

The White Savior and the Waif: A Human Rights Critique of Humanitarianism

2020's Summer of Black Lives Matter protests in the US and abroad brought to the surface concerns about racial discrimination and inequality in the Nobel Peace Prize-winning humanitarian NGO, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders.) 1000 employees sent an open letter decrying "dehumanizing" field operations overseen by a "privileged white minority." One of those signatories, the British physician and chair of the UK's MSF board, Javid Abdelmoneim, wrote:

I have understood how the humanitarian aid sector at large is an industry that is a product of a paternalistic White Saviour complex bound close to the old and despicable colonial narrative of "the white man bringing civilisation to the savage"...This is reflected in today's image of the European humanitarian movement bringing succour to needy people of Africa...MSF language perpetuates those powerful colonial tropes: we go "on mission," I'm an "expat," we've "beneficiaries."

It has not just been MSF facing criticism: Oxfam, Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee, and agencies of the UN have all come under pressure from within and without their organizations to confront the historical legacies of colonialism, and address what the Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole calls the "White Savior Industrial Complex," in their operations, media, and collaborations with human rights abusing states. I, too, have heard echoes of that complex as I have worked with refugee university students from the war in Syria over the last 8 years to improve access to higher education for displaced young people.

The humanitarian industry that Abdelmoneim describes has remained largely unchanged and unexamined during the last century. What is different now, though, is that the voices of those facing abuse and discrimination can more easily be raised through forms of social and traditional media, the arts and literature. Equally, as the MSF letter shows, those voices have become difficult *to silence*.

Listening to those voices and those of refugees, genocide survivors and relief workers in the field, has been a problem for historians and others in the humanities and social sciences, limiting the value of the humanities to ongoing public debates about humanitarianism. *The White Savior and the Waif: A Human Rights Critique of Humanitarianism* that will define and map a new approach to the study, criticism and practice of modern humanitarianism. The book will follow from ideas and histories first explored in my *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (California, 2015;) and add to a growing literature evident, for example, in the journal *Humanity*, that seeks to build productive conversations among humanities professionals and the broad global-public of the humanitarian community, including donors, policy makers, refugees, and aid workers. The book will be a historian's practice-informed approach similar to journalist David Reiff's 2003 *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*.

The book rejects the way humanitarianism envisions and creates what I call the *Waif* – the abandoned, adrift, alienated, often female human that sits at the center of humanitarianism. The *Waif* is the most durable leitmotif of humanitarian history because of her prominence in the self-justification and logic of humanitarianism itself. The refugee or survivor becomes a mere symbol, incapable of possessing history because of the timelessness of her nature and dependence on the humanitarian for mere survival. At the same time the *Waif* legitimizes the racialized, paternalistic and ahistorical practices of the *White Savior*, which harken to colonial pasts and reveal structural inequality and inequities in the present.

Systematically recovering the voices of refugees, mass rape victims, and genocide survivors in the study of humanitarianism must be a fundamental feature of efforts to create a more humane, non-discriminatory and effective humanitarianism in the now. An equal goal of this work, is to demonstrate how the *tools of the humanities* can support organizations like MSF which are engaged in fundamentally important work begin and sustain the kinds of critical conversations about their “industry’s” past. By providing them with a historical grounding in the colonial and compromised history of humanitarianism, my work will establish a useful framework for a new way of thinking about humanitarianism that centers on the human, shared humanity, and human rights.

Sources and Organization: *The White Savior and the Waif*, as demonstrated in the writing sample (an early exploration of the themes of this project written for a generalist Middle East Studies journal) uses an interdisciplinary framework, including history, area studies, anthropology, ethnography, literature, art history, and the study of gender; and draws from a wide variety of source material in several languages (Arabic, Turkish, French, and Armenian); employs archives and public materials of aid organizations, the memoirs, poetry, books and other traces of refugees and displaced peoples aid workers, administrators and observers. Material culture and the built environment of informal settlements and refugee camps provide additional evidence. Of particular importance is reading archives and other sources generated by humanitarian organizations and governments “against the grain,” first understanding the narrative those archives seek to establish and then dismantling that narrative as a way to retrieve the voices of the unheard.

