

THE SILENCING OF CAMINANTES IN THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)'S OFFICIAL NARRATIVE

116. ERICK MORENO SUPERLANO
BARD COLLEGE BERLIN • GERMANY

The aim of this essay is to examine the ways in which Caminantes¹ are silenced by official United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports.² For this purpose, I establish a dialogue between Liisa Malkki's idea of "speechlessness" (1995; 1996) and Walter Mignolo's idea of "the right of enunciation" (2009). Adopting Mignolo's argument that the racialized subject has no right of enunciation in a modern/colonial world-system,³ I argue that the UN refugee agency (re)produces a modern/colonial narrative that perpetuates the racialization of Caminantes, and thus the silence referred to by Malkki.⁴

1 In this essay, I refer to Venezuelan South-South migrants as Caminantes (walkers) despite the fact that they are asylum-seekers, temporary residents, displaced people, and non-documented migrants. The plural form aims to account for this diversity as well as for other elements of their identity such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. For a better understanding of the historical, political and social background of Caminantes, which I cannot provide here for space reasons, see Ávila 2018; Pineda and Ávila 2019.

2 I focus my analysis mainly on the UNHCR Global Trends report 2019 which is representative of UNHCR's official narrative (by the time I started working on this essay the 2020 report had not been published).

3 See Dussel (1993); Quijano (2000a); Mignolo (2011).

4 I depart from the principle that racialization and racism consist of the dehumanization of people as put forward by Ramón Grosfoguel in his 2016 essay, "What is Racism?"

THE "HUMAN" RIGHT OF ENUNCIATION

Venezuela is experiencing the most severe economic and humanitarian crisis in its history (Lander 2019, 142). To escape this dire situation, the most affected, those with the least resources and cultural capital, undertake long and dangerous journeys of up to 3,500 kilometers on foot in search of employment, medical services, and the possibility of sending remittances to their families (Pineda and Ávila 2019, 60). According to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 90% of them claim to have migrated for lack of food, and 82% claim to have migrated for lack of work. It is estimated that by the end of 2021 there will be 6.2 million Caminantes in Latin America and the Caribbean (Europa Press 2020). This group of people represents an immense diversity of lifeworlds, however, this is not reflected in UNHCR's official reports. Instead, as Malkki observes, "refugees suffer from a peculiar kind of speechlessness in the face of the national and international organizations whose object of care and control they are. Their accounts are disqualified almost *a priori*, while the languages of refugee relief, policy science, and 'development' claim the production of authoritative narratives about the refugees" (1995, 386).

The “speechlessness” pattern, to which Malkki draws attention, can be productively considered in relation to Mignolo’s idea of “the right to enunciation” that links the silencing of certain subjects with their categorization in a racial hierarchy on a planetary scale. In “Speechless emissaries”, Malkki (1996) shows how Hutu refugees in Tanzania, silenced by representational practices of humanitarian organizations, suffer the violence of dehistoricization and universalization. However, she does not attribute these effects to the racialization of Hutu refugees by such representational practices. By taking racialization into account, the “speechlessness” of Hutu refugees, as well as the “speechlessness” of Caminantes, can be explained by the fact that they do not have “the right to enunciation” due to their inferiority as humans in a world-system hierarchized racially, epistemologically and economically by the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000a, 536-537; 2000b, 192). In this global order, only the human, the uni-versal subject—vis-à-vis racially subhumanized bodies—has the right to enunciation.¹ But how is it that, to this day, an established order on a planetary scale centers a single voice as the uni-versal reference, systematically silencing racialized voices like those of Hutu refugees and Caminantes?

¹ I divide the word uni-versal with a hyphen, as does Mignolo, to emphasize the dominant character of the “one” inherent in this notion and to highlight its contrast with the multiple, the plural, that is, the pluriversal.

The idea of the “human” is an epistemic and ontological construct formulated in Europe throughout the Renaissance, and afterwards imposed and standardized on a global scale through European colonial expansion from the 15th century onwards (Mignolo 2009, 10). According to this construct, the “uni-versal human” is the white, bourgeois, hetero-cis, European man, and therefore, his knowledge and ways of producing knowledge are uni-versal (Mayblin and Turner 2021, 57). He justifies his superiority in relation to the colonized subject through “colonial differences” (Mignolo 2009, 8, 17). In *On Decoloniality*, Mignolo and Walsh explain how the dehumanizing, modern/colonial narrative that articulates such colonial difference developed throughout time:

All the narratives created by missionaries, men of letters, and soldiers (and, in the eighteenth century, travelers) about the New World and, later on, about Africa and Asia and their inhabitants are framed by the assumed cultural differences between the European narrators and the regions and people being narrated. But these cultural differences, as discussed above, also became an indication of the lesser humanity of the narrated people and regions. (2018, 185)

The white, bourgeois, hetero-cis, European male possesses the domain of enunciation and thus can narrate for both the “uni-versal human” and the “other.”

