Losing Value: the Problem of Humanitarian Order in a Georgian IDP Camp

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LOSING VALUE: THE PROBLEM OF HUMANITARIAN ORDER IN A GEORGIAN IDP CAMP

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts Department of Geography 2014
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Losing Value: the Problem of Humanitarian Order in a Georgian IDP Camp
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
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Why is humanitarianism unable to deliver value to the people receiving its aid? During the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, approximately 26,000 people were displaced from South Ossetia into Georgia. In the wake of this disaster, the Georgian government began constructing new settlements for internally displaced people (IDPs) with the help of Western aid agencies. Although these housing projects were intended to create a new sense of community among IDPs, it was soon clear that the residents there felt trapped by their surroundings. As a result, IDPs viewed the settlements as temporary shelters rather than permanent residents. Therefore, what was originally promoted as a new home for IDPs was more accurately regarded as camp.

I argue that this breakdown occurred through the mistranslation of value. On humanitarian terms, value is conceived of in a narrow framework where houses equate basic survival and land a source of economic livelihood. The production of this humanitarian subject and space, however, did not accommodate the broader social impact of displacement. Because the 2008 war disrupted social networks, collective histories, and a longstanding dependence on the land, IDPs are not only economically but also spiritually impoverished. In that humanitarianism is unable to consider these losses, the process by which it tries to reproduce community are
hollow. Ultimately, the humanitarian camp and the housing units within it only stand as empty placeholders for a broader sense of value among IDPs living there.
CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................1

II. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AID ......................................26

III. THE HUMANITARIAN VALUATION OF LIFE ......................53

IV. THE GEOGRAPHY OF BOREDOM .......................................81

V. CONCLUSION ......................................................................101

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................106
FIGURES

FIGURE

1. Map of 2008 Conflict .................................................................21
2. Map of IDP Camps Across Georgia........................................29
3. Satellite Image of Tserovani Camp........................................74
4. WFP’s Consumption Score Chart...........................................75
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

138 white houses stand alone in an empty field. Seven roads partition seven rows of houses to form a perfectly symmetrical square. Their architectural design leaves nothing to the imagination – four rooms, four windows, a square patch of land around each house, a fence around the yard, and a road running along each fence line: a cadastral blueprint imprinted 138 times across previously barren earth. The houses’ silver-tin roofs and whitewashed walls reflect a harsh glare that contrasts a patchwork of corn, potato, and cabbage fields surrounding it. This farmland extends outwards through neighboring villages, military checkpoints, and eventually to the severe horizon of the Caucasus Mountains in the north. These mountains, which stretch east and west before plunging into the Black and Caspian Seas, ostensibly form the neat physical boundary between the countries of Russia and Georgia, yet what appears on the map is far from the entire story. The land between military checkpoints and mountains is South Ossetia, the site of repeated violence, occupations, and forced migrations. The most recent occurred in 2008 when sporadic regional conflicts escalated into a full-scale war, exiling thousands into Russia and Georgia.

Those who went south, most of whom are ethnically Georgian, ended up in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs). Before arriving there, however, these
thousands of newly displaced navigated unfamiliar cities, crowded temporary shelters, and the over-burdened institutions tasked with managing their exile amidst the chaotic period of post-war reconstruction. With the country still reeling from the intense but brutal war with Russia, the government hastily undertook a massive housing project to resettle the thousands who could no longer return home. Construction crews worked around the clock, continuing through the night under floodlights. Four months later, the camps were finished and the government bused IDPs out of the capitol city by the thousands. Most did not choose where they would live but were told where they would go. Not knowing how long they would stay, they were dropped off with food, clothing, blankets, and keys to a house – a house, like the 138 identical ones standing in this field, that was intended to replace what was lost in the war. These 138 houses, the 454 people who live here, the military outposts and the disputed territories they defend, as well as the events that led to such a tenuous arrangement weave together the complicated and contentious social fabric that is the Khurvaleti IDP camp.

Before 2008, what is now Khurvaleti was simply part of a windswept valley along the Georgian central plains. Residents from nearby villages had little use for the area because it was unsuitable for building their houses, its soil less fertile than the land nearby. The clouds that hang in the lower valleys to the north and west dissipate overhead, leaving the soil cracked and dry through the summer. When it does rain, it settles into a muddy swamp. The nearby infrastructure that made Khurvaleti a convenient site to build crisscrosses the area. Massive power lines
humming with electricity tower overhead, and the country’s only transnational highway is just a kilometer to the south. Lying between these major arteries in an empty field, Khurvaleti now seems like a municipal afterthought. Before it was an inhabited space, this spot had no name or practical use and had little value imbued upon it.

After the war, the once empty space was transformed by state and humanitarian-led construction projects to house the newest wave of displaced people. Khurvaleti and the 15 other camps of similar design is the product of a large-scale humanitarian response to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War that saw nearly 30,000 people displaced from the breakaway region of South Ossetia. These housing units represent a global effort to provide what the United Nations High Council on Refugees (UNHCR) refers to as “durable solutions” for displaced people with little or no prospect of returning home. The “durable solutions” approach, described as both disaster relief and a longer-term strategy of “social reintegration”, has become the preferred method of care for the growing number of displaced people across the world (UNHCR 2011). Despite specific failures in meeting basic standards in housing construction (TI Georgia 2011), food aid, and financial assistance, the humanitarian mission has been largely viewed as a success four years after the war. Very few state and humanitarian actors, however, acknowledge the larger social dilemma that shadows the effort. IDPs in the camp reported that they have had no one protecting their interests, were not being helped, and were left with “nothing” after the war (Dunn ND).
Aid projects often collapse at the point where institutional knowledge does not meet realities on the ground (Ferguson 1994), yet the case of Khurvaleti appears to defy the basic framework of success and failure. On one hand, humanitarian organizations claim that the post-war reconstruction process was a success, and on the other, IDPs feel that this effort is an inadequate response their ongoing crisis. This is because the standards for success, value, and meaning are of two different languages. In most cases, the humanitarian goal to provide “durable solutions” was met, the material items lost in the war replaced. Those living in the camp, however, feel that during the process of being displaced and resettled, some basic value of their life had been lost. That value of life, which is clearly measured differently by aid, is not present in the camp. Why, then, is humanitarianism unable to deliver value to the people receiving its aid? Likewise, what kind of value does humanitarianism actually create and how do its recipients make sense of it through their own world?

Scope of Study: Why Value?

Value is a term that bears multiple, in some cases conflicting, meanings, yet nonetheless is inconsistently used and understood across disciplines (Graeber 2001). Because of this, value is often broadly conceptualized as many different things. Marx (1978) most clearly establishes value as the socially necessary labor-time of a given commodity, yet this says nothing about the value of something outside of its
structure of meaning. In my own research, I argue that value can only be understood within a given structure that gives it meaning. In the case of the Khurvaleti IDP camp, those structures are overlayed on top of one another in the same space. Therefore, this thesis lays out both the humanitarian notion of value and various competing notions in the camp. To conclude, I explore what kind of reality such a tension produces.

Chapter 1. Value on these terms is specifically the use and exchange value of global aid, which has its own (re)productive cycle, system of currency, and objects of value. Here, I frame aid as a network of social actors, institutions, and ideas that include humanitarianism, development, and global capitalism. In chapter 1, I also outline the inherent inequality in aid, which establishes a system of patronage where “experts” propagate certain knowledge about what is and is not valuable. It’s through this knowledge mill that aid most effectively reproduces itself. Whether it’s a local office with five employees or the national headquarters, an NGO is only able to keep its doors open by appealing to its donors. Thus, the entire system becomes an integrated unit through the aid funding cycle. Local organizations must appeal to larger organizations for money and resources while Western aid agencies set the standards for progress and success.

One result of this system is that accountability in aid increases as the scale of operation decreases (Bruckner 2011). Because local organizations and individuals are in greater need and what they do with the money is more highly scrutinized, aid ultimately becomes a veiled performance of western value that is later retranslated
at the local level. “Civil society meetings” turn into afternoon coffee, “training sessions” a public forum for people to air grievances, and the money from entrepreneurial and small business grants a way to pay medical bills. Thus, knowledge about the value of aid, the practices that propagate it, and the systems of truth built around it all constitute a humanitarian discourse of value, and the gap between those who give and receive aid is one of competing value systems. At one end, a global discourse of aid sets the standards not only for how it’s administered around the world but for how security, development, and progress are more broadly valued. At another end, the recipients of aid must translate these standards to better meet their own needs. The result that manifests in the IDP camps, local NGO offices, cities, towns, and villages across Georgia is a kind of aid that is chaotic (Dunn 2012), socially irrelevant (MacFarlane 2012), and in some cases utterly confusing.

Chapter 2. Despite their physical uniformity, the 138 houses that make up Khurvaleti embody this confusion. These houses are more than just the walls and roof, building materials, and an architectural design but a certain ideological blueprint for how to live. Moreover, the houses people lost in the war were more than a place of residence. They were farms, businesses, ceremonial places, and a central site tying together families and friends. Therefore, the houses people were given after war were flimsy replicas of what they had lost. In chapter 2, I explore how competing notions of value manifest in the camp’s physical structures. Here,
the notion of value is evaluated more broadly as a set of rules and standards for living, a concept I call the humanitarian valuation of life. The knowledge that is produced in aid translates into a mode of governance and techniques of security. These standards for living, however, are not part of any written code such as policy, but rather through the engineering of space. Western values such as property rights are embedded in the camp itself – its houses, building, and architectural design. The residents of the Khurvaleti IDP camp did not settle but were placed here. The highly institutionalized environment was more than simply an aesthetic barrier but rather an alternative prescription for living that is at odds with what people had previously known. As residents began appropriating the space for themselves, a patchwork of different renovations and additions began appearing through the camp. While in many cases the changes people have made to their environment are minor, each disrupt the spatial logic that originally shaped Khurvaleti. Despite these attempts to recollect what was lost in the war, most people simply do not have the money, resources, or will to change their life in a way that makes them satisfied. In chapter 3, I explore why that might be the case.

Chapter 3. Through trying to make sense and order a world that sprung from the chaotic upheaval of violence, humanitarianism sets forth a way of living that impedes upon IDPs’ own attempts at finding meaning in their new lives in the camp. When I first arrived to Khurvaleti, I was struck by how lifeless the place was. Most days, the streets, playgrounds, and community centers were empty, and
life inside the home was not much more vibrant either. The most troubling aspect of the phenomenon, however, is that it persists years after the war. When camps like Khurvaleti were built, they were called “settlements”, which reflected the main humanitarian goals of social reintegration and community building. It never really stuck though, and most fixate on going home rather than settling in, despite an implicit understanding that this might never happen. Therefore, in chapter 3, I address a greater ontological dilemma in the camp, that of boredom. I saw the deficiency in the daily routine in Khurvaleti as more than simply a lack of things to do, however, but an impoverished way of living. This broader impoverishment is what I choose to call boredom. I look at boredom from a number of different perspectives to answer how humanitarianism blocks the production of meaning. I argue that several phenomena in the camp, such as disorientation, stagnation, trauma, loss and nothingness, all are part of boredom. Ultimately, boredom is the precise point where blockage occurs. The impediment of boredom prevents people from accessing what Heidegger (1977) calls Dasein, or the revealing of being. I call this access to the profound, a phenomena that is accessed through specific sites and which produces its own spaces of experience for anyone willingly participating. In conclusion, I critique humanitarianism for impoverishing that process and instilling its own order to life that is often at odds with IDPs’ sense of meaning. What is that sense of meaning, though, and do the people living in Khurvaleti know it themselves?
The most valuable work on humanitarian aid thus far has come from internal critiques and institutional ethnographies such as Didier Fassin’s work on Medicine Sans Frontieres’ (MSF). Additionally, the critique of the humanitarian logic as well as the moral imperatives it uses to justify intervention (Reiff 2002; Fassin 2012) is the fundamental starting point for this research. This growing body of literature, however, speaks little to the everyday experiences of the people who receive that aid. While I wish to contribute to a critique of humanitarianism, I do so looking from the ground up. Thus, my fieldwork consists primarily of my time spent in the Khurvaleti IDP, listening to people’s stories. I recorded these narratives while talking to neighbors, sharing a coffee, watching the evening news, playing a game of backgammon, or just hiding from the afternoon heat in the porch shade. What emerged was more than a cohesive narrative of loss and exile but a feeling that normal life had profoundly fractured in a way that disrupted the collective vision of the future. Although there was a general consensus of how and why these people were forced to leave their homes in South Ossetia, what they were doing in Khurvaleti simply made no sense. Thus, the stories that emerge from my time in the field come together as fragments, snapshots of lives that have only just settled in the dust storm that still rages around them.
The Geography of Forced Migration

Perched on a tiny stool made of steel and laminate particleboard, Beka Managadze hunches over an electric-coil burner on his living room floor stirring us each a muddy cup of Turkish coffee. Beka lives alone across the street from his parents in Khurvaleti. He was once married, raising children in Georgia and later moving to Russia. In 2006, when he decided to return to his birthplace, a village in South Ossetia called Ksuisi, his wife did not follow him. Beka’s two kids, Giorgi and Salome, both still lived in Georgia, and his aging parents were finding it harder to work their farm alone, so the move made sense despite the separation. Beka could not have foreseen that war would break out in his home just two years later. Pouring the grainy coffee into espresso-sized cups, Beka begins telling me how he fled his village, unsure of where he would end up. As it turned out, he wound up here, a place he wishes he could leave but cannot because there is simply nowhere else to go for now. Beka’s story, like most here, is one with an uncertain ending, and yet one that offers very few conceivable alternatives. The conditions of Beka’s arrival, however, are not an isolated event but rather part of a larger, historical trend of statelessness and displacement.

Today, the UNHCR estimates that there are 12 million stateless people (10.5 million of whom are considered refugees) and 27.5 million internally displaced people spread across the world. More surprising is the compounding growth of these groups – in 1997 the total number of IDPs was just 17 million. That the
numbers of internally displaced have far surpassed refugees and asylum seekers is no surprise, for the regional violence that marks the post-Cold War landscape has emerged alongside more aggressive policies to keep refugees out of Europe, often within their own borders and subjected to the administration of the governments that originally displaced them (Fassin 2010). Furthermore, the new and variegated political, economic, and environmental circumstances under which people are forced into exile have increasingly vast and interconnected impacts on migration around the world. For example, a Western development initiative in renewable energy and infrastructure creates dams in Eastern Turkey, displacing thousands in the process. Some of those displaced end up in camps where political violence foments. These camps as well as the residents in them are then the target of a broader development, securitization, and counter-insurgency strategy that includes the same Western partners that helped produce the problem. In cases like these, refugees and IDPs are treated as a problem in need of fixing, a manageable population, or simply as a threat to larger-scale growth. These factors all contribute to what now amounts to a global class of displaced, mostly comprised of people without adequate places to call home, basic human rights, and the governing bodies to grant them those rights. Because many states are the causes of violence and displacement (and rarely the answer to solving these problems anyway), humanitarian agencies have taken on new roles in managing this new class of people. Thus, what Barnett (2010) calls the “international humanitarian order”, is born from the tension between forced migration at the international level and an
increasingly impenetrable system for seeking asylum in Europe (Fassin 2010). The answer to how we arrived at such a moment is rooted in the history of European colonial and imperial expansion.

