

# Troubling Sympathy: Teaching Refugee Narratives

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## Introduction: Assigning Narratives of Human Suffering

*I always recited speeches from MacBeth and Julius Caesar, as those were the adults' favorites. I was always eager and excited to read for them, because it made me feel that I was really good at speaking the English language. (Ishmael Beah on his experience with English literacy at seven-years-old, *A Long Way Gone*, p. 105)*

STORIES ABOUT REFUGEE EXPERIENCE HAVE BEEN POPULAR ASSIGNED READING IN BOTH COLLEGE WRITING COURSES AND COMMON READING PROGRAMS. Examples include non-fiction books like *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team*, and *One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference* by Warren St. John (2009), *War Child: A Child Soldier's Story* by Emmanuel Jal (2009), and *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah (2007). Others could also be fictionalized accounts, such as *What is the What* by Dave Eggers (2007) and *Weeping Under This Same Moon* by Jana Laiz (2008). Based on survey data compiled by Barbara Fister (2015) and the *National Resources Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition* (2015), refugee narratives have been used in first-year common reading programs by at least twenty-six different colleges and universities between 2007 and 2015. Beah's child soldier memoir was also the most read book by high school seniors in Michigan (O'Keefe, 2014), the state where I currently work. As schools continue to articulate a global mission to incoming students, programs look outward for ways to develop community on campus.

With increased media coverage and an amplified, divisive rhetoric on the "vetting" of various refugee groups from certain parts of the world, the experiences of refugees are a common object of public discourse. What purpose, then, does assigning such narratives serve? In my own classes, I have developed assignments on stories of refugee experience as a way to help students foster a global perspective. But, the decision to assign these particular kinds of narratives also

raises questions about the “ethics of reading” (Gallop, 2000) and the politics of representation (Trinh, 2004). By drawing on sample student writing in response to those stories, this essay attempts to understand how readers might question and reflect on their own consumption—and exploitation—of human suffering.

The range of ways readers, students and teachers alike, might respond to refugee narratives can be limited and speaks to what Luc Boltanski (1999) terms “distant suffering,” which describes the relationship between the “spectator” and representations of human suffering. A framework of “distant suffering” helps describe a paradigm in which there is a “spectator who views the suffering” and is able to do so “without being directly exposed to the same misfortune” (p. 114). Analysis, Boltanski has argued, has often focused on the “spectator’s internal states,” that is, on how a spectator feels or is moved to action. Instead, he proposes that more attention be paid to “the formation of statements about suffering” (p. 41). In an effort to understand statements made about refugee experience in a classroom setting, I apply this theory of “distant suffering” to student writing collected from two college writing courses in which I asked students to read and respond to the above refugee narratives.

Although many of the student excerpts in this case study reproduce discourses of sympathy and reinforce the kind of distance between spectator and subject Boltanski describes, a close reading of student writing also shows that students might *trouble sympathy*, or work toward a critical engagement with the text. I think of “troubling” in this case as having a double meaning. As an adjective, expressions of sympathy can be described as troubling when they are unreflectively informed by economies of aid and charity. They reinforce rather than question global attitudes of condescension that cast refugees as passive objects of aid (MacDonald, 2015; Malkki, 1995). As a verb, to *trouble sympathy* would be to position oneself deliberately—self-consciously—in relation to the text. The local-global contexts in which one consumes narratives of human suffering would be one aspect of this reflection. If storytelling is a means of cultivating empathy in readers, then troubling one’s own reading might work to unsettle expected reactions in order to open space for a deliberate sense of complicity in global events. To trouble discourses of sympathy would be to move from an impulse of sympathy to a reflection on complicity.

The central questions guiding this essay have been: How do statements about human suffering in student writing reproduce discourses of sympathy? How might student writing move from expressions of “internal states,” or emotional responses, to ethical reflections on complicity? It is important to note that my purpose for using student writing as an object of inquiry is not to make moral judgments about the student as a person, but to acknowledge the performative aspects of student writing and use that knowledge to provide teachers an opportunity to reflect on how we might frame these narratives in sufficiently complex ways. I am also concerned with how we might examine our own complicity as teacher-scholars in the production of sympathy. One way to trouble sympathy, then, would be to provide students and teachers alike opportunities to situate themselves within complex, asymmetrical networks of production, circulation, and consumption.

### **Distant Suffering: From Sympathy to Complicity**

*“Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want.” (Eggers, p. 21)*

Scholarship at the intersection of pedagogy and refugee studies typically addresses questions that arise for teachers when they have refugee students in their classrooms (Bekerman

& Zembylas, 2013). Less attention has been paid to the use of stories about refugee experience *as texts* for student engagement, even though it is not an uncommon curricular practice. Yet, discursive as well as visual representations of refugees often conform to Western expectations. For instance, Liisa Malkki (1995) observes how depictions of any kind of universal “refugee experience” constitute myths that benefit the aid economy (p. 511). Popular refugee stories similarly appear to exhibit familiar patterns. Many tell a kind of “Amazing Grace” narrative: Those who were once “lost” then were “found,” rescued by saviors from the West and given a chance at a new life.

