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# **From Acting to Activism: Unveiling the Construction of the Distant Sufferer – A Critical Analysis of Celebrity Advocacy’s Representation of the Distant Sufferer**

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### ***Abstract***

This paper delves into the convergence of racialisation and feminisation within the framework of Celebrity Advocacy (CA) as it relates to the portrayal of distant sufferers. While previous discussions of CA have explored its ties to neocolonialism and the oversimplification of distant suffering, there has been a notable absence of an intersectional examination, particularly in the context of racialisation and feminisation. Therefore, our research question is framed as follows: “In what ways is the distant sufferer represented in celebrity advocacy?” This study hones in on CA and its depiction of distant sufferers in a post-humanitarian context. Employing a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Angelina Jolie's discourse and visual analysis of accompanying images, our findings shed light on the racialisation that occurs under Jolie's and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) white gaze. This representation manifests a white saviour complex and adopts a paternalistic tone. We argue that an intersectional approach is imperative to challenge the portrayal of the distant sufferer as a monolithic figure or simply a “third-world woman”. This paper contributes insights into how CA reconceptualizes those on the move, legitimising hegemonic processes favouring the dominant group.

### ***Keywords***

Celebrity advocacy, Distant Sufferer, Feminisation, Intersectionality, Racialisation

## *Authors' Biographical Note*



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## 1. Introduction

Studying celebrity figures goes beyond the surface. It holds significant academic value despite some critics brushing it off as shallow. As Brockington (2014) pointed out, celebrity culture is pervasive, making it essential to grasp its appeal and impact. In this paper, we position ourselves within the realm of Celebrity Advocacy (CA), following the framework discussed by scholars such as Chouliaraki (2006). CA provides a contextual framework for examining how the representation of distant suffering intersects with factors like feminisation and racialisation. Distant sufferers play a pivotal role in transforming humanitarian communication and constructing what Chouliaraki (2006) coined the "spectacle of suffering".

While CA has been exemplary in understanding the changing nature of solidarity, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of how celebrities become integral figures in shaping the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) discourse on distant suffering, thus contributing to the establishment of what Chouliaraki (2012) refers to as "truthclaims". Moreover, the UNHCR is not just a knowledge creator but also a dominant agency in refugee policy and protection, as observed by Chimni (1998). Despite its prominence in the refugee regime, there is a gap in the scholarly exploration of the UNHCR's role in sustaining a particular vision of a world order. Therefore, this paper delves into how Celebrity Advocacy (CA) represents the distant sufferer, with a specific focus on how processes of feminisation and racialisation shape both the portrayal of the distant sufferer and how society perceives them. Our central research question is: "How does Celebrity Advocacy depict the distant sufferer?"

To tackle this question, we will use intersectionality, based on Crenshaw's (1991) theoretical development, as our analytical tool. We will also closely examine how the distant sufferer is portrayed, a term we use to encompass those facing conflict, displacement, and other unfortunate circumstances. Our interest lies in exploring how the intersection of racialisation and feminisation influences the image of the distant sufferer. This examination considers societal factors that often lead to the decontextualisation and depoliticisation of these individuals. These historical trends have sometimes been used to justify protective neocolonial measures (Crawley, 2022). This paper seeks to address the significant gaps in our understanding of how representations of distant sufferers are created, particularly in the context of migration governance, where the legacies of colonialism have often been overlooked. Our primary objective is to challenge neocolonial narratives that underpin contemporary policy and practices related to the International Refugee Regime (IRR). There is a pressing need for more research on the gendered aspects of refugee representations and how International Organizations (IOs) and their partners perpetuate power dynamics and stereotypical victim-saviour relationships, as discussed by Johnson (2011) and Crawley (2022).

To this end, we delve into the prevalent gendered and racialised stereotypes within the IRR's discourse. It is worth noting that these narratives frequently prioritize the perspectives of Western experts, reinforcing the idea that the Global North largely shapes refugee representations and imaginaries. The subsequent sections

of this paper lay out our conceptual framework, including discussions on how CA fits into a post-humanitarian world, our conceptualization of the distant sufferer, and the ongoing debates surrounding CA. We then outline our chosen methods, including Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and visual analysis, and end this section with ethical considerations. The analysis applies these frameworks to the collected data, emphasizing an intersectional perspective.

In the conclusions section, we summarize our main findings and stress the importance of ongoing critical engagement with how distant sufferers are constructed and represented within the realm of Celebrity Advocacy.

## **2. Framing CA in a post-humanitarian world**

As Duffield (2019) states, to fully understand contemporary CA and its innovative discourse strategies, it is essential to highlight the technological advancements in the humanitarian field, particularly in its communication departments. This new era is commonly called “post-humanitarianism” (Chouliaraki, 2010; Duffield, 2019). Post-humanitarianism is thus tainted by a form of “depoliticised, consumption-oriented and network-driven” solidarity and is said to require fewer professional skills than was the case in the past (Duffield, 2019; Chouliaraki, 2021).

The shift from traditional humanitarianism, focused on compassion and aid, to post-humanitarianism emphasises individualistic solidarity driven by personal fulfilment, recognising the influence of technology in reshaping perceptions of suffering. In our opinion, this transition offers a more relevant epistemological framework in today's context. This shift is influenced by new media forms that convey the stories of distant others to the Western public but also run the risk of silencing their voices (Chouliaraki, 2013). Boltanski (1999) adds that the Western world often approaches distant suffering with a politics of pity, attributing it to “unfortunate fate” rather than addressing underlying social injustices. This approach tends to overlook the need for structural change.