History of Forced Migration

The Charter of the United Nations was signed in 1945 on the idea that “never again” would the atrocities of two world wars be possible. Soon thereafter, the UN General Assembly established the UNCHR in 1950, and a year later drafted the first international law to recognize the status of refugees and grant certain protections such as the right to asylum, property, and legal protection. Despite this legal framework, the burgeoning “refugee question” that surfaced after World War II appears increasingly imminent today. Failed attempts of national emancipation and state-building, regional conflicts, and unimaginable acts of ethnic cleansing and genocide have sharply ruptured what was an already tenuous status of living, occupation, and coexistence for many people around the world. In doing so, this violence has pushed many outside and to the margins of legal and political systems protecting their rights (Agier 2008). Thus, the problems of statelessness, internment, and legal exceptionalism clearly challenge the common claim that human rights are inalienable to the individual: “No paradox of contemporary politics is filled with a more poignant irony than the discrepancy between the efforts of well-meaning idealist who stubbornly insist on regarding as ‘inalienable’ those
human rights, which are enjoyed only by citizens of the most prosperous and civilized countries (Arendt 279).”

Who, then, establishes and oversees these rights? Where states have failed, humanitarian institutions have taken the role, but not without drastic complications. Fundamentally, how nation-states make claims to sovereignty through territory and the legal code can be challenged by other countries, foreign militaries, militarized “humanitarian” missions (in Bosnia, Somalia, and Libya for instance), and the international community more broadly. Therefore, the geopolitics of displacement manifest across multiple scales and through a range of different actors, further complicating and in some cases obfuscating the broader impacts of human migration across the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Georgia, where recent history of violence has brought about successive waves of IDPs that now amount to nearly 7% percent of the country’s total population (UNHCR 2011). The first of these IDPs were displaced from South Ossetia in 1991 and Abkhazia in 1993, and the circumstances of these events undoubtedly contributed to the thawing conflict that finally boiled over in 2008.

Forced Migration in Georgia

Although the conflict between Russia and Georgia was brief, earning it the title “the 5 day’s war”, its effects as well as the events that set it in motion extend well beyond August 2008. Additionally, Georgia’s tumultuous national
emancipation in 1991, regression into political chaos and violence through the 90s, and the brazen state-building project following the Rose Revolution all play significant roles in shaping conflict in the region. When fighting between South Ossetian separatists and the Georgian government periodically ceased in 1992, life in the region eventually stabilized to a tenuous coexistence, but not before some 16,000 ethnic Georgians had been displaced (UNHCR 2011). Later in 1993, the Abkhazian war pitted an outmatched Georgian army against the Russian military ordered to protect its de facto citizens, most of them Abkhazians, who now held Russian passports. The result of this war was the additional displacement of approximately 250,000 ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia to what was the increasingly diminutive Georgia proper (De Waal 2010). People who were displaced during this time were given very little if any attention or support from a corrupt and dysfunctional Georgian state that couldn’t even provide people with basic shelter. The Iveria Hotel in downtown Tbilisi turned into a makeshift collective center for many IDPs and was covered in a patchwork of blue tarps and people exposed to the bare skeleton of the building. Many saw the place as a constant reminder of the dire state of living and the futility of government in the 90s, and after Mikhail Saakashvili took power, it was torn down. Now a 20-story Radisson – complete with a rooftop bar, infinity pool, and weekly poker tournaments – occupies the space. On one hand, this kind of large-scale infrastructure development is an outward expression of the country’s progress over the last decade that includes a rising GDP and HDI alongside the reduction of widespread political corruption (TI
Georgia 2011). On the other, this kind of facelift is merely a superficial improvement that obfuscates the violence endured since the country claimed independence in 1991 (De Waal 2010). Even more troubling is that the call to improve the living standards for all IDPs in Georgia has coincided with trend of pushing IDPs and their problems further out of site. While tearing down the Iveria Hotel meant progress for some, it meant that the IDP problem was no longer a daily reminder for most citizens. While the mundane, daily problems of IDPs are largely forgotten in Georgia today, the reason for their exile – conflict over national territorial integrity – has driven regional politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The hot wars of the 90s were replaced by cold geopolitical negotiations between Georgia, the secessionist regions, Russia, and the West at the turn of the millennium. Despite these tensions, the villages dotted across the South Ossetian countryside returned to an equilibrium that made daily life relatively normal. Many claimed that despite sporadic, localized fighting, Georgian and Ossetian villagers lived in relative peace with one another. The South Ossetian capitol, Tskhinvali not only connected these ethnically divided villages through its regional market but also emerged as the hub for illegal trade in Georgia – stolen cars made a beeline to Tskhinvali while cheap counterfeit cigarettes, heroin, and arms flowed outward to the rest of the South Caucasus. A corrupt government and police force under Eduard Shevardnadze did little to quell an entrenched and well-functioning mafia that could reach from Moscow to village neighborhoods effortlessly. While the
country had endured the worst poverty and violence throughout this period – a time when some of the most basic needs like heating in winter, food safety, and electricity were in dire shortage – it was growing tired and restless towards the intractable Shevardnadze regime that appeared intent on retaining its wealth and power at the cost of national well-being. It was during this brief period of tenuously sustained peace that produced the non-violent transfer of political power.

By 2002, the political climate in Georgia had begun to shift dramatically as hopes for a regime change seemed imminent (Mitchell 2009). Out of the fervor, a new charismatic leader, Mikhail Saakashvili, emerged as a key voice to the opposition against Shevardnadze. In the 2003 parliamentary elections, Saakashvili’s United National Movement (UNM) initially projected to win a 26 percent majority over the pro-government and other oppositional parties, yet official results declared a victory for the Sheverdnadze regime. The tide quickly turned, however, as protests near the Georgian Parliament building on Rustaveli Avenue reached a boiling point over the next two weeks (De Waal 2010). When Sheverdnadze attempted to assemble the new parliament to legitimize the recent election, Saakashvili stormed the building with his supporters. Holding a single rose, he entered the parliamentary chamber yelling for Sheverdnadze to resign. Security forces rushed the president out of the building as Saakashvili took the podium and drank from Sheverdnadze teacup. Although provisional elections would have to be held later, the message was clear: Georgia had its new leader.
During his inauguration, Saakashvili made his intentions clear: “at the grave of King David we must all say: Georgia will be united, strong, will restore its wholeness and become a united, strong state (De Waal 2010, 78).” That his speech occurred at the grave of the 10th century king who ruled Georgia during its “Golden Age” of expansion is no coincidence (Suny 1994). Saakashvili’s vision of a modern, unified Georgia was part of his greater aspiration as a state-builder (he often compared himself to King David the Builder, Mustafa Atatürk, and Charles de Gaulle). His first move to reclaim national unity in 2004 was met with little resistance when tanks rolled into the semi-autonomous region of Adjara to oust its de facto leader, Aslan Abashidze. While Saakashvili’s vision to rebuild Georgia started auspiciously, the growth of his political regime was troubling.

As it turned out, the broader notion of change and progress meant to eventually encompass a soon-reunited country were translated into state-building and infrastructure development at the cost of political freedoms and social equality (De Waal 2012). Because the police force had been extensively reformed, organized crime was crippled, and daily life became far easier to navigate for most people, yet these forms of violence did not vanish altogether but rather diffused upwards into increasingly powerful government bodies like the Ministry of Interior, and thus those who were affected by the violence also changed.

Not surprisingly, a Georgian middle-class has slowly emerged alongside the country’s political transition. Life for the increasingly wealthy Georgian middle-class stabilized as long as they agreed with the new administration while the well-
being of the political opposition as well as the extremely poor and disenfranchised remained increasingly difficult (De Waal 2010). When armed agents working under the Minister of Interior, Vano Merabishvili, stormed the oppositional television station, “Imedi” (which means “hope” in Georgian, ironically) in 2007, it was clear that this state-building project would incur great collateral damage. Demonstrations following the raid of “Imedi” were met with a draconian crackdown and Saakashvili’s popularity, especially in the capitol of Tbilisi, plummeted. DeWaal (2010) argues that these events combined with Saakashvili’s misdirected confidence in American support and an aggressive policy towards the territorial reintegration of its breakaway regions set in motion the 5 Days War in August, permanently displacing 26,000 people from South Ossetia.

By March of 2007, when Mi-24 helicopters attacked the village of Chkhalta from neighboring Karachaevsko-Cherkesia in Russia, there were several warning signs that the conflicts from the 1990s were beginning to thaw (Corso 2007). Tense relations escalated when Ossetian leader Dmitry Sanakoyev narrowly escaped an assassination attempt while bypassing Tskhinvali on July 3rd. On July 14th, Russian “peacekeeping” troops were shipped into the North Caucasus for “military exercises”. In response to Sanakoyev’s attempted assassination, the Georgian military captured the Sarabuki heights area surrounding Tskhinvali, firing mortars into the city (De Waal 2010). By August 1st, Georgian and Ossetian villagers began exchanging fire for the first time in nearly four years. Despite agreeing to a ceasefire on August 7th, Saakashvili ordered a large-scale offensive on Tskhinvali.
On that same night, the night sky in Tskhinvali was illuminated with a hailstorm of mortars from Georgian tanks. Although it appeared as though the Georgian military was initially victorious, newly stationed Russian peacekeepers were quickly deployed from the North Caucasus to the region and fighter jets flew over the South Ossetian villages towards Gori to carry out a series of tactical airstrikes. When the villagers from Ksuisi, Vanati, and Disevi (just to name a few) fled South Ossetia, most thought that they would be able to return in a few weeks, if not days. Intermittent conflicts at the local scale were a constant threat in the region, and many accepted it as a part of their lives. As the Russian military performed a series of tactical airstrikes on the city of Gori and tanks rolled into the villages surrounding Tskhinvali, it was clear that this conflict would be much different.

As Beka blows the rising steam off his cup, I survey mine, hoping the grounds have settled a bit more. Eventually we return to the story of the war, and Beka recalls fleeing to the capitol, running out of gas, and fighting with a gas station attendant as he begged for some free gas to keep going. “That motherfucker wouldn’t even spare a dime of petrol for us. Luckily someone else passing through loaned us some cash.” When he finally decided to leave Ksuisi on August 8th, Beka loaded friends and family into his old, Soviet Lada. There were so many people in the car by the time they left for Gori, there was hardly any space to see out the windows. He and his family took nothing from the house when they left. The idea of leaving someone behind in place for clothes, furniture, or a television set would have been inhumane. As they headed southbound, the chance of being bombed on
the road by Russian fighter jets was dangerously high. When the group arrived in Gori, some people broke off, heading to relatives’ and friends’ houses in the city, but it was soon clear that the war was making its way to Gori as well. Beka and his remaining passengers left for Tbilisi shortly thereafter, missing the airstrikes, burned out apartment buildings, and Russian tanks rolling past the statue of Josef Stalin in the city center that would become the iconic image of the war. It was on his way to Tbilisi where he encountered the unforgiving gas station attendant. What follows is mostly a blur for the 127,000 people who fled between August 8th and 12th (figure 1).

The streets of Tbilisi were overrun with people, hospitals, schools, and other public buildings were shut down to house the influx. Many kindergartens were shut down for the remainder of 2008 to serve as temporary shelters. Most of the people I spoke with do not remember any specific order of events but rather a loose collection of images and experiences: entire families sharing a single bed, toilets overflowing with human waste, and a panic of uncertainty for the future. It was now clear that the conflict in Georgia was a full-blown humanitarian crisis. Aid agencies like the UNHCR scaled up their operation accordingly, while the Red Cross and Doctors without Borders expanded their reach into the areas of conflict and military control in South Ossetia (that they were to able speaks to the influence such international agencies have). Meanwhile, the international community was too preoccupied with the Olympic games in Beijing to comprehend the initial extent of the war’s damage. Soon thereafter, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and US
Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice flew into the country to negotiate peace treaties between Russia and Georgia, and on August 13th, the two countries agreed to a ceasefire. The war, brief but brutal, was officially over, but it’s aftermath would have lasting implications for the people who were not allowed to return to their homes in South Ossetia.

![Map of Conflict in 2008](http://www.refworld.org/publisher,OCHA_MAP,GEO,48be65642,0.html)

When the two countries agreed to the ceasefire, the humanitarian response to the war was soon scaled up dramatically. Immediately thereafter, aid agencies launched into crisis response, funneling money and resources into emergency relief.
USAID, for example allocated 19 million dollars for “assisting conflict-affected populations with humanitarian relief commodities, nutrition, protection, shelter, food security and agriculture, and water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions (2008 report).” On October 22, the European Commission and World Bank held a conference in Brussels where four and a half billion dollars were pledged to the post-war reconstruction effort (Bruckner 2011). Considering that the estimated population of Georgia is estimated under 4 million, the per capita monetary assistance ranks it comparatively astronomical to other humanitarian efforts around the world. More surprisingly, the majority of these aid dollars went to large-scale economic and infrastructure development, the pledged contributions far surpassing the suggested costs of emergency relief, housing projects, and social assistance programs to IDPs (Bruckner 2011). Following the conventional logic in aid (Sachs 2001), economic development was seen as a path to stability and security in the region. That is not to say that no attention or money was given to the humanitarian emergency, but rather that the priority for both the Georgian state and the international aid community was clearly centered on a much grander state-building plan. What attention was given was done so haphazardly and clearly without a plan or driving logic (Dunn 2012), the result of which was scattered and deeply fragmented process of resettlement for most IDPs, which left most in complete disarray.

In the middle of this reconstruction effort in early 2009, I began working as a researcher for Transparency International Georgia on a project to monitor the
process. As a fieldworker, I conducted interviews across the country in the newly built collective centers and camps across the country. It was immediately apparent that the housing projects were ill conceived, and the shelters were already showing signs of serious damage. The untreated wood inside the walls had been sweating profusely, and the walls bowed and cracked from the pressure. Likewise, mold crept from the corners of every room, spreading upward and across the ceiling. The floorboards split apart like the broken keys of a piano letting in a procession of ants, worms, and other bugs. Beyond the more basic material conditions, people were expressing a broader, less-definable problem of simply being “stuck” in the camp with nowhere to go, no one protecting their interests, and seeing no worth in the houses where they lived. These preliminary findings through TI Georgia helped establish a new framework for understanding displacement and the camp that was more critical of the processes that created them. It was also during this time that I first went to Khurvaleti

The Gori central bus station is a bustling center of local business that includes not just the station itself but an expansive indoor-outdoor market crudely covered with tatters of blue, white, and orange polyethylene tarps. The veins of this place, its cement and iron corridors, alleyways and stalls, are the heart of a station which serves people from across the Shida Kartli region. Shopkeepers selling produce, meat, car parts, tools, and hardware chat with one another over the constant din of people and cars. It’s hard to believe that just four years ago, Russian fighter jets were bombing this city. Looking around the station market, it
appears as though life has returned to normal. Here in the station’s dingy hallway, I searched, sat, and waited for the next bus to Khurvaleti. After getting a ticket, I passed the time by strolling the market, looking for some chocolates to give my host and interviewees – it’s common to give a small gift to your host, especially if your stay is a long one. In my case, the stay would be all summer, the arrangements of which I had yet to finalize.

Through a friend who was also an IDP living in another humanitarian camp, I was given instructions for how to find the house of her mother-in-law, Dodo Shoshitashvili: Khurvaleti camp, first row, tenth house. Dodo had a phone but rarely answered it, and besides, it was easier to organize the meeting through our mutual friend and family member. Khurvaleti is just a 20-minute minibus ride from Gori, but it seems worlds apart. Upon arriving, I was struck by the camp’s institutional austerity even years after the war. After living in the former Soviet Union for four years, however, I was inured to aesthetic monotony and had come to realize that people could live vibrant lives despite their surroundings. In Khurvaleti, there appeared to be no will to overcome that burden though. In my interviews with people, there was a growing sense of malaise around people’s lives here. Although many people had given up on a future elsewhere, they were nonetheless complacent about improving life in the camp. The prescription from the aid community often amounted to a band-aid on a fatal wound. Despite countless livelihood strategies, small-business grants, and programs for social reintegration, the same sense of discontent persisted in places like Khurvaleti. It was clear the
success/failure paradigm of aid was shortsighted – potentially blind – to the problem. How can something be fixed when the problem cannot even be understood? I was soon clear that part of my research would entail redefining the terms by which displacement, forced migration, and resettlement were previously framed.
CHAPTER II

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AID

Introduction

Standing between two rows of houses along the dusty, gravel road that bisects the camp, the community center is the most prominent building in Khurvaleti. Apart from the bath house and a playground, the center is the only thing that breaks up the institutional monotony here. Compared to the houses, it’s cavernous inside: stained-wood rafters line the high ceilings and the expansive floor is covered with stone tiles. Two rows of flat-panel computer monitors are arranged against the far wall, and in the adjacent corner, there is a small children’s library. As the name implies, the center was intended to be a multi-purpose facility serving everyone who lives in the camp. Computer and English lessons, NGO trainings, and local government activities were all proposed with its construction. Although the center does still house some of these activities, it seems as though the original vision has been lost.

