Our Engagement with the “Faces” of the “Other” and the Ethical Quandaries in Refugee Protection

Abstract

What prevents us from truly engaging with the suffering of others, and how do our reactions vary with different refugee groups? This is a theoretical essay which examines the sentiments and narratives surrounding the refugee movements after the 2021Afghanistan "Fall of Kabul" and the 2022 Ukraine-Russia conflicts using Judith Butler and Emmanuel Levinas. I argue that although we feel an innate responsibility towards those fleeing persecution and violence, society has constructed certain displaced groups as precarious and grievable and has removed us from thoroughly engaging with the ones who are not. Furthermore, when we are forced to contend with the violence that seems relatively close to us, when it occurs within closer "proximity", people respond with more passion. This paper finds that the general population and the media play an important role in the "positive" construction of certain refugee groups which then garner effective policy, legal, and social responses.

Introduction

When it comes to violence, suffering, and refugee movements, I keep coming back to what prevents us from truly engaging with the suffering of others and how our reactions vary with different refugee groups. This essay will explore this question (and others) by theoretically examining the sentiments and narratives surrounding refugees, explicitly highlighting the differences between the reactions to the 2021 Afghanistan and 2022 Ukraine-Russia crises. I argue that although we feel an innate responsibility towards those fleeing persecution and violence and can, at a fundamental level, connect with "others", society has constructed and portrayed certain refugees as precarious and grievable and has removed us from thoroughly engaging with the ones who are not. When we are forced to contend with the violence that seems relatively close to us, mainly when it occurs within closer proximity, people respond more aggressively, with more passion and anger. Thus, they can construct these refugees' lives as grievable and precarious to garner effective policy, legal, and social responses.

The question I am asking is not why the legal and political responses to Afghanis and Ukrainians differed, as several underlying factors contribute to their differences. Instead, my interest is in the ethical engagement towards Ukrainians compared to the Afghanis or other refugees from the Global South. It is on how we construct precarious and grievable lives for refugee populations from different regions. Clearly, the responses to the Ukrainian refugees versus the Afghani refugees have racist, discriminatory, and colonial underpinnings. Thus, it was inevitable that Canadians had greater sympathy for Ukrainians than Afghanis. However, when considering reactions to conflict and refugee movements, I am interested in theoretical understandings of humanity, proximity, precariousness, and grievability of human lives and suffering.

This paper will ask: How precarious are the lives of those removed from us, and how involved are we with their struggles? How do we determine which lives are more precarious and grievable? How does proximity play a role in deciding who is precarious and how we engage with their suffering? How are our responses toward refugee displacements constructed? What stories of law, violence, and suffering are being told? And how does the language of law and politics shape our views of human suffering? This paper will primarily use Judith Butler and Emmanuel Levinas to explore humanity, violence, precariousness, grievability, and proximity concerning refugee law, discourses, and policies. I will first briefly explain the conflicts between Ukraine and Afghanistan to contextualize the situation, and then dedicate most of my paper to Butler and Levinas and explore the reactions toward Ukraine and Afghanistan. My examination can offer how and why people fundamentally view refugees the way they do and why, despite our best interests, we remain removed from the suffering of others. Finally, I will briefly offer potential avenues of what we should explore as alternate solutions. Perhaps then, we can decenter ourselves to look at the "faces" of those suffering without constructing binaries to understand our responsibility towards the "other."

Ukraine versus Afghanistan Conflicts and Responses in Brief

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine escalated in 2022 when Russia led a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, leading to approximately 8.1 million Ukrainians fleeing the country in search of asylum.[1] This resulted in an emotional and sympathetic reaction towards the refugees fleeing Ukraine from Canadians and people worldwide. When Canada announced it would establish a unique program for Ukrainian refugees, the Canada-Ukraine Authorisation for

[1] "Ukraine Refugee Situation." UNHCR: United High Commissioner for Refugees. https://data.unhcr.org/fr/situations/ukraine.

Emergency Travel Program (CUAET),[2] the public lauded the government's quick response and action. However, only a couple of months prior, the world watched as the Taliban took over Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, and American forces pulled out of Afghanistan. This led to a mass exodus of people fleeing the country, fearing for their lives under the new regime.[3] The media showed horrific images of people clinging to airplanes while trying to flee the country, and the Fall of Kabul sparked outrage and campaigns to raise money and offer protection for the refugees. However, although Canada pledged to resettle 40,000 Afghani refugees and established two programs to attain these objectives, the process has been slow.[4] Furthermore, the Ukraine crisis then took over headlines, and the situation in Afghanistan followed the suit of other conflict-ridden areas. It was pushed aside.