Additionally, there is a commercial aspect where altruism is sometimes used for marketing purposes, often conveying simplified messages in the realm of “development buzz”. Furthermore, Chouliaraki (2012) highlights the importance of a celebrity's “persona” and “personification” within CA. The “persona” signifies how the celebrity's humanitarian identity becomes normalised, while “personification” involves the celebrity's ability to transform distant suffering into a personal narrative. For instance, the author uses Jolie as an example to demonstrate how Jolie's persona is closely tied to her “hyper-celebrity” or “iconic” status, ensuring maximum visibility. This process results in a dual impact: on the one hand, the UNHCR gains increased exposure, and on the other, Jolie solidifies her reputation as a humanitarian figure in the public eye.

## *2.1 The distant sufferer's image construction*

The academic examination of how distant sufferers are portrayed in CA and humanitarian communication is intricate and multifaceted. Boltanski (1999) perceives the distant sufferer as a burdened character, emphasising the weight of their hardship. Calain (2012) discusses the concept of “suffering bodies” in humanitarian health communication, representing them as modern “victims”, and Chouliaraki (2006) delves deeper into this figure in the context of Western spectators, highlighting the media's role in creating a “spectacle of suffering”. This spectacle encompasses a range of constructions whereby the sufferer's presence varies from large nameless numbers to identifiable figures “almost like us”.

To understand how the distant sufferer is constructed, it is crucial to consider the historical context, particularly the 1951 Geneva Convention. Western feminists have attempted to address the convention's male bias by highlighting the experiences of their female counterparts. However, this has often resulted in a narrative where female distant sufferers are portrayed as objects of salvation, especially from racialised men in their countries of origin. As Crawley (2022) points out, this reductionist approach narrowed policy and practice to “saving brown women from brown men”. As a result, although the latter might lead to public support for these perceived victims, it constructs a stereotypical and harmful image of the distant sufferer. Additionally, female distant sufferers have found themselves censoring their narratives to fit into the expectations of how a distant sufferer should be to be granted rights.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship and feminist epistemology from a non-Western perspective posit that white women produce a script in which the distant sufferer is essentialised (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1998). The latter is part and parcel of a neo-imperialist hegemonic discourse, which places these women in a confined role of victim or belonging to a vulnerable and helpless collective. On the other hand, they might be constructed as “the exotic other”, lending weight to the orientalist tone of much of the same discourse. Complexities and heterogeneities of this said group are suppressed, and instead, a monolithic subject is constructed.

### *2.1.1 Racialisation of the distant sufferer*

This paper operationalises racialisation as a social and political process where race, as a socially constructed concept, shapes racialised groups and allocates (dis)advantages (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Gans, 2017; Hochman, 2019). In simpler terms, “racialisation gives race a specific meaning in everyday interactions” (Ahmed, 2002: 46). Racialisation is crucial for analysing overt and covert racist behaviours. Within this framework, “hegemonic whiteness” is a foundational concept that normalises the racist status quo and perpetuates the racialisation of black bodies as the “other” (Ahmed, 2007). Following this author, whiteness is not just an individual attribute but a structural characteristic that shapes social realities through cultural constructions, social practices, and identity formations. This structural aspect establishes hierarchies, positioning those who identify as white as superior and relegating racialised bodies to subordinate positions.

In essence, whiteness helps maintain racial oppression in contemporary social systems. The dominant group, composed of elites and influential figures across public, social, and economic domains, is predominantly white, as seen in CA.

Individuals racialised as non-white are repeatedly dehumanised, denying them the positions and rights granted to white-identified individuals. Based on this statement, it is important to mention the contribution of Fanon (1967), who delimits the “zone of being” for those white bodies with the “zone of non-being” for those racially marked bodies. This latter zone is one in which agency is reduced and one is dehumanised. The overarching framework upholding this setup is what Quijano (2009) names “the coloniality of power”, which has persisted from the colonial administration of the past. The zones mentioned before are reproduced in this modern form of colonialism rooted in racial hierarchies and cultural dominance, whereby Western knowledge systems and practices dominate.

### *2.1.2 Engendering the distant sufferer*

Hegemonic whiteness needs to be understood in conjunction with gender, as the construction of racialised bodies cannot be separated from their gender and sexualisation. When considering the notion of the “third world woman” the essentialist nature of Western feminist discourse is revealed, where she is reduced to a gendered and geographically defined category, often depicted as oppressed, impoverished, sexually controlled, and powerless. Based on Ahmed's (2002) contribution, this portrayal contrasts sharply with the sexually liberated and self-determined Western feminist, positioning the latter as central while marginalising “the other”. From an institutional perspective, the UNHCR has prioritised “refugee women” as a distinct category, perpetuating the Western perception of them as powerless and vulnerable victims. This separation of men and women reinforces gender essentialisms, creating stereotypical categories like the “ideal victim” comprising vulnerable and innocent women, children, and the elderly, juxtaposed against their threatening male counterparts. Such constructions aim to justify international action and white saviour behaviour, often leading white feminists and Western institutions to speak on behalf of “the vulnerable”.