When I first came to the camp, I tried visiting the community center to find it locked. I soon found out that the camp supervisor, called the mama sakhlisi, had the only key. When there was a computer lesson, training session, or visiting local
government officials, he opened the building, but otherwise it was closed to the public. On a day when it was open, I met Lali, the computer teacher and a resident of the camp. Although she was happy to have any kind of job and salary, she was only able to work a few hours a week, earning less than 100 Georgian Lari (GEL) per month – the equivalent of about 60 dollars. Moreover, her teaching contract was ending soon, and it was unclear how she would return to work. For Lali, the work itself, was less important than even the meager salary she earned to support her family. While interviewing her, I looked around and noticed that the computer lesson comprised of a few boys who were playing the popular first-person shooter called “Counter-strike”, a game where black ops soldiers fight against terrorist enemies.

I returned to the center on several occasions, most of which served as a public interface between the aid community and the camp. NGO representatives visited, collected survey data, and held trainings. When they left, the mama sakhlisi locked the door again. Ultimately, the center served the interests of the aid community, not the IDPs living here. After all, “community” is a word from the West, one that does not even translate clearly into Georgian. This kind of mistranslation, however, is more than just a name, but a mistranslation of the basic values between those who give aid and those who receive it. In most cases, what aid delivers in material assistance and knowledge practices is reappropriated by IDPs to resemble something wholly different. How, then, did the intentions of the aid community become so disconnected from the reality of the camp? In this chapter, I argue that
the newly built IDP camps across Georgia are the sites at which competing notions of value are in constant tension.

Tracking the Flow of Aid

Although the Georgian government oversaw the post-war reconstruction in 2008, a collection of different aid agencies helped with the effort. Those like World Vision, the NGO that built the Khurvaleti community center, were some of the first to provide humanitarian relief to the thousands of people fleeing the violence in South Ossetia that quickly spilled into the broader central Georgian valley (figure 2). During the war and the few weeks after it, over a hundred thousand had fled the area, inundating the capitol, Tbilisi. There, city officials closed hundreds of kindergartens to house the wave of people. There was not enough space, however, and entire families shared a single bed while the bathrooms overflowed with human waste. Before the international community met in Brussels to generously pledge 4.5 billion dollars to the reconstruction efforts, organizations such as the UNHCR, World Food Program (WFP), United State Agency of International Development (USAID), and CARE quickly scaled up their operations to provide immediate relief. Funds shifted out of projects and into material assistance like food, clothing, and hygiene kits. While organizations like the Red Cross and Medicine Sans Frontiere (MSF) were well prepared for such a disaster, others were haphazardly opportunistic. Money from the Brussels Conference soon flowed into Georgia, and
in the wake of the war, NGOs started scooping it up in piles. As relief shifted to reconstruction, so to did these organizations transition from humanitarian assistance to longer-term development strategies. While chaos drove the entire effort forward (Dunn 2012), most organizations comfortably justified their role throughout the process. World Vision’s statement provides one such example:

World Vision Georgia commenced its emergency response from the very outset of the conflict to meet the needs of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). World Vision began by providing emergency assistance to the conflict-affected population and then slowly switched to the recovery phase in 2009 by focusing on social and economic aspects of the affected groups.

Figure 2. Map of IDP camps built after 2008 Russo-Georgian War.

http://www.refworld.org/publisher,OCHA,MAP,GEO,49a664bb2,0.html
Nowhere does it mention, however, that project managers working on volunteer training programs and youth leadership trainings were now scrambling to fill the role of field operatives, grant writers, project directors. Despite the ad-hoc nature of the operations, money still flooded NGO offices and aid grew steadily. It’s within this period that I wish to interrogate the means by which aid so effectively produced its own capital. During such times of crisis when aid money increases in a given area, NGOs spend as much time generating profit through donor funding as they do implementing projects. While the profit model for aid differs from that of the free market, NGOs nonetheless expand similarly to businesses based on the same logic of capital growth. Such a logic of growth also determines how aid organizations transfer these downwards. When donor money does eventually reach its individual recipients, it arrives with certain values attached to it. To fully explain this process, I ultimately look from the bottom-up, the sites to which aid reportedly flowed.

Selling an Ideology

Most of the aid revenue from Brussels did not end up in the camp, but rather in other places such as in the administrative overhead for NGO national offices and large-scale infrastructure development projects such as the transnational highway to Turkey. Thus, what eventually made its way to the camp was not material
assistance, but an education in development. In other words, instead of money, most IDPs received trainings. What little grants did make it to IDPs came attached with certain expectations of how to use the funds. In many cases, then, most who receive any real money must first show that they have learned something in the process. Therefore, as aid generates the necessary capital for its own reproduction and growth, it does so by not by delivering more capital to the recipients of its aid, but a set of values. Moreover, while IDPs willingly demonstrate their knowledge of these values, they do so only to re-appropriate the aid they receive to translate into an entirely different value system. The camp, then, becomes the site at which competing notions of value are in constant tension. Ultimately, this ideological interplay in the camp highlights not only the growing gap between caregiver and beneficiary but also the larger uneven development in Georgia.

Aiding Capital Growth in Georgia

What makes Georgia, a country roughly the size of Ireland with a population of 4.5 million, a place of such strategic interest to the West? Likewise, how has it emerged as a valuable new marketplace in the global economy and what role does foreign aid play in making that possible? Although the events of the 2008 war were decidedly brutal, the outpouring of aid support seemed disproportional. After all, the 4.5 billion dollars pledged at the Brussels Conference amounted to about a thousand dollars for every citizen – a total, which amassed at the family level,
constitutes their yearly earnings in most places across the country. Indeed, only a small percentage of the money was even allocated to the post-war reconstruction effort, with most of the funds moving into larger infrastructure and development projects. It’s not surprising then, that the government’s massive, hyper-capitalist state-building project continued to flourish not just in spite of but likely because of the war. Moreover, since 2008, Georgia has emerged as an even more attractive new market in the global economy by lowering tariffs for foreign direct investment (FDI) and welcoming in large-scale development projects from international partners across the world. Not surprisingly, the neoliberal logic behind the country’s social and economic policies emerges out of a growing fraternity between Georgia and the West. As its country’s leaders seek membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), economic prosperity translates more broadly into national and regional security as well. Despite obvious setbacks since the Rose Revolution – most Western partners see Georgia as a model for the successes of Western development and democracy building.

This proclaimed prosperity, however, is not necessarily achieved across the country, and in most cases, the architectural and infrastructural overhauls intended to display the country’s wealth have hidden the violence and inequality that follow such activity. As new high-rise apartments, hotels, and casinos appear along city skylines, the nation’s poorest are quietly being removed from sight. When, for instance, developers sought to build a new hotel in the city of Batumi, a coastal city
that attracts thousands of tourists from Turkey, Armenia and Iran each year, hundreds of IDPs from Abkhazia who had been living in the derelict building for 15 years were evicted. Although they were compensated $10,000 for the loss, the rising cost of real estate – in many cases brought on by similar large-scale development projects – forced most of these families out of the city, a second displacement for most. Thus, the capital that has been reshaping the Georgian landscape has also reconfigured the social order in these places as well. The effect of such a reordering has been the concealment of more complicated inequalities.

For instance, it’s much easier to notice the new hotel on the beach than it is a group of poor families now dispersed into smaller towns and villages because of that hotel. Such examples indicate a kind of neoliberal turn that widens the gap between the rich and poor, a trend intensified by a capitalist spatial order that effectively whisks the most visibly poor out of sight (Harvey 2005; Harvey 2011). Therefore, a better question might be why does capital continue to flow so freely into Georgia despite the inequality it produces and has aid flourished because of it?

Aid benefits from capitalism because it’s the necessary response to the exploitation created through rampant growth. Moreover, aid – which receives a kind of subsidiary growth through charity – is arguably part of the same productive cycle of capitalism. While Marx (1978) predicts that the need for constant growth and increased accumulation in capitalism would ultimately lead to crises and collapse, its mechanisms to overcome these barriers are what keep the system alive. Two major factors in this survival are geography and ideology. Zizek (2004)
contends that charitable giving is simply a way of making the systematic inequality of capitalism acceptable. Harvey (2010) contends that capitalism averts its crises through a “spatial fix” that finds new market spaces and modes of generating profit. While the global economic system is indeed becoming more vastly interconnected through time and space, the landscape nonetheless remains uneven. Interconnection, after all, is not synonymous with equality. Rather, as capital seeks out new markets, it only overcomes one barrier to create another by reproducing inequality in a new place. International aid is not a solution to this problem, but rather another mechanism for its growth. If the “spatial fix” is the geographic mode by which capitalism overcomes barriers to its contradictions, then aid represents a kind of ethical fix that overcomes certain barriers of exploitation through charitable giving. That is to say, the system of aid, which has now come to include military intervention, disaster relief, civil society and nation-building, and development, is a mode by which capital finds more resources, creates new markets, and mitigates its own predisposition for crises and collapse.

This chapter then presents aid as part of a larger reproductive cycle of capitalism, a necessary stage of its growth. Because development and humanitarianism can intervene in the worst instances of exploitation and violence, it makes such a system tolerable, the effect of which is the continued and complementary expansion of both capitalism and aid. In other words, what capitalism undoes, aid sweeps up. When developers evict squatters from a derelict building to construct a new hotel, for instance, aid acts as the social safety net that
does more to make the development possible than the suffering impossible. Without aid, the ugliest side of capitalism would be generally be unacceptable, and with capitalism, aid would not have the same volume of poverty and suffering to alleviate. Moreover, the evolution of humanitarianism to include military intervention, state-building, and even more blatantly, corporate interest and collusion, aid appears to be more than a way of mitigating the wrongs of capitalism but a Trojan horse of the Western market (Reiff 2002; Harvey 2005; Pupavac 2010).

Because the aid system functions on a certain kind of market logic, I choose to examine it on those terms through the notion of value. In doing so, I will analyze the objects of value aid produces, the relationship between NGOs and donors based on their cycle of funding, and how economic value becomes a powerful discursive tool to promote values more broadly. How, then, is value produced in aid and how is that value objectified? The donor system is a complex and chaotic system governed by a mish-mash of ideology, bureaucracy, and political agendas. Therefore, to imply there is a fundamental order to the system would be misleading. There are, however, functional norms that appear to keep aid running across different places in similar ways. The funding cycle and its hierarchy of donors, larger agencies, and NGOs puts forth a certain operational standard by which these various bodies metabolize need and suffering. That is to say, when aid identifies certain problems like poverty, health, or violence, it also creates a mode for defining, targeting, and fixing those problems. This operation mode translates to a more concrete protocol for project funding. Proposals, PowerPoint presentations, and final reports are the
currency of the system and thus the objects of value produced by aid. This combined with a certain market logic that emphasizes institutional efficiency, communication, and coordination determines not only how aid is delivered but also what kind of assistance is provided. This only focuses on institutional structure, however, and says nothing of how it affects those receiving aid. Ultimately, I wish to interrogate the relationship between those giving and receiving aid by asking how a specific knowledge of Western value is promoted. In its entirety, aid function from a top-down model that transfers capital from donors to NGOs and ultimately to “beneficiaries – the final recipients of aid. Along with this transfer of money, however, ideology and capital logic come attached with it. As aid dollars move downward, they diminish. In lieu of actual funds, NGOs – the aid workers who populate them – transfer knowledge and values in its place. Therefore, I am not only interested in the means by which aid capital is produced and transferred from the top down, but how knowledge is produced in this system as well.

The Development-Security Nexus

Aid most broadly divides into two categories: humanitarian relief and development, each of which has created a global discursive and institutional framework. Humanitarianism, thus, combines the sentiment of charitable giving and abolitionism (Haskell 1985; Reiff 2002) with the framework of public international law (Chesterman 2001) and the human rights movement (Moyn 2010).
Additionally, development emerged out the post-World War II reconstruction of Western Europe, a model for growth and progress that has been attempted across the Global South. Often, the transition from humanitarianism to development occurs alongside a temporal shift in suffering. Humanitarianism, working within a perceived state of emergency (Redfield 2008), performs a kind of triage to provide relief in the field, while development aims towards longer-term goals, sometimes loftier goals such as to “eradicate extreme poverty and hunger”, “promote gender equality and empower women”, and “ensure environmental sustainability”. Although these missions imply different organizational capacities, most aid agencies conceive of the transition as a seamless process. The mission statement from CARE International Georgia illustrates this point:

Bridging the gap between humanitarian relief and development work, CARE started the three-year programme “Stabilisation and Integration of IDPs into Mainstream Georgian Society”... The programme aims not only at economic development of the IDP settlements, but also at creating viable socio-economic ties between IDPs and the host communities. It moves from providing aid to the displaced people to creating conditions for development and integration of their communities. (3)

In this case, humanitarianism can linked more closely to development through security practices. The terms “providing aid” are synonymous with the emergency relief and disaster management that immediately followed the war, whereas “creating the conditions for development and integration” indicates the long-term strategy of securitization through socio-economic stability.

Thus, the process of disaster emergency relief has evolved as the broader practice of crisis management that advocates for self-governance, “empowerment” (a
term I will unpack later this section), and relinquishment of certain state responsibilities to social welfare (Pupavac 2012). This trend also redefines the temporality of risk and crises by treating them all as development projects aimed at preventing disaster then mitigating it when it eventually occurs. Therefore, what Calhoun (2008) calls a constant, imagined state of emergency, changes the way in which development is realized on the ground. As such, these states of emergency are a mode of justifying humanitarian interventions and the continual presence of aid in certain places, a trend some have labeled a “global order” (Barnett 2010; Fassin 2010; Orford 2010). In Georgia, the trend towards crisis management takes shape in a place like the humanitarian camp where the state plans to give camp residents deeds to their house and ensure their property rights as a method of weaning its displaced population from its care. In constructing this neoliberal state in post-Rose Revolution Georgia, the governing party has likewise produced a new kind of neoliberal subject in the process, something I will discuss further at the end of this chapter. Thus, the “development-security nexus” is one that includes military and economic intervention, social rehabilitation, as well as a neoliberal ideology of progress and reform passed off as sustainable and grassroots development (Peet 1998)

In Khurvaleti, the temporality of aid manifests in the ongoing construction and renovation process. Directly following the war, the Georgian government contracted the construction of Khurvaleti and the 17 other camps still under duress and with the urgency of disaster response. Construction crews operated around the
clock, teams working into the night under massive floodlights. Meanwhile, displaced families continued to strain the city infrastructures in Tbilisi and Gori. This period, marked by the disorder of the war and the chaos of the aid response ultimately ended when families were bused to their new houses. The transition from emergency response to “durable solutions” for resettlement was not easy, however. The plans for building the camps was ill-conceived and haphazardly carried out, the results of which surfaced on the walls, ceilings, and floorboards of people’s new houses. While working for TI Georgia, I visited hundreds of these newly built homes, most of which were rapidly deteriorating. The walls sweated moisture for months because the wood used to build the interior frame was green and had not been properly aged. Mold formed in the corners, on the ceiling, and behind beds while the cracking and warping floorboards let worms, ants, and even rats into people’s living rooms. Outside, the cheap stucco exterior cracked and fell off by the handful. The government’s failings in the process, however, provided new organizations the opportunity to launch projects: monitoring missions, assessments, renovations, and home improvements.