The reasons why the legal and political responses to the Ukraine crisis versus the Afghanistan crisis were different are evident and have been explored thoroughly within the literature.[5] For example, in a special issue of *Refugee Watch,* Nergis Canefe lays out why the responses to the Ukraine and Afghan cases differed. First, the reception of States and International Refugee Law towards refugees in and from the Global North and the Global South has never been uniform.[6] The current Afghani situation is not an anomaly.[7] Refugees and asylum

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[2] "Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel." Government of Canada. March 22, 2022. https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/03/canada-ukraine-authorization-for-emergency-travel.html.
The CUAET program was implemented in March 2022. The program helps Ukrainian families quickly get visitor visas to Canada to have a safe, temporary home while the country is at war. It also allows these applicants the ability to study and work.
[3] "Afghanistan, Events of 2021". Human Rights Watch. 2023. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/afghanistan.
[4] Kushan Azadah, "The Necropolitics of Canada's Afghan Resettlement Programmes," *Refugee Watch 60* (December 2022): 46.
As of 2022, Canada only managed to bring in 17,000 Afghan refugees, whereas within the first month into the Ukraine crisis, Canada approved the entry of over 41,000 Ukrainians.
[5] During the height of the Ukraine crisis, several academics, lawyers, human rights advocates highlighted and called out the difference between the responses by the states towards Ukraine and Afghanistan (and other countries in the Global South).
[6] Nergis Canefe, "Methodological Quandaries of Studying Post-Soviet Displacements: An Invitation to Consider 'Global Postcoloniality' in Forced Migration Studies", *Refugee Watch 60,* (December 2022): 1.
[7] Although in this case due to the fact that these conflicts occurred within months of each other it is a good illustration of people's responses to refugee crises from different parts of the world that emerge due to conflict.

seekers from the Middle East and the Global South have faced scrutiny and apprehension from the general public, with the majority of the sentiments leaning towards exclusion and opposition.[8] For example, scholars have shown how the post-9/11 fear of refugees from the Middle East and the impact of the war on terror rhetoric have framed Muslim refugees as a threat.[9] Refugees from the Middle East and the Global South always teeter between the line of deserving and undeserving, and constantly have to prove their refugee-ness within the legal realm and in society.[10] Moreover, refugee flows and movement occur at a regional level and is a multi-staged mobilization process that uses previous paths and labour market needs.[11] Furthermore, while Ukrainians are largely monolithic in terms of religion, culture, and ethnicity, Afghanis embody diverse identities and will travel to places that fit these identities best.[12] Thus, the destinations for different types of refugees vary and are region-specific. Lastly, there are a lot of young, educated people among the refugees in Ukraine, and they are key candidates for the job market.[13] Thus, they are welcomed in Canada as opposed to Afghani refugees.

Furthermore, law and politics play a role in distinguishing between Ukrainian and Afghani refugees.[14] Giorgio Agamben posits that sovereignty is connected to the state of exception, which has become the archetype of governance today, wherein the sovereign stands both inside and outside the law and can suspend the standard juridical framework indefinitely.[15] The state of exception used to be something extraordinary, brought up during unprecedented

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[8] Canefe, "Methodological Quandaries of Studying Post-Soviet Displacements," 2.
[9] See for example (amongst others): Alsultany, E.'s. Arabs and Muslims in the media after 9/11: Representational strategies for a 'postrace' Era (2013); Nacos, B.L. and O. Torres-Reyna's "Framing Muslim-Americans before and after 9/11" (2003); Poynting, S., G. Noble, P. Tabar, and J. Collins' Bin Laden in the suburbs: Criminalising the Arab other (2004).
[10] Christopher Kyriakides, Lubna Bajjali, Arthur Mcluhan, and Karen Anderson, "Beyond Refuge: Contested Orientalism and Persons of Self-Rescue", *Canadian Ethnic Studies 50,* no. 2 (2018): 61.
[11] Canefe, "Methodological Quandaries of Studying Post-Soviet Displacements", 2.
[12] Canefe, "Methodological Quandaries of Studying Post-Soviet Displacements", 2.
[13] Canefe, "Methodological Quandaries of Studying Post-Soviet Displacements", 2.
[14] The theoretical and philosophical constructions of this will be explained later in the paper.
[15] Ulrich Raulff, "An Interview with Giorgio Agamben", *German Law Journal* 5, no. 5 (2004): 609.

