Connections and Complicities: Reflections on Epistemology, Violence, and Humanitarian Aid

Kiri Gurd

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By Kiri Gurd[1]

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between power/knowledge and violence. It attempts to connect epistemological constructions and discursive practices to conflict and humanitarian aid operations by deconstructing the narrative of 'Development'. The paper also attempts to tease out the way seemingly transparent and humanitarian actions, even within the academy, are complicit in reiterating hegemonic representations that reproduce systems of inequality and injustice. The paper draws on feminist methodologies that are primarily deconstructive in nature in order to highlight these connections and complicities, making clear that the way certain knowledges become centralized, while others are subjugated, reflects the functioning of the global political economy and imperialism. Thus, the paper argues that a transformative humanitarian aid practice must affirm what is 'excluded' from the discourse – the 'incommensurable'. Lastly, the paper examines the potential of the 'rights-based' approach to sustain the affirmation of incommensurability. The paper hopes to make clear the importance of critical feminist theory for politics and practices.

Keywords: humanitarian aid, power/knowledge, violence, feminist methodologies, deconstruction

Introduction: Disjunctions and Conversations

This project came about from my own experience struggling with a disjunct between two crucial conversations within the academy. Initially, I dedicatedly partook in these conversations because I assumed their shared commitment to global justice to create a seamless dialogue. Yet, I learned that in these discussions one voice was heard and the other silenced. The disjunct was personified most clearly, although not exclusively, between my two departments: Gender and Development. Although this experience was personal, it has seemed to reflect broader contentions concerning the (re)production of power/ knowledge within the academy, the development paradigm[2], and the global political economy.

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[1] This paper was written for Kiri Gurd's MSc dissertation in Gender and Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She graduated from LSE in 2003, and since then has been working as the Director of Community Education and Outreach at the South Shore YMCA in Boston, MA. In this position, she is responsible for ensuring that the association is providing services that meet the needs of our immigrant communities. In addition, she coordinates a Federal education grant for 'at-risk' youth in lower socioeconomic areas. Lastly, she oversees the association's International Program, which entails establishing partnerships with YMCAs overseas and developing programs that build cross-cultural awareness. She has recently finished applying to PhD programs starting in the Fall 2006 and looks forward to continuing to engage with the issues presented in this paper.

[2] I use the term 'development paradigm' broadly here to refer to the many different processes intended to alleviate poverty and violence.

In traveling, both theoretically between the literatures and physically between the classrooms, I found that the construction of my 'Development curriculums' – the contributions included and excluded from the reading lists and lectures – worked to silence particular discussions, deafening the seminar exchanges to voices of resistance, recycling mimetic analyses and thus closing any thresholds for transformation. The experience made clear that even within the spaces of such a prestigious academy, hegemony worked to determine what there was to know. My particular interest, and subsequent research, in complex emergencies and humanitarian aid[3] made this pedagogical functioning alarmingly violent, bringing me to think quite critically about the type of intellectual economy that was circulating and its relationship to conflict.

Humanitarian Aid has been, and continues to be, extensively critiqued. Such work has been unquestioningly valuable, initiating both a vital interrogation of the premises, assumptions and ethics of humanitarian aid, and humanitarianism in general, as well as a comprehensive gutting of institutional policies, practices, and outcomes. However, epistemological analyses, central in contemporary gender theory, that deconstruct the production and impact of knowledge in relation to the global economy, development, and violence rarely appear in conversation. More specifically, recent feminist scholarship has drawn on conversations in postcolonial, legal, deconstructive and psychoanalytic theories to highlight how particular knowledges get legitimized and naturalized while o/Other knowledges get subjugated, dismissed and appropriated. The ways in which this appropriation informs the formulation of the Self and Other is thus connected to social injustice and conflict. Despite the relevance of these insights to development theory and practice, the analyses are either made absent from the debate, charged as impractical, impenetrable and elitist, or subsumed under another weekly topic, often 'Gender and Household Economics'.

In this way, the disjunct in conversation between my two departments seemed symptomatic of the way liberal politics, in general, 'accommodates' that which is 'different'/ other (Schutte, 2000): either by oppositionally relegating it to the 'outside' and therein solidifying the 'inside'; or, by appropriating it in order to make it the same. In either case, there is an oppositional staging that essentializes differences. Such oppositional functioning is at the heart of discussions surrounding humanitarian aid, creating an endless series of debates concerning its provision: whether it is philanthropic or political, universal or particular, and recently, whether aid is good or bad. This oppositional staging ignores how such binaries work to obfuscate the way power is exercised within and throughout each of these concepts, and thus the way discursive constructions govern material conditions. Therefore, the disjunct in conversation between my two departments seemed a part of a larger political breakdown, namely the (dis)connection between discursive and material violence.