A strong example of this pattern can be seen in one of the texts I assigned, *Weeping Under This Same Moon*. Refugee narratives often begin by showing some form of agency and stability, such as when Mei, one of two narrators, describes her love of painting before she is forced to leave her home in Vietnam (p.10). Then, catastrophic events and political turmoil remove that agency, producing what Malkki calls the “ideal” refugee figure (p. 385). This process renders the refugee as “victim,” while also imposing other familiar stereotypes, like refugees being thought of as “dishonest,” “unmanageable,” “hysterical” (Malkki, 1996, p. 384-85), “savage” (Powell, 2012, p. 302), and “fearsome” (Zembylas, 2010, p. 32). Then, readers learn about the refugee camp—a liminal space between conflict and community, loss and finding—where refugees are almost entirely dependent on foreign aid. Narratives reach a climax when the refugee figure is “found” in the camp and deemed “worthy” of resettlement in an English-speaking host nation, a process that is dominated by geopolitical agendas rather than need (Nyers, 2006). There, refugees are “given” the chance to start a “new life,” gaining a new sense of agency, though an agency that often has unacknowledged limitations.

Readers consume narratives of human suffering at a safe distance and have the privilege of constructing a response to that story. The response is often one of sympathy or pity. Boltanski (1999) observes how “pity” *moves* the spectator from a focus on “one’s own needs” to “the needs of someone else” (p. 47). Pity is then expressed through a communicative act (speech, writing, etc.) wherein spectators “take up a posture which indicates, in words but also by the way in which the emotion is expressed,” the possible ways they might act, when and if they could (p. 47). Put another way, the relationship distant suffering describes is one in which the spectator is compelled to act in some way, either through direct action or through a “posture,” a performance, or discursive gesture.

Yet, according to Marita Eastmond (2007), refugee writers are “self-conscious about the power relations attending to the production of biographical texts” (p. 248). The complex philosophical relationship between writing and lived experience requires that important distinctions be made between “life as lived,” “life as experienced,” “life as told,” and “life as text” (p. 249). During the writing process, “an experience is never directly represented but edited at different stages” (249). These complexities in the representation of experience would fit well with theories of phenomenology, or the use of experience as an “object” of inquiry (Stoller, 2009, p. 709), particularly in regard to issues of “perception” and “exclusion” (p. 717). For instance, perceiving an experience necessitates the exclusion of others and is therefore always a process of interpretation (p. 718). However, one important critique of phenomenology is it does not always focus specifically on discourse (p. 722), and because this case study examines *discursive* interpretations of refugee experience, Boltanski’s framework of distant suffering provides a more useful lens for reflecting on the relationship between spectator and text, between the “subject who is describing” a response and the representation of human suffering that is being responded to (p. 24).

One consideration troubling sympathy in the contexts of the classroom is the performative aspect of student writing (Newkirk, 1997; Buley-Meissner 1990). In this regard, students' responses as readers and writers are all "postures" to some degree. When examining excerpts of their writing, it is difficult to determine to what extent a given statement is an expression of critical reflection or a performance of reflection, if it is a result of audience expectations, or in this case, their teacher's, or a messy combination of all of these. But, what kind of reflection would lead to an ethical engagement with texts that describe human suffering? According to Lili Chouliaraki (2006), spectators might express an "awareness" of distant suffering and enter a "process of deliberation" in which "they are always part of an ongoing conversation, even if this conversation takes place in the confines of their own homes – indeed, as a whisper" (p. 45). A posture or not, an expression of awareness might represent a move to *trouble* sympathy, especially if it were the result of deliberation among other readers in the classroom. Students might even enter into a kind of deliberation with themselves, as they negotiate between the "self writing" and the "self being written" (Buley-Meissner, 1990, p. 48). The classroom can afford students and teachers the opportunity to identify the terms of deliberation and analyze them alongside the genre and audience expectations of refugee narratives.

The reliability of narrators provides one such object of deliberation. In the texts I selected, the most explicit example would be *What is the What* by Dave Eggers. Subtitled *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*, Eggers' novel is a fictionalized account of Deng, a "Lost Boy of Sudan," who was orphaned during Sudan's civil war with several thousand other unaccompanied minors from what is now South Sudan. They lived in refugee camps for ten years before being chosen for resettlement in the U.S. Early in the novel, Deng—as narrator—reflects on what could be referred to as the "genre" of the Lost Boys' story (Varvogli, 2012, p. 27). Deng explains how

...sponsors and newspaper reporters and the like expect the stories to have certain elements, and the Lost Boys have been consistent in their willingness to oblige. Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want, and that means making them as shocking as possible. (Eggers, 2007, p. 21)

Through this admission, Deng identifies the performativity in his own story. During class discussion, my students found this confession to increase their trust in Deng as a narrator.

