Humanitarianism, Displacement, and the Politics of Nothing in Postwar Georgia

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In the spring of 2009 I went to Koda, a new settlement in the Republic of Gorgia built for internally displaced people (IDPs) who had been ethnically cleansed from the breakaway province of South Ossetia during a brief but brutal war with Russia in 2008. As I stood in front of a newly renovated apartment building, a man walked up to me, clearly eager to talk to a foreigner.[1] "We have nothing!" he said. "People just come here to us, and lie and lie. . . . Maybe people in other settlements get something, but we have gotten nothing at all." His lament was identical to one I heard from almost every IDP I interviewed: "They do nothing for us. The government and the NGOs are not helping us, they do nothing for us. We are alone, we are abandoned, and we have nothing."[2]

It was true that the IDPs—mostly ethnic Georgians—had lost everything during the war. Most of them had fled with only what they were wearing. Yet, in the early months after the war, emergency humanitarian aid, in the form of cots, medications, food packages, plastic washing basins, firewood, cash, and other goods donated by western governments and distributed by international NGOs, streamed in. Later, humanitarian organizations gave the IDPs microcredit loans, plots of land to farm, vocational training, and many other services meant to help their social reintegration.[3] Yet, even surrounded with all this physical evidence of aid, the man was adamant that he had received nothing at all.

Why would displaced people surrounded by donated aid continue to insist that they had nothing? During my seventeen months of interviews and participant-observation in the Georgian IDP settlements between 2009 and 2012, it soon became clear that *nothingness* had become a central category

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1. In this article I have deliberately avoided using the real names of IDPs. Because the political situation in Georgia continues to be volatile, and because the ramifications of working with a western anthropologist are unknowable, I err on the side of safety to protect their identities.

2. See Elizabeth Dunn, "The Chaos of Humanitarianism: Adhocracy in the Republic of Georgia," *Humanity* 3, no. 1 (March 2012): 1–23.

3. CARE International in the Caucasus, "Post-Emergency Development Newsletter," no. 3, at www.care-caucasus.org.ge/photos/emergency%20newsletter%203-ENG.pdf (last accessed 26 December 2013); CARE International in the Caucasus, "Post Emergency Development Newsletter," no. 4, at www.care-caucasus.org.ge/photos/Emergency%20newsletter%204%20ENG.pdf (last accessed 26 December 2013); Elin Jönsson and Elin Åkerman, "Direct Cash Transfer and Food Security in Georgia" (master's thesis, Lund University, 2009), at www.lunduniversity.lu.se/o.o.i.s?id=24965&postid=1482612 (last accessed 26 December 2013).

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Georgian man displaced from South Ossetia, now residing in Shavshvebi IDP settlement, Republic of Georgia. Photo by Hannah Mintek. Reproduced with permission.

through which the IDPs had come to understand their new lives in the settlement, their new social status as displaced people, and their new political relationships to the state and the international community. Nothingness was something actively produced in the settlement, in and through the process of humanitarian relief and postwar reconstruction.

But what, exactly, is nothing? This question, it seems, has challenged European philosophy from its Greek origins, which rested on the notion that nothing cannot exist.[4] Is nothing merely an empty ground on which meanings and objects are superimposed—an absence of being? Or could there be a form of nothingness with a life of its own in time, space, or even society?[5] In this article I use the case of the Georgian IDPs and the work of Alain Badiou to argue that nothing is a social phenomenon with its own existence that disrupts the process of social reconstruction and the making of meaning.[6] I show that despite best intentions, the practices of the international humanitarian system create four kinds of voids: anti-artifacts, black holes, imaginary

4. See Victor Hugo's rant against the concept of nothingness, which is a diatribe against atheism and nihilism: "There is no such thing as nothingness. Zero does not exist. Everything is something. Nothing is nothing." Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood (New York, 1887 [1862]), volume 2, book 7, chapter 6, at www.gutenberg.org/files/135/135-h/135-h.htm (last accessed 10 February 2014). See also Charles Seife, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (London, 2000).

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York, 1956), 5–6.

6. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London, 2001), and Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London, 2007).

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numbers, and absolute zero. These voids disrupt the central task of displaced people, which is to reconstruct the "normal situation," or the matrix that links things, people, practices, and meanings together in ways that make everyday life relatively stable and predictable. The result, as I show, is that rather than inhabiting a lifeworld in which they can make plans and take actions to socially reintegrate, displaced people are left in the long-term limbo of protracted displacement.

War and the Explosion of Existence

Understanding how and why humanitarian aid creates existential voids requires first understanding the wars humanitarianism responds to and their effects, not only on the material world, but on the social processes of constituting a meaningful world. Wars can be *Events*, in Badiou's sense: a "pure break with the becoming of the world" that ruptures the web of material objects, social relations, and symbolic meanings that make the world appear as coherent, consistent, and meaningful.[7]

The Russo-Georgian war was a short but brutal conflict that erupted on the territory of South Ossetia, a breakaway province on the southern slope of the Caucasus Mountains, in 2008. Hoping to gain the advantage of surprise, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili attacked South Ossetia in order to seal the southern end of the Roki Tunnel and prevent a Russian invasion.[8] The response from Russia was swift and devastating: the entire Russian Fifty-Eighth Army invaded. Despite Saakashvili's assumption that either NATO or the United States alone would come to Georgia's assistance, the west stood by, unwilling to enter a potentially expansive geopolitical conflict in which it had no strategic interest.[9]