Gender essentialism plays a role in predefining the distant sufferer as feminine, innocent, vulnerable, and dependent. Butler's theory of gender performativity (1999) highlights how “universalistic claims” rooted in communal oppression based on femininity are brought forth, obscuring complex intersections of race, class, and other social factors. The feminisation of the distant sufferer reflects shifting gender roles, emphasising the feminine and portraying her as politically non-agentic. It is central to the narratives of victimisation and depoliticisation, mediating her plight to a Western audience, to present her femininity as a symbol of decency and non-threat.

Another significant aspect is the distant sufferer's motherhood or her perceived role as a maternal caregiver. While this focus may elicit sympathy, it does not address gendered power dynamics and reinforces

essentialist assumptions equating femininity with inherent peacefulness. The question of which distant sufferer deserves protection becomes entangled with the perception of motherhood, justifying paternalistic narratives.

### ***2.2 Compounding marginalisation***

The conceptual development would not be comprehensive without delving deeper into the intertwined racialisation and feminisation processes that shape the distant sufferer's construction. The representations of distant sufferers are deeply rooted in narratives produced by the Global North, and understanding this subjectivisation of the distant sufferer is crucial for grasping how individuals are framed as gendered and racialised entities within power dynamics (Butler, 1997). In our approach, intersectionality provides a robust analytical tool to explore how social identity categories like race, gender, and class mutually shape specific subjectivities. Examining the portrayal of the distant sufferer, often depicted as a “third-world woman”, necessitates considering the interplay between race and gender, the two primary axes through which her oppression is analysed.

The intersections of race and gender give rise to complex and unique experiences influenced by power dynamics and social structures within power-laden processes like colonialism and neoliberalism (Patil, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Therefore, employing intersectionality as an analytical lens centres the experience of the distant sufferer and provides a nuanced understanding of their construction. Crenshaw's (1991) discussion on structural inequality elucidates the intersectional nature of the lived experience of black women. Representational intersectionality reveals dominant imaginaries of racialised females and their reinforcement of patterns of social power. Stereotypes of sex and race are harnessed to create specific images of women of colour, whether through discourse or visuals. As such, social hierarchies exist in individuals' everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion and on the level of representation in texts and symbols. The division between structural and representational intersectionality is not clear-cut; instead, they are interconnected, with each level of analysis having both material and symbolic impacts. When analysing the construction of the distant sufferer in CA, representational intersectionality offers insights into stereotypical depictions of racialised women and their real-world consequences.

### ***2.3 Debating CA***

Historically, IOs' purpose has often been obscure, but celebrities have played a significant role in solidifying the universality of United Nations (UN) processes and practices (Alleyne, 2005). The celebrity diplomacy initiative gained momentum with Kofi Annan's appointment as Secretary-General of the UN in 1997. CA's rhetoric intertwined celebrity personalities with improving public opinion regarding humanitarian issues while avoiding potential conflicts with member governments. This led to debates about whether CA obscured the UN's self-promotion and international relations shortcomings. Questions arose about whether celebrities enhanced the UN's credibility and profile, historically challenged in gaining international recognition.



The critical discourse surrounding CA, extensively discussed in existing scholarship, addresses its historical power dynamics and connections to neocolonialism (Chouliaraki, 2012). This discourse suggests that CA is another form of Western governance reinforcing power imbalances between the West and the rest, ultimately disempowering the distant sufferer (Popoola et al., 2020). Similarly, celebrity motherhood has been linked to neocolonial characteristics, exemplified by Jolie and Madonna's participation in “new momism”, where celebrities are portrayed as having their pick of children from around the globe (Bell, 2013).

CA often simplifies the experiences of distant sufferers, perpetuating paternalism that illustrates the prevalent perception of distant sufferers as passive recipients of Western solidarity (Calain, 2012). Additionally, CA contributes to colonial imaginaries and interpretations of Africa, cultivating a hierarchical relationship where the Global South remains inferior to the West, solidifying the invisible violence inherent in CA (Yrjölä, 2008). Furthermore, one of CA's criticisms is its oversimplification of complex issues, prioritising soundbite messages over nuance and complexity (Dieter and Kumar, 2008). While some argue that contemporary humanitarian communication breaks from oriental and dehumanising language (Koffman et al., 2015), it often overlooks the colonial legacies that underpin global inequalities.

Chouliaraki (2012) adds another layer to this shifting solidarity, highlighting the blurred boundaries between the sufferer's condition and the celebrity's emotional connection. This blurring reinforces the perception of non-agency, where the sufferer's invisible, distant, and unnamed voice is subordinate to the celebrity's visible, intimate, and world-famous voice. Similarly, Kuhn's (2015) study on focus group reactions to CA reveals that respondents are primarily interested in the celebrity and their feelings rather than the distant sufferer's story.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Application of the Methods***

As the production of suffering through heartbreaking narratives and visuals continues to be “the resource for moral education” (Chouliaraki, 2012: 17), we can view celebrities' performances and production of imaginaries as “lenses of understanding” (Marshall, 2006), a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of all textual material will be implemented. Discourse can be understood as “a [structured] form and unit of language use” or communication method, which articulates logical progressions of meanings (Van Dijk, 1995). Importantly, discourses encompass representations of different social realities and bring forth imaginaries, i.e., how things should be (Fairclough, 2001). CDA takes a multifaceted approach, starting with the premise that language and text must be critically studied to uncover social problems such as racism, colonialism, sexism and other accompanying ideologies.