But, Eggers is the author, so an additional layer of questions about trust and ethos affect readers' presumptions in this regard. Eggers shadowed Deng in real life, and *What is the What* might be thought of as a kind of experimental ethnography. In the book's preface, Deng accounts for some of these complexities, writing, "[I]t should be noted that all major events in the book are true. The book is historically accurate, and the world I have known is not different from the one depicted within these pages" (p. xiv). Critical readers might still have questions about the ethics of Eggers' account. As a white, American man, he speaks from a relative position of privilege. His role in the production of distant suffering is contradictory. He commodifies the story, but aims to raise awareness. These are compelling questions to take up in class discussion as well as scholarly research on displacement and voice. The book reads like post-modern fiction, a fragmented voice that places more importance on ways of reading than on the truths of story. In fact, a cursory review of scholarship shows that the above excerpt—"Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want"—has appeared in at least nine peer-reviewed publications in areas

such as biographical studies (Peek, 2012; Smith & Watson, 2012), African and postcolonial literature (Goyal, 2014; Krishnan, 2015; Moynagh, 2011), as well as literacy studies, cultural studies, and English studies (MacDonald, 2015; Geertsma, 2012; Powell, 2012; Varvogli, 2012).

A framework of distant suffering can afford readers opportunities to reflect on their own positionality. In *Giving an Account of One's Self*, Judith Butler (2005) provides a useful reflection on the self-Other relationship, that “it may be that only through an experience of the other under conditions of suspended judgment do we finally become capable of an ethical reflection on the humanity of the other” (p. 45). To what extent can reading and writing within the rhetorical situation of the classroom make possible the conditions for this kind of “suspended judgment?” Or, does reading and writing only provide voyeurism and commodification because of the limits imposed by distant suffering? I wonder if reading stories of human suffering are fruitless exercises in pity production or if the performative nature of reading and writing might be leveraged to open space for “ethical reflection,” for students and teachers to do more than “posture.”

In “Empathy and the Critic,” Ann Jurecic (2011) explores such questions in relation to debates about the role of literature in the fostering of empathy. Jurecic writes,

[T]here is a surprising level of agreement, from educators to politicians and philosophers, and even talk show hosts, that *reading literature* makes us more empathetic. This consensus affirms the pedagogy of many teachers of college literature who assign works that broaden students’ understanding of human experience to encourage them to develop empathy for people very different from ourselves. (emphasis in original, p. 10)

Although reading might help audiences identify with survivors of human suffering, Jurecic warns that a feeling of identification might actually “prevent one from recognizing one’s own complicity with the social and political structures that engender such violence” (p. 11). Jurecic’s observation about “complicity” is a crucial component of troubling sympathy. For instance, Boltanski advocates a form of “active responsibility,” that spectators should seek to understand how they might be implicated in the lives of those they read about, of the stories they consume, that they are, in fact, “in a causal relationship with this suffering as agents of an oppressive system” (p. 76). Expressions of empathy, I believe, are not enough. In excerpts of student writing, such expressions constitute more of a posture or performance than a reflection on complicity. A reflection on complicity would instead work to trouble sympathy, would make reading more active, and would make reflection on the contexts of one’s own consumption of human suffering a central subject of inquiry.

### Curricular Choices and Design

I assigned refugee narratives as central readings in two junior-level writing classes at two different four-year universities. The first was at a large research campus in Wisconsin; students in the course were predominantly white and middle class women. I taught the other at my current university in southeast Michigan, where students are linguistically and culturally diverse, though this course was mostly filled with white, English-speaking women. Several students in the class

identified as Muslim and were from Arabic-speaking countries. About a third of the students were also transfer students from local community colleges.

Both courses satisfied general education requirements for education majors. In Wisconsin, the course met outcomes such as “knowledge of human cultures” and “intercultural knowledge and competence.” In Michigan, the course met outcomes like “identify, summarize, and understand the problem, question, and/or issue” and “consider and interpret alternative perspectives to support analysis.” Both universities also endorse a global vision for research, teaching, and community engagement. The two courses differed in that the Wisconsin course specifically focused on examining refugee resettlement, while the Michigan course engaged more with issues of representation. Refugee narratives were a major component, but as discussed shortly, the final project asked students to reflect more on their own communities and cultures.

### Text Selection

An important part of this case study’s design was the selection of course readings. The stories I presented to students both conformed to audience expectations and challenged them. The texts students read included: *What is the What* (Eggers, 2007), *A Long Way Gone* (Beah, 2007), and *Outcasts United* (St. John, 2009), as well as *War Child: A Child Soldier’s Story*, a memoir by hip-hop artist and former “Lost Boy of Sudan” Emmanuel Jal (2009), and *Weeping Under this Same Moon*, a novelization of the 1970s Vietnam refugee crisis by Jana Laiz (2008). Then, in order to begin the work of *troubling*, I assigned critical essays on identity (Trinh, 2004), the idea of “Africa” as a key term (Ferguson, 2007), representations of refugees (Malkki, 1996), close-reading (Gallop, 2000), and rhetorical analysis (Hauser, 2002).