A key part of the offensive was the destruction of ethnically Georgian villages in South Ossetia. The villages were first shelled with BM-21 GRAD rockets and then aerially bombarded. The houses were then looted by Ossetian irregular forces, burned to the ground, and, in some cases, bulldozed to ensure their residents could never return. More than twenty-eight thousand people were permanently displaced as the Russians closed the border between South Ossetia and Georgia. Moved into thirty-six new camps—euphemistically called "settlements" by the Georgian government, who acknowledged the unlikeliness of the refugees' return—the IDPs became a target population for the international humanitarian order. While the western powers had declined to assist during the conflict, the exodus of people from South Ossetia had created what the United Nations classified as a "humanitarian crisis." More than ninety-five NGOs and intergovernmental agencies, spearheaded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), had arrived to

7. Caroline Humphrey, "Reassembling Individual Subjects: Events and Decisions in Troubled Times," *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 4 (2008): 360. See also Badiou, *Being and Event*, 99; Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to the Truth* (Minneapolis, 2003).

8. Heidi Tagliavini et al., "Report of the Independent International Fact Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," at www.ceiig.ch (last accessed 26 December 2013).

9. Ronald Asmus, *The Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York, 2010).

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provide aid to the refugees, assume many of the functions of government, and "build capacity" in the Georgian government for dealing with them, largely by dictating new policies and procedures to government ministries. Over $450 million out of a total $4.7 billion in postwar foreign aid was earmarked especially for the displaced.[10]

Like all wars, the Russo-Georgian conflict damaged the lifeworlds of those it displaced. It was no coincidence that their memories of the war came not as linear narratives but as disconnected fragments: the booming sounds of exploding artillery, the sight of heavy furniture flying across the room as a bomb hit the house, or the spray of dirt and glass as the road they were fleeing down was hit by GRAD rockets. But war not only blasts displaced peoples' material worlds apart. It also violently fragments time and space, as Kurt Vonnegut shows in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and splinters the individual subject, as Ismet Prcic so brilliantly illustrates in *Shards*. It is a radical rupture in what Badiou calls "the normal situation," the structured set of elements that present themselves in everyday living.[11]

The normal situation most often has a fairly (but not completely) stable internal structure: things and people are related to or distinguished from one another in ways that are the same from day to day. It is what creates place, as material things and spaces are linked in complex relations with one another.[12] It creates subjectivity, as people are connected to one another and to social roles and as the internal aspects of the person are linked through processes of discipline and governance.[13] It creates meaning, as signs, symbols, and practices are related to one another in a relatively stable matrix. The normal situation is, of course, dynamic and changing—the web of connections is never fixed. But on a day-to-day basis, for most people around the world, the normal situation changes slowly enough that it creates a phenomenological experience predictable enough for people to calculate risks and take actions that have foreseeable consequences. It is, for most people, "a world that is in essence as rationally ordered as their thoughts about it can be."[14]

The normal situation can be shattered by what Badiou calls an *Event*. War damages not only buildings and bodies but the way life was before the war. The traditions and routines, social networks, expected behaviors, symbols, and personal identities that once made up a world intimately known are all blown apart, separated from the context that gave them weight, reality, and meaning. The connections between people, places, things, and meanings have been ruptured, and the structure of sense making gravely damaged.

10. International Crisis Group, "Georgia: Risks of Winter," *Europe Briefing*, no. 51 (26 November 2008), at www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/south-caucasus/georgia/b051-georgia-the-risks-of-winter.aspx (last accessed 26 December 2013).

11. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 515–16; Hallward, *Badiou*, 139.

12. Yael Navaro-Yashin, *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity* (Durham, 2012), 42.

13. João Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman, "Introduction: Rethinking Subjectivity," in João Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman, eds., *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations* (Berkeley, 2007), 5.

14. Michael Jackson, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago, 2012), 31.

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There is no longer a predictable framework within which to occupy social roles, constitute economic value, and engage in meaningful daily practice. Without that structure, displaced people are confronted with the free-floating shrapnel of existence: not just the objects that humanitarians give out as aid but the scraps scavenged from their old homes, the bits given out by kin and friends, the jobs and products obtained on the market, the symbols and meanings handed down by the national government, and so on.[15] None of these are elements of a single ordering discourse. They are elements brought into the camp without having a preordained place in the structure of life.

My key argument, then, is that the work of the displaced is to remake their own lifeworlds in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. Displaced people must remake themselves as coherent subjects, determine their own values, and create a meaning for their own lives. They must rebuild the normal situation by reassembling the fragments of existence into a structure that creates that meaning. It is a painstaking process that blends the elements that previously made up the lifeworld—not just possessions but also occupations, skills, religious beliefs, and even the geographic features of their former villages—with the elements of the humanitarian relief effort (including everything from food deliveries and sanitation infrastructure to neoliberal market ideologies and political symbolism) to recompose a mode of existence that is at least coherent and somewhat stable if not beautiful, happy, or comfortable.