The methodological approach employed in this paper provides key advantages for the analysis. Firstly, it allows for understanding the interaction between interpretative context and the discourse or image under examination. Additionally, it sheds light on the positive self-representation of both the UNHCR and Jolie,

illustrating the dominant position of the institution in controlling and shaping discourse related to the distant sufferer. We have applied Fairclough's (2001) three-step guide to analysing the public discourse by investigating the discourse as is and how the discourse was situated in the context of competing explanations (Van Dijk, 1993).

The research data consists of online documents, including speeches and official statements, disseminated by the UNHCR and delivered by Jolie. This data encompasses textual content and accompanying visuals, thus allowing for a comprehensive analysis of both aspects. The online sources were gathered from the online page "Look to the Stars" with the filters "UNHCR" and "Angelina Jolie". Considering the scope of this paper, a defined time frame has been selected, focusing on the period post-2012, which marks Angelina Jolie's appointment as a special envoy. Jolie is chosen because of her role in the "peak of [the] contemporary celebrity" in a post-humanitarian context (Hopkins, 2018: 281). The preliminary thematic schema, informed by prior desk research on relevant theoretical foundations, including post-humanitarian, CA, feminisation, racialisation and intersectionality, guided the analysis process.

Visual analysis refers to the "dissection and interpretation of visual data" (Ball and Gilligan, 2010). As Mason (2002) suggested, visuals are intentionally or not constructed by someone for a purpose. Therefore, the interpretation of visuals must be understood in their specific context. The visual analysis component was applied to accompanying images, of which there were thirteen in total. To examine closely how the distant sufferer was constructed visually, Kurasawa's (2015) discussion on the representational genre of victimhood, often impersonated by the "third world woman", was given special attention. Moreover, we investigated which attributes were repeated to identify "archetypal categorisations" (Maneri, 2021: 10). The utilisation of CDA and visual analysis offer the most appropriate method for examining the representation of the distant sufferer in the context of CA, given their focus on power dynamics, ideology, and social challenges. CDA's emphasis on uncovering hidden meanings and implicit ideologies will expose dominance and hegemonic narratives. At the same time, a visual analysis of UNHCR's communication illuminates prevailing constructions of the distant sufferer, thereby revealing underlying imaginaries.

### ***3.2 Limitations and Ethical Reflection***

Discourse analysis has emerged as a valuable approach to examining language and social interactions (Gill, 2000). However, it has been argued that this method does not lend itself to extensive empirical generalisations, as it considers specific situational contexts. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the technique selected for this paper does not imply exclusivity in analysing the chosen textual material. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge the potential for interpretive inaccuracies, as critics of CDA have accused it of selectively citing text passages deemed significant for the study. Nevertheless, such issues can be mitigated by being mindful of the contextual qualities of the interpreted pieces.

Moreover, CDA is rooted in "social or political ethics", leading to other critiques of the methodology, namely

its subjectivity and bias, even though, unlike most other critical study methods, CDA specifies its viewpoint (Van Dijk, 1995). Another point worth noting is the focus on top-down domination rather than bottom-up forms of resistance (Van Dijk, 1993). Further to this is the discussion on the methodology's academic contributions, which, measured by efficacy and relevance and its ability to impact change, may seem minor compared to bottom-up acts of resistance.

In the realm of visual analysis, it is crucial to recognise that images can be reinterpreted and contested in many ways. Visual analysis entails subjective interpretation, as different individuals may attach different meanings to the same image. Therefore, visual analysis relies heavily on examining specific contexts in which images are produced and consumed (Banks, 2001; Silverstone, 1999). Related to this is the myriad of social actors included in producing and circulating images. These encompass, for example, photographers and editors. By taking into account contextual and subjective challenges, we aim to ensure an accurate picture of the representation of the distant sufferer.

To promote methodological rigour and self-awareness, we engaged in reflexivity, which “exposes or questions our ways of doing” (Hibbert et al., 2010: 48). Particularly, we acknowledge how our pre-existing theoretical assumptions and specific interests influenced the selection and dissemination of data. In this process of methodological reflexivity, it is crucial to be aware of the non-neutral character of qualitative research. Additionally, we interrogated our self-identity with the research context. As white Western researchers studying a topic that seeks to centre marginalised individuals, it is essential to acknowledge and critically reflect upon our positionality and its potential implications on the research process and outcomes. This acknowledgement includes recognising the lack of barriers we have faced in writing this paper, a privilege not universally shared by others. Therefore, by acknowledging our positionality, we strive to minimise the potential for reproducing dominant narratives or silencing the voices of marginalised communities.

#### **4. Analysis - making sense of the data**

This critical analysis is situated in the context of IOs frequently employing specific discourse and visual strategies to mitigate funding reductions. It focuses on the UNHCR and its dominant role in shaping the discourse, often sidelining the voices of those suffering from a distance. The analysis also highlights the UNHCR's positive portrayal, facilitated by celebrity endorsement from Angelina Jolie and the singular testimony of a distant sufferer praising her humanitarian efforts.