Trinh T. Minh-ha’s (2004) essay, “Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference,” helped open up a discussion of insider/outsider perspectives (p. 217). My goal was to have students consider how a reader might be an “outsider” to refugee experience, not to increase the distance between them and the text, but to acknowledge how that distance might prevent readers from ethical engagement with the texts. A common response from students, though, was to apply the “outsider” term to the refugee subjects in the stories. Although useful for analyzing the positionality of the narrator in *What is the What*, for instance, or the difficulties of assimilation, I had trouble moving students toward a consideration of their own positions as readers or spectators.

The first chapter of James Ferguson’s (2007) book, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, allowed us to identify the kinds of assumptions Western audiences have about the idea of “Africa.” Similarly, Malkki’s (1996), “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization” provided a framework for examining mainstream representations of refugee identity. Students often expressed surprise that the term “refugee” could be used in positive ways (p. 377).

In order to keep students focused on textual evidence, they read about and practiced Jane Gallop’s (2000) methods of close-reading and Gerard A. Hauser’s (2002) strategies for rhetorical analysis. By being faithful to the text itself, the actual words on the page (Gallop, 2000, p. 7), I wanted to avoid generalizations and hypothetical examples that might easily reproduce expected audience reactions of sympathy.

## Assignments

The excerpts in the following sections come from students' final projects. In the Wisconsin course, students were asked to research a population of refugees not addressed in the books we read. In the Michigan course, students examined communities they might see themselves as a part of and how those groups were represented through images, metaphors, and other discourses. Therefore, while I assigned refugee narratives in both classes, the student writing from one class more directly (though not exclusively) addressed the questions raised in this paper.

Weekly, low-stakes writing in both classes involved students in similar tasks, specifically, what students were thinking about the assigned readings. I attempted to guide their responses with this prompt:

Personal perspective is important for this class. So, in lieu of summary, I want you to include your personal reaction to these texts as part of your analysis. This is important because texts often make us respond in one way or another, and we need to understand how and why we, as readers, respond the way we do. We will call this “reflective” writing.

I had mixed feelings about including weekly assignments as part of this case study and ultimately decided to narrow the focus just on final projects. I wanted students to have the freedom to express whatever they wanted at the moment and did not want to set them up for easy critique. At the same time, I think this is a limit of this case study because if these texts were included, I would be able to show a more visible trajectory between where we started as a class and where we ended up in the final projects.

My hope was that students would try to describe the contexts in which they read the assigned narratives. The kind of feedback I gave to them on writing throughout the semester included statements like, “Try to explain what expectations you have when readings stories like this and where your expectations come from” and “On the last page, you ‘reflect’ on Eggers’ choices, but I want you to reflect on your own choices, your own reactions as a reader, and why you think you have those expectations and assumptions of the text.” Students were skilled in analyzing authors and texts, but did not always apply those ideas to themselves as readers.

In the final project for the Wisconsin course, students were asked to apply what they learned to individual research on a refugee population that we did not discuss in class. Some of these groups included Hmong communities, Georgian refugees, and the “Lost *Girls* of Sudan.” My goals were to engage students in the tricky work of representation and then to reflect on their own roles as readers and writers. In my guidelines for the final project, I described the reflective component by asking questions like, “What responsibility does the reader/viewer have when consuming stories of refugee experience? If your impulse is to feel sympathy, pity, or empathy toward the people in these stories, then why, and more importantly, where do these impulses come from?”

In the Michigan course, the final project asked students to focus a little more on themselves as an object of inquiry. That is, they were to think about their own communities and then discuss concrete examples of those communities were represented, particularly through discourse. I asked them to consider the following:

Think carefully about representations others have made of you as well as representations you have made of others – think about how you have represented refugee experience, or the experiences of women or people of color in your writing. Think about how others have described you or people “like” you, and use the assigned readings to help you critique, challenge, and reflect on these representations—made by both you and others.

As I look back at these prompts, I see how I could have spent more time in class discussing how we respond as readers and on the possibilities of where these “impulses” might come from. More class activities could have been geared toward reflection so that students had those notes to draw on when they worked on their projects. Nevertheless, students engaged with ideas of sympathy and distance in a variety of ways. Sometimes, they reproduced that distance, and sometimes, they worked to trouble it. Many times, their writing fell somewhere in between.

### Excerpts of Student Writing

I call this project a “case study” because the sample size is relatively small—twenty-three final projects were examined in total—and it is unclear to what extent the themes could be generalizable to other contexts (Yin, 2002). This project does help, I believe, show how curricular choices can either reinforce audience expectations of refugee narratives or resist exploiting them through critical reflection. IRB permission was obtained from students to use writing from their final projects. I used a qualitative data analysis program (QDA) to examine student writing and identified twenty different codes. QDAs are convenient, but have been critiqued because their ease of use “can distance researchers from their fieldwork,” or in this case, the text of student writing itself (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 638). In order to consider these excerpts in relation to the theory of distant suffering, I categorized the excerpts according to whether they *reproduced* sympathy or *troubled* it. Codes included descriptors like “pity,” “sympathy,” “personal reflection,” “identity,” “insider/outsider,” and “comparison.”