The normal situation is not foregone conclusion, though. While humanitarian aid is meant to help displaced people remake the normal situation and "socially reintegrate" into the communities they have been placed in, for the IDPs themselves it often amounted to nothing. Why did so much aid count for nothing in the eyes of its so-called beneficiaries? And how might the nothingness of aid unintentionally create the long-term limbo of protracted displacement rather than help people resettle and reintegrate? The answer emerges through examining the kind of voids humanitarianism creates and asking how it blocks the reconstruction of the normal situation.

Having Nothing: Nothingness and the Material World

Having heard the IDPs complain about having nothing, I first tried to understand "nothingness" in material terms by asking workers at a UN-sponsored cluster meeting of humanitarian groups why the IDPs might deny that they had received anything of value. To my surprise, the aid workers at the table erupted in anger. "They're lying," said an aid worker from the NGO Caritas Internationalis. "They aren't telling you things so that they can get more aid." "They aren't telling you they've received things, not because they can't tell you, but because they won't tell you," said another woman, from the Georgian Red Cross. Indeed, from the perspective of the aid workers, who were intently focused on the central problem of distribution, it was impossible to think that the IDPs had nothing. Humanitarian work is premised on the notion of war as a cataclysmic rupture of normal life, particularly as it is constituted in and through the material world. The void that was produced, at least in the aid

15. Navaro-Yashin, *Make-Believe Space.*

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workers' view, was first and foremost a loss of property. Filling that void with new property—that is, distributing the cots and pots of humanitarian aid—was seen as a means not only to sustain life or to remedy the condition of propertylessness but to heal the rupture of the event and reestablish a new normality. To deny that someone had received something, then, was to reject the entire premise of humanitarianism.

As I began spending time with IDPs in the new settlements, however, I began to seriously question the idea that they were merely strategically angling for more aid. Indeed, no matter how many plastic buckets or "hygiene kits" with razors and washcloths had been handed out, no matter if they'd been given a small cottage or secondhand clothing or free food, people still felt as if they had nothing. From time to time I'd confront one of my interlocutors in the midst of the "nothing" litany and ask about specific items of aid. "But didn't you get this month's food package from the [United Nations] World Food Programme?" I'd ask. "Isn't this medicine from one of the NGOs?" The person I was talking to would invariably acknowledge that the family had indeed received these specific forms of humanitarian aid and make a ritualized statement of gratitude to the Saakashvili government or the United Nations but then launch right back into the litany of nothingness. It was as if there was a conceptual blind spot, a problem that allowed the IDPs to know that the things had been given, to see and handle them, but not to consider them as counterweights to all that had been lost in the war. Indeed, many of the donated objects were like zero itself: they filled up space but didn't seem to have positive ontological value.

What were these objects that were both something and nothing? What is it about humanitarian aid that disallowed it from being the expression of care and solicitude that the government hoped it would be and prevented it from being the material foundation for resettlement and development that the NGOs hoped it would be? What kind of ontological status did the material objects handed out by the humanitarians and the government have in the lives of the displaced?

One particular object, delivered in excess, offered a window onto this question. As part of humanitarian food packages offered by the UN World Food Programme (WFP), IDPs were offered large quantities of macaroni. It was plain semolina macaroni, the same kinds of noodles in various shapes that one might find in any North American grocery store, intended primarily to ensure that each IDP received 2,240 calories per day, the WFP's standardized measurement for daily caloric needs, with each person given the same ration: 1.5 kilograms of macaroni per month. This was enough for 26.4 servings of noodles per person per month, or a serving of macaroni almost every single day.

Macaroni is not a staple food in Georgian culture. A Russian import, it does not occupy a place in the grammar of Georgian cuisine, which is based on heavily spiced dishes often involving walnuts, pomegranate, cilantro, fresh vegetables, beef, and chicken. Although Georgian people eat macaroni, they rarely incorporate it into dishes as elaborate as the ones that predominate in Georgian cuisine. Instead, it shows up as an oddly plain dish made of pasta boiled in water, then fried in oil and perhaps sprinkled with sugar if served

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for breakfast. For many Georgians, macaroni is not food: it is just calories, something that poor people eat so as not to starve. "Look, it's UN help, it's to keep you alive," said a woman displaced from the village of Disevi. "But there's no comfort in it."

As the first winter of displacement wore on, I was surprised by the contrast between macaroni and another form of food that was soon circulating widely: homegrown, home-canned fruits and vegetables. When I entered a cottage to talk with an IDP family, I was often offered home-jarred honey, fruit preserves, or compote, often with an explanation that these sweet treats were from the host's village of origin and a description of the beautiful gardens or orchards they came from. When I asked how they had come out of South Ossetia—surely nobody fled with cases of jam or honey—my host's voice would often drop to a whisper. While sometimes they were jars of food that had been given to relatives before the war and returned after the crisis, on other occasions IDPs had illegally crossed the border into South Ossetia to poke through the cellars of their ruined homes, hoping to find jars of food that had escaped destruction.