The failure of the development discipline to acknowledge the role of discourse and epistemology, both in and of the classroom, results in a failure of those within the

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[3] This paper discusses 'humanitarian aid' in relation to extreme conflict situations, but the term is used broadly here to refer to the many processes that constitute the practice, such as emergency relief, post-war reconstruction, peacekeeping, etc. The purpose here is not to suggest that particular responsibilities or actions are not associated with each of these processes but more they are all parts of the same institution. In addition, while this paper acknowledges that humanitarian has taken place within national borders (and continues to do so), the primary concern here is humanitarian aid's North/ South (See note 3 for a definition of a North/ South) relationship.

development system (practitioners, students, policy makers) to interrogate the processes by which their own identity and experience is being constructed by, and is a part of, transnational processes. This lack of self-reflexivity erases the conditions of power by which certain knowledges become centralized, seen as self-evident truths, and O/others are excluded, registering as irrational or incomprehensible (impractical; impenetrable). The way hegemony is legitimized and naturalized thus goes unrecognized and is further reinforced. In this way, pedagogy plays a key role in normalizing the alliance between inequality and humanitarian pursuits (Spivak 2003). Excluding what appears as incomprehensible, or other, has also worked to fuel conflict. The common practice of labeling genocides as 'unimaginable' or 'insane' removes violence from the 'human realm' and inhibits a thorough interrogation of the rational causes of conflict (Keen 2005). This exclusion also enables local actors to operate under a cover of, supposed, 'incomprehensible' violence and international actors to justify parsimony and inaction (Keen 2005). Lastly, analyses attempting to understand and explain the causes of violence have shown that it is often the very act of being excluded - from development, from peace treaties, from 'democratic' reconstruction – that has caused violence[4.]

This paper attempts to demonstrate that this disjunct between discourse and practice has the effect of reifying the same set of hegemonic relations, both local and global, that initially created the conflict. In other words, within the arena of humanitarian aid, the on-going staging of oppositions is not just an intellectual debate but a very real 'crime against humanity' that costs and kills lives: the 'violence of the episteme' (Spivak 1988) materialized into an insidious and incessant reoccurring of genocides. Thus, the experience of personal disjunction between my departments is a reflection of the ways in which oppression operates.

This paper also hopes to make clear that if humanitarian aid is to assist in peace, it cannot dismiss or silence what may seem incomprehensible. Rather, I argue here that it is precisely that which is most often excluded - the moment when knowledge does not register seamlessly - that can lead towards new strategies, relationships, and social structures. In this way, as I see it, a large part of the project for cross-cultural workers concerned with peace and social justice is to take seriously our relationship with the Other, within and outside ourselves. I am not suggesting to simply 'include women' and 'the voices of the poor', a romanticization with the subaltern or cultural relativism -- although these moves can have strategic importance -- but rather to recognize the alterity in everything and to affirm what is incommensurable.

The affirmation of incommensurability refuses to exclude or appropriate that which is Other but rather positions the Self relationally so that to be human is 'to be intended towards the other' (Spivak 1999: 46). To be repositioned relationally disrupts Self/ Other binaries so that imperatives are 're-imagined as the responsibility of being human' (Spivak 1999: 46). Humanitarian aid is thus no longer a question of choice, as in Should we provide Aid? But as a matter of ethical responsibility, in which we ask: How can we best act to promote just relations (Edkins 1996)?

This essay explores the relationships among discursive and material violence and the affirmation of incommensurability in relation to humanitarian aid. To do this, I draw on feminist methodologies that are primarily deconstructive in nature and which take as

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[4] Keen 2005; Gilligan 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1999

priority the experience of Western[5] colonialism and its contemporary effects. In using these methodologies, I hope to make clear the role of deconstruction in relation to politics and practice or, more broadly, the meaning of epistemology and theory for grounded intervention. In this way, I try to sustain, simultaneously, the two conversations between my departments in order to 'think through' approaches of 'knowing' that affirm that which is excluded or repressed but which is always there: the 'incommensurable'. Lastly, it is important for me to note that I do not assume, in writing this paper, that I have rendered transparent my own investment, implication, and complicity in these ways of understanding the world.

Section I of this paper provides an overview of the current context and content of humanitarian aid by looking at a few examples of relief operations. My intention is to briefly summarize the contemporary debate over 'good' and 'bad' aid. Section II provides a broad overview of deconstructive theory in order to apply it to the narrative of humanitarian aid and to demonstrate how power/knowledge functions. I then argue for the affirmation of the incommensurable. Section III takes the main theoretical tenets of the analysis to explore the advantages and disadvantages of the leading framework for humanitarian aid work, namely the rights-based approach to complex emergencies. My intention is to interrogate the transformative potential of the rights-based approach.

Section I: An Overview of Humanitarian Aid

The doctrine of 'humanitarianism' rests on the principles of philanthropy and neutrality in relation to an unquestioned value in preserving human life (Slim 1997; 2002). Humanitarian aid specifically was born from a commitment to practice these principles within disaster zones around the world, initiating a doctrine of obligation to help even those 'to whom we are unrelated by birth or citizenship, race or geographic proximity' (Ignatieff 1998: 12) and to make 'no distinction between good and bad wars, between just and unjust war causes, or even between aggressors and innocents' (Fox, 2001).