times. However, Agamben argues that it is now the norm, and the state of exception is not the exception but the rule.[16] Thus, violence or intervention by the state for security reasons are not illegal but are extra-legal because they are made possible through the state of exception where the standard juridical order no longer applies.[17] The notion of *homo sacer* (one excluded from all religious community and political life and thus reduced to bare life) can be applied to refugees, in that refugees are reduced to bare life by the state and thus can be excluded from society.[18] Legal protections are taken away in these cases, and the state can impose governance outside the "regular" legal order.[19] Connecting this to the Ukraine and Afghanistan situations could also explain why Canada could bring in more refugees from Ukraine faster. This was not violence against these refugees under the state of exception but utilizing the state of exception paradigm to benefit specific groups of refugees. At the same time, Afghani refugees and refugees from the Global South are scrutinized in another form of the state of exception. Here, the refugee protection law is suspended due to the chaotic situation in Afghanistan and the perceived security risks refugees from Afghanistan pose.

However, the lives of Ukrainians and migrants from the Global North have always been favoured (due to the abovementioned circumstances), and thus they would always benefit from the law. Although Agamben's theories on the state of exception could explain some of the processes and responses by Canadians and the Canadian government, we can take this further when looking at the narratives, discourses, and the engagement of people, the media, and the general population. Furthermore, these conflicts exposed some interesting phenomena. It showed that people were inherently concerned about the well-being and suffering of refugees. This

[16] Raulff, "An Interview with Giorgio Agamben", 609.
[17] Raulff, "An Interview with Giorgio Agamben", 609.
[18] Giorgio Agamben, "The Camp as the Nomos of the Modern", in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* D. Heller-Roazen, Trans, (California: Stanford University Press, 1995): 116.
[19] Agamben, "The Camp as the Nomos of the Modern", 116.

occurred both in the case of Afghanistan and in the case of Ukraine. However, with Ukraine, the public, the media, and politicians could turn that emotion and ethical responsibility into action far more easily than in the case of Afghanistan. So, what underlines this difference, and why is it easier to engage with the suffering of certain people?

Levinas, the "Face" and the "Other"

Levinas uses the idea of the "face" and our relation to the "other"[20] to understand our innate sense of responsibility towards another person.[21] The "other," which Levinas also refers to as alterity, is the whole construction of otherness, of being someone other than the self.[22] Levinas' ethical theories of responsibility come from our interaction with the "other, and in this encounter they speak to and command us; when we respond, we comprehend our responsibility and ourselves in relation to the "other" and within the framework of their history.[23] For Levinas, when we stand before the "other," they ask for our responsibility and at the same time, they accuse, calling our freedom into question.[24] This is because the "other," as per Levinas, is a being you can kill or negate because they are someone you do not understand.[25] However, in this encounter you are summoned to engage and thus can either acknowledge or negate the "other." This is the freedom that is called to question. The ability to change your initial violent tendencies to goodness.[26] Levinas argues that the "other" should be someone whose differences should be

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[20] I put "other" in quotations because I will be analyzing the meaning of the "other" in relation to Butler and other scholars later in the essay.

[21] Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas", in *Face to Face with Levinas,* ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 23.
According to Levinas, his approach to face is the basic mode of responsibility.

[22] Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 103-104.

[23] Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 9.
Also recognizing that we cannot possess the "other".

[24] Theodore de Boer, "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy", in *Face to Face with Levinas,* ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 93.

[25] Levinas uses negation for murder or killing. So, in this case, when encountering the "other" the way you can negate them is by killing or murdering them.

[26] de Boer, "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy", 93.

celebrated, and we should look at them with care and concern as they are a mystery and are different from us.[27] Therefore, our encounter with the "other" and being responsible for the "other" is difficult. This is because the encounter holds us accountable and demands our attention.[28] Thus, to genuinely engage with the "other," Levinas states that we need to look at and acknowledge the "face" of the "other."