Home-canned food was thus worth risking the social embarrassment of recalling a gift or, worse, being shot by border guards or the Ossetian irregulars who still roamed the destroyed villages. Macaroni, on the other hand, seemed to be worth little: better fed to swine than eaten, unless absolutely necessary. What made the two foods so different was provenance. Macaroni was food given out by nobody. The WFP, which organized the food packages, and World Vision, the NGO that delivered them, appeared only as an anonymous agencies that none of the IDPs I interviewed could remember the names of, saying only that the food came from *mtavroba* (მთავრობა, the government) or *gaero* (გაერო, "the UN," a generic term often used for all aid agencies). It was made by nobody, at least nobody any of the recipients knew, and it was made nowhere in particular—in some anonymous factory outside Georgia.[16] Home-canned food, by contrast, came from familiar lands and was prepared by people known and beloved: mothers, grandmothers, aunts. Rather than being transported by unknown agents and handed out by anonymous aid workers, the jars of home-canned food circulated in the deeply elaborated kinship networks central to Georgian sociality, reforging the ties of family that had been splintered by war and the fragmentation of extended families into separate settlements.

Home-canned foodstuffs were thus something that was something by virtue of being emplaced and attached to persons. Macaroni, on the other hand, was something that was nothing, a material zero. It served not as an artifact of humanitarianism but as an anti-artifact, a particular kind of void in the network that makes up the normal situation. Anti-artifacts do not represent their own actual character, neither the substance of what they are nor the intentions of those who produce them. For the IDPs, at least, anti-artifacts do not stand as metonyms of the projects that produce them, nor do they embody the affects or wishes of their makers, purchasers, or donors. The United States

16. In fact, most of the pasta given out by the WFP was purchased in Turkey, but none of the IDPs I interviewed could identify its place of origin.

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Agency for International Development (USAID), the donor of some of the macaroni, which was proudly labeled as "a gift from the American people," might have liked it to serve as the material representation of U.S. generosity. WFP and World Vision might have wished for the macaroni to stand as a concrete symbol of organized compassion. Yet, for the IDPs, the macaroni didn't represent any of that.

Humanitarian anti-artifacts thus served as placeholders. Much as the zero in the figure "505" holds open the place where something of value might go while acknowledging the emptiness of the place it creates, anti-artifacts signal the existence of a void, a category that remains unfilled. These objects don't point to their maker, donor, or distributor in the present; they are not attached to a social context and a meaning in the way they would have to be to be in the network of things and meanings that makes up the normal situation. They represent not what they are but what they are not. They indicate not what is present but what is absent. Anti-artifacts are thus what Badiou refers to as *singularities*: things that are present in the real world but aren't presented in the structure that organizes the normal situation.[17] They are signifiers devoid of signifieds. Rather than replacing what was lost, anti-artifacts are things that exist but do not count in the set of things that make up the lifeworld and so are nothing at all.

Doing Nothing: Black Holes and Imaginary Numbers

Nothingness is not only material but also temporal. It is a void of unfilled time, long stretches with nothing to do but wait, and the absence of normal routines and activities.[18] Despite its best intentions, humanitarian aid routinely creates this kind of void, pinning people down not only in space but in time and holding them in an extended state of torpor and stasis. This is the defining characteristic of protracted displacement—not just the ongoing problem of people being out of place but the perpetual problem of people with nothing to do.

Humanitarian donors and aid workers do not intend to create temporal voids and inactivity. For them, IDP settlements are not warehouses for people considered as asocial "bare life" or trash heaps for surplus humanity waiting to die.[19] Rather, they envision IDP settlements as recycling centers: places to transform the inert matter of a victim population, make it useful again, and send it back to reenter the "normal" population. To do that, they seek to create what Michel Foucault called *security*: that is, to manage the features of place in a way that will restore the IDPs to their full status as social persons by re-embedding them in webs of economic, religious, social, and political circulation.[20] Under the banner of the UNHCR's push to find "durable solutions"

17. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 522.

18. Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, *The Secret World of Doing Nothing* (Berkeley, 2010).

19. Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (New York, 2003); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951); and Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, 1998).

20. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke, 2007); Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing*

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for people in protracted displacement, IDPs around the world are being told to "reintegrate" into the societies in which they are residing and to become regular, unmarked, nonspecial citizens once again. IDP settlements are thus designed as productive technologies, meant to stave off the possibilities of social blight (like prostitution, drug running, or black marketeering) by pushing people toward gainful employment and proper kinship roles. They do this by offering IDPs something to do: a structured and limited set of opportunities to make them economically productive as workers or entrepreneurs, socially productive as good spouses and parents, and, most of all, politically productive as citizens.

In Georgia, the ninety-two NGOs involved offered an impressive list of things to do, mostly in the context of "schemes to improve the human condition," to use James C. Scott's phrase.[21] There were breastfeeding support classes, microcredit loans and business planning seminars to encourage small business development, agricultural tools and seeds for farmers, small demonstration factories at one settlement, and workshops for psychosocial rehabilitation for the traumatized.[22] At cluster meetings sponsored by the UN at which NGOs reported on their projects and activities, the settlements were presented as veritable hives of activity, with program after program designed to rehabilitate, reenergize, and reintegrate the displaced.