In the years since the Cold War, the principle of humanitarian aid has both been called upon and challenged. Since then, a new global politics has emerged characterized by, what is termed, 'globalization'. Globalization refers to 'a process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the *spatial* organization of social relations and transactions, expressed in transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction and power' (Held and McGrew, et al. 1999). In short, globalization can be understood as the growing interconnectedness and integration of the world's economies, cultures, and politics[6]. Furthermore, within this globalized context, a proliferation of so-called 'new wars' (Kaldor 1999) has emerged. These new wars have been mostly intra-state, the majority of which have taken place in the Third World, and have markedly

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[5] The terms 'First World', 'North', 'Western', 'developed' and 'Third World', 'South' 'undeveloped' are used here to distinguish between affluent, privileged nations and economically and politically marginalized nations (Mohanty, 2003: 226). These are broad terms that are highly problematic and overly homogenize whatever population in which they refer. However, they are used commonly within the literature I am referring to and therefore are both necessary and useful

[6] I have tried here to provide an impartial definition of globalization. However, it is an implicit part of the argument of this paper that globalization is complicit in reinforcing and producing worldwide inequality and violence.

different characteristics then pre- Cold-War conflicts (Turton 1997). Specifically, within these internal wars, civilians are not only innocent victims but the objective target of violence. Such violence is carried out in immediate physical confrontation with friends, neighbors, and even relatives (Turton 1997) and results in a perpetual threat of terror that is then used to manipulate and command both the physical and psychological lives of civilians (Summerfield 1996). This form of warfare strategically destroys people's entire social world so that the institutions and social networks that are normally appealed to in times of distress are not capable of providing any aid. Consequently, the philanthropic tenet of humanitarianism has been called upon not only for 'assistance' but 'for the future of life on the planet' (Ignatieff 1998: 20).

Correspondingly, humanitarian aid has shifted from responding primarily to 'natural disasters', such as cyclones and droughts to 'complex emergencies'. The term was coined in the late 1980s but has become increasingly used to make clear the political complexity of 'new wars', as Mark Duffield (1994:38) states:

> So-called complex emergencies are essentially political in nature: they are protracted political crises resulting from sectarian or predatory indigenous responses to socioeconomic stress and marginalization. Unlike natural disasters, complex emergencies have a singular ability to erode or destroy the cultural, civil, political and economic integrity of established societies... (Duffield 1994: 38).

Humanitarian aid's engagement with complex emergencies has created a 'new era of humanitarianism' (Duffield 1994), characterized by an increased involvement in the heat of war, a proliferation of aid professionals and agencies, and a series of legal and ethical principles. Despite the necessity in which this new humanitarianism seemed to be born, it has nevertheless provoked much critique, which has come to shape both the discourse and practice of humanitarian aid.

The critiques claim that within complex emergencies, humanitarianism – in the form of food, supplies, trauma relief, publicity, and language - can become a manipulable resource for local and international actors to fulfill their self-interests. As a result, aid operations often incur harmful consequences, such as: the buttressing of perpetrating regimes, the delaying of aid to where it is most needed, the dismissal of local healing strategies, and the disabling of political accountability[7].

The 'famine' in Ethiopia in the 1980s empirically illustrates the argument. Critics have argued that despite the fact that the Ethiopian government was strategically provoking a famine in order to starve its opponents and hide the war under the pretense of food shortage, international aid agencies aligned methods of assistance with the requests of the government. These methods secured funds from government donors, who – for geopolitical reasons - refused to condemn the government (De Waal 1997). As a result, much of the relief aid was consigned to government militia and withheld from the areas of people who needed it most. In addition, critics claim that by deferring to the government and remaining 'neutral' (or silent) about the large scale abuses they were witnessing, humanitarian aid agencies worked to pacify the conflict and create a diplomatic vacuum which, ultimately, allowed the government national and international impunity (De Waal 1997). Critics also argue that the social and political initiatives of the

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[7] See (Keen 1994; De Waal 1997; Duffield 1994b).

rebel opposition group, Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), were effective in feeding, aiding, and, generally, stabilizing devastated areas but were ignored in deference to organizational priorities. Consequently, the TPLF's innovative and successful strategies have gone unacknowledged and marginalized from the wider humanitarian effort.

. The 'trauma relief' operation during the aftermath of the genocide in the former Yugoslavia also makes clear some of the negative consequence so aid. Critics assert that Western relief agencies prioritized their own agendas and therein dismissed local responses and recovery strategies (Summerfield 1996). As a result, the humanitarian effort exacerbated harms and inhibited healing (Summerfield 1996). In this case, the psycho-social trauma model's methodologies of counseling, symptom evaluation, and 'needs assessment', for example, added to feelings of loss of control, alienation and fear (Summerfield 1996) but under the banner of humanitarianism such methodologies went unchallenged and maintained legitimacy.

Lastly, critics argue that this 'new humanitarianism' has spread a culture and language that conflates humanitarianism and impunity (Sorensen 2002), greatly affecting the success of long-term reconstruction processes. Jennifer Schirmer (1999) discusses this form of cooption in relation to the peace processes after the Guatemalan conflict. Schirmer argues that the military 'has learned to loot the vocabulary of human rights and democracy for the purpose of crafting a unique state of civil-military governance' (1999: 93). In this way, the military has been able to appease international peace accords and the 'international humanitarian' (Duffield 2001) in general, while still maintaining coercive and violent control of the population.

The critiques demonstrate that humanitarian aid can have negative political, economic, and social ramifications. The argument illustrates aid's inevitable political involvement and challenges the very premise of humanitarianism. The acknowledgment that aid could have a dark side has created a certain amount of moral unease among policy and field workers alike and has initiated a debate within the international community over both the ethical nature and the material pragmatics of 'good' and 'bad' aid (Slim1997). This debate has sparked aid agencies to redefine, refine, standardize, and technologize their moral and ethical principles into aid programs that 'Do No Harm' (Anderson 1996). It is these debates and corresponding programs that form the current context and content of humanitarian aid discourse and practice.