Student writing did not fall neatly into one category or another. Instead, students often reproduced sympathy even while appearing to trouble it. It was difficult to determine if an excerpt showed evidence of critical reflection on distant suffering. I settled on four overall themes that helped account for these difficulties: *Reproducing sympathy*, *May be reproducing sympathy*, *May be troubling sympathy*, and *Troubling sympathy*. Not necessarily intended to be a rigid spectrum, I nonetheless saw these categories as moving from where we started in the course to where I wanted the course to conclude. As Table 1 shows, however, it was easier for me to identify clear moments when sympathy and distance were reproduced. It was more difficult to determine when these ideas were troubled. I believe this challenge says as much about my own approaches as it does about the students’ consumption of refugee narratives. “Postured” responses to stories of human suffering were difficult to unpack, and I think this prevented me from moving us forward during the course of the semester.

Table 1.



Theme	N umber of Excerpts	Related Codes and Occurrences	Sample Excerpt
Reproducing sympathy	7	1 refugee-define (2), pity (5), sympathy (2), personal reflection (4), comparison (3), Africa (1)	“I feel bad they lost their home, friends, family, and most importantly they lost their peace and feeling of safety.”
May be reproducing sympathy	4	refugee-define (1), personal reflection (2), Africa (1)	“It is also painfully clear that assimilation into American culture is a difficult and confusing journey ... many refugees we studied also had to contend with the technological barriers of everyday American life.”
May be troubling sympathy	6	1 refugee-define (3), pity (2), sympathy (2), personal reflection (6), “you” statements (1), comparison (1), texts as contact zones (1)	“The concept of silencing the refugees was seen to be valuable to humanitarian practices as Malkki states because then education would not be seen as a threat.”
Troubling sympathy	8	pity (2), sympathy (2), personal reflection (2), comparison (1), texts as contact zones (1)	“Our impulse is be sympathetic for refugees that we discussed in class. But what we fail to realize is the culture of refugees.”

By identifying excerpts rather than whole projects, I was able to see how student writing could be nuanced and complex, at times reproducing sympathy, at other times, troubling it. When student writing expressed a statement like “I feel bad,” I saw this as a clear reproduction of sympathy. When excerpts fell into the *may be* category, though, the writing was often relying on unsubstantiated generalizations such as, “many refugees ... had to contend with the technological barriers.” And, perhaps it was my own bias as a teacher-scholar of refugee narratives, but excerpts that seemed to trouble sympathy in some way were typically connected to a course reading or specific text. Careful attention to definitions stood out to me as working towards a more critical reflection than general statements.

The following sections discuss examples of student writing in more detail in order to outline how the two major categories, *Reproducing Sympathy* and *Troubling Sympathy* can be defined. These sections also show how arguments could be made to see each excerpt as at least working toward some sort of “troubling.” In that regard, the excerpts were chosen because they

highlight the possibilities for rhetorical movement between expressions of sympathy and empathy to reflections on responsibility and complicity.

### Reproducing Sympathy

Excerpts that reproduced discourses of sympathy and distance often expressed how it was difficult for student writers to relate to the stories they read. They included statements like, “I found this to be extremely shocking”; “I found the stories themselves to be heart wrenching”; and “It is such a sad situation.” Others used descriptions like “awe inspiring” and “gut wrenching.” These kinds of reactions seemed to cast the student-as-spectator in the role of sympathizer and left little room to trouble that point-of-view or reflect on the distance between the reader and the subject of the text. The following extended excerpts reproduced discourses of sympathy in ways that emphasized this distance.

The first student, Beth (all student names are pseudonyms), began her project (for the Wisconsin course) by talking about her grandmother’s experience as a missionary in the country of Georgia. Here, Beth explains the purpose of the trip:

In December 2008 my Grandmother ... traveled on a mission trip to Georgia, where she had the privilege to share the gospel with these people, but also to see another part of the world less fortunate than us ... [Her] group brought with them suitcases full of both bibles and clothes. The kids and adults were very anxious and overly excited about receiving these new items, especially the clothes.

Perhaps it is telling that people were seemingly more excited about the clothes than they were about the bibles. But, the ideas Beth stresses revolve around the distance her grandmother traveled—“to see another part of the world”—and invokes the commonly used phrase, “less fortunate.” The other kind of distance, of retelling someone else’s story, seems to affect Beth’s statements about suffering, too, because of a lack of detail available to her. She can only emphasize certain, generalized concepts, and in this case, they are statements of sympathy. According to Boltanski (2009), the “subject who is describing” (p. 24) can benefit from a “vague” subject position. Specific detail or historical context that is replaced with statements about sympathy are viewed as “credible” because there is no specific “commitment.” That is, Beth’s role (perhaps similar to her grandmother’s own role) is simply to “observe, listen, and report” (p. 29). This is the kind of relationship to events distant suffering produces. However, looked at from a wider perspective, statements of sympathy actually constitute forms of political commitment, and in my opinion, work to construct refugees in a subordinate position relative to the spectator.