Soon the most pressing problems in the camp were no longer the houses but life within them. Thus, a wave of more traditional development projects emerged in Khurvaleti. NGOs promoted small business grants, built a community center, and offered trainings to teach technical skills. In most cases, these projects addressed were a paltry solution to the larger social and economic problems in the camps. Others yet were completely non-sensical. In the nearby camp of Berbuki, the
Cooperative Housing Foundation (CHF) – now rebranded as Global Communities – offered grants to develop small businesses in the camp. In a camp that had fewer than 500 residents, three people had been awarded grants to open a hair salon. At a meeting between collaborating NGOs, one aid worker put it dryly: “how are these income generation projects supposed to generate anything if there’s no money in the first place?” In that the community center became the primary setting for the dialogue between NGOs and IDPs, it came to symbolize not only the uncertain transition from humanitarian relief to development, but also the impotency aid in the camp. These projects nonetheless reflect the broader changes in an aid industry that receives its financial support from donors, not beneficiaries.

The Political Economy of Aid: from Donors to “Beneficiaries”

Global aid is yearly a hundred billion dollar industry that reproduces itself not through a typical profit-generating model but rather through a complex lending system that channels money from the West to a collection of different borrowing countries (Bruckner 2011). Although it’s a common marketing ploy to show suffering masses – often times women and children – to compel people to give, the money donated never travels to those suffering individuals as advertised. Rather, Western donors allocate money to large aid agencies each of which manage an umbrella of subsidiary organizations at the national and local scale. The model, which ostensibly differs fundamentally from capitalism and its endless pursuit of
growth (Harvey 2010), nonetheless continues to expand in a similar fashion, becoming the “world’s largest business” (Sörensen and Söderbaum 2012). Instead of endless growth, aid survives on endless suffering and the need to alleviate it. Such suffering generates a similarly endless wave of prescriptions that structure the flow of aid capital.

When the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were established at Bretton Woods in 1945, these organizations operated as advertised, as banks and lending institutions (Willis 2005). As such, they lent money based on the assumption that borrowing countries would repay. Following the Latin American financial disasters that were structural adjustment programs (SAPs), the model of Western development has become one of donor-recipient investment (Wedel, 2001; Harvey 2005). That is not to say, however, that the changing the model from international lending with interest toward a donor model indicates no expectations of a return on investment. Whereas the SAPs of the 70s and 80s expected the kind of financial return where investments were repaid with interest, the economic overhauls and reforms of the 90s in places like Poland and Romania – “shock therapy” being another imprint of Sachs – were simply the same programs with different expectations of return (Verdery 1996; Dunn 2004). Here the return was soft, the payback to Western lenders being one of political alliance and global security (Sachs 2001; Collier and Rohner 2009).

The programs themselves, however, sprung from the same neoliberal ideology of reducing the role of the state in economic affairs, privatizing public services,
increasing trade by reducing tariffs, and advocating for self-reliance over state welfare (Willis 2005). The neoliberal turn in development over the last 20 years is not just limited to macro-level reform and adjustment, however, but also produces the standards by which development occurs scales. At the national and local scale, NGOs are increasingly turning towards sustainable, grassroots development strategies that focus on small-scale, labor-intensive activities such as agriculture and small business development through practices like microfinance (Willis 2005; Roy 2010).

These micro-scale projects, which are lauded as sustainable, engage more directly with the individual recipients of aid, what the aid community calls the “beneficiary”. Following this line of reasoning, “beneficiaries” are not the traditional passive recipients of aid that previous practices created, but rather a self-serving individual who is “empowered” not just through monetary means but also through education and skills training. Peet (1998) notes that the neoliberal turn of development had its cultural component in the West with thinkers like Ayn Rand popularizing the image of the self-serving, rugged individual. The Western ideal of the rugged individual clearly has its development counterpart in the “empowered beneficiary”. Those who are able to extract the most money from aid are those individuals who are able to play the role of “beneficiary” most effectively, whether the performance is genuine or not. Thus, despite the movement away from large-scale, top-down models of development, the ideological structure of knowledge and expertise still flows down from above.
Ultimately, aid is structured to push accountability downward while growth is nonetheless concentrated at the highest institutional levels. As money in aid travels downward, it gets smaller and smaller from agency to individual, yet the accountability of what is done with that money increases as scale decreases. In other words, those organizations and institutions that wield the greatest amount of aid capital are precisely those who are held the least accountable. This is even more egregious considering the fact that the overhead and administrative costs of some projects can exceed well over half of the entire budget. In 2009, I attended a two-day conference held by CARE International Georgia that was set to unveil a new project for social rehabilitation for IDPs living in camps. Following the UN logic of “durable solutions”, there was a project clearly designated for the next phase of the post-war relief effort. In the project details, the problem of social integration was posed where new residents of IDP camps were not welcomed by neighboring villages. Direct assistance to IDPs came in the form of training sessions, with direct funds only making their way to beneficiaries through microfinance loans to women wanting to start small businesses in the camp. Of the total $3.6 million USD project proposed, only $80,000 would make it directly into the hands of 50 or so IDPs. While the salary of Jonathan Pudifoot, CARE Georgia’s former country director, was undisclosed, most top level positions in big international NGOs (BINGOs) are well over six figures. This example illustrates not just the top-heavy nature of ostensibly bottom-up development, but indicates the ways in which the system of aid produces its own uneven geography. Moreover, the actors I have
described in this section – donors, aid agencies, and “beneficiaries” – create an integral relationship of use and exchange that keep the system moving. Whereas Western donors act as both capital investors and consumers who fund aid projects, NGOs – the aid workers who populate them – are the labor force of the industry. Ultimately, the “beneficiary” – their images, stories, and reports – are the exchangeable units of currency that NGOs trade for more funding. Because it’s the representations of beneficiaries and not the individuals themselves who are valuable to NGOs, these organizations invest more into reports, images, and stories than they do in the projects themselves.

The Value of Aid

In the following sections, I argue that value is represented in three ways through the (re)production of aid. The first takes material form – objectified value – as the project proposals and reports that ensure the survival of an NGO or other aid agency. This indicates the producer/consumer relationship in aid as primarily existing between the NGO and donor, the project report being the unit of exchange between them. The second way is through the production of use value, the implementation of project and the assistance delivered to the recipients of aid. The third way value is represented more generally is through what I call value-knowledge. This implies a subtle shift from value to values, a broader system of worth. Knowledge in this case entails transferring a system of Western values to
the “beneficiary”. Here, the knowledge about what makes something valuable is structured based on the producer/consumer relationship between donors and NGOs, with Western aid agencies passing down not just the directives for a project but also the parameters by which all development should occur, the rules of the aid game so to speak. As aid channels the knowledge downward (and more broadly from the West), it determines how the subjects of aid – both the workers and beneficiaries – should position themselves to receive any gains. Aid workers whether foreign or local, are spokespersons for aid that can speak for the value of aid. The aid workers that can do this most effectively gain the status of “expert”. An “expert” does not just pass knowledge from one node to another, but is integral in creating new knowledge. The “local expert” is a coveted role, both because it grants this actor greater privileges and, more practically, gives them a higher salary. Gaining the status of local expert often entails a process of alignment wherein local values and knowledge are eschewed in favor of some Western value of development. It’s in the production of the value-knowledge that the recipient of aid is transformed into the “beneficiary”.

The neoliberal turn in aid practices that advocate for self-empowerment means that the recipients of aid must play the role of beneficiary to receive any material gain from the system. The cruelest irony, however, is that the recipients of aid are competing, in some cases with each other, to receive things they do not necessarily want. Ultimately, tension arises in a place like Khurvaleti because different systems of value (or ways of constructing value-knowledge) compete with
one another in the same space. In the following section I will summarize these three conceptions of value in aid – exchange, use, and value-knowledge – to further theorize how the subjectivity is produced through aid and how that process produces conflicting truths in the camp.

It is also worth mentioning that I cultivated my knowledge about this process largely during my time as a researcher for Transparency International (TI) Georgia from 2008 to 2010. During that period, I worked both on an aid-monitoring project as well as a contracted researcher to follow up on other aspects of the project. Ultimately, my work contributed to a larger report on aid mission to Georgia from the perspective of IDPs. In addition to months of fieldwork in the newly built camps and collective centers across the country, I also sifted through dozens of projects proposals, donor presentations, and final project reports from organizations such as the UNHCR, UNDP, CARE International Georgia, USAID, the World Bank, World Vision, and CHF International, among others. As part of my MA research, I continued exploring these documents. Ultimately, the paper trail of aid leads me to interviews with field workers, project managers, and country directors in the previously mentioned organizations.

Exchange Value and the Reproduction of Aid

How is desire to help and reduce suffering commodified through aid? For a commodity to realize its exchange value it must have some use value, some purpose
of being consumed, on the market (Marx 1978). Most basically, this exists as a relationship between buyer and seller, producer and consumer. Capitalists, however, take on the dual role of both buyer and seller, often to act as the intermediary between producer and consumer. In the aid system, the positionality of buyer, seller, producer, consumer are rather muddled, because use value is not transferred to the consumer/investor of aid: the donor. Thus, the cyclical system of exchange, growth, and ultimately reproduction occurs primarily between aid investors, donors, and the producers of that aid, NGOs. NGOs, then, are generally construed as the labor force behind the production of aid. Here, the system is further complicated because the material form of their labor is twofold: 1) the project proposal, PowerPoint presentation, and final report and 2) the aid delivered to “beneficiaries”. The first component, which I will broadly categorize as the “paper trail” of aid, is the means by which aid agencies justify their very presence in a place and thus the mode of their survival. These products, delivered in hotel conference halls and NGO meeting rooms (and usually in the capitol city), are rarely, if ever presented the recipients of aid, the “beneficiary”. While the “beneficiary” receives aid, and thus enacts its use value, their satisfaction with these commodities is secondary – a result of the bifurcation of use and exchange value in aid. The bifurcation of value ultimately translates into a disconnected reality between the aid world and the places that receive its assistance, a concept which helps explain how the gap between aid organizations and their recipients manifests (Ferguson 1994). While the “development cowboy” (cite), the figure who
supersedes the bureaucratic inefficiency of the system to get things done, is common
in aid, it nonetheless speaks to a larger process of alienation between reproducing
aid and the process of delivering it to people. Here, the development cowboy is any
aid worker inured to exploiting donor sentimentality for more money but still the
committed to some vague notion of servitude or care. Three realities are thus
produced from this bifurcated system: what NGOs or aid workers say they are going
to do (in project proposals), what really happens on the ground (how projects are
“implemented” in development speak), and what they say they did (the final report).
None of these realities, however, are necessarily connected to one another, because
to some extent, they each represent a self-contained stage of the reproduction
process. While each stage must occur in succession of the others, they nonetheless
can occur in a relative vacuum to one another. Thus, the system of exchange,
initiated in the project proposal and finalized in the report is an exclusive one
between NGO and donor. Not surprisingly then, the “beneficiary” is similarly
created in such a vacuum. This ideal recipient of aid is one who embodies the
practices of aid, gaining valuable knowledge in the process. Such a constructed
subject, however, does not exist in a place like Khurvaleti. Rather, recipients of aid
perform the role in order to receive whatever they can get.
Value-Knowledge and Constructing the “Beneficiary”

What is the value of aid to the people who receive it? Moreover, how does the final transfer of aid from expert to beneficiary demonstrate the uneven balance of power in a place like Khurvaleti? Expert knowledge in development theory relies on producing and perpetuating knowledge bounded in relationships of power. That is, the ways in which development is constantly revised, improved, and repackaged do less to empower the recipients of aid than the decision-makers and institutions already in powerful positions. Similarly, Edwards (1989) argues, “underlying all these problems is a simple inequality of power between North and South. Knowledge is power, and the control of knowledge is the control of power. Power is the central component of development and without it there is little that the poor can do to change their circumstances (1989, 310).” Peet (1999) notes that even when the actors from the Global South participate in this process, many are academically dependent on the West for knowledge about their own countries. Thus, regardless of the actors involved, development strategies and projects clearly reinforce the production of knowledge-power and “regimes of truth” by Western institutions (Foucault, 1978).

Thus two, subjects of aid are produced in a place like Khurvaleti: the “expert” aid worker and the “beneficiary”. The interactions between these two actor positions are one inherently uneven, the aid worker representing the only access point to money and resources for the beneficiary. Thus, the beneficiary must
demonstrate some sense of the value-knowledge of aid to receive this assistance, regardless of how foreign the notions might be. I saw this theater of development played out in community center on several occasions. As NGO representatives carried out the trainings they had learned from the head office, camp residents listened politely, offered platitudes about the success of project X, and quietly vied to find any source of real money. While aid workers came to the meetings representing their NGOs that gave them a job, women often attended as the representatives for their families they hoped to support. Just as means of reproducing aid, from the project proposal to the final report, is a dis-integrated process, so too is the process of receiving that aid. While the business plans they proposed ranged from composting bins to hair salons, the funds also helped pay for medical bills and buy basic necessities like food and clothing. Therefore, the performance of development that might suggest a certain collaboration between the aid community and its “beneficiaries” is a more complicated re-appropriation of value.

Conclusion: Competing Values in the Camp

On a hot afternoon in Khurvaleti when most people are hiding from the relentless summer sun, our neighbor Tamuna stops by to tell me about an upcoming training at the community center. “It’s a training in farming,” she tells me, inviting me to join. At the meeting, twelve middle-aged and elderly women and one man sit
around the conference table hearing about new techniques in sustainable agriculture with a representative from Elkana, the Biological Farming Association – a Georgia-based NGO. The representative talks extensively about crop placement and rotation, composting, and using green houses. Along with the training, a hundred-page manual densely packed with graphs and statistics is given to every participant. After the half-hour lecture, the women ask a few questions about the techniques before the conversation quickly turns to how such projects will be funded. The representative explains that those who complete the entire training series are eligible to apply for small agro-business grants, but that no money is guaranteed. When the session ends, the representative joins the women for lunch provided by his organization. Fresh fruit, cheese bread, sausages, and cakes fill the table as the conversation shifts to personal stories in the camp. Irakli, the NGO representative, tells me about his education in agricultural economics and how he ended up at Elkana. When we finish, Irakli packs up his training materials and leaves in the company SUV while the women divide up the remaining food to take home.

That afternoon while sitting with my friends Nodari and Irma under their porch, I flip through the manual while they stuff me with food. The manual is titled “The Principles of Bioeconomics” and I ask Nodari if he had any idea what that means. He simply waved his hand down, dismissing it with a smirk. It was a subject we had discussed before – the confusing language of the development world. To people like Nodari, it simply did not translate to his world. Why not though? I
looked around their yard at the dozens of rabbits they were raising for meat, the plants and vegetables outgrowing their plots, the massive canning operation that stocked the pantry all winter long and saw two very successful farmers. The gap that existed between the aid community and Khurvaleti, then, was not one of a broader vision but of value. Why, then, does the kind of value aid can deliver not translate to what people really want or need in the camp?