Essentially, the "face" is an understanding of our ethical gaze toward someone who is not us, the "other."[29] A Levinasan face is not precisely or exclusively human, but "it communicates what is human, what is precarious, what is injurable."[30] When looking at the "face" of the "other," we understand our responsibility and are never discharged from our duty to the "other."[31] By looking at the "face," we are genuinely getting to know the "other" so that we can understand our ethical responsibility towards them. Without looking at the "face" of the "other," the temptation for total negation remains.[32] However, when engaging with the "face" of the "other," the "face" will say to you, you shall not kill, and with this phrase we understand that we cannot survive on our own, and we cannot find meaning within sameness, so we owe more to the "other" than ourselves.[33] In this sense, Levinas offers a philosophy of responsibility and humanity by positioning ourselves against the "other." When we are forced to look at the "face" of the "other" and really look at their humanity, we must contend with our ethical responsibility towards them. Only then can we understand our responsibility not to harm them in any way and instead offer protection and care.

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[27] Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, Michael B. Smith (trans.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 97-98.
[28] Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 105.
[29] Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 97.
[30] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,* (New York: Verso, 2004), xviii.
Hence why the "face" is in quotations throughout this paper.
[31] Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 106.
[32] Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 9.
[33] Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas", 24.

Fundamentally, I believe we all have an innate sense of responsibility towards other human beings and their suffering. It is why when we saw the horrors of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan or the invasion of Ukraine, we reacted emotionally. However, where my argument deviates from Levinas' is in the level of engagement we have with the suffering of people. In addition to the apparent differences in the processes towards Ukraine and Afghanistan, there were also clear differences in the narratives, discourses, and sentiments towards Ukrainians and Afghanis. When the media and news outlets showed the horrors of the Fall of Kabul, we were forced to look to the "faces" of the "other" to engage with them and to contend with our responsibilities towards them. This was the same reaction when looking at the "faces" of the Ukrainian refugees. If we follow Levinas, all lives should be equally precarious and grievable, especially when we continuously see the "faces" of those suffering on social media and news outlets. However, our engagement was not equal, and it is evident that the response varies.

Grievable and Precarious Lives

Judith Butler posits that the reason for the difference in our engagement is that we are distributing vulnerability and precariousness to different populations in varying ways.[34] Butler defines grievability as lives that are worthy of mourning because they are recognized and valued as lives, and ungrievable lives are those that cannot be lost or destroyed because they are, from the beginning, already lost and destroyed.[35] All human lives are thus precarious because they can be erased at any given time. Precariousness is the idea that, in some ways, a person's life is in the hands of the other, which makes it exposed and dependable on those known and unknown.[36] For Butler, precariousness and grievability are not just ethical quandaries, but they also exist as a

[34] Butler, *Precarious Life,* x11.
[35] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (New York: Verso, 2016), xix.
[36] Butler, *Frames of War*, 14

social condition influenced by politics and other forces.[37] Connecting this to Levinas, engaging with the "face" of the "other" is understanding what is precarious about life.[38] Similar to Levinas, this type of engagement does not come easily. For example, Butler argues that when we see images of those suffering on our phones or TV screens, we can choose to either click deliberately or not.[39] In other words, we can choose to engage with the suffering of "others" or not. We only act when we are compelled or moved to act.[40] However, the argument here is that our lives are intricately tied to politics, society, community, and belonging, and the life of the "other" is constructed by the social, political, and legal world.[41]

I have been alluding to the fact that with the ascription of grievability and precariousness towards certain groups of people, we also construct who is human and who is not. Levinas would argue that ethically when we turn our gaze towards the "face" of the "other," we recognize their humanity and thus will not kill them or cause them any suffering. However, if we consider Butler's arguments, who is grievable and precarious is also based on whom we construct as humans.[42] To examine this, let us consider how we construct refugees, law, violence, and the "other."

Constructions of Refugees, Law, Violence and the "Other"

Who is a Refugee?

Within society and law,[43] there are pre-conceived and long-standing constructions of who is a refugee and what an idealized refugee should look like. The 1951 Convention for Refugee

[37] Butler, *Frames of War*, xxv
[38] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 134
[39] Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy 26*, no. 2, (2012), 136.
[40] Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation", 136.
[41] Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation", 140-141.
[42] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 141.
[43] And within refugee studies itself.

