

Reframing the Americas: Challenging the Humanitarian Lens

Natalie Tines Villarraga
Institute for Social Strategy
Laichingen, Germany

Abstract

The categorization in the contemporary field of Refugee Studies poses the refugee as a „problem“ locating the object of study within the bodies and minds of people categorized as refugees instead of in the political conditions or processes that produce massive territorial displacement (Malkki 1992). Silencing the victims also means the ability or lack of ability, to establish narrative authority over one's circumstances and future.

Within the realm of research, the challenge is that of the documentation on refugees and the disregarding of the issue of agency altogether. This problem is not unique for work on post-conflict rebuilding, but also characterizes a lot of research done on migrants altogether. It becomes obvious that such approaches are supported by „the process by which policy agendas are established and more particularly the way in which people, conceived as objects of policy, are defined in convenient images“ (Wood 1985:1) and lead to the formation of categories, tending to separate people's stories and needs from actual context. The vision of helplessness is closely linked to speechlessness and the refugee is reduced to a victim in need of protection and someone to speak for them (Malkki 1996). The humanitarian practices themselves are embedded in long historical and political processes and tend to hide the political, or the political-economical, connections that link the television viewers' own history with that of „those poor people over there“(Ferguson 1995 in press).

One of the largest challenges to contemporary documentary of crises is to move away from the familiar spectacle of misery, from the image of suffering in these times of proliferating humanitarian emergencies, and to take up the challenge of interrogating the complex political and economic causes behind the effects of migration hysteria and show how migration delineates a creative act of political transformation and a site of resistance and agency.