Section II: Deconstruction and Affirmation

In general, deconstructive analyses maintain a disbelief towards metanarratives (Lyotard: 1984). The argument asserts that metanarratives, such as liberalism and Marxism, are fictions of the modern era whose assumptions of modernity and progress, reason and Enlightenment, need to be questioned. In this way, metanarratives are no longer 'truths' but privileged discourses (Parpart: 1995). For Michel Foucault, discourse is a historically, socially and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs (Scott 1988: 36). Furthermore, discourses are the sites where meanings are contested and power relations are determined, and the ability to control this meaning and knowledge is the key to exercising power in society (Foucault: 1980). For Foucault, power and knowledge are inseparable (Diamond and Quinby 1988: xxii). The analyses work to expose the discriminatory ways that discourses function and call for a

deconstruction of the relationship between discourse, knowledge, and power.

Jacques Derrida takes up such a deconstruction and emphasizes the power dynamic in binary opposites. He points to the predominance of binary opposites in Western discourse such as truth/ falsity, reason/emotion, peace/war whereby the first term is deemed superior to the second and yet it is defined by, and thus reliant on, its opposite (Derrida 1976). Derrida extends this understanding to a notion of 'drawing boundaries'. Necessarily, in drawing boundaries, there is an 'inside' and 'outside', the assumption being that the inside (included) is superior and the outside (excluded) inconsequential. Derrida questions this dichotomy. He argues that the inside is constitutionally defined and created by the existence of the outside, and so the outside is of necessity and certainly consequential (Derrida: 1992). In taking these insights to humanitarian aid, the ways in which power and knowledge function to maintain hegemony and create violence becomes clearer.

The discourse of humanitarian aid begins with a crisis in the international order. In this post-cold war story, ethnic, religious and political fragmentation, unprecedented levels of conflict, and ruthless dictators within the rogue states of the Third World threaten the established liberal order. This threat then requires Western 'aid,' necessary for 'the rescue of huge numbers of the world's people' (Orford 1999: 692). The story works to represent the West as the guarantors of progressive values such as security, freedom, and peace and, in opposition, the Third world as the symbol of poverty, violence, and helplessness. Correspondingly, the narrative constructs the identity of those in the West as heroic saviours and those of the Third World as either powerless, passive victims (usually women or children) or savage, irrational barbarians (Orford 1999: 697). These constructions can be traced back to the period of colonialism, in which the White colonizer represented civility, rationality and righteousness. The black 'colonized', the Other, represented opposite values that therefore required the impartation of civility and reform (Orford 1999). In both narratives, the necessity of intervention is naturalized and legitimized.

Humanitarian aid is thus not a neutral story of benevolent assistance. Rather, it is an imperial discourse of liberal modernity, in which its production and deployment has profound political, economic, and cultural effects and results in concrete practices of thinking and acting through which imperialism is incessantly reinforced (Escobar 1995). The empirical examples noted above helps make clear the ways this discourse impacts material conditions.

In the case of Ethiopia, the legacy of the inferior 'other' underpinning humanitarian aid may have helped the government to conceal, and therein continue, its war. By manipulating the representations of Third World 'underdevelopment' the government was able to mobilize an unprecedented amount of international assistance (agencies; funds; media) and hijack the publicity and supplies for its own political objectives. In addition, the representation of the Third World as passive and helpless may have contributed to the international community's dismissal of the politically and socially astute indigenous relief operations organized by the TPLF (De Waal 1997). Furthermore, by ignoring the strategies of the TPLF, the aid narrative was reinforced: the Western aid operations were considered necessary and heralded as heroic and the image of the Third world as helpless and inferior was re-inscribed.

The problematics of Western psycho-social trauma relief provides another example of the way particular representations work to create practices that have harmful consequences. Again here, the narrative of underdevelopment may work to justify and legitimize the universal application of Western trauma methodologies and the subsequent dismissal of local healing strategies. Furthermore, critics[8] argue that excluding these strategies worsens and prolongs distress, fueling hatred and resentment and laying the emotional and psychological foundations for violent retribution (Gilligan 1999).

The analysis highlights the way the narrative of humanitarian aid constructs representations that reify unequal power relations and, therefore, elucidates the connection between discursive and material violence. In addition, the analysis is a necessary deconstruction of the discursive oppositional binaries that obfuscates alterity. The argument demonstrates that this liberal metanarrative is constructed upon an imperial understanding that attributes the North with certain positive, progressive characteristics and the South with inferior, primitive ones. In this way, the North is deemed superior and the South inferior and the North/ South power binary made explicit. Following Derrida's understanding of binaries, such an oppositional positioning works to erase the ways the superiority of the North is dependant upon the inferiority of the South. Orford makes this erasure clear in the context of today's global economy:

> Those who celebrate the age of globalization 'actively forget' the extent to which access to the bodies, labor and resources of people in states subject to monetary intervention is the condition of the prosperous lifestyles...In turn, the exploitation of the suffering of people in civil wars or famines enriches global media corporations and their shareholder...The attempts to disavow this leads to more violence (2002: 287-90).