Following an engaging introduction, the book unfolds in four core chapters; to build an approachable narrative framework, where possible each section is centered on the lived historical experience of individual survivors, refugees, aid workers and others.

Part One: A History of Humanitarianism from Below: The history of humanitarianism is all too often written, to use an idea from social history, from the “top down” rather than “from below.” The section will explore the way humanitarianism as an enterprise understands its own history, the way it has silenced other voices and constructed the image of the waif through literature, the graphic arts, media and photography.

Part Two: The Aid Worker: The aid worker in the field, who is sometimes dispatched from the center or recruited in the area of a humanitarian action, sits at the intersection of issues raising concerns in contemporary aid organizations. Using memoirs, oral history where possible and other traces, this section unravels the role of aid

workers as an agent of both humanitarianism's silencing efforts and resistance to its dehumanizing practices. It will focus on the life and decades-long career of the American relief worker Stanley Kerr.

Part Three: Beyond Caring: Friendship and Mutual Respect: What is the ethical basis for humanitarianism? This section asks a series of questions about how humanitarianism has legitimized itself as a professional practice and social good in the past as a way to explore a more human-focused alternative, including the possibility of building humanitarian practice on the twinned concepts of friendship and mutual respect. This section will be built around the experience of a Berlin-based German family and a group of Syrian refugees they befriended after 2015 to explore the idea of *Willkommenskultur* – welcoming culture.

Part Four: The Refugee Archive: The final part of the book asks a question: how would refugees and others receiving humanitarian assistance want to be heard? This chapter would seek to draw those voices into conversation and reexamine the oft-used humanitarian concepts of resilience and empowerment, the language of entrepreneurialism, and the concept of the "deserving refugee," all of which sit at the center of claims of dehumanization and raise important questions for democratic societies about assimilation and integration.

Competencies, Skills and Access: I am the author of two major historical monographs: *Being Modern in the Middle East* (Princeton, 2006) and *Bread from Stones*. Both books are taught widely at the universities in the US and abroad. The second has received multiple awards, including from the Pacific Branch of the American Historical Association and the Ahmanson Foundation. I have published widely in the fields of Human Rights Studies, Humanitarianism and History, including in policy-focused publications and for the general public. Equally, I bring to the project my own experiences in human rights and humanitarian action, from being a young election monitor in Eritrea a generation ago, working to create links with the Iraqi academic community in the wake of the 2003 US invasion, to more recently assisting the California legislature to craft laws to promote refugee higher education access, and administering a major Ford-foundation sponsored project for refugee university students. I direct the University of California system's largest Human Rights Studies program.

I received the Institute of International Education *Centennial Medal* as recognition of my work with refugee students and academics; and I am currently a Public Scholarship Fellow at my university engaged in policy writing derived from my first-hand experiences in the Middle East and the Balkans. Through my own extensive humanitarian work abroad, I have developed a network of professionals in the field who can serve as interlocutors for this project; because of my work in refugee university assistance, I have also developed a large network of refugee and former refugee colleagues and friends, who equally can assist. I have used some of the archives needed for this project before; over the last few years, many of the archives of aid organizations, as a response to more transparency have been digitized.

Final Product and Dissemination: The final book, which should appear in late-2022/early 2023 will be between 50,000-60,000 words to ensure readability and increase the likelihood it will be read by humanitarian professionals. In addition to book talks, podcasts, radio shows and tours as I've done in the past, a special focus

for dissemination will be a series of articles and essays on the subject I plan to place in non-academic publications in an effort to make a connection with those in the field of humanitarian action. My awards and recognition in the field, and a track record of publishing outside of the academy indicates that my ideas will have an impact. I will also be working with my publisher to create a website for the book, where readers – humanitarian professionals and refugees and displaced peoples – can continue to engage.