Learning to be Refugees: The Bhutanese in Nepal and Australia
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Abstract
The deployment of moral sentiments—humanitarian governance—both at an international and domestic level is a defining aspect of our times. Despite lofty aspirations, this ideology results in a global system of governance where domination and assistance are explicitly linked. Far from benign benevolence, humanitarian ideals are employed by international organisations to manage refugees while maintaining the legitimacy of the nation-based, global order. In an era punctuated by rhetoric and practice regarding the securing of national borders, the Bhutanese are an elite group of among refugees who represent a global community’s humanitarian heart. After two decades living in camps run by the UNHCR, the Bhutanese refugees are being resettled.

Following 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, in South Australia and in Nepal, it became evident this group had an insightful understanding of the expected behaviour of a refugee. Such expectations included mourning a lost nation; constituting a community; and requiring social reform. The Bhutanese actively cultivated an image of domesticated (controlled) subjects eligible for ongoing care and support. This performance required the Bhutanese to transform or mask their existing values and social norms. These performances provided a veneer of compliance that masked action. It is through these various junctures of expectation, performance, and contestation that their dynamic experiences are fruitfully examined. The well-meaning discourse of humanitarianism absolves the conscience of the global community in the face of ever increasing evidence of injustices caused by nation building. Though the Bhutanese are a specific group, their experiences are reflective of the mores, values, and assumptions of our world. This ethnography illustrates how humanitarian ideals actively contour refugee identity to maintain the global order. Refugees must reinvent themselves to mirror the expectations of the governing institutions. It underscores that in accepting the role of humanitarian subject, refugees must abandon their role as contributors to the nation state and become satisfied with the position of guests. As supplicants in global reconstitutions, refugees articulate both the grand aspirations and the desperate shortcomings of a new, humanitarian system of global relationships.