The quote explains the ways in which the coercive action undertaken to maintain this positioning, namely the exploitation and control of people and resources in developing states, becomes hidden (Orford 2002). This discursive oppositional staging also masks the ways that western political foreign alliances, policies and practices often counter the democratic and humanitarian values that they claim to personify and that afford them their 'superior' status. Uma Narayan (2000) explains:

> Political rhetoric that polarizes Western and Non-western values risks obscuring the degree to which economic and political agendas, carried out in collaboration between particular Western and Third World elites, work to erode the rights and quality of life for many citizens in both Western and Third World contexts. Such polarization detracts attention from real-politik-driven collaborations that result in Western economic and military support for brutal and undemocratic Third World regimes (Narayan 2000:93).

Narayan highlights the way in which the 'Western' and 'Non-Western' discursive binary ignores internal contestations and contradictions. In this way, the North/ South binary is

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[8]See Gibbs 1997; Summerfield 1996

not essential or self-evident but a particular political articulation that strategically and selectively depicts the North and South in ways that maintains unequal power relations.

    Humanitarian aid as a liberal modern discourse is positioned within the 'center'. Complex emergencies, in so much as they are represented as endemic to the Third World and as not connected to the practices of the North, are relegated to the 'outside'. As discussed above, it is the repression or negation of the 'outside' that enables the positive and superior position of the 'inside' to be maintained. Complex emergencies, therefore, are simply obstacles on the road to liberal modernization (Edkins 2000: 167).

    The critiques noted above worked to undermine this positioning by highlighting the ways humanitarian aid is implicated in situations of conflict by fueling conflict, subverting local strategies, and undermining political accountability. In this way, the critiques worked against the established representations of the North/ South binary and place humanitarian aid on the outside, displacing it from its exalted position (Edkins 2000). Such an analysis was an important attempt to repoliticize aid, drawing it out from its philanthropic roots and placing it within discussions of geopolitical economy.

    However, the transformative potential of the critiques fail in so much that the conclusion of their analysis only reverses the binary, in which aid becomes not the *solution* to the conflict but the *cause*:

> The conclusion is that not only does international emergency intervention and aid *not solve the problem* of famine: aid, through the mechanisms of power and control that it enables to operate, *produces* famineϒThis is a situation of inversion: where aid is no longer the *remedy*, aid is the *cause* (Edkins 2000: 146).

Jenny Edkins explains here that the critics' conclusion that aid produces famine (or conflict) does not disrupt the binary – the imperial logic underlying the discursive oppositions remains intact – it simply switches the positions. In this way, the critiques have done little to provide a challenge to the discourse and practice of humanitarian aid: whether aid is positioned as the 'inside' or 'outside', the way that it is implicated in epistemic violence is dismissed and/or suppressed (Edkins 2003).

    Alternatively, the practice of humanitarian aid should be seen as neither the cause nor the solution (good nor bad); whether it solves or exacerbates the crisis is impossible to know (Edkins 2000: 147). In Derridean terms, such an impossibility is an example of the 'double contradictory imperative' (1992: 72): on the one hand, aid must be given - humanitarian assistance cannot be withheld from those who are suffering; on the other hand, humanitarian aid must be withheld - aid is contributing to the crisis. This insight acknowledges that political engagements are not about determined, right or wrong, good or bad choices, as is purported by modern discourse. Rather, politics is an engagement with that which is beyond the binary: the incommensurable. This understanding can inform a more transformative practice of humanitarian aid.

    A transformative practice begins, not with a reversal of binaries but by deconstructing and affirming the never ending representational interplay between the two oppositional terms: as the 'outside' is brought into focus, it replaces or joins the inside, creating and being defined by yet another 'outside' (Derrida 1976). This abyssal relationship can never be fully grasped; there is always excess meaning or alterity in understanding (Schutte 2000: 50); a residue that is incommensurable (Schutte 2000) and that always remains 'other':

> Deconstruction is an affirmation of what is wholly other (tout autre), of what is unforeseeable from the present. It is an affirmation of an otherness that is always to come, as an event which exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations (Biesta, 1998:2).

The affirmation of the incommensurable is not to fully understand it - the abyssal nature of it forecloses this possibility – it is a recognition of the limits of knowledge and thus an acknowledgement of the unknown, or other. Therefore, affirmation works to resist appropriating and dismissing that which registers as 'incomprehensible' by surrendering to an intimate and loving 'translation':

> The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay (Spivak 1993: 181).

Cultural translation is the practice of learning to 'read' and 'speak to' another, rather than listen to or speak for (Spivak 2003). Such a practice demands recognition of the 'infinite heterogeneity of culture' and thus requires meticulous attention to cultural, political, and economic differences as well as speaking positions, narrative timeframes, and consciousness within historical moments (Schutte 2000). In this way, cultural translation draws attention to the alterity present in everything and makes clear that any unitary concept in fact contains repressed or negated material (Scott 1988). In this way, cultural translation transforms our understanding of the self and other. Schutte makes clear:

> These multiple and disjunctive temporalities create a displacement in the relations between self and other, allowing the recognition of alterity both inside and outside the self (Schutte 2000: 51).

Schutte explains that the practice of cultural translation demonstrates that the other is not just outside ourselves but within each of us. In this way, cultural translation demands a sense of self-reflexivity so that one 'might have to acknowledge his own split subjectivity, change his fixed way of life, welcome the stranger within, and perhaps alter his views and relations with others in ways he had not foreseen' (Schutte 2000: 54).