Through this act, he constructs the differences between himself and the “other,” the subhuman, “without being named in return” (Mignolo 2009, 9). An example of this power of enunciation, relevant to the case at hand given its relation to UNHCR, is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is a modern/colonial construction that centers the white European man and reinforces him as the norm in all cultures. The Declaration is a “uni-versal” narrative issued from an institutional, international platform of enunciation and, as Mignolo (2009, 14-16) argues, gravitates around the human as described in The Bill of Rights in England, The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in France, and The Virginia Declaration of Rights in the United States. Similarly, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines (enunciates) the official category of “refugee,” as well as the language and forms of migration studies (Malkki 1995; Mayblin and Turner 2021, 11), and extends it to all inhabitants of the planet. The Convention arose out of the need to guarantee protection (only) for European refugees after World War II (Mayblin 2018). In a modern/colonial world-system, it was (and still is) “natural” for the states that participated in it, and the later 1967 Protocol, to tailor the new category of “refugee” according to the measures of the “uni-versal human².”

² My intention is not to downplay the importance of human rights but to point out the fact that these are a Western construct that can/should be interrogated with the aim of pluriversalizing the idea of “human.”

Malkki observes how representational practices of humanitarian organizations assisting Hutu refugees create a uni-versalizing, single category that dehumanizes those who benefit from the organizations’ aid (1996, 378). I argue that the same is true for the (mis)representation of Caminantes by UNHCR. Since Hutu refugees and Caminantes are not considered “human,” according to the metaphysical architecture of the Renaissance humanists and their heirs, they do not have access to an enunciative platform from which to challenge the uni-versalizing, single category that denies their lifeworlds. It is in this sense that the historical agency and subjective experience of Caminantes are erased by what Malkki calls “the production of authoritative narratives about the refugees” (1995, 386), and what Mignolo calls “the rhetoric of modernity” with its promise of salvation (2009, 14).³ Considering the circumstances behind the origin of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which serves as the foundations of UNHCR, it is necessary to critically examine its inherent modern/colonial narrative and the ways in which it describes Caminantes in the uni-versalizing terms of the “uni-versal human.” In the following section, I use the UNHCR Global Trends report 2019— whose main purpose is to provide data on migration and displacement to help national governments and organizations plan their humanitarian response—as a case to examine the rhetorical and visual representation of Caminantes by this enunciative platform.

³ In this essay I refer to it as “the modern/colonial narrative.”

THE (MIS)REPRESENTATION OF CAMINANTES IN THE UNHCR GLOBAL TRENDS REPORT 2019

When analyzing UNHCR's narrative about Caminantes, we must remember that Europe's colonial expansion is intimately related to poverty and high levels of conflict in the Global South (Rodney 2018 [1972]), including Venezuela and the rest of Latin America, and the Caribbean. Knowledge of this history is crucial in comprehending the origin and complexity of the causes that mobilize Caminantes, which is completely disregarded in the UNHCR Global Trends report 2019. This constitutes an act of violence that erases their historical agency as well as their experience as subjects; they "stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general" (Malkki 1996, 378). Such a procedure replicates the modern/colonial logic of there being no history until Europeans brought it to pre-colonized territories (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 68). That is why in the report in question "seeking asylum is conceived as being related to unique national or regional circumstances, unrelated to an entangled history of global exploitation, imperial oppression, and capitalist expansion" (Gutierrez Rodriguez 2018, 19). As a consequence, the coloniality of power that is largely behind the multiple difficulties faced by Caminantes and their "speechlessness" remains intact and even unquestioned, invisible behind the modern rhetoric with its promise of salvation.

At the same time, UNHCR's modern/colonial narrative seeks to elicit pity and Christian charity while denying the migrant's agency and capacity for self-sufficiency (Gutierrez Rodriguez 2018, 24; Pineda and Ávila 2019, 70).¹ The two photos of Caminantes in the eighty-four-page-long report show only vulnerable, helpless, and powerless people of color, such as a young mother named Daniela with her baby at a bus station. The image is accompanied by a text that briefly describes the difficult circumstances Daniela finds herself in, on the border between Ecuador and Peru (UNHCR 2019, 10). We don't know much more about her.

¹ For other examples of this modern/colonial narrative about Caminantes (re)produced by other enunciative platforms of the "uni-versal human", see the 2018 World Bank Group report *Migration from Venezuela to Colombia: Short- and Medium-Term Impact and Response Strategy*; and R4V's *RMP 2020 End-Year Report*, 2021.