Ferguson (1994) argues that this gap occurs at point where knowledge in the aid community does not match the realities on the ground. While this is true, it does not explain why the intended beneficiaries of such an inappropriate system help reproduce it. One explanation is simply of the social hierarchy in the camp that keeps things running. The IDPs who live in Khurvaleti are not in a position to bargain for better aid, instead taking what they can get. In doing so, they are similar to the scavenging poor of Brazil and India, the camp simply a rural slum. The process of scavenging is indeed one of re-appropriation, and in this case, IDPs render the detritus from aid to serve some other, useful function. The UNHCR blankets that were distributed immediately after the war now cover holes in fences or serve as makeshift curtains, while the outdoor bathrooms that never received plumbing became tool sheds. Thus, the collection of ill-fitting objects of aid emerge as a patchwork of reused materials across the camp’s landscape – a patchwork that illustrates the broader miscommunication of value between these two groups.
CHAPTER III

THE HUMANITARIAN VALUATION OF LIFE

Introduction

Dodo Shoshitashvili’s living room is stark. Apart from the calendar she replaces each year, the pale, blue walls remain bare while cracks and mold make spider webs across the plaster. A dining table and mix-match of old schoolroom chairs stand in its center. On either side of the room adjacent to the front door, two sagging, single beds draped with UNHCR blankets serve as couches when there are guests. In the far corner, the television is angled to meet Dodo’s eye from her favorite seat. Apart from a few personal additions and renovations, her house has not changed much since she arrived to Khurvaleti over four years ago.

Before 2008, Dodo lived in Ksuisi, a village about 20 kilometers south of the South Ossetian capitol, Tskhinvali. On August 7th, Dodo fled Ksuisi under the threat of air raids and an impending ground assault from the Russian military. After she spent four months in a temporary shelter in Tbilisi, government officials loaded her and 200 other Ksuisi residents onto a bus with a few basic supplies like hygiene kits, bulk food items, and linens. They arrived to Khurvaleti to find a desolate patch of muddy land that looked more like an unfinished parking lot than a place to live. Although the newly planted trees and gardens make it a much more
welcoming site four years later, most do not accept their stay as permanent. When I ask Dodo about Ksuisi, she responds wistfully: “when I wake up in the middle of the night, I always think that I'm in my house in Ksuisi. The older people who live here in Khurvaleti are all like that as well. No one feels like this is really their home.” What about this place makes it so unfamiliar to Dodo? The humanitarian mission in Georgia replaced many of the things she lost in the war: land, a house, and furniture to go in it. Dodo, however, saw these replica items as meaningless placeholders for a previous life. This land, the house, the rooms inside it is everything she has and yet nothing she wants. Her experience is like many others here. How, then, did this mission ultimately intersect with these people’s daily lives in such a way? More importantly, how is life in the camp insufficient for the people who live here?

Producing Value in Aid: Chapter 1

In the first chapter, I argue that the camp is the site at which competing notions of value are in constant tension with one another. At one end, the actors that make up the aid apparatus – donors, humanitarian and development agencies, and the state – funnel an ideology of progress based on the logic of capital profit through its institutional structure downward to recipient communities. The language of development is thus one of the capitalism, an idea reflected in the thousands of NGO project proposals, descriptions, and final reports. These reports
are colored with success stories of individuals who overcame their own misfortune through hard work, ingenuity, and a little push from NGO X. Therefore, the final stage in the reproductive cycle of aid is constructing the “beneficiary”. Somewhat surprisingly, IDPs in the camp help construct this identity by performing the expected roles of the “beneficiary” to receive aid that, in some cases, they find completely inappropriate. The aid most people receive is not useful because its value is not produced for them. NGOs increase profit and protect their own survival by making aid more attractive to donors, not to IDPs. Most of the solutions IDPs put forth to their own problems would be disastrous to this reproductive cycle, yet they are not in a position to suggest or make any significant changes and thus begrudgingly take what they can get. Ultimately, then, the gap between those who give aid and those who receive it continues to exist because all actors are willing participants, despite the inherent unevenness in the system. Here, I explore how such a value system interacts with people’s daily lives in the camp.

Housing Value: Chapter 2

Why are the houses in Khurvaleti meaningless replicas to the people living here? In this chapter, I argue that the humanitarian values that went into building the camp do not translate into anything meaningful to IDPs. In doing so, I explore two components of aid: the humanitarian valuation of life and the ideological blueprint for the camp, both of which guided the material construction of
Khurvaleti. While the houses in the camp embody the values of aid, they are either alien or directly conflicting with IDPs own values. In the face of a traumatic and indefinite exile, IDPs have been unable to recollect any other sense of worth to the life they previously lived, a reality far more complicated than the material aid they received after the war. In other words, the place that Khurvaleti is prevents people from making it the place they want it to be. Here, I do not wish to appeal to some greater sense of place – a field of inquiry that too readily relies on an essential notion of home and identity – but rather critique the humanitarian project that built Khurvaleti and the damage it does as the people living here try to recollect some imprecise understanding of what home used to be. Because the houses here are more than just wood, cement, and stucco but an ideological blueprint mapped onto the landscape, I choose to analyze the camp’s architecture, design, and physical layout to explore how the values of humanitarianism are embedded into daily life here. Likewise, the renovations and additions to these houses represent more than just choices of personal comfort but partly indicate the collective values of the people living here. These values, however, map unevenly across the landscape – a fact that illustrates how the camp architecture houses such tension. In the next section, I investigate how aid measures the value of an individual IDPs life to better understand how those calculations helped to construct the camp.
The Humanitarian Valuation of Life

What calculations are used to measure the value of human life and how do they prescribe certain techniques of governance in the camp? In this section, I outline three such ways human life is categorized in aid. The first is through the metric of capital value. In this case, the potential for a given individual is their productive capacity in the market. In cases where this capacity is unfulfilled, unproductive members of this system are either pushed to the side or rendered more capable. Thus, the second metric, empowerment, is more directly a strategy that returns to the measurement of market value. Empowering individuals, however, also necessarily includes a biopolitical component intended to make “beneficiaries” more self-sufficient, governing, and disciplined. Therefore, the biopolitical calculus is the final component by which humanitarianism evaluates human life, in this case for its biological capacity to survive. These three components contribute to the perceived value of IDPs as well as how they are to be managed within the camp – a discussion reserved for the following section. These prescriptions, however, do not necessarily dictate the flow of daily life in Khurvaleti, but rather act as a point of tension for residents of the camp. This tension ultimately exposes the hollowness of the aid project that built Khurvaleti, a point which I examine in the final section of this chapter.
The Value Metric

How is the value of capital profit the primary metric by which humanitarianism measures human life? If aid is an outgrowth of capitalism, a point I argued in the previous chapter, then the individual recipient of aid is a subject of capitalism. Thus, such an individual is generally measured by his/her productive capacity – or lack thereof – in such a system. Capacity, a key term by which aid signifies progress and sustainability, is what Oxfam calls the right for people to be the “authors of their own development (Eade 1997).” Such an author only succeeds on the terms of aid, however – terms that measure the individual “beneficiary” for its productive capacity. That is to say, for aid to get a substantial return on its investment of aid, the recipients of that aid must demonstrate some kind of value in aid. Not surprisingly, to justify value in aid, NGOs must appeal to donors and demonstrate the potential value of a given group in the marketplace. On these terms, the recipients of aid are the “standing reserve” for the productive machine of the market (Heidegger 1977). Those with no real market value emerge as a useless class or standing surplus to the system.

Because growth is necessarily achieved through accumulating wealth, capitalism also necessarily creates the conditions for exploitation and poverty (Marx 1978). Another related byproduct of the system is an impoverished class of people useless to the production of capital. As such, they are a threat to the model of social progress through economic growth upon which capitalism hinges. Not surprisingly,
poor people and their suffering are seen as the problem rather than the system that could produce such living conditions (cite). In most cases, the easiest solution for such a problem is to remove it from sight, and nowhere is this truer than in Georgia, where conspicuous consumption and ostentatious displays of wealth obfuscate “miserable conditions of large segments of the population, such as the unemployed, rural farmers and prisoners (DeWaal 2012).” Aid emerges precisely at the point where those conditions are uncovered or become socially unacceptable. Where Harvey (1990) shows how capitalism overcomes its internal crises through hegemonic spatial transformations, I argue that it also overcomes collapse by employing a kind of humanitarian fix. In other words, aid acts like a cup of cold water in a boiling pot. If aid engages with its recipients on these terms, how then are IDPs any different from anyone else within this impoverished class?

Khurvaleti is offset about a kilometer from the country’s central line of transportation. From the highway, it looks like a military installation or old Soviet pioneer camp. Compared to the villages people left in 2008, Khurvaleti is starkly institutional. The valleys and foothills of those villages are visible from the camp’s northern edge. From the same vantage point, new road systems carved into the mountainside transporting Russian soldiers and supplies can be made out. The buffer zone and its borderline of Russian military control run just two kilometers from the camp. If the frozen conflict were to renew today, the most logical points of entry for the Russian military would be in the areas surrounding the camp. As a result, the camp is a highly securitized space where the flow of human traffic is
closely monitored – all cars must pass through a military checkpoint and police
make bi-hourly rounds north by the camp and toward the buffer zone. Thus, the
location, layout, and security presence all demonstrate the kind of spatial logic that
governs the camp. Unlike other sites of aid intervention in Georgia – government
offices, schools, and hospitals, the camp houses a tighter zone of influence that also
intersects with people’s daily lives more extensively. Therefore, the value metric
that drives the aid agenda is felt more squarely in a place like Khurvaleti.
Moreover, the camp is not only a place where aid projects are carried out but is
itself a project of aid – the houses a discursive blueprint of the aid apparatus. In
other words, the camp is a landscape where the calculations of value can more
clearly be observed.

The Empowered Beneficiary

The notion of empowerment has been focal point of grassroots development, a
subversion to the conventional, top-down model of development (Willis 2005;
others). Likewise, the post-Cold War era of development that has been marked by
an emphasis on sustainability, self-reliance, and good governance, valorizes the
notion of the self-made, empowered subject of development. The emphasis towards
self-reliance is more than a neoliberal code word, however, but a broader strategy to
insert aid recipients into the market. Such movement also requires a kind of
biopolitical self-discipline of the subject, a point that Sharma (2008) elucidates further:

“Empowerment, it is argued, acts as a biopolitical technology, which constructs self-interested and self-governing disciplined individuals – homines oeconomici – needed for the smooth functioning of a market economy out of the culturally differentiated great mass of humanity. It has become a preferred tool with which to produce ‘self-governing and self-caring social actors, orient them towards the free-market, direct their behaviors towards entrepreneurial ends, and attach them to the project of rule (16).”

Thus, the empowered beneficiary is one who not only realizes his/her productive capacity within the market but also self-regulates to better achieve such an ends. Of course, this is rarely realized in a place like an IDP camp, where there are no jobs, marketplaces, or opportunities to transcend such miserable geography. What emerged in places like Khurvaleti where utterly misguided attempts create an internal market within the camp, a program promoted through small business and entrepreneurial grants. These programs never amounted to anything, however, because a collective of impoverished and unmarketable individuals would never generate a localized economy. Ultimately, the hair salons and mini-market closed down or were never opened in the first place, the funds used for more basic needs like food and medicine. Duffield (2012) argues that empowerment creates a binary between the marketable subject and the disposable one, those without market value being mere “surplus life”. In the context of the camp and on the terms of the market, IDPs can only ever be disposable. In that there are no real opportunities for IDPs to contribute to the market in a place like Khurvaleti, creating a self-reliant community appears to be a thinly veiled attempt to sweep it under the rug.
Complete negligence, however, is unacceptable. There still remains a responsibility to care for such a vulnerable population, a task taken on by both the state and aid organizations. In most cases, care on these terms amounts to managing the group’s conditions for survival.

Homo Sacer and Bare Life

What is logic behind the biopolitical calculus of human life and how are IDPs management in such a scheme? Agamben’s (1998) homo sacer, retrieved from the annals of Roman law, is the figure who can be killed but not sacrificed. The exception towards this life arises out of the paradox of sovereignty: “the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law (15).” The logic of sovereignty thus distinguishes two kinds of life, zoë and bios. Here zoë can be taken as mere biological existence whereas bios refer to life imbued with some sort of political value. Through creating the sovereign ban which deems a life worth killing but not sacrificing, homo sacer is reduced to a base form of existence, what Agamben calls “bare life”. Thus, the production of the modern, sovereign subject is an animal whose “politics calls his existence as a living being into question (119).”

Through the ban, sovereign power produces “bare life”, a convergence of zoë and bios. Likewise, Agamben argues that biopolitical power and sovereign power are inextricable – that the production of bare life is the original nucleus of sovereign
power. In doing so, he asks if the concept of sovereign power is to be abandoned, then “where, in the body of power, is the zone of indistinction (or, at least, the point of intersection) at which techniques of individualization and totalizing procedures converge?” (6). Here, the author returns to Arendt’s discussion of human rights. What are granted as inalienable rights, then, turn out to be a misnomer when they are systematically stripped from the individual. The convergence of these forces takes absolute form in the concentration camp, yet Agamben maintains that this transformation fully subsumes our interaction with the world and nexuses of power: “we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created (174).”

How does this translate to the camp reality though? While much of the literature in humanitarianism uses Agamben to index cases of “bare life”, this produces no new avenues of inquiry, nor does it adequately explain the real conditions in a place like Khurvaleti. Therefore, I do wish to point to every example of “bare life” in the camp but explain how the biopolitical logic of humanitarianism is framed in the context of this place. In the next section, I discuss how the discursive framing of the camp puts forth a mode of governance in the camp. In most cases, managing survival amounts to an equation where a baseline of acceptable nourishment, hygiene, and health are considered when distributing aid. This does not, however, imply that the conditions of Khurvaleti are synonymous to a concentration camp, but that such a logic for biological governance does indeed
exist. As I illustrate later, these calculations are realized differently on the ground than in their abstract conception.

The Value of IDPs to Aid

Considering the previous measures, what is the value of IDPs to aid? In this section, I analyze what measure of value IDPs serve in reproducing aid and building the Georgian state to illustrate why certain governing techniques are employed in the camp. It’s worth noting that while human life is regarded in terms of market value, this is not the explicit language of aid but rather its operational reality. Because aid projects are marketed to funding donor agencies, NGOs will only target populations that can ensure a return on investment. Whereas the Georgian Roma population is an undefined, heterogeneous group that does not fit nicely into any targeted assistance, IDPs living in camps and collective are comparatively much more stable. As such, they become the currency by which aid is able to reinvest and reproduce itself effectively.

Another key value of IDPs to Western aid agencies is their location. As immigration to the West continues to rise, European countries are closing their doors to asylum seekers, stateless persons, and refugees (Hathaway, 2007; Chimni, 2008). Because of this, the global numbers of internally displaced is rapidly outpacing international refugees, the result of which is the shifting burden of responsibility to displaced populations back onto the state and humanitarian
organizations. Therefore, in order to protect the national economic interests of the donors back home, aid agencies partnership with host-country states abroad to manage the IDPs. Unfortunately, the resulting compromise means that NGOs work to help governments that in many cases were the cause of the conflicts that displaced people. To mitigate the problem, aid organizations often take some of the roles of the state, thereby dividing the relationship between citizen and sovereign for IDPs.