Protection was established because of the European refugee problem due to World War II for those who became refugees after January 1st, 1951.[44] It was meant to protect those fleeing the horrors of the war and was put in place after the failures of states to provide safe protection for Jewish refugees.[45] Later, the 1967 Protocol for Refugee Protection removed geographical and temporal limitations. These treaties remain the foundation for refugee definition and protection at the state level and within international law. However, the construction of refugees within these documents is (primarily) white, Eurocentric, and "Western," stemming from the Cold War interpretation of displacement.[46] This perpetuates discourses of what sort of refugees come from the Global South versus what an idealized refugee looks like within law, politics, and public perception.[47]

Additionally, international and domestic refugee law remains largely positivistic, mainly to remove itself from politics.[48] Thus, the refugee law is a system of rules to easily identify, interpret, and assign the status of a refugee.[49] The issue is that forced migration and refugees are political. There are historical and political factors that not only cause the movement of people but also inform states' responses. Thus, there is also a divide between deserving and undeserving refugees, which ultimately broadens the range between the Global North and the Global South, and the people coming from those regions. Therefore, the responses to refugees coming from the Global North and the Global South will be different because it is part of our fundamental

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[44] James C. Hathaway, *The Law of Refugee Status* (Canada: Butterworths, 1991): 1-2.
[45] James C. Hathaway, *The Law of Refugee Status*, 175.
This is not to say that there were not refugees from other parts of the world at that time but in terms of a legal definition which garnered it certain protections, that was for refugees in Europe.
[46] B.S Chimini, "The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies: A View from the South," *Journal of Refugee Studies 11,* no. 4 (1998): 351.
[47] Chimini, "The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies", 351.
Chimini and other scholars call this the "myth of difference": wherein the idea is that the nature of refugee flows from the Global South is radically different from the flows in the Global North, thereby creating a idealized, normal refugee who is "white, male, and anti-communist".
[48] Chimini, "The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies", 352.
[49] Although of course this is not done easily nor is it evenly assigned and enforced.

understandings and fabrications of a refugee. In the case of Ukraine and Afghanistan, the emotional reaction to the refugees from Ukraine shows that vulnerability has been unevenly distributed between the refugees from different parts of the world. As a society, we have ascribed refugee-ness to the Ukrainian population and have deemed them more viable and in need of protection. Hence, as Butler states, "Some lives are grievable, and others are not."[50]

Furthermore, Butler states that those who gain humanizing representations (in the media, law, and politics) have a better chance of being seen as precarious and grievable and thus, people have a stronger engagement with their suffering.[51] Even if Levinas states, the "face" is not a human face but an ethical gaze, this representation is still a condition for humanizing certain people. Butler says this occurs through the production of the "face" and whether each construction is humanizing.[52] She asks whether we encounter these faces in the Levinasan way. I argue that we do not due to the socially, politically, and legally constructed "faces" of the "other." The "faces" we are being shown are constructed in particular ways; therefore, our engagement with them and our ethical gaze toward them is also constructed. Thus, we cannot encounter these "faces" in the Levinasan sense because we cannot remove the implications or the history of the "faces" we see.

Constructions of Violence: What is Justifiable?

Moreover, grievable and precarious lives are constructed within the context of the conflicts themselves. The history of the Afghanistan conflict and its surrounding factors have constructed the conflict in the country as long-standing and justifiable, at least in the

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[50] Butler, *Precarious Life,* xv.
[51] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 141.
[52] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 141.
Butler uses the example of the face of Osama Bin Laden, Yasser Arafat, and Saddam Hussein as constructed by the media, and these faces are usually portrayed as the face of terror, deception, or tyranny itself. This is contrasted by the faces of Afghani girls and women with their faces showing, burqas off, and this was constructed as freedom, and success of democracy.

consciousness of the Global North. [53] Furthermore, the American media vilified Afghanistan and its conflicts primarily due to 9/11. Constructions of Afghanistan after the attacks were of absolute terror, not of a particular state or large-scale aggressor, but of individuals and ideology.[54] The violence within Afghanistan by the United States and other countries was also justified because they were there to "help" people. Butler states that the framework of understanding the violence in Afghanistan by the United States, explained by the language of the law, excludes certain kinds of questions and historical contexts and instead functions as a justifiable and moral reason for retaliation.[55] With Afghanistan and other countries in the Global South, the violence, the conflicts, and the refugees are all blurry; because the aggressor is ideology, non-state actors, and/or individuals, the refugees are also seen as suspicious. Thus, this leads to less engagement with the "other" and their lives seen as less grievable and precarious. On the other hand, the conflict in Ukraine was inflicted by Russia, a long-standing, clear aggressor to the countries in the Global North. What is interesting is that here it is also a war against ideology.[56] However, with the general public, the conflict in Ukraine was easier to understand. Thus, it was easier to engage with, and it was easier to construct those lives as precarious and grievable.