Yet, in the settlements where I spent the most time participating in daily life, we spent long hours of the day with nothing to do. Most people were unemployed; those few who had jobs were in the employ of the government. Women had some chores to do in the mornings—washing laundry by hand in plastic washtubs, preparing food, or weeding gardens—but it was little in comparison to the workload they had in South Ossetia, where there were large houses to tend, land to work, and livestock to look after. Men had even less to do: a few hours a day in the garden plots or spent making small additions to the cottages exhausted most of the possibilities for productive labor. Most of the day was spent watching hours and hours of television. Lots of people slept for hours during the day. The time was long and empty and the boredom stressful for people accustomed to long days of physical labor. How did the humanitarians unintentionally make people inactive rather than active, the passive recipients of aid rather than the authors of their own resettlement? What kind of void did humanitarianism create that sucked away people's energy and ability to invest labor in their own futures? Here, I argue that the activities sponsored by the NGOs are a particular kind of nothing: black holes, or spatiotemporal voids, into which energy disappears without even the faintest trace.

The Georgian IDPs originally welcomed the NGOs, believing the humanitarians' promises that the programs offered would give them a chance to start

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Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism (Minneapolis, 2000); and Ilana Feldman, *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917–1967* (Durham, 2008).

21. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998).

22. CARE International in the Caucasus, "Post-Emergency Development Newsletter," no. 3, and "Post-Emergency Development Newsletter," no. 4.

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new lives, and they turned up in droves for the activities they sponsored. But the IDPs soon became jaded, tired of attending yet another meeting in which nothing happened and from which nothing was gained. For example, at one psychosocial aid meeting I attended at Berbuki settlement, sponsored by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), approximately forty-five women were initially rounded up to participate in the workshop. The first half hour was spent having each woman in the circle introduce herself and say "something she liked." "I'm Nino, and I like music!" said the facilitator, modeling for the participants the introduction that was desired. The IDP women shifted in their chairs, unsure of what to say. "I'm Keti, and I like my family," said one. "I'm Guliko, and I like spending time with my new neighbors," said another. Finally, when the introductions reached the top of the circle, a woman said what had been on the others' minds: "I'm a displaced person [დევნილი ვარ, *devnili var*]. I don't like anything. What is there to like?" Her comment pointed out the flaw in the facilitator's thinking: rather than having the idealized quality of "liking to do things," IDPs did not engage in hobbies, because knitting needles, yarn, musical instruments, and other supplies cost money they did not have. As the introductions wore on and as the participants became visibly bored, women began to stand up and leave. By the time the facilitator introduced the main event of the workshop, a "theater of the oppressed" staging designed by IOM officials in Italy, there were only eight IDP women left. Soon, the six facilitators outnumbered the participants. By the end of the workshop, only a single woman remained.

On another occasion, when workers from CARE International approached the IDP community coordinator (მამასახლისი, *mamasakhlisi*) in Tsmindatsqali settlement, he flatly refused to round up IDPs for a community meeting. "I can't get thirty people to come to a meeting any more," he said. "They're tired of you wasting their time." His statement pointed out people's resentment at the "participatory corvée," or the enormous waste of person-hours on rituals of participation when, in fact, decisions about development projects had already been made by NGO staff and donors.[23] As the NGOs soon discovered, it became harder and harder to get people to participate in the programs that were supposed to benefit them, even ones where they stood to gain financially, such as microcredit schemes. "It's too much effort for too little gain," said one IDP I knew. Indeed, the low numbers of IDPs served by each individual project showed how few potential "beneficiaries" felt they would benefit by participation. For example, two microcredit projects that were part of CARE International's $3 million "social integration" projects for IDPs and people in the "adjacent area" had only fifty-six participants out of more than twenty-eight thousand potential beneficiaries.[24]

The glowing images of busy IDPs grateful for the chance that the NGOs

23. On "participatory corvée," see, for example, Holly High, "'Join Together, Work Together, for the Common Good—Solidarity': Village Formation Processes in the Rural South of Laos," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 21, no. 1 (April 2006): 22–45.

24. This information comes from a CARE International internal document titled "MSA (Monitoring, Study and Analysis) Report Draft," which analyzes the effectiveness of the "Enhancing Rural Livelihoods in the Adjacent Area" project and the "Job Creation through Enhancing Small-Sized Enterprise Development" project.

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gave them to rebuild their lives—photographs and slightly canned voices that appeared in the glossy four-color brochures put out in English by the NGOs themselves—thus seemed to me to be about some other settlements, not the ones in which I had been spending my days and nights. I hardly recognized the places the NGOs talked about in the cluster meetings as those I knew. There were clearly two very different ontologies in the camps: one based on the imagined security that appeared in NGO meetings, the activities that humanitarians imagined IDPs engaging in, and the grateful attitudes that humanitarians imagined their beneficiaries had; the other on the bitterness and empty time of the camps that the IDPs actually inhabited.

Humanitarian action is aimed not just at restoring the world to what it was before catastrophe but at improving the human condition. What humanitarians present is a vision of society in an idealized form, what it might be or what it will have been once their projects and procedures have been implemented.[25] Badiou talks about these kinds of visions as *excrescences*, or the opposite of singularities, things that do not exist in real life but are represented in the structure of the normal situation.[26] A more specific way of glossing the images of the camps that appeared in the NGOs' talk would be to think of them as imaginary numbers. In mathematics, an imaginary number is the square root of a negative number, a nonzero number that is theoretically possible but nonetheless cannot exist in the substantial, tangible world. There is an entire number line of imaginary numbers that runs perpendicular to the line of real numbers. In mathematics, of course, the set of imaginary numbers and the set of real ones intersect at only one point: zero, or the void. It was the intersection of the imaginary axis envisioned by the humanitarian workers—that is, the camp as a utopian place that provided activity and security—and the real axis inhabited by the IDPs—the camp as a dystopian place of powerlessness, suffering, and boredom—that produced the void, the black holes into which activity disappeared.