The study examines the interaction between the UNHCR, Angelina Jolie, and the distant sufferer, revealing racialisation processes perpetuating a colonial perspective and promoting a “white saviour” complex and paternalism. A section on “feminisation” delves into how the discourse emphasises the suffering of women and girls, particularly regarding motherhood and pregnancy, reinforcing the idea that they deserve aid. An

intersectional approach is introduced to understand better how distant sufferers are represented, recognising how social processes of racialisation and feminisation intersect and influence each other. This approach allows for a more nuanced comprehension of the portrayal of distant sufferers, considering various forms of discrimination and their interconnectedness.

#### ***4.1 Celebrity Advocacy in Action***

The provided section delves into the dynamics among three key elements: the institution represented by the woman in a blue vest (UNHCR), the celebrity mediator (Jolie), and the distant sufferers, depicted as the girls standing next to and in front of Jolie. Building on Chouliaraki's (2010) insights regarding CA, this image highlights the notion that UNHCR's objectives and the stories of distant sufferers are filtered through Jolie herself, underscoring her role as an authority in the realm of the IRR. Furthermore, Jolie's well-established humanitarian image in the public eye adds to her credibility. Her unwavering commitment exemplifies this, as she has stated that she is “with UNHCR for life” (Jolie, 2017). Her persona is intricately tied to her ability to listen to and subsequently convey the stories of distant suffering, essentially her role as a witness to tales of both hardship and resilience.



*Figure 1. Credit/Copyright: UNHCR/Ivor Prickett (2018)*

Additionally, this analysis brings to the forefront several key points. Firstly, it underscores Angelina Jolie's perspective on the ideal state of affairs, advocating for the international community to adopt her views on how things should be done. It also highlights how Jolie's words contribute to the UNHCR's positive image, particularly by drawing attention to the organisation's financial challenges and urging the international community to provide resources for the benefit of distant sufferers. For instance, in 2019, Jolie emphasised the importance of supporting UNHCR financially in light of the refugee crisis. Furthermore, Jolie's departure

as a special envoy in 2023 is noted in an official UNHCR statement, praising her for using her influential voice to raise awareness about refugee issues and mobilise action. However, this focus on Jolie's role has a potential unintended consequence, as it could overshadow the voices of distant sufferers, aligning with the post-humanitarian approach that risks marginalising other perspectives (Chouliaraki, 2013). In summary, this analysis highlights how Jolie's advocacy impacts the UNHCR's image and the representation of distant sufferers, with the potential side effect of diminishing their voices in the process.



*Figure 2. Credit/Copyright: UNHCR (2023)*

Furthermore, the imagery accompanying Jolie in her role as celebrity mediator inadvertently reinforces a sense of detachment between her and the distant sufferer. Figure 2 depicts images which label generic groups such as “Syrian refugee family” or “refugees from Myanmar”, while Jolie's name is prominently displayed. This juxtaposition establishes a clear association with the concept of non-agency, where the sufferer's voice is rendered invisible, distant, and nameless. In contrast, the celebrity's voice becomes visible, intimate, and internationally recognised, as we posed in our theoretical contribution.

Using personal stories in Jolie's discourse aligns with the post-humanitarian style characterised by individualistic forms of solidarity (Vestergaard, 2014), whereby Jolie's “persona” heavily relies on transforming distant suffering into personal narratives, effectively positioning herself as a passionate witness. Through the following personal accounts, Jolie creates emotional connections and fosters empathy among the spectators. For instance, she (2019) expresses how “deeply upsetting [it was] to meet the families who have only known persecution and statelessness their whole lives”, and who speak of being “treated like cattle”. She (2016) also draws parallels between the plight of refugee children in Jordan and the experiences of her children, stating that “like any other parent, it is impossible for me not to imagine what it would be like for my children in this situation”. Jolie establishes a connection between the experience of suffering and the spectator by employing a strategy that prompts them to imagine her anguish. This approach will likely enhance sympathy as the viewer's involvement is heightened when the suffering subject pertains to a globally recognised humanitarian emblem, such as Jolie.

## 4.2 Constructing the Distant Sufferer

Figure 3 depicts Jolie's encounter with Syrian refugees in a Jordanian border camp, exemplifying the overarching representation of the distant sufferer throughout her discourse. Notably, Jolie herself is prominently featured, accentuated by a bright light. Adjacent to her is a UNHCR representative identifiable only by the colour blue. The remaining individuals in the image are shown with their backs towards the camera, including an unidentified group of men and a veiled woman. What follows is Jolie's conceptualisation of the distant sufferer - who they are to her and what they are not. She emphasises those points that configure the distant sufferer through her eyes while differentiating between economic migrants and “genuine” refugees.



*Figure 3. Credit/Copyright: UNHCR/J. Tanner (2012)*

Building upon Boltanski's (1999) concept of the distant sufferer, Angelina Jolie's discourse amplifies the gravity of their plight. In her 2012 portrayal, she underscores that “every refugee matters” and highlights their individual stories and their immense suffering, which she believes surpasses her capacity to bear. In a 2016 op-ed for *The New York Times*, Jolie portrays refugees as distinct individuals—men, women, and children—caught in the chaos of war or targeted by persecution. One recurring theme in Jolie's discourse about distant sufferers is the emphasis on their deservingness of assistance. She frames this narrative to make Western audiences feel a closer connection to these individuals, rendering them more relatable. This aligns with Chouliaraki's (2006) concept of the “spectacle of suffering”, where the distant sufferer resembles us. While accepting an honorary Oscar for her humanitarian work in 2013, Jolie asserts that a woman is similar to her in abilities, desires, work ethic, and love for family. However, this woman is confined to a refugee camp and lacks a voice, highlighting the silencing of distant sufferers.