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[53] Canefe, "Methodological Quandaries of Studying Post-Soviet Displacements", 8.
The counterbalanced centralization of authority in Afghanistan due to colonization, and the involvement of Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Soviet regime, the United States and NATO dissolved Afghan statehood into a space with organized and random violence.

[54] For example, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and the threat of "radical Islam".

[55] Butler, *Precarious Life,* 4.

[56] Swagata Sarkhel, "Misogynist Norms and Women's Resistance Movements in Afghanistan", *Refugee Watch 60,* (December 2022): 63.
In fact, the Taliban emerged in the midst of the chaos after the Geneva Accord took shape to resolve the crisis in Afghanistan in 1988 and the Soviet troops were withdrawn.

Who is the "Other"?

As mentioned previously, Levinas believed in "otherness," where the "other" is a person's otherness, their difference from sameness and the self.[57] Here, we are speaking about the other in the abstract and in the Levinasan sense. But what happens when we put a real face to the "other"? Regardless, Levinas would say we still have an ethical responsibility to engage. However, although I believe Levinas' moral reasoning is fundamentally accurate, the construction of the "other" prevents us from completely engaging. In society and the legal order, someone is always on the periphery.[58] Although they are not entirely on the outside, they are usually someone who is not us and someone whom society has deemed unworthy or cast aside, onto whom violence is acceptable.[59] In these constructions, the "other" is still everything outside of ourselves, and this "other" is strange and unfamiliar. [60] Although we are fundamentally inclined to protect others, it is not the "other" that we are willing to protect. In this way, we have created what critical scholars call the "othering" process, different from the Levinasan sense. For example, when looking at Canadian migration policies, the "othering" process has defined Canadian identity and then determines everything that is not this identity as the "other."[61] Similarly, for years, we have constructed refugees fleeing from some conflict-ridden regions as the "other," as different from our constructed identities of who a refugee is. Thus, our sentiments towards these refugees remain at a surface level. However, when we turn our gaze towards Ukrainians, who seem to have similar identities, we can ascribe the "otherness" that Levinas

[57] Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas", 25-26.
[58] For example, concerning the Jewish Question by Marx and Arendt.
[59] Karl Marx (1843), "On the Jewish Question", in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert Tucker (ed.), (New York: Norton & Company, 1978); Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
[60] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978), 27 & 56.
[61] Chizuru Nobe-Ghelani and Anh Ngo, "In Search for Ethical Relations in Social Work with Refugees Communities: Reflections on The Syrian Refugee "Crisis", *Canadian Social Work Review 37*, no. 1 (2020): 68; Catherine Dauvergene, *Humanitarianism, identity, and nation: migration laws of Australia and Canada,* (British Columbia: UBC Press, 2005), 72-73.

posits. We can see the ethical responsibility towards them and thus can engage with them closely.

Levinas, Butler, and ("Radical") Proximity

During the Ukraine crisis, the media and news outlets constructed the lives of Ukrainians as grievable and precarious by framing the war in relation to the general public and closing the proximity between Canadians and Ukrainians. For example, a senior foreign correspondent from CBS News, Charlie D'Agata, stated in the early months of the Ukraine conflict that Ukraine was not "a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European….city, one where you wouldn't expect that or hope it's going to happen".[62] D'Agata was not the only journalist to express these views, and several journalists and news anchors expressed similar sentiments during the Ukraine crisis.[63] What was interesting about these opinions was the wording they used, "European people with blue eyes and blond hair," "cars that look like ours," "middle-class people," and "they seem so like us."[64] What these journalists are embodying is a sense of proximity they feel with the refugees fleeing from Ukraine.

When talking about proximity, Levinas invokes the idea of the arrival of a second and third party, which shows the proximity of human plurality.[65] These parties work in relation to each other. However, this begs the question, "Which one comes before the other in my responsibility?".[66] Ethically, it should be the same; the one far off deserves the same recognition

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[62] Moustafa Bayoumi, "They are 'civilised' and 'look like us': the racist coverage of Ukraine," *theguardian*, March 3, 2022. http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/news/2000s/2022/march/guardian3mar2022.pdf.
[63] For example, BBC, France's BFM TV, Poland's ITV, the Telegraph, and numerous other news outlets expressed the same sentiments as D'Agata.
[64] Moustafa Bayoumi, "They are 'civilised' and 'look like us': the racist coverage of Ukraine."
[65] Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence,* 141-142.
[66] Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence*, 142.