Interpersonally, this self-reflexivity can work to resist 'turning the other into something like the self in order to be ethical' when the 'other' registers as incoherent or unrecognizable (Spivak 1993: 183). Such a resistance can create:

> Ways of knowing far deeper than the type of thinking wherein dominant cultural speakers perceive themselves to be at the epistemic and moral center of the universe, spreading their influence outward toward other rational speakers (Schutte 2000: 55)

The affirmation of the other creates new, less oppressive relationships by resisting epistemic violence. The affirmation and translation of incommensurability may also initiate a reconceptualization of international political discourses and practices and thus a more transformative engagement with social justice. Cultural translation provides a conceptual framework in which to demonstrate not only the alterity within the self but

how the 'pluricultural temporalities create a disjunctive tension with the linear temporality of modernity governing the identities of producers and consumers in advanced capitalist societies' (Schutte, 2000: 51). In this way, cultural translation works to uncover the hegemonic interests of the transnational global system, which conceal themselves through, supposed market transparency and 'passive' consumption, which have specific implications for those populations in the Third World:

> The deceptive transparency of signs, the growing expansion of passive consumption, the recourse to loans as the concrete mechanism for maintaining consumption, the exorbitant rates of interest imposed on already subaltern population… are interconnected forms of exploitation (Schutte 2000: 61).

The work of cultural translation uncovers interconnected forms of exploitation and their implications. In the process, cultural translation maps the specific ways the global economy affects people's lives around the world. By acknowledging ruptures and translating responsibly, the conditions, both material and discursive, which sustain and threaten people lives in specific locations around the world are exposed. The outcome draws out points of commonality of how the logic of capitalism in the contemporary global arena exploits both First and Third world populations (Mohanty 1997) and how 'power and privilege are maintained by corporations, systems, operations and agendas that are by no means purely local' (Code 2000: 74). In this way, affirming and translating the incommensurable works to inform our global methods and frameworks towards dismantling, instead of reinforcing, imperial discourses and practices.

In returning to aid as incommensurable, translation has particular implications both conceptually and materially. Aid is recognized for the possibility of both its good and bad potential and, more specifically, it being philanthropic and political at the same moment. In this way, the principles of aid as altruistic and neutral are constantly being negotiated with 'the concrete conditions of its implementation, the determined limits of its representation, and the abuses of or inequalities in its application as a result of certain interests, monopolies, or existing hegemonies' (Edkins 2000: 149). For aid practitioners this is the recognition that their job consists of a relentless encountering of moral dilemmas (Slim 1997). Hugo Slim has defined moral dilemmas as 'a choice between wrongs...situations in which each possible course of action breeches some otherwise binding moral principle' (1997: 5). Slim helps to make clear that within moral dilemmas there is no 'commensurability': whatever one does will be wrong and 'will continue to be troubling rather than liberating' (1997: 6). However, while such dilemmas are inevitable in contexts of humanitarian aid in which one is present in the worst human tragedies, it should not preclude one from attempting to act ethically. For this reason, the affirmation of incommensurability implies that humanitarian aid is a responsibility to finding a way to contain in each decision the principle of philanthropy with the specificity of its political application.

Ultimately, the work of cultural translation makes clear the connections between personal, interpersonal, and international discourses and practices. These connections help clarify the relationship between classroom practices and humanitarian aid practices and how particular disjuncts in conversation are related to material violence. In this way, pedagogy, as a major site of the production of knowledge, becomes a key player in the

global economy and systems of inequality. Therefore, in exposing the relationship between how power/ knowledge circulates and the intricate processes of exploitation, cultural translation and the affirmation of the incommensurable help to address the 'violence of the episteme' (Spivak 1988).

Section III: Sustaining the Incommensurable

Returning to the concrete practices of humanitarian aid, the question is raised as to whether a humanitarian aid framework can practice cultural translation. The framework must be able to recognize multi-spatial, trans-historical and economic relations that would; one, expose hegemonic discourses and destabilize binaries; second, affirm the incommensurable; third, translate cross-cultural disjunctions. By taking these tenets to the current dominant framework for humanitarian aid, namely the rights based approach (Morago-Nicholas, 2000), the transformative and dangerous potentials of the framework are elucidated.

The rights based approach to humanitarian aid rests on a particular understanding that conflicts emerge as a result of the denial and/or violation of human rights. The approach considers human rights to be founded upon the principle of equality, understood as a social contract to ensure that each individual has *equal* capabilities and freedoms 'to live a life one has reason to value' (Sen 1999). In this way, human rights are seen as claims to a set of social arrangements, norms, institutions, laws and an enabling economic environment that can best secure the enjoyment of these rights (Elson 2002: 1). Correspondingly, human rights approaches attempt to secure such social arrangements and are therefore an explicit engagement with political structures of power (Slim 2002).