In her World Refugee Day speech in 2015, Jolie draws a clear distinction between economic migrants and refugees. She argues that those seeking refuge are not economic migrants seeking a better life but “desperate

refugees” escaping hardship. During a mission to Peru in 2018, she acknowledged the “justified public concerns” regarding the influx of migrants. Jolie explains that economic migrants choose to relocate freely, while refugees face immediate threats to their lives and cannot safely return home, making their protection an international responsibility. She emphasises the need for robust systems to identify “genuine” refugee claims. This narrative can be problematic as it excludes individuals who may not fit the narrow refugee definition and may justify stricter asylum policies.

#### 4.2.1 Processes of racialisation



*Figure 4 (left). Credit/Copyright: UNHCR/Mark Henley (2017). Figure 5 (right). Credit/Copyright: UNHCR/J. Tanner (2012).*

The analysis of UNHCR’s imagery, including Jolie and the distant sufferer from 2012-2023, reveals the persistence of the colonial gaze and processes of racialisation. The distant sufferer is racialised in all images, albeit unintentionally. In the above images, for example, the children’s race becomes noticeable in the encounter with Jolie. Under Jolie’s and the UNHCR’s “white gaze”, black bodies become othered. Concurrently, Jolie inadvertently racialises herself by wearing a veil in instances where the dominant culture expects women to do so. An alternative perspective illuminates Jolie’s attempt to assimilate into her surroundings as a constituent of the perceived “exotic other”. While some may discern this as a sign of respect, it does not signify a reciprocal cultural exchange. Consequently, we must consider whether wearing a veil represents an appropriation of cultural practice or a short-term act of solidarity. Jolie’s choice to wear a headscarf can be viewed as a form of reverse passing, representing an effort to establish credibility or gain acceptance. While Jolie may want to align herself with the distant sufferer’s experience, her privilege allows her to engage in this form of passing without having lived the systemic discrimination faced by females who wear a headscarf regularly. As Bell (2013: 17) posited, “her whiteness inheres in its invisibility”. Due to the normalisation of whiteness, racialised individuals are marked and not granted the same freedom to camouflage into their surroundings.

While Jolie is veiled in many images, it is still evident that her state is one of desire or cultural superiority.

Racial markers can be detected despite the absence of explicit racial references in Jolie's discourse. In her (2021) speech marking World Refugee Day 2021 in Burkina Faso, she states that "human strength and resilience are most clearly seen ... not in the world's gleaming capitals, but places like this". On that same occasion, she states that "the burden is falling on ... people of countries like Burkina Faso and other developing nations". By grouping "third world" countries, Jolie risks obfuscating the vast differences between these contexts and ultimately "exoticises non-specific representations" of these places (Bell, 2013: 2). What is more, she marks her plight - one of freedom to live in luxurious locations and travel to the oppressed whenever she feels like it, while those in the "third world" do not.

Importantly, CDA teaches us that dominance within discourse might be implicit, thereby rendering the current processes of racialisation covert (Van Dijk, 1993). The analysis of imagery, including Jolie and her discourse, demonstrates the persistence of the colonial gaze and its impact on processes of racialisation. The nameless racialised subjects en masse surrounding Jolie and the exoticisation of non-specific representations of diverse nations collectively perpetuate racial asymmetries.

#### 4.2.2 *White Saviourism and Paternalism*

An intrinsic aspect of the section addressing racialisation is the white saviour complex it displays, reinforcing Western authority. As previously mentioned, Jolie emphasises the distant sufferer's dignity. For instance, she (2019) asserts: "we have a collective responsibility to ensure that they can live dignified lives" or "when you empower them, you bring them dignity" (Jolie, 2017). Jolie (2012) further underscores her esteem for the distant sufferer by stating, "there is nowhere [she] would rather be today than here, with refugees, the people [she] admires most". During her visit to the Domiz refugee camp, she (2018) described the "people of the Middle East" as having incredible "dignity, resilience, warmth, generosity and grace". Similarly, while on a mission to Jordan, she (2016) expresses deep admiration for their "decency, tolerance and humanity".

In 2014, UNHCR published a statement remarking how Angelina Jolie "changed lives in Afghanistan". The statement includes a conversation with a 13-year-old named Hameda, who says, "Angelina Jolie is a generous and wonderful woman" for giving her the chance to graduate. While, at first glance, these statements seem altruistic, they perpetuate a distance between Jolie, the white woman offering dignity, and the distant sufferer, who supposedly needs to receive this dignity from the celebrity. This illustrates the phenomenon of the white saviour complex, which hides its self-serving intentions under acts of charity and justifies international action (Golash-Boza, 2016).