Humanitarianism must, therefore, be based not just on the desire to sustain human life or rebuild what existed before catastrophe. Humanitarians operate on the principle that they can improve the social world for their beneficiaries, making it better than it was before the event by, for example, improving people's public health literacy, reallocating political power, changing gender relations, or altering the ways that members of different ethnic groups interact.[27] Many of their projects are therefore aimed not just at restoration but at transformation: they aim not just to keep people alive but to make both society and the people who inhabit it better. This means that humanitarians often operate in what Martin Frederiksen calls "the future anterior," focusing on what "will have been" after programs and projects have been implemented rather than on current conditions and needs.[28]

25. See Martin Demant Frederiksen, "The Would-Be State: Reforms, NGOs, and Absent Presents in Postrevolutionary Georgia," in this issue.

26. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 507.

27. Michael Barnett, *The International Humanitarian Order* (London, 2010), and Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, 2011).

28. See Frederiksen, "The Would-Be State."

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In Georgia, the axis the NGOs described was full of imaginary quantities of people served and their imaginary qualities (industrious and busy, as presented in the elaborate brochures; lazy and conniving, as presented in the cluster meeting). Life in this imagined reality was full of problems that seemed only to appear because the NGOs already had programs to remedy them. For example, in the early days after the war, six NGOs and the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science offered breastfeeding support programs, assuming that the war and the fact that the U.S. military had offered infant formula would dissuade women from breastfeeding.[29] This is indeed a serious issue in many displacement situations, particularly in the Third World, where displaced mothers without clean water to use in mixing formula may inadvertently expose their babies to life-threatening diseases. But in Georgia, a country with a long history of industrialization and development, infant feeding was not a significant issue after all. Clean water was readily available at any tap, infant formula was constantly available in stores, and breastfeeding was openly and commonly practiced. Yet at the same time, the IDPs, who were disproportionately elderly and sick because of migration patterns before the war, did not have reliable access to doctors and pharmaceuticals and were suffering from hypertension, heart conditions, diabetes, and other serious maladies. The conditions imagined by the aid community seemed to have little in common with the IDPs' lived social reality.

Perhaps one reason why the planned efforts of the NGOs' world have so little to do with IDPs' real needs is that the intersection of the imaginary number line and the real one was so fleeting. In the camps, the humanitarians would blaze in driving large, four-wheel-drive vehicles, almost always with six or seven people. Then they would run around summoning IDPs to attend a meeting they had planned but not announced in advance. The meetings were held at a breathless pace in large canvas tents set up by UNHCR or, later, in the "community centers" built by one of the NGOs that were locked to keep the community out except when the NGOs came. The meetings were nearly always held in accordance with the NGOs' predetermined agendas, with little space for the IDPs to raise issues that mattered to them outside the framework of whatever project was at hand. Then, the NGO workers would load themselves back into the jeeps and blaze out as fast as they had come, and the settlement would once again descend into sleepy silence.

The IDPs' real world only appeared via highly artificial "rapid needs assessment tools"—short surveys that only requested answers to predetermined questions. In the first year of displacement, at least, there was little unstructured time for NGO workers to listen or to learn from IDPs what was really needed, such as a bridge to get tractors to the orchards, or laundry soap, or medication. Instead, prefabricated models developed in NGO offices in sub-Saharan Africa or southeast Asia—what Peter Redfield has called "humanitarian kits"—were used as heuristic devices, functioning as empty categories into

29. UNICEF Georgia, "Calmness and Love for Displaced Breast Feeding Mothers in the New Temporary Shelter," 26 August 2008, at www.unicef.org/georgia/reallives_10695.html (last accessed 26 December 2013).

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which the very different post-Soviet world of the IDPs was to be crammed.[30] The projects that made so much sense in the imaginary camps inhabited by humanitarian workers made so little sense in the real ones occupied by the IDPs that they seemed to be utterly nonsensical. Soon, the IDPs began to feel that any effort they contributed to them was just drained away to no effect, as their energy and commitment was sucked into the black hole of a bureaucratized, institutionalized humanitarian project.[31]

What this suggests is that humanitarians often create the very conditions they see themselves battling: "lazy" and uncooperative beneficiaries who remain dependent on donor aid and government largesse rather than actively striving to find jobs, found businesses, till fields, build peace, or empower women. The lack of activity and the almost deathly quiet in the camps during the day are not something intrinsic to the people who live there: they are the product of the humanitarians' reliance on models, moral principles, and idealized visions of the world as it should be rather than a response to the real conditions of the camps and the needs of the people there as they themselves defined them. By offering planned activities as a means to an end, and then ensuring that the activities didn't result in the hoped-for outcome (or, indeed, any outcome at all, as far as the displaced people could see), the humanitarians ensured that, rather than providing their beneficiaries with something to do, they created "nothing to do"—a void that makes purposeful activity almost impossible.