What are Daniela's talents? What are her hobbies, her musical preferences, her fears, her aspirations? What was her home in Venezuela like? What would she like her new home to be like? What was her baby's first word? In the other photo in the report, divided in half by a percentage table of displaced people, we are confronted with a family of seventeen members, mostly pre-teens, sitting by the roadside with backpacks and blankets, "trying to warm up in the sun after leaving their shelter early in the morning" (ibid., 14-15). There is a man in the photo, presumably the father, who is hugging a person wrapped in a blanket: a gesture of tenderness and vulnerability. The languages of refugee relief, policy science, and "development," which take the form of tables, figures, statistics and percentages, narrate the experience of the "uni-versal refugee" in different parts of the world and occupy most of the pages. This statistical overview of

global migration trends frames Caminantes' photos, and invites the question of who is the report's reader. Who is the target audience? Malkki offers a clue:

Such transnationally mobile representations are often very easily translated and shared across nation-state borders. And because they are shared among the institutions that locate, fund, and administer refugee projects, these presentations can reasonably be expected to carry significant consequences. One of the most far-reaching, important consequences of these established representational practices is the systematic, even if unintended, silencing of persons who find themselves in the classificatory space of "refugee." (1996, 386)

In parallel, the modern/colonial narrative uni-versalizes the experience of Caminantes with the objective of—and by means of—promoting a neoliberal image of migrants to its readers, highlighting their value not as a human being, but as a potential labor force (Gutierrez Rodriguez 2018, 25; Pineda and Ávila 2019, 70; Sukhwant and Forkert 2016, 51).² It commodifies the subjective experience of Caminantes by (re)presenting them within the framework of racial capitalism (Robinson 2021 [1983]). This dimension of the narrative aims to persuade the report's readers to invest in Caminantes because of the labor, economic, and fiscal benefits that their incorporation into the market brings.³ In the report, refugees and displaced persons are referred to as "socio-economic assets and contributors" (UNHCR 2019, 35). Modern, salvific rhetoric attempts to allay fears in the host society by declaring that immigrants put the jobs of locals at risk, and this destigmatization work is important and necessary. However, coloniality, constitutive of modernity (Mignolo 2011, 3), creeps into the articulation of this narrative. Therefore, as Gutierrez Rodriguez (2018) notes in relation to the coloniality of migration, the

² As an example of this modern/colonial narrative (re)produced by other enunciative platforms of the "uni-versal human" see OECD 2013. And for a local reproduction of this narrative, see Lafuente and Genatios 2021.

³ As an example, see UNHCR 2019, 52-53.

logic underlying the modern and salvific narrative actually obeys the "rationale for the process of racialization in the recruitment of migrant labor and the selection of the migrant workforce via parameters of profit and efficacy" (21).

In short, the UNHCR Global Trends Reports 2019 is a narrative artifact of the "uni-versal human" that names (enunciates) "without being named in return." Caminantes cannot access the enunciative platform, and therefore cannot define themselves, cannot narrate their own experience, as they have been racialized by—and in relation to—the "uni-versal human." UNHCR (re)produce the epistemic and ontological categories that define the "refugee," referred to by Malkki (1996) as an "other" without historical agency and subjective experience. These categories are then reified by racial capitalism (Mignolo 2018, 177; see also Gutierrez Rodriguez 2019). In this way, UNHCR's efforts to provide support and relief to Caminantes serve to mend the harms produced by the coloniality of power, while at the same time perpetuating their racialization and economic exploitation. This ensures the stability and continuity over time of the coloniality of power, and at the same time, of UNHCR.

“IT IS THE OBLIGATION OF EVERY PERSON BORN IN A SAFER ROOM TO OPEN THE DOOR WHEN SOMEONE IN DANGER KNOCKS”

CONCLUSION

Iranian-American novelist Dina Nayeri writes that “It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks” (2017). Caminantes are human beings in danger—that should be sufficient enough for any country to welcome them. But, in a modern/colonial world-system, are Caminantes considered “human”? Are they considered a “someone”?

The coloniality of power has organized human beings, their cultures and knowledges according to a racial hierarchy that describes the white European man as “human” and the rest as subhuman. As stated by Mignolo, upon this technology of organization and domination rests the enunciative authority of the white man and his enunciative platforms, that is, of institutions such as UNHCR that (re)produce his modern/colonial enunciation and impose it on the racialized subject at a global scale. According to the logic of the coloniality of power, Caminantes have no right to enunciation because of their subhuman condition. The UNHCR Global Trends report 2019 serves as an example of how the modern/colonial narrative operates to silence Caminantes through uni-versalization, dehistoricization, and commodification, as Malkki points out. At the same time that the UN refugee agency silences Caminantes, it provides them with material relief—salvation—to make amends for the harms produced by the coloniality of power. This generates a cycle that justifies the existence of UNHCR and guarantees the continuity of coloniality, which means the continuity of an institutionalized, imposed and normalized Western racial hierarchy on a planetary scale in which Caminantes are enunciated and never enunciators themselves.

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