Broadly, the rights-based approach's shift away from philanthropy and towards a political position means humanitarian aid is not solely concerned with saving lives but with conflict management, peace building, and justice (Fox 2001). In this way, the approach attempts to focus not only on long term goals that address structural power dynamics. Correspondingly, an analysis of power emerges as a central component to the rights-based approach (Morago-Nicholas, 2000:3). The rights-based approach believes that such an analysis brings awareness concerning the complex and diverse ways that rights are curtailed within different social arrangements by raising important questions, such as:

> Who defines the nature and scope of the relations both within the group and between members and non-members of the group? What are the formal and informal instruments of regulation of such relationships? What are the existing patterns and causes of inequality, exclusion and vulnerability? Who are the winners and losers resulting from the interplay of such patterns and causes (Morago-Nicolas, 2000: 1)?

The approach asserts that the questioning of power relations provides valuable information as to how to decrease violence and promote peace. For example, the rights approach asserts that such awareness informs on the ways the unequal distribution of material resources can cause or exacerbate conflicts. Following, the approach's overall mandate in distributing food and supplies asserts a commitment that attempts to move

beyond traditional 'needs assessment' and attempts to operationalize the human rights principles into specific material requirements and standards in order to ensure equal distribution (Dufour, et al. 2004). In these ways, the rights based approach to humanitarian aid is a significant shift away from traditional aid approaches premised upon philanthropy and neutrality.

The centrality of equality, politics, and power in the rights-based approach has potential to sustain the incommensurable. The cross-cultural application of the notion of equality can bring attention to the ways rights violations are incurred in multiple ways, including Western-governed trans-national flows. In calling attention to the way the West is implicated in the curtailing of individual's rights, an explicit challenge to the imperial narrative of aid and therein a material deconstruction of the North/ South binary may be initiated. In addition, the acknowledgment of the ways the West is implicated can help to provoke a sense of self-reflexivity in relation to conflict. To elaborate, the deconstruction of essentialized representations and discourses begs a challenge to one's own role in relation to conflict and violence (Sereny 2003). The above analysis made clear that personal and interpersonal implications are integral to international insights (Schutte, 2002). For these reasons, the rights-based approach's attempt to take the universal principles of human rights and apply them to highly particular, diverse and sensitive situations may be able to be seen as an attempt at 'tracking commonality through responsible translation' leading 'into areas of difference and different differentiations' (Spivak 1993: 192). As has been noted, such a translation can work to undermine essentialized representations within the discourse of humanitarian aid, challenging the incessant retelling of the imperial narrative and therein epistemic violence.

The rearticulation of the colonial narrative may also be challenged by the rights-based approach's explicit political engagement. The politicization of humanitarian aid has the potential to resist the paternal tendencies of the philanthropic approach. Advocates of the rights-based approach have argued that a philanthropic approach can work as a 'veneer for the preservation of inhumane political status quo' (Slim 2002: 3) and is therein easily hijacked by those perpetrating violence. Hugo Slim makes clear:

> The virtues of charity and philanthropy, which should have equality at the center of their meaning, have all too frequently become the means to make the opposite principle of inequality and its resulting suffering morally, socially and politically acceptable. A system of 'good works' can serve as a smooth gloss over more structural violation and injustice (2002:5).

Slim thus warns of a 'humanitarianism' that remains premised upon philanthropy. Relatedly, the paternalistic tendency of humanitarian aid may also be challenged in the rights approach's perspective on material conditions. More specifically, in viewing a lack of minimum material resources as a rights violation and as part of the crisis, the right-based approach can expose the injustice of material inequality, potentially illustrating the way global capitalism is implicated in this injustice. Here, again, the approach attempts to examine specific conditions within a conflict and make critical global connections. In this way, the approach may be able to think through issues of social justice from an inclusive paradigm that is premised upon an 'experimental and analytical anchor in the lives of

those most marginalized' (Mohanty 2003: 231). Furthermore, making these connections may position the providing of material requirements as a *responsibility* not a benevolent duty (Spivak, 2003). Responsibility can help to reconceptualize the relationships between aid workers and those directly affected by the conflict, providing both with a sense of agency and resisting the romanticization of both the 'humanitarian' and the 'subaltern' (Spivak, 2003). This reconstruction has the potential to destabilize hegemonic power relations and (re)construct a more ethical global system.

Lastly, the rights-based approach expresses an explicit commitment to challenging unequal power relations. The acknowledgment of power as a praxis is an important shift for humanitarian aid as it may help aid workers to acknowledge the way power is immanent and omnipresent (Foucault 1978; 1981), and therefore exists even within humanitarian action. In this way, the complexity and incommensurability of humanitarian work may be acknowledged rather than dismissed.

Despite the above noted potential of the rights approach, critical dangers reside as well. The danger of the right-based approach to humanitarian aid is that which has haunted the entire analysis: the propensity for it to maintain the hegemonic global order by co-opting the discourse and the practice in imperialist ways. The rights approach places the international community in the position of 'righting wrongs', once again establishing the moral superiority of the West as 'righters' and the inferiority of the impoverished, ill-educated, and 'perennially wronged' South (Spivak 2003). This creates a superficial distance between 'those whose task it is to define and enforce the rights, and those whose task it is to accept and observe them...the 'we' who take it upon ourselves to right wrongs and the 'they' whose wrongs are to be righted' (Owen 2003: 11). This dichotomy only reinforces the imperial discourse, undermines the potential for the rights framework to affirm the incommensurable, and reproduces epistemic and material violence.