Being Nothing: Absolute Zero

The ways that life in the humanitarian condition led to having nothing were brought to light by anti-artifacts, and the ways aid led to doing nothing were signaled by the existence of black holes and imaginary numbers. But the most significant problem in the camp was not only one of materiality, of having nothing, or of temporality, of doing nothing. It was a profound existential dilemma of subjectivity, of *being* nothing, of having their capacities for human agency profoundly limited by life in the camps. The problem was made clear by the aid workers' increasing frustration with the IDPs' unwillingness to participate in the programs offered. They seemed largely uninterested in using microcredit loans to start new businesses, participating in psychosocial aid schemes, or exploring the introduction of new crops to their small plots. While the aid workers were in a frenzy of activity—doing needs assessments, responding to requests for proposals from donors, writing reports, and making brochures—the IDPs themselves seemed to be absolutely frozen. To the humanitarians, the IDPs appeared as "bare life": people on the threshold between life and death, so devoid of social agency that they are almost no longer subjects.[32]

30. Peter Redfield, "Vital Mobility and the Humanitarian Kit," in Andrew Lakoff and Stephen J. Collier, eds., *Biosecurity Interventions: Global Health and Security in Question* (New York, 2008), 147–72.

31. Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Business* (London, 2013).

32. Agamben, *Homo Sacer.*

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Georgian aid workers often attributed this to a problem of regional character, saying that Georgians from South Ossetia were passive, phlegmatic, or downright sluggish. "That's just how they are up there," one NGO worker told me. "Just slow." But the real problem was that life in the camps itself, rather than being a springboard from which to relaunch social, political, or economic activity, in fact robbed the IDPs of their agency. Camp life was a matrix that kept IDPs in stasis, almost utterly paralyzed. It produced *absolute zero,* a social condition not unlike the physical condition of matter at –273.15 degrees Celsius, the temperature at which the molecules are completely drained of all their energy. As I show here, it is the profound uncertainty of life in the humanitarian condition that produces absolute zero. Although rebuilding the normal situation requires an environment in which people have enough information and certainty to take reasonable action, the organization of life in the settlements constantly worked to disrupt that environment. It created tensions that pulled people in opposite directions, preventing them from reassembling themselves as coherent subjects with enough agency to act. Instead, the absolute zero of the settlements left them as "no one," trapped in the void between multiple futures, with little capacity to bring any one of them into being.

To understand how the uncertainty produced by humanitarianism impedes displaced people's attempts to remake themselves as coherent subjects, I must part company here with Badiou and his understanding of subjectivity. Badiou argues that most of the time most people are fragmented, multiple subjects, but that at crucial moments there are people who acclaim truths so radical that they upend the previous normal situation, making new forms of sense. In doing so, they become true subjects. St. Paul, says Badiou, was a subject: by acclaiming the notion that "Christ is risen," he so radically transformed the previously stable ways of thinking about people in relation to one another, to the state, and to God that nothing could be the same again.[33] Likewise, Vladimir Lenin, Arnold Schoenberg, and Galileo Galilei were all subjects, because they proclaimed truths that caused "immanent breaks" in the normal situation.[34]

The rest of the human population is, in Badiou's estimation, a mere collection of "some-ones" who act within the confines of the normal situation without upending it, "animals of the human species" who are in thrall to existing knowledge and to their own interests.[35] But Badiou sets the bar for subjectivity too high. As Caroline Humphrey points out, even people who don't meet Badiou's definition of subjectivity appear as individuals who can think and act—that is, they manage to form themselves into coherent subjects.[36] She proposes instead that people become subjects through what she calls a "decision event," a moment when they must look at the array of potential futures in front of them, gamble on one of them, and bring the fragmented parts of

33. Alain Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Palo Alto, 2003).

34. Badiou, *Ethics*, 49.

35. Ibid., 44.

36. Humphrey, "Reassembling Individual Subjects," 363.

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themselves into the form of a coherent individual in order to bring that future into being.[37] It is the wager on a particular outcome—the selection of a specific vision of the future as a goal to be worked toward—that turns individuals into subjects who can act, even if they are just some-ones who can only act within the confines of the world as they know it.

In Georgia, becoming a some-one who could take reasonable action in the pursuit of his or her own aims was the key element in socially reintegrating the IDPs. However, it was exactly that process of becoming an acting subject (or at least a some-one) that was profoundly disrupted by life in the camps. When the war broke out and the IDPs were displaced, their subjectivities were blown apart along with their previous way of life, their social networks, and the futures they had envisioned. Binding them back together required being able to wager on a future outcome and to act in the service of attaining it. But because they were held in the settlements, the sites where humanitarian aid could be delivered, the IDPs were held in absolute zero, a situation of radical uncertainty in which they were unable to "plump for" one future or another.

There were four possible futures, each competing with the others. The first was renewed war. As the first anniversary of the war approached, tensions on the border with South Ossetia began to rise again. Just a few miles from the settlement, Georgian and Ossetian soldiers were firing on each other. Nobody could tell which way the shots and mortar fire were heading. The Georgians blamed the Ossetians, the Ossetians blamed the Georgians, and the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia could not get close enough to determine who was responsible. One night in the village of Plavi, Ossetian border guards came down the hillside and across the border, got drunk, and began firing in the air. The next day, a fourteen-year-old boy saw something hanging in a tree, pulled it down, and had his arm blown up by a detonator.[38] People in the villages on the border began sleeping in their gardens, fearing they might be crushed in their houses in the event of an aerial attack. While this situation was not caused by humanitarianism, the very grouping of IDPs into settlements and their placement so near the border made them especially vulnerable. In Tsmindatsqali settlement we lay in bed at night feeling the ground vibrating underneath us as tanks and armored personnel carriers moved over the earth at the military base across the road. The anxiety level in the settlement was so high that nobody slept well. In Khurvaleti, a settlement that was between the Georgian checkpoint and the Russian-controlled administrative boundary line, the situation was even worse: they could actually see Russian forces on the hill above the settlement.

