory.” For example, organizations can facilitate refugee access to education, reliable means of communication, and online training, especially in rural communities that may be under-represented. And they can use their websites and support networks to promote refugee education, community connection, and self-assistance strategies.

Finally, organizations can participate more actively in an overhaul of the way media is performed. Electronic media allow all individuals with access and ability – not only legal citizens – to craft their own identities through media blogs, social media, and citizen journalism (Horst 2006). Instead of only writing news articles that quote refugees, organizations could shift their online presence to more updated forms of media that facilitate refugee self-representation, inclusion of online refugee communities, and community formation. For example, the software company Esri has used ArcGIS, a geographical information system (GIS), to create "story maps" that link geographical regions to recent stories, videos, and other forms of social media, as shown in the screenshot in Figure 6.1. Organizations could use software like this to encourage refugee communities to create, post, and link their own stories and photos.

Horst (2006) warns that a focus on online self-representation might bias the image of refugees in other ways, especially in favor of young, male, and/or urban refugees. However, by being aware of this likely bias, organizations can anticipate it and play a role in counteracting it.



Figure 6.1: Esri story map, "Syria's Deepening Crisis."
<http://storymaps.esri.com/stories/2013/syria>.

Looking Ahead

Due to the limited scope of this study, I mainly discussed photography, talking only briefly about social media in this conclusion and very little about video. Research could build on this study by examining how refugees are represented in other forms of media. Future studies on refugee representation through images would also benefit from more direct fieldwork with specific refugee communities.

Another interesting extension from this research would be to conduct collaborative research between academics, organizations, and refugees in order to examine the use of images of refugees more thoroughly, including organizations' understandings and strategic manipulations of refugee visibility and invisibility. A possible collaborative goal of such a study would be to improve an organization's image use and facilitate refugee self-representation.

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