The Georgian government generally sees IDPs as a necessary but burdensome problem of the state, its role often one of the absentee parent. Not surprisingly, the office in charge of IDPs, the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodations (MRA) is one of the most underfunded and legally impotent bodies in the Georgian government. I visited the office of the MRA on several occasions, and when I did, there were always dozens of people waiting outside and in the lobby. The claims and complaints ranged from backlogged compensation to the miserable living conditions for some. As requests were denied, ignored, or forgotten, human traffic bottlenecked around the entrance and in the lobby as people grew restless and angry. The scenes I witnessed came to a head in October of 2010, when Nana Pipia set fire to herself in protest of the MRA’s disregard for her constant pleas to help improve the miserable conditions of her collective center in western Georgia. Such an atmosphere at the MRA underscores the government’s broader indifference towards IDPs, a parasitic group that supports no growth in the eyes of the state.
Ultimately, IDPs are of greatest value for their impotentiality. As long as displaced persons at the global scale continue to stay within their own borders, they do not threaten to burden the economies and welfare programs in Europe. In places like Georgia, IDPs are best to be managed neatly in the camps. When protestors amass at the MRA, or in the streets of Tbilisi or the western capitol of Zugdidi, they threaten the already unstable political climate in Georgia. Additionally, the cost of supporting IDPs is a considerable burden to the state, even as it has recently trimmed its budget in that sector. Therefore, the partnership of humanitarian, development, and state actors that manages IDPs is focused on internalizing the functions of the camp to extricate itself from certain socio-economic responsibilities. Where it’s still unable to justify such sidestepping, care given to IDPs is calculated as a set of baseline standards for staying alive.

Subverting Aid through Competing Values

Ultimately, these calculations are nothing more than a prescriptive guideline, and do not always produce the same reality in a place like Khurvaleti. IDPs are not passive objects on which these values are mapped, but a heterogeneous social group with lives that stretch in, around, and beyond the camp in many ways. Focusing only on the biopolitical ordering of life, for instance, ignores the social (if not political) value of life in these places. Refugees and IDPs are certainly placed in a context where their biological survival is highly structured and managed, but this
does not imply they have been stripped of their will to carry out a different kind of life. Displaced people living in camps still maintain certain social ties that existed before exile while developing new ones, a process where bios reemerges from the rupture of violence. Ultimately, seeing bare life and bare life only in the camp obscures the dynamic social fabric tenuously stitched together by the residents of these places, most of whom would reject the notion they are the modern homo sacer if not in words, then certainly in practice.

Exploring this zone of dissensus, then, is the crucial task of this chapter. If the humanitarian values that produced the camp – the value metric, empowerment, and a biopolitical calculus – are meaningless to the IDPs living in Khurvaleti, then seemingly, some would have the will to resist such a prescription for living. Finding where and how these mistranslated values breakdown in the camp helps critique the foundational logic of the aid system. Before doing so, however, I must first explore how the humanitarian valuation of life puts forth the logic and techniques of governance in the camp.

The Ideological Blueprint for the Camp

If the value of capital profit is the primary metric by which aid measures human life, then how does that logic emerge across the landscape in the camp? Likewise, how does this architecture frame relationships of power and authority in Khurvaleti? In this section, I argue that three governing principles, internal
sustainability, technocratic efficiency, and biological sufficiency, guided the construction of the camp. Moreover, these guiding principles emerge in the camp’s physical layout. Ultimately, IDPs disrupt the camp’s architectural logic to create their own, more sensible conditions for living. Because they recognize that their own lives operate on a much different logic, IDPs criticize aid for being worthless to them, the camp an embodiment of that uselessness. Their critique emerges as both an explicit and implicit denial of the humanitarian values that built the camp.

Internal Sustainability

After exiting the main highway and passing through the military post, a dirt road leads to Khurvaleti. At the camp’s entrance, a collection of different signs and placards are posted into the dirt by the road. CARE planted 835 fruit and nut trees here, one sign reads. The Swedish International Development Corporation (SIDA) is in the process of built new latrines to replaces the pits that originally came with the house and are now nearly overflown. USAID built outdoor, clay ovens for baking bread – a strategy to reduce food aid in the camp. Some of the signs are faded and cracked, their representative NGO long gone from the scene, the new organizations on the block planting theirs in front of the old ones. Ultimately these signs all read with the same basic message: Khurvaleti is a sustainable community. Moreover, it underlines a fundamental assumption that sites of development can be first identified and targeted for assistance, constructed (in the case of the camp) or
intervened upon (in existing communities), and injected with aid. These sites are viewed as tightly bound units, places at which aid succeeds or fails (Lawson 2007). Thus, the model on which Khurvaleti is created – one which strives to make the camp an internally sustainable unit – is more broadly structured on the logic of capital growth. A good example of such an ideological blueprint for economic development is the Millennium Villages Project (MVP).

In response to the criticism that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) could not be achieved at the local level, the economist Jeffrey Sachs established the MVP in 2004 (Sanchez et al. 2007). The MVP sought to create model villages of development through a process of “targeted multi-sectoral investments (2007: 16778).” Generally speaking, the MVP attempted to refocus the grand vision of the Millennium Project by scaling it down to the local scale. While it does challenge the conventional scale of “D”evelopment strategies, the MVP nonetheless reifies spatially bounded practices and notions of the local. Therefore, a place like Sauri, Kenya becomes simultaneously a site of local expression and a reflection of global change. In ignoring the spatial and historical production of poverty, however, this approach does not challenge, and in some cases even perpetuates, the structural inequalities of such practices.

In many ways, Khurvaleti, like the other camps built at the same time, is MVP thinking extended to humanitarianism. This process is what I call constructing the camp as “community”, a vague term in the aid community that extends to any given population housed in a physically bound unit. That
“community” does not even have a direct translation in Georgian underscores the fundamental miscommunication of this governing principle to the people who live in the camp. What aid does not consider, however, is that the vast social networks that existed before the war as well as those formed after disrupt the camp as neatly bound unit. The movement of people, goods, and knowledge between camps, from home to camp, and from cities to camp all help constitute the social backbone of Khurvaleti. Thus, the fruit and vegetable dealers who drive their Ladas from neighboring through the camp as part of their daily rounds, the extended families that exchange gossip, money, and visits between camps and cities, and the relatives abroad and in Tbilisi who send their remittances all make Khurvaleti what it is. Aid squares as only a minor feature to these relationships. The notion of internal sustainability is thus a myopic vision of development that only considers social processes as they occur in the vacuum of the camp. The daily interactions of most IDPs, then, challenge this model.

Internal sustainability implies that development occurs within a spatially-bound unit like a village or camp. Such a myopic vision of development sees projects succeeding and failing within a vacuum rather than through the complex geography that originally formed these places. Although the camp was creating with such a vision in mind, the social networks that continued to exist despite the war challenge such a model.
Technocratic Efficiency

Only the center of Khurvaleti is structurally different from the rest of the camp. There, three structures stand beside one another: the community center, and two untended bathhouses. The NGO that built the bathhouses intentionally left funding that would have kept the boilers running out of the project. The idea was that whichever community leaders were in charge of operating the public showers would charge a small usage fee to keep the hot water running. – a plan for internal sustainability that was never realized. Now traveling doctors use the bathhouses for makeshift patient rooms, and occasionally other health organizations use the space to distribute vitamins, dietary supplements, or medical supplies. Outside the bathhouses, the state-owned Liberty Bank makes monthly visits to Khurvaleti in a mini-bus equipped as a mobile cash dispensary. Residents line up to receive their pensions, social assistance checks given to all IDPs, and use any other bank services like withdrawing or exchanging cash. In the community center across the street, aid workers stop through to carry out trainings. During elections, mobile ballot boxes a put in the community center for a few hours before they are moved to the next camp. These service providers come and go freely, the camp design abetting their movement. Meanwhile, IDPs wait for their services, often immobilized by their own living conditions.

Khurvaleti is both a model and a monster of urban planning. On one hand, the institutional design of the camp underscores the spatial logic that manages the
flow and circulation of people and goods as well as the equal and efficient
distribution of aid. On the other, it signifies the kind of thinking in aid that
normalizes the features of capital growth and maps them onto the landscape (Li
2007). Thus, the produced environment is one that is both aesthetically unpleasing
as well as rigidly interfaced to the outside world of service providers. The result is a
system wherein both aid workers and material assistance circulate freely in and
through the camp while IDPs remain stagnate. That the main civil services like
medical care, education, and finance only exist and temporary and mobile entities
here underscore the hollow legitimacy of Khurvaleti as a “community” as
development planners would have it.

In Khurvaleti, the timing and schedule of doctor, bank, and NGO visits
makes interpersonal interactions predictable in this setting. Likewise, even in the
cases where spaces have been appropriated for different purposes – such as with the
bathhouses turned into health clinics – the structures themselves indicate a certain
kind of official usage. These places would not, for instance, be used for a funeral,
wedding, or even birthday. What emerges, then, is not a model by which the camp
residents are coerced into making certain decisions but rather suggested to make
some. The governing space produced in the camp is not one of hegemonic sovereign
authority but rather a skeletal grid by which bureaucratic procedures occur (figures
3). These procedures nonetheless influence a range of broader social interactions in
the camp as residents choose how to engage with that bureaucracy – whether it is
through forms of resistance or compliance.
In this case, the management of circulation underpins the governmental logic of the camp (Foucault 2004). Urban planning, for instance, foresees not only how zones will be used, but also conceives of all the possible events and elements that have to be regulated within that space. Thus, Khurvaleti is managed upon scalar units: the camp, rows, houses, and individual IDPs. Those units are best governed as immobile objects, and the IDPs are no exception to that. Therefore, rather than manage IDP pensions by having people travel to Gori and Tbilisi, it was easier to bring the bank to the camp. Similarly, health, education, and political participation follow the same model of efficiency. In this case, techniques of governance are intended not only to direct the flow of goods and people but also to manage the well-being and survival of its population. This form of biopolitical governance is the topic of the next section.

Biological Sufficiency

On a hot, summer morning in Khurvaleti, I noticed people filing from their houses towards the community center. A representative from the World Medicine Company was passing out vitamin packets to each resident and checking them off of a list as they received their supply. The vitamins it appeared were intended as a food supplement to a diet low in certain nutrients. Humanitarian organizations like World Medicine made several deliveries every month. Dietary supplements, medical supplies, hygiene kits, agricultural supplies, clothes, and even monthly social welfare checks were part of the revolving door of services that came and went
from the camp. Not just the spatial layout of the camp, but the overall statistical dataset on IDPs and refugees have given aid agencies a more exact method for delivering goods and services to the residents of the camp (see figure 3). As a form of governance, humanitarianism has perfected many of its biopolitical techniques. In these biopolitical zones, the humanitarian apparatus calculates, regulates, and analyzes the right to live (Foucault 1978). Thus, organizations such as the World Food Program (WFP) played an integral role in managing survival at the onset of the 2008 war. The following graph (*Figure 4*) indicates this calculus:

![Satellite Imagery of the Tserovani](image)

*Figure 3. Satellite Imagery of the Tserovani underscores the institutional aesthetic of the humanitarian camp.*
This example, one of many in the WFP's report on food security following the 2008 conflict, demonstrates the ways in which human survival can be reduced to a set of equations that determine the rate and value of food consumption. In addition to this graph, the WFP also established a set of equations to calculate coping strategies, greatest risks to food security, access, and the populations affected by these factors. In these cases, the production of "bare life" seems present (Agamben 1998), yet is it truly a totalizing feature of life in an IDP or refugee camp?

Figure 4. WFP's consumption score.

Alternative Value Forms

The humanitarian mission to Georgia proposed a simple exchange: what was lost would be replaced. While this could not be achieved at a comprehensive scale, this basic principle remained. IDPs lost houses, land, and livestock in the war, and in many cases were compensated with houses, land and livestock (although of lesser size and quality). Despite this, most IDPs still claimed that they were given "nothing" after the war (Dunn ND). Why are these replica items unable to fulfill larger social functions for IDPs? I argue that humanitarian assistance is
meaningless to IDPs because it’s unable to conceive of the social relationships that were embedded in the objects and places lost through war. Thus, while the houses in Khurvaleti replace the physical structures of those lost in South Ossetia, they simply serve as empty placeholders. In this section, I outline three different stories to demonstrate how the value of lived spaces for IDPs cannot solely be captured through the humanitarian notion of value.

Physical arrangements

Tamuna lives alone in Khurvaleti. Her three children who were all displaced during the war now live spread across the country in different IDP camps. Before 2008, Tamuna lived in Ksuisi, a village about 20 kilometers south of the South Ossetian capitol, Tskhinvali. On August 7th, she fled Ksuisi under the threat of air raids and an impending ground assault from the Russian military. After she spent four months in a temporary shelter in Tbilisi, government officials loaded her and 200 other Ksuisi residents onto a bus with a few basic supplies like hygiene kits, bulk food items, and linens. When I ask Tamuna about her old home, she responds wistfully: “when I wake up in the middle of the night, I always think that I'm in my house in Ksuisi. The older people who live here in Khurvaleti are all like that as well.” The cognitive dissonance that Tamuna experienced was not simply symbolic either. Before the war, Tamuna lived in the same or neighboring villages to her three children and their families. Along with neighbors and friends, these familial arrangements formed Tamuna’s support network. The value of such a network extends beyond economic support to include other forms of social, emotional, and
spiritual care that most villages provide to the elderly. Following the war, Tamuna’s family moved to different locations seeking jobs, proximity to their old homes, and better schools for their own children. They visited Tamuna on occasion but lacked resources or money to do it often. As a result, Tamuna told me she felt trapped and alone in Khurvaleti. In physically fragmenting this social network, both the war and the humanitarian resettlement process further isolated Tamuna from the care she once received. Therefore, Khurvaleti, like the other camps across the country, was not a simple transfer of one village population to another place but rather a deep rupture that reordered and fractured social space for its residents.

Historical Depth

One day over coffee my neighbor Marina mentioned that her son was getting married. It was good news and I congratulated her, asking about the wedding plans. “Oh, we’re not going to have a wedding. We’re IDPs.” The sentiment shocked me because weddings are one of the most important ceremonies in Georgia, perhaps only after funerals. Not surprisingly, both of these ceremonies are deeply connected to the historical features of the land itself. By stating that IDPs do not celebrate weddings, Marina was implying that the meaning of a wedding was as much about the place it was held as the people in it. In the same regard, the collective sites of ritual that includes the church, cemetery, and home all act as nodes in a larger socio-historical network that both consolidates a collective identity.
and connects memory to the site where they occur. Therefore, displacement is more than physical relocation, but a kind of historical rupture between collective self-representation and place. There is no church in Khurvaleti, while the dead are slowly filling a bare patch of land near the road. Because the humanitarian project often framed as both a de-politicized and ahistorical project, it cannot address these problems in the camp.

Imaginative Capacity

In her former life, Naira Javakhishvili was the director of the Ksuisi public school. During our interview, we spoke at length about the dismal situation for her and the other teachers from Ksuisi. Like most of her colleagues, Naira was struggling to find work after the war, and there were no schools in the camp. When I switch topics to ask about her old neighborhood, however, she immediately perks up:

It was like a garden of Eden. We had all sorts of fruits: apples, pears, figs, pomegranates, peaches, and cherries. Our neighborhood was well known for its roses. Everyone had beautiful roses in their yards. Our neighborhood was even named for that reason – vardisubani [the rose district]. Life didn’t bother us there.

Naira contrasted these descriptions to Khurvaleti, a place she described as dull, barren, and lifeless. Her dissatisfaction stems not just from the material conditions in Khurvaleti but also from the vibrant social life that her former place housed: “I miss the walls of my house, the ground, my gardens, my roses. If I could return to
Ksuisi I would with great excitement and joy. My roots are there: my family, my ancestors, my history."

During many of my interviews, a similar litany of deficiencies emerged about the camp, and each feature had a superior counterpart back home in South Ossetia. While some argue that this is an essential place-making strategy that defines home for displaced persons (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010), I understand these rather as a mode of critiquing the humanitarian value metric that does not square with most people who live here. These description help form imagined binaries between previous homes and the camp. Where the South Ossetian villages were described as green, Khurvaleti was brown or gray. Where the villages were lush, Khurvaleti was often called a desert. Ultimately, they were places that housed rich and vibrant lives and livelihoods, whereas Khurvaleti is seen as a place impoverished of all these qualities. Ultimately, these spatial imaginaries demonstrated that Khurvaleti was not only a place that lacked history but a future as well.