Later in her writing, Beth returns to statements about suffering by making comparisons between her life and the people she read about:

It is very hard for me to completely empathize with the refugees from Sudan, Ethiopia, and Georgia because I have never been in a place where I am fleeing from my home and can never return. In order to empathize with them, I can only speculate how I would feel, which would be a sense of despair and helplessness. This leads into my

feelings of sympathy for these victims because I feel bad they lost their home, friends, family, and most importantly, they lost their peace and feeling of safety.

This excerpt expresses some of the elements that I think *could* lead to ethical reflection, and perhaps even a sense of complicity. Beth identifies important feelings, that she tried to “empathize,” but it was hard because she had never experienced anything similar. She acknowledges that reading did not make her more “empathetic.” She could “only speculate.” Instead of focusing on her role as a spectator and her own contexts of consumption, her reading gave her a glimpse of “despair and helplessness,” which led to “feelings of sympathy,” of feeling “bad” for those she read about. In this way, I did not see Beth’s project as moving from sympathy to complicity. Her responsibility as a reader appears to stop at the point of feeling sympathy for the people in the stories. The distance she perceives between herself and the suffering she read about is constructed according to a binary of fortunate/less fortunate.

Another set of excerpts that draw on this fortune binary is from a project about “African education” (in the Wisconsin course). To some extent, every book we read had a strong emphasis on educational opportunity as a motive for resettlement. This student writer, Nicole, links education and privilege to her understanding of reader responsibility:

When the reader is exposed to the stories of refugee experiences, we have the responsibility to not be biased and a willingness to understand their living conditions. We have a responsibility to be sympathetic because the United States can provide more aid to people that are in need.

Because her topic is education, Nicole includes a structural view of privilege, placing the U.S. in the role of the sympathizer. She then moves from a critique of “bias” to a connection between “responsibility” and sympathy. The link she makes, though, leads her to focus on “aid” rather than her own, personal sense of responsibility as a spectator. She continues this discussion by transitioning from “posturing” statements, from a “we” point-of-view to possible actions she can take personally:

The United States is privileged and we should try to think before we complain. I feel that from now on, I will be more aware of refugees and try to help in whatever area that I can. I will not take what I have for granted. I can do this by limiting my food waste and utilize resources necessary to complete my education. I have tried to account for the responsibility of refugee stories by sympathizing with refugees and trying to identify how I can help.

In addition to switching voice, from a broad perspective, “The United States,” to “we,” and then to “I” statements, Nicole uses the future tense to explore what she might do, how she might give her time and resources because of her increased “awareness” of refugee experience. This move appears to reflect what Boltanski (1999) calls the “Good Samaritan.” The Good Samaritan “does not accomplish the impossible. He [sic] sacrifices time, goods, and money, but it is a limited sacrifice” (p. 8). The sacrifice Nicole proposes, though, appears disconnected from the rest of the ideas in the excerpt. It is unclear why she identifies “food waste” and her own “education” in the same sentence. The way she alludes to the potential future value of her own education, however, might be considered a moment in which she starts to make a critical

connection to her own role as a spectator. Though it might not represent a sense of complicity, it does seem to trouble the idea of sympathy by moving away from aid and pity and toward her own contexts.

Nicole concludes her discussion with a reemphasis on distance. This excerpt reads similarly to Beth's in the way it explains the difficulties she had empathizing with the subjects of the assigned stories:

I appreciate the stories that refugees have told. It makes me more humble to the countless privileges I have had. I find it hard to understand the harsh events that they experienced. I could not imagine experiencing life as refugees have.

To some degree, I see this writing as beginning the work of troubling sympathy, but the reliance on the fortune binary does not seem to reflect the kind of reflection on complicity readers could explore. Like in Beth's project, performances of privilege in these excerpts acknowledge the distance a spectator feels, but do not necessarily recognize how such responses might themselves be a constructed performance or an expectation of the genre they are reading. Perhaps it was my own understanding of genre that made reproductions sympathy easier to identify. Perhaps the term "privilege" has become a loaded concept, and students have developed a vocabulary of what should be accounted for when it comes to that idea. Another approach to ethical responsibility and complicity, in that case, might be needed.

### **Troubling Sympathy**

More difficult to identify were excerpts that clearly troubled discourses of sympathy. Student writing that appeared to do so critically engaged with refugee narratives in ways that both acknowledged the distance they perceived between the spectator and the stories *and* then closed that distance through reflective writing. Several short excerpts that stood out in this regard were: "I was very sad to hear some of the stereotypes or uninformed opinions they held about this newer group of people that were settling in America"; "I wonder if it is necessary to silence refugees and to treat them in such a manner"; and "I feel that we respond this way because we cannot fathom the living conditions in our individual intellect but as a reader I feel that we quickly respond this way because we feel sorry for these people." I saw these statements as taking questioning stance and paid closer attention to definitions and stereotypes.

The following extended excerpts most clearly troubled sympathy in unique and compelling ways. In the first example, the student writer, Sara (Wisconsin Course), chose to examine scholarly work on refugee identity. She elected not to research a specific refugee population and instead explored scholarly ideas in refugee studies and their implications for the stories we read. This set her project apart from the others in many ways and appeared to help her avoid reproducing certain discourses of distant suffering because she was not necessarily seeking to generalize about a specific group of people.