as the one near.[67] Taking the meaning of proximity one step further and following the idea of "radical" proximity, looking at the face of the "other" forces one to deliberate, and it forces one to engage. It risks your sense of totality and damages your sense of security. You are then forced to take responsibility for the "other" because the suffering they feel is not as far from you as it seems, and their suffering is not removed from us. Our ethical sense then should be activated, and engagement should come freely.[68]

However, as I have argued, we are not devoid of politics. Therefore, proximity and "radical" proximity in the case of Ukraine and Afghanistan operate differently. From the statements of the journalists, we can see that the Global North feels that it has closer proximity to the Ukrainian refugees than the ones from Afghanistan. This could operate at a physical level because Ukrainian refugees look like the so-called "majority" in North America and Europe.[69] However, this also operates at a figurative level because they are fleeing a conflict caused by a well-defined, agreed-upon aggressor in Russia, a country whose politics and laws are in direct contrast with the Global North. These characteristics of the Ukrainian crisis allowed the general public and the media in the Global North to engage in "radical" proximity. It was easy to look at the "faces" of people who look like you and feel a sense of ethical responsibility.

This is not to say that the general public did not care about the refugees from Afghanistan. I believe there was engagement when looking at the "faces" of the Afghani refugees after the Fall of Kabul. We were exercising "radical" proximity, but it was not the same engagement as there was later with Ukraine. This is because the refugees from Afghanistan have always been constructed and portrayed as being far from us, removed from us, and different from

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[67] Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, Michael B. Smith (trans.), (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 172.
[68] Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence*, 105-106.
[69] The narrative is that they are European, middle-class, and Caucasian, just like Canadians.

us. This is not just that they do not look like the majority of the population in the Global North on a physical level, [70] but that they have been continuously constructed as different. The idea was that people of colour and the places in the Global South were conducive to war, which is their natural state.[71] Thus, the proximity here has constantly been pushed further and further through politics, the language of the law, and the media. Thus, although Levinas would say this would not matter, people cannot engage with refugees from the Global South as they are not willing to look at the actual "face" of this "other" to engage with their suffering. Our ability to engage with the "other" cannot be removed from the reality of our world. There will always be political, social, and legal forces that affect how we engage with the suffering of others and how our reactions vary with different refugee groups.[72]

Although the momentum of the responses to the Ukraine crisis by the general public and the news outlets started with fervour and rigour, it has since died down. Soon it will be part of the many other refugee crises. In that sense, a refugee crisis in the Global North or the Global South faces the same forgetfulness by people worldwide. Although the rhetoric around Ukrainian refugees has not changed, as people still believe they are deserved refugees, their responses have diminished. Therefore, it is clear that although we can commend Levinas for proposing an ethical gaze of responsibility, people still lack engagement with the "face" of the "other." Thus, this paper has strived to understand the intricacies of people's relationship with the suffering of "others." As we tend to be forgetful creatures, if we are not bound to those who are familiar and close to us, then we will continue to be exclusionary and distant.[73] Moreover, if we continue to construct who is human and humanize only to those we feel deserve precariousness and

[70] For example, Afghanis are people of colour.
[71] Chimini, "The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies", 357-358.
[72] Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation", 138.
[73] Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," 138.

grievability, then we remain in distant proximity to the suffering of "others."[74] Ultimately, we need to come to the understanding that when we engage with the suffering of "others" and look at their "faces," we are also contending with the fact that what happens "there" could happen "here." Perhaps in this way, we can also strive to be less forgetful, less divisive, and actually engage with the ethics of refugee protection.

Conclusion: What can "we" do?

The question framing this paper was not the difference in the responses by the states towards Ukraine and Afghani refugees. However, I think the Ukraine crisis shed some light on the excuses that countries in the Global North constantly propose: they do not have the capacity or the means to bring in more refugees and forced migrants. The Ukraine crisis showed they have the ability and means to produce robust protection mechanisms for refugees fleeing from conflict rapidly. Moreover, these countries can absolutely host refugees, either temporarily or permanently. Therefore, it is disappointing to recognize that countries in the Global North can do the same for refugees from the Global South. So perhaps, this is not a question of whether the Global North can and should offer refugee protection to those fleeing from conflict. This is not even a question of the different types of refugees and the differences between refugees from the Global North versus the Global South. The reliance and gaze toward the Global North to protect the world's refugee population are futile. The countries in the Global North (wealthy as they may be) are not benevolent states, welcoming people with open arms. They are sovereign, self-interested states who choose who is let in and who is not. Centring our gaze towards just the Global North allows questions such as the one between Ukraine and Afghanis to dominate the

[74] Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation", 136.

discourse. Instead, this is a question of our collective response to the refugee crisis, forced migration, and dispossession.