Conclusion

The kind of lived space that humanitarianism imagined was the absolute one of wood, bricks, and cement. Across this physical landscape, it attempted to regenerate social value through certain market incentives, yet in doing so, failed to realize the larger social and historical depth of displacement. The utter lack of
these features in Khurvaleti, far from being abstract values, materialized as part of the worlded expressions of loss, fragmentation, and isolation in the camp. In constructing the camp and attempting to reintegrate IDPs into new communities, the humanitarian mission in Georgia misses this fundamental point. In 2009, I visited the Tserovani IDP camp near Tbilisi with a foreign aid worker from the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), an expert in his field. While walking through the camp, he told me “you would never tell this to anyone who has been evicted from their home, but these people have it pretty damn good.” On the terms of value that he understood, this was indeed true. People lost land, shelter, and their agricultural livelihood and were given new versions of all these things. What this expert did not consider, however, was that there was more in a home than simply building materials, but rather a way of life that these conditions livable in the first place.
CHAPTER IV

THE GEOGRAPHY OF BOREDOM

Introduction

When the wind rushes across the central valley and through the camp, the blue polyethylene tarp wrapped around the frame of the front porch expands and contracts, beating wildly with intermittent gusts. The wind gives the house life and the tarp is like a beating heart exposed to the harsh elements of summer. When the wind does stop, a ghostly silence descends on Khurvaleti. Most people stay inside, napping and watching television to avoid the heat. My bedroom provides little relief, though, and I spend most of the afternoon staring listlessly at the ceiling. Previously on days like this, I dutifully made my rounds of the camp in search for new interviews, but I soon found that good discussions were sparse, and my presence was sometimes unwelcome during such a dismal time of day, so I followed suit, retired to my room, and waited for a better hour. On some days, however, the setting sun did not bring vitality to the camp. During those nights, I tried reading, transcribing field notes, and writing commentary but everything failed. My room hummed with a silence so still, I grew anxious. It was in these times outside my zone of comfort as a researcher that I first felt boredom, an experience I began to notice in every lagging moment, blank space, and enervated expression in the camp.
As it turned out, my notion of boredom, of being bored, was a shared reality in Khurvaleti.

I had lived in a small village in western Georgia for two years – a place called Khoni, and yet the experience of ostensibly doing nothing was felt much different there. The hours spent on park benches, street corners, and lounging in people’s living rooms were almost always events in their own right. In fact, the most common understanding for the word boredom in English had no direct translation in Georgian. The closest approximation, motzk’eniloba, meant something closer to a dismal sort of melancholy. I recall times when I feebly tried to explain my boredom in a given situation, only giving up to realize that the people I was with were simply not having the same experience as I was. In some cases, this was because I had missed the hidden purpose of time spent seemingly doing nothing: business transactions, gossip, and local politics often played out in what seemed like mundane circumstances. In other times, I grew to understand that doing nothing was simply a way of enjoying the company of guests, family, and neighbors. It was during these two years in Khoni that I grew to appreciate the importance of everyday routines in this village. Khurvaleti, however, was clearly different.

In Khurvaleti, I lived with an elderly woman named Dodo Shoshitashvili. Like most of the other residents who lived in the first two rows, Dodo is from Ksuisi. In the camp, her main occupation came from the small plot of land around her house. There she grew corn, potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, and garlic. She also tended a dozen chickens in the small 10x30 foot plot in front of her house.
When she was not occupied with this kind of basic subsistence, she often just sat, staring at the wall. Even in the evenings when the sun was setting, I would arrive back to the house to find Dodo in a dark living room with the lights and television off. She told me that it was too hot to shut the doors and windows, but that moths and mosquitoes would flood the room if she left lights on. While this was true, I was astounded that she could endure such asceticism. For Dodo, these moments were not filled with meaning but were placeholders, moments spent waiting for something else to happen. She waited to see her family who would visit from a nearby camp. She waited for her daily conversations with her neighbors and friends. When I started living there, she waited until I returned from interviews to make us food and talk over dinner. The spans in between these activities were punctuated by what appeared to be nothing. In reflecting on these activities, I realized that it wasn’t the activities that were important but precisely these moments in between. These gaps were moments in a particular space where some kind of meaning was lodged but ultimately obscured. I argue that it’s precisely these gap-ing moments and spaces where boredom resides – often in place of other meanings – to constrain IDPs’ own attempts at finding and constructing meaning. Therefore, I pose the question: how does humanitarianism impoverish IDPs’ attempts at producing, expressing, and living a meaningful life?

In that the humanitarian project produces boredom in the camp, this mission impoverishes IDPs’ own attempts at carrying out a meaningful life there. Therefore, the task of this chapter is to better understand not only how boredom
manifests as the fundamental ethos of the camp but also how boredom stands in place of other values and truths. I argue that the humanitarian production of boredom is rooted in its modernizing mission. Therefore, exploring boredom in the modern world helps explain how it surfaces in the camp (section 1). While political violence physically displaced the thousands now in camps, the revelatory process of coping with this event only leads to the impossibility of returning home. Here, boredom manifests as a kind of haunting that reveals the ontological displacement of war (section 2). Revisiting this cycle of events that includes disorientation, loss, trauma produces the feeling of stagnation and nothingness – symptoms of boredom – that obstruct any other pursuit of meaning in the camp (section 3). Ultimately, then, boredom is the impotentiality of life in the camp that humanitarianism produces but is unable to ever overcome (section 4).

It’s worth noting that while my previous chapters more explicitly deal with the notion of value, I am making the semantically subtle yet theoretically extensive shift from value to meaning. In Chapter 2, I explored how humanitarianism produces both objects and knowledge of value. This in turn produces specific subjects of aid, from the aid worker to the IDP as “beneficiary”. In Chapter 3, I argue that the metric by which humanitarianism values individual life conflicts with IDPs’ own sense of value towards life. The result is that IDPs carry out their daily practices in a place that has no meaning to them. The houses where they live are merely hollow replicas of what they once had. In this chapter, I explore the broader effects of such a tension between aid and its recipients. The IDPs who live
in Khurvaleti appear as though they are doing and feeling nothing, the most common elements of boredom. This boredom, however, is not simply the result of a lack of stimulus in the camp but the process by which IDPs sort through the impossible reality of their displacement. If the place where IDPs now live is meaningless, then the only possible solution is to return home. Given such a contradiction, humanitarianism is ill suited to manage the ontological dilemma of displacement. Thus, the geography of boredom is ultimately both a point of analysis and a critique to the humanitarian ordering of life.

Boredom, Broadly Speaking

How is boredom a side effect of modernity? Moreover, why does the passage of time in the modern context produce such unease that we must shy away from it with indifference? Although it goes by many names – ennui, melancholy, listlessness, lassitude, and malaise – boredom encapsulates all these terms as a mode of being that is both featureless and insignificant. Boredom does not repudiate truth, meaning, or sincerity but rather clouds the concepts, rendering them unintelligible. Boredom also has many counterparts: monotony, routine, restlessness, anxiety, and distraction. While monotony and routine appear to produce boredom, restlessness and anxiety are symptoms of it. The prescription for such feelings is not to confront them directly but to distract oneself with something else. Thus, boredom is a process by which the nature of being, living, and dying are
put aside and forgotten. Psychology characterizes this process as a cognitive
dilemma of the under-stimulated mind, but this is an insufficient explanation of a
much vaster question around being itself. Therefore, I explore boredom not just as
a state of mind but a state of the world. The world I present in this section is that
of modernity, a historical context that creates the conditions for boredom to flourish.
Ultimately, I argue that to face boredom in the modern world is to confront the
horrors a lifeless life, the hollow replica of a meaningful one.

The only real truth that the material world presents us is that we live and
die. From that ontological framework, humanity has proceeded to create complex
and beautiful forms of knowledge through art, religion, and science. Modernity
pursues such expressions through technology, or rendering the material world
around it to represent that truth and knowledge (Heidegger 1977). In using
technology, humans have “worked up inorganic nature” to become a unique kind of
“species-being” (Marx 1978). The relationship to technology in the modern world,
however, has certain side effects. The first is creating a false binary between the
natural world and the social one (Latour 1993). This social body, emerged from a
conceived pre-modern state of nature, continues to move itself upwards through
successive stages. The result is a vision of time as telos, an arrow progressing
outwards from a savage past. Such a passage is never smooth, however, and there
are endless points where the modern project fails to achieve such progress.
Boredom manifests at such a temporal blockage.
The notion of boredom first appears in the West as a way to describe the tedium of modern living. In Bleak House, Charles Dickens describes boredom as a dullness of the wealthy life in industrial Europe. Lady Dedlock, much like Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, tries in vain to fill the unspeakable void of meaninglessness with constant distractions:

Sooth to say, they cannot go away too fast; for, even here, my Lady Dedlock has been bored to death. Concert, assembly, opera, theatre, drive, nothing is new to my Lady, under the worn-out heavens. Only last Sunday, when poor wretches were gay … — encompassing Paris with dancing, love-making, wine-drinking, tobacco-smoking, tomb-visiting, billiard, card and domino playing, quack-doctoring, and much murderous refuse, animate and inanimate — only last Sunday, my Lady, in the desolation of Boredom and the clutch of Giant Despair, almost hated her own maid for being in spirits (108).

In her endless pursuit of new thrills and adventures, Lady Dedlock finds that no matter how extravagant, they are ultimately hollow attempts at finding meaning. Wilde’s (1992) description of ennui as listlessness and dissatisfaction are echoed in those to whom “life denies nothing” (186), and Milosz (1951) critiques a bourgeois vision of the world as an “atomized vision of life” that “isolates every phenomenon, such as eating, drinking, dressing, earning money, and fornicating (10)”. The world of Dickens, Wilde, and Milosz contained miserable suffering and destitution alongside the melancholy despair of being rich and is in many ways the proto-experience of a increasingly fragmented and chaotic reality produced through capitalism (Lefebvre 1991; Harvey 2010).

Because capitalism seeks social progress through economic growth, and growth depends productivity and efficiency, one effect of capitalism is to speed up
time (Harvey 1990). This acceleration of time alongside the deeply fractured and “atomized” vision of life is the core of the postmodern ethos – its subjects seeking meaningful experience through constant consumption (ibid). To consume experiences as such is to constantly distract oneself, just as Dickens’ Lady Dedlock. Today, such distractions are ubiquitous and not simply the pursuit of an elite class. Social media like Facebook attempt to create a spatially unbound social eco-system, while new technologies like smart phones give people access to such a world nearly anywhere. In producing such a socio-technological grid, the West has all but eradicated boredom, yet there is a symbiosis between the rampant consumption of pleasurable and entertaining experiences and the exploitation, poverty, and violence it produces in the world. In other words, in its flight from boredom, the modern world has created an even greater, more destructive social machine. In doing so, the gaps and gap-ing moments where boredom does resurface are increasingly potent and destructive. Thus, the modern subject confronts boredom as the social horrors of violence, decay, and desolation.

In T.S. Eliot’s The Wastelands, post-World War I London is presented as the “unreal city”, a place where the social underbelly is hollow and rotten. Here, boredom is not simply a point at which distractions no longer suffice but a state of impoverished humanity:

The Time is now propitious, as he guesses,  
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,  
Endeavors to engage in her caresses  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.

... She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
“Well now that’s done; and I’m glad it’s over.”
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone.

The First World War introduced new forms of mechanized warfare such as grenades, the automatic rifle, and poison gas. Moreover, the war introduced the language around the post-trauma of violence. Veterans came home to Europe and the United States “shell-shocked” from the horrors they had experienced. Such immediate effects had a rippling effect on the larger social body that had to cope with this new understanding of humanity. Rather than apocalyptic destruction, however, boredom resurfaces in the face of such inconceivable truths as a kind of numbing haze. Thus, the “brown fog” that descends on the “unreal” city of London, is what Heidegger (1977) calls the “silent fog” of “profound boredom”:

Why do we find no meaning for ourselves any more, i.e., no essential possibility of being? Is it because indifference yawns at us out of all things, an indifference whose grounds we do not know? Yet who can speak in such a way when world trade, technology, and the economy seize hold of man and keep him moving? And nevertheless we seek a role for ourselves. What is happening here? (99).

Is the experience of boredom, then, the impossibility of peacefully dwelling in a world of unspeakable injustice? If it’s indeed impossible to both confront the violence and inequality in the world and live without it constantly haunting our daily presence, then places like refugee camps are the physical manifestation of such an impossibility. It’s in such a place that boredom emerges with even greater
presence because the tension between violence and meaningful living is a daily phenomenon. In this context, this violence becomes the singular event that forces people to completely reconfigure and reevaluate their lives. In that most end up in places like Khurvaleti, this process is never resolved. IDPs and refugees have perhaps fewer answers and viable alternatives than they had immediately after being exiled. Such a tension reveals the kind of ontological displacement that has occurred four years after the war in Georgia.

Boredom as Haunting

It’s another hot, summer day in Khurvaleti. With the sun beating down on our dusty little patch in the yard, we escape indoors for an afternoon nap. Dodo’s granddaughter Nino is visiting from the nearby camp of Tsminda Tskali. Dodo and Nino occupy the two single beds in the living room while I retreat to my bedroom. Sometime later, I hear the two stirring, talking about their dreams. Nino tells her grandmother that every time she falls asleep, she “returns to Ksuisi.” In other conversations, Dodo tells me she wakes up in the middle of the night thinking she is home in Ksuisi. These imaginations are not simply due to the disorienting moments of sleep, but a larger attempt to reorient towards home and the familiar. Similarly, most interviews I had while in Khurvaleti focused on relocating past lives and places. While this is indeed part of a larger strategy of place-making, in this section I argue that IDPs’ constant reorientation towards previous lives illustrates a larger dilemma in Khurvaleti. As IDPs attempt to reorder their lives around the
desire of returning and their inability to do so, boredom manifests within the haunting reality of such an impossibility. As a result, IDPs experience a kind of double displacement that begins with forced migration and ends with a kind of existential withdrawal from the camp. This withdrawal is what I call the ontological displacement of uncertain exile.

Loss and Trauma

When I first visited Khurvaleti in the winter of 2009 while working for TI Georgia, it looked uninhabited. The houses’ exteriors remained completely unchanged while the yards and surrounding fields were fallow. The atmosphere inside was not anymore vibrant either. My first interviews took place in cold and empty living rooms with drunken men reliving their anguish from the war. When I returned two and a half years later, it appeared as though only the physical environment had improved. While the crops and gardens had made the place a little greener, my conversations with IDPs still focused on the war, home, loss, and the poor conditions of life in the camp. No one, however, spoke about their future in this place or their plans here but rather that they wished to return home. Moreover, it did not matter that most people’s houses – and in some cases entire villages – were destroyed, bulldozed into the earth. One respondent told me that she would happily return to her home even if it was just a patch of dirt: “I would
build it again, from the ground up.” When I asked people if they still had hope for going back, most could not give an answer either way, but no one said no.