The discourse is permeated by racially and colonially informed pillars of white saviorism. Furthermore, it reinforces the paternalist imagery of consoling the distant sufferer while ultimately exerting control over them. This elucidates the self-serving nature of celebrity humanitarianism as well as the cultural authority of Jolie. Drawing on Bell's discussion of the white saviour complex, it becomes evident, as mentioned earlier, that Jolie aligns herself with the narrative of "speaking for" the distant sufferer and offers them dignity,



thereby exemplifying an attitude of salvation. Her cultural authority is underscored by various factors, including the emphasis on “the difference she has made for refugees” (UNHCR, 2023).

#### 4.2.3 Feminisation

An essential aspect of the representation of the distant sufferer pertains to the specific focus on the feminine given in Jolie's discourse and throughout the images analysed. This emphasis becomes evident in numerous encounters with distant sufferers, where Jolie consistently highlights the experiences of women and girls in such situations. For instance, in 2017, she mentioned that “over half of all refugees and displaced people worldwide are women and children”. Similarly, in 2019, she acknowledges that “reports suggest that many thousands have been killed since the violence broke out in Myanmar, including women and children”. This emphasis aligns with UNHCR's approach of prioritising the needs of women and girls, resulting in a separation between males and females (Freedman, 2010). In her statement on World Refugee Day, Jolie (2021) explicitly urges the audience to focus on “crimes committed against the women and children of Burkina Faso, Yemen, Myanmar, and Ethiopia”. The category of women and children has become a recognisable representational genre associated with victimhood, propelling aid institutions' focus on this category. Historically, aid institutions have employed the category of women as the “ideal” beneficiaries.



Figure 6. Credit/Copyright: UNHCR/O.Laban-Mattel (2013)

The reduction of the distant sufferer to her female gender becomes intertwined with associations of poverty and powerlessness as humanitarian aid campaigns emphasise the heightened vulnerability associated with being female in situations of conflict, for example, the increased risk of sexual violence. This trend is closely connected with the recurrent mention of mothers or pregnant women in Jolie's encounters. For instance, Jolie (2012) recounts an incident where she narrates an “elderly matriarch” who shares her story of loss. Similarly, she (2012) describes a meeting with a heavily pregnant woman who shares a traumatic border-crossing experience.

The above image portrays Jolie (clearly recognisable) facing a veiled female (whose back is turned to us) and a wandering child whom we can assume to be the daughter. In 2016, Jolie underscored the themes of femininity and motherhood by stating, “Besides the millions trapped inside Syria whose lives are at risk daily, 75,000 Syrians are stranded in Bern ... including children, pregnant women, and gravely ill patients”. Scholarly analysis suggests that this trend of emphasising the motherhood of the distant sufferer perpetuates essentialist assumptions that equate femininity with peacefulness (Carpenter, 2005), subsequently deeming those who are mothers as deserving of protection.

Moreover, Jolie (2019) highlights the additional burdens women and girls face in the context of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). She (2019) remarks that “Syrian women and girls face additional burdens, including severely limited work opportunities and SGBV, such as forced early marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation, and domestic violence” or “when there is not even the bare minimum of aid ... women and girls are left vulnerable to sexual violence”. The focus on the vulnerability of the female distant sufferer due to sexual violence illustrates the overlooking of other potential root causes of vulnerability (Freedman, 2010; Malkki, 1996).



*Figure 7. Credit/Copyright: UNHCR/Santiago-Escobar Jaramillo (2019)*

The image's caption reads, “Jolie speaks with Rohingya women who survived sexual violence in Myanmar”. The interplay of political and cultural dynamics of oppression, such as neocolonialism, is obscured as the emphasis narrows exclusively towards sexual harm (Ticktin, 2011). The spectator can only see the veiled backs of the women who are presented devoid of contextual backgrounds. Consequently, the observer is confronted with faceless and nameless figures whose identity is reduced to survivors of sexual violence. Although Jolie does not state that sexual violence is an isolated matter, no substantiating evidence or speech is provided to support this assertion. Part and parcel of this is the rhetoric of “saving brown women from brown men”, justifying adopting a state-centric approach to aid, as the victims become the international

community's concern. The instances above illustrate a process of subjectivation described by Butler (1997), shedding light on how the female distant sufferer is positioned vis-a-vis Jolie in a web of power relations. These female figures, depicted as highly susceptible to sexual violence, become a fixed category of analysis and are based on gender essentialisms rooted in universalistic claims of communal oppression, giving rise to victimisation and depoliticisation. The gendered subject, portrayed as a mother or victim of sexual violence, embodies the “ideal victim”. Moreover, by solely focusing on sexual violence or motherhood, the complex interplay of race and other social axes is obscured. Consequently, this narrow framing enables paternalistic attitudes amongst white-identified feminists and Western institutions.

#### ***4.3 Towards an intersectional understanding of the distant sufferer***

A nuanced understanding of the representation of the distant sufferer requires an exploration of its intersectional character. In portraying the distant sufferer, they are often reduced to a monolithic identity associated with their feminine gender and, secondly, their affiliation with the “third world”. Racial markers and stereotypical attributions of neediness accompany this reduction. When examining the images featuring distant sufferers alongside Jolie, we can discern a common thread of universalising experiences. This universalisation tends to homogenise individuals' diverse and complex realities within the broader category of the distant sufferer (Mohanty, 1998). It is important to notice that although the images may not always include solely women, as in Figure 4, the accompanying text frequently zooms back in on the females' plight. The caption of this Figure reads: “Jolie meets children and siblings of vulnerable female refugees in Nairobi”.