So, what are the alternatives? What can "we" do? One of the ways to perhaps conceptualize alternate protection avenues is by examining the efforts of grassroots movements and civil society organizations that are on the ground working towards providing effective solutions for asylum seekers, forced migrants, and displaced people. These groups can provide a path to decentering forced migration from the hegemony of international law and the current refugee protection regime. Furthermore, many of these movements and groups stem from the Global South, further decentering the authority of the nation-states in the Global North. Rather than viewing these groups as separate from our political and legal institutions, we should examine their practices to close the proximity we feel for the "other."[75] Furthermore, forced migrants and asylum seekers are the ultimate insider-outsiders to engage in the conversation as they already know that the system they are trying to belong to is a fallacy.[76] Yet, many do not have the luxury of leaving or returning to their countries of origin. What forced migrants and asylum seekers reveal is that those who have experienced violent conflicts and human rights abuses can become political subjects.[77] This also broadens the understanding of what constitutes "political space" beyond the formally recognized decision-making spheres.[78] These groups engage actively with other people and the world's social, economic, political, and legal operations while simultaneously fighting for solutions that do not assimilate existing institutions

[75] They often utilize legal and political systems to achieve their goals.
[76] Patricia Owens, "Reclaiming 'Bare Life'?: Against Agamben on Refugees," *International Relations* 23, no. 4, 2009: 576
[77] Owens, "Reclaiming 'Bare Life'?, 576; Cindy Horst & Odin Lysaker, "Miracles in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt and Refugees as 'Vanguard,'" *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 1, 2019: 75.
[78] Horst & Lysaker, "Miracles in Dark Times", 82.

and policy options.[79] These are also people mobilizing for a cause outside of themselves (even when they are part of this cause), usually for the betterment of all people.[80]

The nuances of grassroots, Global South, and forced migrant mobilization cannot be justifiably summarized within a short paper and requires a robust examination. This paper's main goal was to effectively explore the importance of decentering ourselves and engaging with the collective. Engaging with "others" is a political activity, and it is through actions that we reveal ourselves as political entities.[81] As individuals, we suffer when we face the consequences of our actions (or non-action).[82] Thus, to truly live a moral and meaningful life, we must challenge the view that our ethical obligations only emerge within established communities or when we share the same ethnicity, language, or borders.[83] As Butler states: "There is no one part of the population that can claim the earth for itself, no community or nation-state or regional unit, no clan, no party, and no race."[84] Rather, we must be willing to contend with the "faces" of all "others."

In the scramble to figure out who should shoulder refugee protection, who are refugees, and who deserve protection, we have forgotten that this is not the path to effective solutions. As Butler states, it is necessary to hear beyond what we can hear.[85] It is essential to decenter ourselves from the hegemony of what refugee protection looks like, which is evident in the language of the law, politics, and even studies of forced migration. Instead, it is about challenging contemporary capitalism and colonialism, examining the root causes of

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[79] Marianne LeNabat, "On non-violence: An Arendtian perspective on recent political movements," *International Critical Thought* 2, no. 4, 2012: 470.
[80] Margaret Conovan, "The People, the Masses, and the Mobilization of Power: The Paradox of Hannah Arendt's "Populism," *Social Research* 69, no. 2, 2002: 412.
[81] Annabel Herzog, "Responsibility," in *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, ed. Patrick Hayden (New York: Routledge: 2014): 188.
[82] Herzog, "Responsibility", 190-191.
[83] Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation", 114.
[84] Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation", 114.
[85] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 18.

displacement, and looking at the realities of historical routes, geographies, conditions, and borders.[86] It is about engaging with the efforts on the ground, listening to forced migrants and asylum seekers, and attempting to close the proximity between "us" and "them." Perhaps then we can actually conduct the exercise of deeply engaging with the "face" of "others" and understand our ethical responsibility towards ending their suffering.

[86] Canefe, "Methodological Quandaries of Studying Post-Soviet Displacements", 11.

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