In this excerpt, Sara uses close-reading to examine outside sources, like Peter I. Rose (1993), who writes, "Resettled refugees are persons apart, outsiders who peer into closed rooms" (p. 9). In response, Sara analyzes the phrase "closed rooms" and wonders about processes of assimilation:

The concept of “closed rooms” almost portrays being American or being “Americanized” as an exclusive club in which everyone “seeks admittance.” It confirms the idea that merely coming to America is not enough; one must pass some unwritten judgment of one’s “acceptability” as an American. This sheds light on the harsh reality of America for immigrants and refugees alike. Though America’s image is one of opportunity, freedom, and equality, it may only pertain to those that comply with American norms, thus the “closed door” metaphor of the separation between “American” and “foreign.”

Sara’s project was concerned with how refugee identity intersects with various legal frameworks. In class, Sara often reminded us that many of our assumptions were based on “American” and “Western” perspectives (particularly in relation to a discussion we had about prescribing therapy to victims of trauma). Here, she brings that perspective to the forefront, observing how opportunity is tied to power and politics. This idea does not necessarily take up discourses of sympathy or empathy, and so perhaps Sara does not explicitly trouble sympathy. She does, however, comment on the distance between those on either side of the “closed door.”

Interestingly, Sara’s engagement with the text does not make much use of the reflective voice or “I” statements, especially when compared to the excerpts above that reproduce discourses of sympathy. Performance and posture do not seem as relevant in Sara’s excerpt because she draws her evidence from texts rather than from her own experience. At the same time, I repeatedly asked Sara how she felt about the course readings because almost all of her writing was in this kind of analytical voice. I wondered about what she thought about consuming narratives of human suffering, especially since she had such a critical perspective on other subjects. So, Sara’s writing only troubles sympathy in certain ways. Perhaps this is a limitation, but her project might also point to possibilities for reframing my own writing in terms of the final project description and asking students to research specific refugee populations.

The last set of extended excerpts I will present were written in response to the novel *Weeping Under This Same Moon* by Jana Laiz (2008). In this story of refugee resettlement, readers encounter the alternating perspectives of two young women: Mei, a Vietnamese refugee who is resettled in the U.S. with her younger brother and sister, and Hannah, a white, middle-class American who wants to find something meaningful to do in her community. An important moment that reveals Hannah’s assumptions occurs after she sees a news story about the Vietnamese “Boat People.” She feels inspired and then goes to bed that night “with visions of smiling refugee children looking gratefully up at” her (p. 162). Hannah ends up volunteering to help Mei and her siblings.

Student writer Suzanne did not so much criticize Hannah’s savior-like sense of self-importance in her final project (for the Michigan course), but instead focused carefully on representations of Mei:

In my opinion, while Laiz tried to make Mei a sympathetic character, I feel that she did not represent Mei as a whole person. The author spent much of the book developing Hannah’s personality, but only gave small facets of Mei’s ... I feel that the book even played into some Asian stereotypes ... Her thoughts and speech in the novel are very formal and short, leaving the reader to feel as though they have read a line of speech from almost any Asian character from almost any book in the last one hundred years.

During class discussion, Suzanne's critique of the novel helped us see the inequality present in the book. I remember how many students in this particular class expressed a dislike for *What is the What*, explaining that it was hard for them to "relate" to the narrator. Most of the students, though, loved Hannah and found her very relatable. Suzanne was the only student who shifted focus to Mei and how she did not seem to be depicted as a "whole" character. In this excerpt, Suzanne explains why the portrayal of Mei upset her:

As an Asian reading the book, I would have appreciated seeing an Asian female character that had complex emotions and is highly relatable, not one that I feel is simply a plot mechanism to propel Hannah's character into action. The character of Mei came off as one dimensional and helpless. She consistently needed the aid of others and lacked spunk, whereas Hannah had an abundance.

Suzanne's use of "I" statements contextualizes her critique and identifies her position as a spectator, something that was lacking in many of the projects that reproduced discourses of distant suffering. She uses critique to discuss the ethics of representation in ways that eschew notions of sympathy and empathy in order to focus on the function of Mei in the text: she is there to "propel Hannah's character into action;" she is an object of pity and aid. This acknowledgement allows Suzanne to trouble sympathy in ways that disrupt the distance between herself and the text. She is an active reader who questions the representations present in the text. Perhaps Suzanne moves toward a certain understanding of complicity because of the way she unpacks representations of Mei. Her writing implies that readers play an important role in how texts about human suffering are constructed, that many of us want to identify with helpers, sponsors, and volunteers.