*Figure 8. Credit/Copyright: UNHCR/Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo (2018)*

Taking intersectionality as an analytical tool to understand the representation of the distant sufferer begins with a simple observation: a large majority (10 out of 13) of the visuals consist of female distant sufferers rather than their male counterparts. Of course, one could assume this is because Jolie's humanitarian persona relies on promoting women's rights. However, aligned with the scholarly debate on the visualisation of victimhood, most images include “third world woman as veiled, with downcast eyes, and sad, helpless expressions” (Crawley, 2022: 366). Therefore, the type of females portrayed reflects the UNHCR's preferred manner of representation. Additionally, it is crucial to recognise that racial markers are consistently present in the depictions, contributing to the formation of the figure's representation.

To avoid concealing the lived experiences of the distant sufferer, it is essential to move beyond examining these socially constructed categories in isolation. Instead, the intersecting dynamics of race and gender, including class and age, are considered. By analysing the mutually constituted processes of feminisation and racialisation, one obtains the dominant imaginary of the distant sufferer, which is by and large impersonated by the “third world woman” (Crenshaw, 1991). This intersectional representation indicates social power dynamics. The imaginary created in the images and through the discourse positions the “third world woman” as inferior and needing salvation, attributed to her gendered identity and racial background. Conversely, figures such as Jolie and the UNHCR personify the embodiment of power and the role of the savior.

### **5. Conclusions**

Jolie's (2016) recognition of the agency of distant sufferers, as expressed in her statement that they “do not want to be passive recipients of aid” but rather want a political solution, must not go unnoticed. This may signify a shift in discourse tone, as Fairclough (1995) discussed. Furthermore, in one of her recent speeches, she (2021) directs her attention to “the international community and its inherited privilege” and highlights how it operates in favour of powerful nations. This acknowledgement signals a critical stance towards prevailing global dynamics but remains a minor development in the overall discourse.

The study of Jolie's discourse contributes to the field of migration studies by offering insights into the reimagining of global phenomena such as human movement, specifically, those experiencing displacement, by CA. The analysis elucidates how Jolie and other celebrities can wield their prominent public personas to serve as witnesses to human suffering. However, this may inadvertently reinforce a sense of detachment between the spectator and sufferer. To come back to our objective mentioned above, we believe the analysis demonstrates the controversial nature of speaking on someone's behalf, thereby giving power to the dominant Global North while minimising the voices of those in situations of suffering.

The above follows the logic that celebrities' discourses serve as interpretive lenses. Within the context of Jolie's speeches, the Western spectator receives glimpses into the lives of distant sufferers, yet they are presented with restricted information regarding the conflicts and related political and cultural intricacies that may have driven these individuals to seek refuge in camps. This observation supports the claim that CA may not significantly enhance public understanding (despite its aspirational nature) due to the omission of underlying mechanisms (Hopkins, 2018). Jolie's discourse does not explicitly encourage her audience to question complex underlying causes of conflicts and the individuals portrayed as the emphasis remains on Jolie's interpretation of the distant sufferer and her ability to narrate their stories, centring on themes of femininity and vulnerability, among others. She (2018) does differentiate between economic migrants and “genuine” refugees, which potentially influences a discourse regarding who qualifies as a legitimate refugee and who does not. When she makes these differentiations, it creates boundaries by excluding groups that do not fit within the prescribed categories of deservingness or legitimacy, i.e. “genuine” refugees. The omission

of covert mechanisms sustaining suffering prevents a comprehensive understanding of the lived reality of the sufferer. The anonymity and generality attributed to the distant sufferers lead to societal and political consequences, namely their decontextualisation and depoliticisation.

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight the representational archetype of the victimised “third-world woman”, which is strongly connected to the concept of innocence, vulnerability and non-agency. Jolie, perhaps unintentionally, perpetuates a historical pattern rooted in colonialism, where individuals assume the role of spokesperson for others, particularly those in the “third world”, reducing them to nameless recipients of benevolence without much internal difference. This starkly contrasts with Jolie, who centres herself through personalising the distant suffering. Further, the white saviour complex and paternalism in her discourse exemplify one crucial component of CDA: the reproduction of hegemonic processes favouring the dominant group. Additionally, while Jolie’s discourse may work towards enhancing awareness of global causes, its representation of the distant sufferer perpetuates the oppression of intersectional understanding. The recognition of representational intersectionality is crucial as it enables a multifaceted approach to the construction and experiences of the distant sufferer. However, power asymmetries are upheld because these intersecting identities are underrecognized throughout Jolie's and the UNHCR's discourse. In this context, it is pertinent to consider Jolie's discourse and that of the UNHCR, as both contribute to the production and advancement of a gendered and racialised imaginary.

Certainly, it is important to acknowledge that CA has historically played a pivotal role in mobilising key actors and influencing public perceptions concerning weighty humanitarian concerns. We believe critical engagement with the representation of distant sufferers throughout CA must be put on the agenda. Ideally, IOs and their celebrity partners should collaborate with grassroots movements characterised by their deep understanding of local contexts. This would mitigate top-down dynamics in the IRR’s decision-making processes. This approach not only serves to diminish saviour narratives but also facilitates the promotion of agency and the acknowledgement of local heroism.

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