The issue of definition and enforcement begs the notion of power/knowledge, therein recalling the temptation to mistake universal human values with what are merely Western interests and desires (Todorov: 2001). In this mistake, an assertion of universality made in relation to human rights becomes only an elevation of one particular form of social organization, which 'makes those values seem naturalized and less open to contestation than values, which are recognized (as they all must be) as culturally specific' (Buchanon and Puhuja 2002: 313). Therefore, a rights approach that lacks cultural specificity and reflexivity amounts to cultural imperialism. In this context, where the language and understanding of human rights has no cross-cultural salience, much less assistance, condemning human rights abuses may only inhibit peace processes or incite violence (Keen 2005). For this reason, it has been argued that the adoption of rights-based approaches has done little more than create a new rhetoric that enables the international community to take 'the moral high ground' while it pursues the same old imperial agenda (Uvin 2003), prescribing Western interests and desires under the guise of universal human values (Todorov 2001). Furthermore, as more and more development organizations adopt the language of rights to pursue their programs, Third World states are pressured to 'acquiesce to the Northern and capitalist culture that accompanies these organizations and their activities' (Didur and Heffernan 2003: 7). These 'rules of development' work to reassert the unequal relations of power between the North and the South.

These dangers undermine the rights-based approach's transformative potential. More alarmingly, the rights-based approach runs the risk of strengthening global hegemony and inciting violence through a discourse that appears even more transparent and 'humanitarian'.

Looking closely at the discussion, it appears that important negotiations are taking place: the negotiation between equality and difference, micro-material conditions and trans-national processes, the particular and the universal, as well as discourse and practice. Furthermore, it seems that these negotiations are far from being concluded or solved, rather it often appears that 'humanitarian relief..and the achievement of justice are potentially conflicting goals' (Owen, 2003: 24). However, the rights-based approach provides a much needed discursive and material space to undergo this negotiation, affirmation, and translation, and its international position holds radical potential for high profile recognition of common injustices that connect discursive and material global flows to local and specific conditions of oppression. The point is not to argue here that the approach is ideal in its past, current or even future institution but only that it offers a space for the relentless affirmation and translation of the incommensurable. In a global system bereft with injustice, an international arena where cross-cultural dialogue and scrutiny of hegemonic practices can take place is critical. As Robert Young argues: 'One cannot write off the righting of wrongs. The enablement must be used even as the violation is renegotiated' (2003:169).

Conclusion: Connections and Complicities

This paper concludes by moving from critique to connection, or deconstruction to reconstruction.
A main goal of this paper was to suggest that cross-cultural work, such as humanitarian aid, be attentive to the ways it remains complicit in global hegemony by drawing some discursive and material connections between the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, narrativity, and struggle as well as the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes. In this way, another goal, albeit implicit, has been to build the connection between scholarship and political organizing (Mohanty, 2003).

It is for these reasons that this paper concludes by gesturing towards the critical political and ethical position, or responsibility, of academia to genealogically trace the production of power/ knowledge through its own and other(s) practices, as Buchanon and Pahuja argue:

> In keeping the fundamental feminist insight that one's theory and practice ought not to be separated, we strongly suspect that the place for us to begin untangling ourselves from the webs of complicity in which we are bound is our everyday lives of teaching and writing...It seems to us that our practice as academics, where we travel to and to whom we speak, are one of things that can either continue to divide the worlds of North and South, rich and poor, or they can serve as a bridge between these worlds (2002: 322).

This is not to glorify the role of academics, but rather to commit to, what Spivak has termed, a 'humanities to come': a practice of teaching focused on demystifying the role of global financialization and international control in human rights initiative, and a practice

that involves learning to read as being attentive to the 'singular and unverifiable' (2003). Furthermore, this practice involves a learning to learn from below that works against the quick fix training institutes that prepare international humanitarian workers, including human rights advocates with uncomplicated standards for success (Didur and Heffernan, 2003:10).

Continuing from this suggestion, this paper calls for the necessity of humanitarian aid to commit to a self-reflexive practice, one that dedicates itself to interrogating its complicity in the ways power and violence is exercised not just through institutions, but through discursive productions, scholastic practices, media representations, policy recommendations, 'humanitarian' interventions, development projects, and human rights redresses. The objective here is not to promote a luxurious introspection or to inhibit decision making, for surely neither are admiral particularly within the context of complex emergencies, but only to acknowledge that the personal and the political, the local and the global, the academy and the field, the discussion and the practice, the particular and the universal, and, ultimately, peace and violence, are not as separated as is commonly positioned. The point then is to commit to the 'necessary but impossible task of intervening at this juncture and displacing a fully rational notion of Enlightenment thinking and human rights' (Didur and Heffernan, 2003: 11).

In returning to the question of disjuncture in which this paper was premised upon, it seems then that my personal experience of disjunct speaks, at least partly, to the lack of reflexivity and responsibility within the academy as well as the strength of 'political totalitarianism' (Campbell, 1999). However, the conclusion speaks to the role of connecting (affirming; translating) to this disjunct verse dismissing it.

In connecting to my own conclusion then, I end this project at a similar point at which it began for me- an attempt to situate and embody my practice of scholarship. In committing to this project, I tried to trace not only the disjuncts in politics, humanitarian aid, and academia but those I create - it is a tracing of the violence I too am complicit in but it is also my responsibility to 'the other that calls us before our will' (Spivak 2003). In this way, I have hoped that the sustaining of these two conversations has been its own attempt at engaging with the incommensurable.

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