It might be unfair to use Suzanne's excerpts in this way. As one of the few people of color in the class, Suzanne often pointed out problems with representation in the books we read, while others more passively accepted them, or at least did not actively draw attention to them. Is it only because Suzanne can identify with Mei rather than with Hannah that she makes these specific critiques? I do not think so. And, at the same time, Suzanne does not capitalize on or benefit from a "vague" subject position (Boltanski, 2009, p. 29). Instead, she directly addresses her own identity and makes it an object of inquiry within her writing. Nothing prevents other students from doing this kind of self-analysis. It is also interesting that Suzanne uses the first-person voice while Sara uses the third, and both seem to trouble statements of sympathy and distant suffering in different ways. I wonder how teachers might take Suzanne's critique as a model for discussing encouraging other students to describe their own subject positions and critique these kinds of representations. What would a critique of Hannah's look like if done by someone who also volunteered to help others in their community? I also wonder how I might apply her critique to my own reflective assignment prompts so that one does not necessarily have to relate to a story in order to reflect on one's consumption of it.

### **Conclusion: Limitations and Implications**

With the exception of Suzanne's project, student writing fell somewhere in between reproducing and troubling discourses of sympathy. And, as seen above, I had difficulty

coming to definitive conclusions on to what extent a given excerpt moved from sympathy to complicity. Student writing tended to be contradictory. For example, the following excerpt about the Lost Girls of Sudan was particularly difficult to code. Here, the writer reflects on what she might do to claim a more active responsibility:

As one single American who does not have enough power to rescue and build futures for as many girls that I desire at this moment, I am left to research until I know enough to do something about their situations and help donate when financially possible ... Perhaps people like me interested in this continuing issue need to address it to a larger and more enabling audience with larger resources to develop bigger solutions and not only focus on the common topic of the fact that there is a genocide in Sudan, but that there are specifically women suffering in Sudan.

I was drawn to the student's emphasis on research and the importance of reading, that pursuing knowledge would be one way to cultivate a more engaged, global perspective. This excerpt also talks about the need to communicate across multiple audiences, like those with fewer or "larger resources." Does this sentiment trouble sympathy? I think it does partially. However, it also clearly reproduces discourses of sympathy, because this student expresses a desire to "rescue," to "build futures" for others. This sort of sympathetic reaction locates Americans and other Western spectators in relative positions of superiority, while relegating those represented in the stories as objects of aid.

One important limitation of this study, then, is that although excerpts were coded carefully, I found it easier to identify discourses that reproduced sympathy and much harder to identify or define those that troubled it. This limitation speaks as much to the biases and projections in my own assignments as they do to the performances of student writers. As Sara's excerpts show, paying close attention to textual examples rather than researching a specific refugee population seemed to help her with her critical analysis. Another related limitation is that I was not sure if I should use individual excerpts as the units of analysis or entire student projects. I chose to focus on excerpts because I did not want to portray any particular student as reproducing sympathy. I did not want to sound like I was making a judgment on their character. Student writing should instead be as an object of inquiry, one that can reveal the possibilities for pedagogy, not as evidence of a given student's capacity for ethical responsibility. A larger sample size might make this choice clearer.

Excerpts instead proved useful for providing evidence of audience expectations and genre conventions. But, I wonder if asking students to research specific refugee populations led them more toward the reproduction of discourses of sympathy than toward a reflection on their potential complicity as spectators. The excerpts above that did the most *troubling*, strayed away from my original prompts and focused on theories of refugee experience or the ethics of representation. Perhaps these excerpts can provide alternative approaches to writing about refugee narratives. Two ways to do this would be to follow the lead of Sara and Suzanne. First, by using Sara's more objective tone as an example, reflections on complicity could look more broadly at stereotypes and common assumptions made by American and Western audiences. And, like Suzanne, students could use their own identities as objects of inquiry and analyze their own positions as spectators. In both examples, close attention to the text was key to moving from general expressions about human suffering to statements that troubled sympathy.

The decision to use stories of human suffering to cultivate a global perspective in the classroom asks teachers to take care in their approach when presenting these texts to students. Specific attention to audience expectations helps unpack the perspectives present in the classroom and can be used to situate students as spectators within local-global contexts. Readers need opportunities to write about their initial reactions to texts. This necessarily involves a degree of reproducing discourses of sympathy, pity, hope, and despair. It might draw on impulses to make comparisons between the reader's life and the lives described in the text. Students should then be asked to revisit those responses, to make spectator expectations a central text of the course. Assignment prompts and supplemental readings might ask students to directly trouble their own writing (like weekly assignments from earlier in the semester). Students might then be in a more clearly defined position to reflect on their complicity as readers who consume refugee narratives.

As I reflect on my own role in the reproduction of sympathy and distant suffering, I wonder to what extent the questions this study raises would apply to other contexts. For example, how might students respond to texts that represent suffering in U.S. contexts, like stories about the displacement caused by Hurricane Katrina? Would this make the stories more relatable? Although, I am not sure if increased relatability is necessarily a productive goal for troubling sympathy, we might find that stories of internal displacement are constructed according to similar kinds of audience expectations as those set in other parts of the world. The excerpts in this essay show that reading is complex and that assigning refugee narratives and other stories of human suffering requires careful attention to context and a continuous reflection on one's own point-of-view. As teachers, I think our goal should be to examine with our students not just the assigned stories, but the writing we produce in response to those stories.

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