Most literature in forced migration and refugee studies suggests that forming group identity in the camp hinges on a sense of place and its loss (Bartolomei and Pittaway 2003). Placelessness in this context is more than a geographic category but a psychological one as well (Woodward 2009). Not surprisingly, many psychiatric studies have shown that people who have been violently displaced exhibit a range of different symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Kinzie, 2006; Ryan, Dooley, and Benson, 2008; Neugebauer, Fisher, Turner, Yamabe, Sarsfield, and Stehling-Ariza, 2009). Therefore, place-making strategies are an essential defense mechanism to deal with the trauma of this loss that also create continuity to new sites of resettlement (Turton 2005). In Georgia, place-making strategies appear to be structured around the notion of home shared by families and passed through successive generations (Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck 2010). If these place-making strategies are such an important way of recollecting lost identities, then why does it appear as though IDPs living in camps are still completely lost four years after the war? Why is Khurvaleti still a camp and not a village? What is it about this place that breeds apathy, indifference, and boredom towards life? What the literature on forced migration and displacement misses is that a larger, ontological dilemma underpins material loss, psychological trauma, and social upheaval.
Ontological Displacement

On a warm evening in August, I visit Violeta’s house to watch some old home movies taken in Ksuisi. Violeta, a widow like Dodo, lives with her cantankerous elderly father. Her granddaughters, on summer vacation from school, are visiting this time of year, and their boisterous energy makes the house feel much more lively. The video, taken in 2001, was from the graduation ceremony of Violeta’s daughter Sopo. We drink coffee and eat biscuits while chatting over the video, Violeta’s granddaughter piling onto the floor at our feet to watch with us. The ceremony held at the school is called the bolo zari, or last bell, and unlike my own American graduation, Georgian ceremonies are a celebration between both teachers and students. After a recital of different speeches, songs, and dances, students and teachers enjoy an enormous feast together with more singing and dancing. I was struck by the sincerity at which graduating high school embraced their teachers, danced together, and laughed. It was what so many ill-conceived aid projects had attempted to generate in the camp: a true moment of community bonding.

The very few school-aged teenagers who live in Khurvaleti will never experience this kind of camaraderie. They attend a nearby village school, but most feel like outsiders to a student body that started school and will graduate together. Moreover, the school they once attended is gone and their teachers are no longer working. Violeta was the math and computer teacher while her neighbor Naira was the director. They both remember the school with a strong sense of nostalgia and
wish they could return. In 2010, they were given a few hours of teaching in the
nearby village school, but by the next year, they were let go. Now like most here,
they rely on their own paltry subsistence and help from family outside the camp.
Thus, the war not only took away Violeta’s house and her job, but a greater sense of
worth she took from being part of the Ksuisi public school. The only record of that
past is the video we watch in her living room. The video is 10 years old, but as I
look at Violeta now, she appears to have aged far beyond that.

The displacement that forced IDPs from their homes also forced them to
reconsider their values after the war. In doing so, IDPs have relocated their sense
of value around what is gone and may never return. This has two effects on life in
the camp. The first is that in contrasting valuable living before the war with
worthless living after, IDPs see the camp as a hollow replica of the village they fled
in 2008 – a theme I explore in chapter 2. The second is that this process of
devaluing life in the camp displaces IDPs from their own physical presence in the
camp. If the houses in Khurvaleti are replicas of former homes, then the people
living there are hollow replicas of their former selves. Rather, the people who live
in Khurvaleti are ghosts haunted by their own pasts. Their mere physical presence
in the camp manifests as a kind of boredom that is indifferent towards daily life, the
normal passage of time, or the will grow into the environment here. Their
humanity lies elsewhere. Not surprisingly, this makes the camp a meaningless
space, a zone of indistinction where there is no value or meaning.
Khurvaleti is a non-place. The space it inhabits is only distinguishable by the things around it. It is situated 70 kilometers from the capitol, Tbilisi, 15 kilometers from the regional capitol of Gori, and pushes against the disputed line of military control. Because the camp lies so close to this border, it is often called the “buffer zone”, an area paradoxically defined by lack of consensual definition. Military posts are stationed into the dirt road leading into the camp, and before anyone can enter, they must present their identification to the guards there. To the south, the country’s only transnational highway and main transportation artery runs from the capitol to the Turkish border. Khurvaleti, however, encompasses none of those things but is rather the blank space in the middle of it. Likewise, the resident themselves are defined by what they lack. Humanitarian organizations identify this as a socio-economic deficiency and thus provide basic needs and “durable solutions” to IDPs: clothing, shelter, food, and prescriptions for social reintegration. IDPs themselves, however, see a different kind of scarcity in the camp, one that defies the humanitarian logic of assistance. They complained that after the war, they had been given “nothing” (Dunn ND). More importantly, IDPs notion that “nothing” had been done for them extended beyond post-war material aid and into lived spaces of the camp itself. In contrast to a past that signified abundance and vitality, Khurvaleti became a place that housed only nothingness after the war.
If the people who live in the camp remain there only as ghosts of their former selves, then Khurvaleti too is merely the holographic façade of a real community. IDPs are the inversion of the world around them and a negation of collective histories, cultures, and geographies. That is to say that the sense of being that emerges from the camp is simply the negative present to a meaningful past. “Our villages had a beautiful landscape, fertile land, rivers, springs, and mountains. Here there is nothing.” Being arises on that which it is not (Sartre 1956). That which is not-being is nothingness. Boredom in this sense is the manifestation of this nothingness through the actions of the individuals within the space of the camp. Boredom is dwelling on that what is not, that which represents nothing. Boredom initially manifests out of nothing to do, yet takes greater dimension as nothing to be. In that people put no effort into creating new lives in Khurvaleti, it is both a place where nothing is done and also a place where no meaning is attributed. The boredom that manifested as a result of the ontological displacement after the war has therefore translated into indifference and complacency towards the environment itself.

As Dunn (ND) explains, nothingness has become a central category of expression for IDPs living in the camp. The space of the camp, the material aid IDPs received represents their lack or inversion. Food supplies like macaroni delivered by the World Food Program (WFP) only served as empty calories and had no real social value. In other words, people ate it to survive but it had not place in Georgian cuisine. Macaroni defined as such is an anti-artifact. Thus, products like
macaroni along with the catalog of other materials distributed by humanitarian agencies existed but did not present themselves (Dunn ND). The camp itself and everything inside it is a placeholder, a mathematical zero, for something else. As nothing takes shape, so too does boredom. Where nothingness exists, nothing can be done. Boredom here is an act of negation where the positive act remains buried in the past by conflict and violence. IDPs eat macaroni where they once ate fresh foods grown on their own land. The macaroni simply acts as the zeroing placeholder for authentic food. Irrigation canals and water towers have replaced natural springs and rivers, and rows of box houses have replaced multi-generational homes built centuries ago. Every point in the camp exists as the negative symbol for another item, and it is easy to provide an even more extensive catalog of such examples. Therefore, the consumption, use, and exchange of these anti-artifacts have as zeroing effect on the spiritual bodies of IDPs themselves. That is to say, consuming the substance of humanitarianism – items like macaroni for instance – can only be done so with indifference. Boredom, then, is not only the displacement of meaning and value but its inversion as well. Such an invasive practice helps explain why IDPs in the camp feel that they have been given “nothing”.

At its most primordial level, boredom is a mode of survival which disrupts ordinary life and acts as a revealing of being-towards-death (Heidegger 1977). Death in this context can only be construed as the path towards complete nothingness. This formulation, however, is built upon the assumption that non-being itself is an entity that exists (Sartre 1956). Through that assumption, the act
of negation or nihilation takes shape. Meaning is thus confirmed through the
denial of meaning and the present. Boredom is both an act of negation and one of
resistance. The dialectic between negative and positive meaning, however,
obfuscates the fullness of dasein as being-in-the-world. Beistegui (2005) argues:

I am nothing outside this worldliness, or this being-in-the-world. What’s left,
then, is myself as this pure openness and exposedness, my world, vulnerable
and abyssal self, and with it, the awareness of something within me that I
cannot master...It is difficult indeed to face life, to look at it straight in the
eyes, and it is painful to bear the nudity of our factical, existential condition.
No wonder we feel like fleeing anxiety or boredom (21).

In that the camp establishes a binary mode of existence between positive meaning
(in the past) and negative meaning (in the present), the only mode of survival is
denial. If the houses in Khurvaleti are meant to be replicas of what was lost in the
war, then they necessarily become valueless placeholders for what was lost.
Moreover, the lives carried out in those spaces become meaningless as well. In the
face of such meaningless, IDPs withdraw from the reality of the camp to reconstruct
and live in the past. Such a process, however, only serves to construct Khurvaleti
as the polar reversal to previous places, like the negative image of a photograph.
Engaging in such a process means that most interactions in the camp appear
everved, apathetic, or altogether indifferent. Unfortunately, this process of
egation induced by the ontological displacement of war, is a cycle that can only
repeat itself, for there is no clear resolution in the eyes of those exiled.
Perpetuating the Cycle

Can IDPs ever truly settle in a place like Khurvaleti? Moreover, are the demands for their own lives and livelihoods unreasonable or simply unresolvable? Given how the camp was constructed, the value placed in the houses when they were built, IDPs feel as though the humanitarian prescription for living is at odds with their own. To locate their own values, IDPs have reconstructed their previous homes as the standard for living. In doing so, however, most find that the only conceivable reality or real retribution to the injustices they have endured is to return home, an impossible future for most. This is an unacceptable truth, and as a result most withdraw from the camp and treat it with indifference. Such a retreat from the reality of the camp is to dwell only on an impotential future that has no resolution. Thus, to experience such displacement is to revolve around a self-perpetuating aporia that has no foreseeable end. Such a realm of indistinction is that of impotentiality.

Conclusion: Boredom as Impotentiality

Between the holographic reality of daily life and the negation of meaning in the camp lies impotentiality, and boredom is the experience of such a life. Geographically speaking, boredom is neither here nor there but the ethereal experience of both and neither – the “profound fog” that fills the void between the
two. The IDPs who live in Khurvaleti are physically present but have located meaning elsewhere and are thus the embodiment of such an indistinction. Dodo sleeps in her Khurvaleti house but dreams in Ksuisi. Similarly, Violeta can only extract her social value as a teacher from the videos and pictures taken in Ksuisi.

In recognizing that we all have the potential for being reduced “bare life”, Agamben (1998) argues that we are all refugees and that the camp is the nomos of modern society. I argue that this is only partly true, however. The condition of the camp is that of a deep fracturing between potential and embodied experiences. The fragmented reality of the camp is not what separates it but connects it to other modern spaces, and our connection to displaced persons is the strain we all endure to unify the self across disparate spatial ontologies. Navigating the fragmented reality of the camp does not necessarily reduce the humanitarian subject to “bare life” but overextends it between multiple modes of being. While the modern subject strains to do this across different spaces, the humanitarian subject is blocked from doing so. Similarly, the modern experience of boredom is amplified in the camp because the friction of distance between potential experience and embodied ones is insurmountable. That is to say, the IDPs in Khurvaleti are unable to deny their previous existence as villagers who lived in South Ossetia and yet also unable to escape the physical confines of the camp. The boredom they experience is the aporia of such a situation. While the humanitarian project in Georgia did not create such an impossibility, it has no means to resolve such a fundamental crises of being
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Value is an elusive term that lacks a grand theory or straightforward method of inquiry. Because of this, it has often either come to accommodate a host of other meanings or simply been reified as a set of measurable objects (Graeber 2001). Moreover, analyses of value and its social application widely vary as well. In such cases, a common slippage between value and values occurs. In my own research, I found the slippage occurring in the humanitarian project from the market value of a house to a larger set of rights that the house was intended to embody. Because the residents of my field site did not have the same notion of value based on market principles, their value system was marginalized in the camp. Therefore, this project explored how both value systems converged across the same space to produce a new kind of political reality for its inhabitants.

On the one hand, the humanitarian notion of value is immediately evident, materializing in the physical form and layout of the IDP camp in Georgia. As such, the institutional world of humanitarianism leaps from excel sheet to barren earth (Dunn 2012). The row houses and crossroads of the camp form a grid of cells and columns that neatly organizes a population within a controlled space. Thus, the humanitarian aesthetic is undergirded by a broader set of values. Fundamentally,
the global aid industry values its goods and services on their ability to be exchanged on a market (Donini 2010). Regarding assistance to IDPs in Georgia, this is largely conceived through housing construction, physical resettlement, and property rights. Following the war, construction and resettlement were clearly the main priorities in managing the ballooning IDP population, yet the focus quickly shifted towards the larger project of “social reintegration” in the camp. This notion of social reintegration, a term most aid workers used loosely, entailed a collection of economic development and rights-based campaigns with the implicit goal, however ill-conceived, of integrating these new camps into the market. This was true during the various meetings I attended after resettlement, where most conversations revolved around vague neoliberal principles. On these terms, IDPs must first be empowered as self-sufficient individuals, given timely investments to generate income and stimulate a larger economy within the camp, and finally be trained as entrepreneurs to maximize their new capacity as market actors. At the center of this broadly articulated plan was the land itself, which theoretically provided both the basis for economic development (through small-scale agro-business) and articulated a new set of rights through ownership of property. This house itself was value-laden because provided that bridge between economic opportunities and political agency. This was later reflected in the state’s action plan concerning IDPs which put forth a protocol for privatizing the publicly owned land of the camp to individual homeowners. Therefore, the social reintegration project that the larger humanitarian mission began implementing after physical resettlement amounted to
nothing more than economic prescriptions intended to encapsulate a broader set of 
social values. While most IDPs were greatly concerned with their livelihood vis-à-
vis job opportunities and agricultural production, the humanitarian notion of value 
fails to capture the broader sense of loss that people felt after being displaced.

The houses in the humanitarian camp stand in stark contrast to the 
surrounding socio-physical landscape. The villages, neighborhoods, and houses that 
person left during the war were not simply components of a socio-economic grid, but 
the sites of historical, cultural, and personal meaning. For instance, a house is 
more than simply shelter but a place that connects an individual to the larger 
village through ceremonies like birthdays, weddings, and funerals. By extension, 
the land itself is not only a site of material wealth through agricultural production 
but the very substance of the body and soul. The people I interviewed in the 
Khurvaleti spoke about their villages as restorative places where the clean air, 
water, and soil were the source of life and health. Even in death, the land still 
binds the collective identity of a village. In Georgian orthodoxy, cemeteries are site 
by which the living commune with the dead. During Easter, for instance, families 
visit the graves of their relatives, celebrating the occasion with wine and food. 
Those I have spoken with about the practice say that they feel as though they are in 
direct, material contact with those in the cemetery. In this way, the 2008 war did 
not simply displace bodies from the land, but many felt as though their souls and 
the collective religiosity of the community was displaced. Such an event is what I 
describe as ontological displacement in the final chapter of this research.
What externally manifested as boredom during my stay in Khurvaleti was what I came to understand as a kind of violent, internal reordering across the collective body and soul of the people living there. Thus, the nature of being-in-the-camp was primarily structured by this spiritual reconfiguration. Because the physical body of the IDP was removed and forbidden from previous sites of meaning, the people I spoke with felt as though this prevented their souls from ever returning there as well. This tension between the corporeal and apparitional is evident in many religious ceremonies as well. Another feature of death in Georgian orthodoxy is the “40 days” celebration. It is believed that a soul stays on earth for 40 days, wandering through the physical sites of his/her past life. On the 40th day, the deceased family members and friends have a feast to commemorate his life and collectively him to heaven. Without this effort, the soul is said to be stuck in the corporeal world without ever ascending. Many people with whom I spoke worried that being displaced in life meant that they would be in the afterlife as well. Ultimately, the IDPs living in places like Khurvaleti mirror the lost dead who wander the earth, unable to relocate to a place of greater meaning.

In proposing a simple transaction for what had been lost in the war, the humanitarian project in Georgia failed to understand the latent meaning in the places people left during the war. IDPs’ collective value system is by no means a unified structure of meaning, yet they were nonetheless linked through generally shared historical, religious, and cultural features. While some of these values fit into the humanitarian logic that located value and power through economic
productivity and property rights, many others were simply not conceivable on these terms. As such, humanitarian solutions were often at odds with reality of life in the camp, which partly helps explain why IDPs’ simply saw nothing in the aid they received. The harsher truth is, perhaps, that nothing can be given in the first place.
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