The fear of violence stood in opposition to a second, improbable-but-still-possible outcome of the displacement—return home. This was no mere dream: Saakashvili had made the goal of return a centerpiece of the 2009 IDP action plan, the government's roadmap for dealing with displacement, and he had managed to convince the United Nations to pass nonbinding resolutions

37. Ibid., 363.

38. See also Olesya Vartanyan and Michael Schwirtz, "Georgia and an Enclave Trade Accusations," *New York Times*, 5 August 2009, at www.nytimes.com/2009/08/05/world/europe/05georgia.html (last accessed 26 December 2013).

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demanding the IDPs' return.[39] There were thus two poles of possibility, one centered on the question "will we go home?" and the other, "will we die?" The uncertainty surrounding either future made any activity in the present almost nonsensical. There was no sense planting an orchard near the settlement or starting a business in Gori, for example, if death or return were imminent. With material needs so high and money in short supply, any investment in an unknown future seemed like a bad use of scarce resources.

The third possible future was staying in the chaos of aid, a situation in which the IDPs remained subject to the unexplained whims of the government and the humanitarian NGOs and were left to drift along waiting for aid to arrive. In the first year in the settlements there were no bulletin boards, no widely distributed newsletters (although there were a few issues of a newspaper that some people got but others had not heard of). There were few posters put up around the settlements to announce projects aimed at the IDPs. When the government issued vouchers for health insurance in January, for example, no information about how to use them was given out until late May, leaving IDPs wondering what was covered and what was not. They often avoided being treated for serious conditions such as hypertension and diabetes, fearing that they might incur bills they could not pay, and so often waited until they had life-threatening conditions and had to call an ambulance.

The NGOs, too, rarely announced or explained their programs. The United Nations Development Program, for example, funded a Gender Resource Center, which had a dedicated helpline for IDP women. But despite the fact that six women staffed the helpline fulltime, the number was never publicized to the IDPs, and nobody ever quite defined just what a "gender resource center" was. Another program, funded by a donor nobody in the settlement could ever identify, paid for gas and electricity in the cottages, until one day it didn't: in the middle of a freezing February in the Caucasus Mountains, all power to the settlements was suddenly cut off. The IDPs were told that the donor had stopped paying months before and that they all had hundreds of lari in arrears that would have to be paid before the power could be restored.

This organizational chaos was a result of the standard unit of humanitarian planning: the project. Humanitarian relief is not planned as a single process, and there is no master plan or coordinating body for what's given to displaced people as aid. Rather, aid comes in the form of prepackaged, short-term projects funded by international donors. In Georgia, as in most humanitarian situations, there was little in the way of coordination among donors or among the ninety-six NGOs that were proposing projects, and the UN's "cluster system," designed to divide the labor between all the partner organizations, did little to point NGOs to areas of need, steer them away from providing help that was unneeded, or ensure any kind of long-term follow-up. From the IDPs' point of view, this resulted in projects that were temporally variable. They seemed to begin and end without reason, popping into existence with a flurry of meetings and then blinking out of existence a few months later with no announcement. Mobile medical teams would arrive one day, for example,

39. See "UNGA Passes Georgia IDP Resolution," 10 September 2009, at www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21447 (last accessed 26 December 2013).

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hand out strong prescription drugs, and then disappear without leaving so much as a medical record or a number to call if something went wrong. Psychologists, too, would drive in, start support groups, and then disappear a few weeks later. Nobody even knew for certain how long the World Food Programme would continue to deliver food.

Temporal unpredictability was met with spatial variability: projects often covered one settlement but not another, which meant that just because Khurvaleti settlement got agricultural machinery or a free dentist visit, Mtskheta settlement wouldn't necessarily get one. With no knowledge of the donors' funding processes, the ways the NGOs divided the labor of aid, or any of the institutional constraints around aid, the IDPs soon became completely baffled by the aid process. The chaos of aid left them completely unable to predict what would happen next, which resources would be available, or how they might begin to plan for the future. In such an unpredictable environment, rumors of backroom deals and covert political connections began to swirl. As farfetched as some of these explanations were, they represented almost desperate attempts to impose some sort of principle of order on what appeared, at least to the IDPs, to be a completely arbitrary and chaotic situation.

As conspiracy theories and rumors grew, they began to contribute to the fourth possible future, one dominated by mystery. This was a future in which the real political decisions that affected people's lives were being made in secret and in which the IDPs, as the beneficiaries of state largesse, were completely incapable of affecting what happened to them. There were reasons to suspect this future might come about: the president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, was well known for staying out with his advisors late into the night, making decisions in restaurants about matters as grave as whether to make a bid for NATO intervention or how to respond to the Russians. Government decisions, it seemed, were not openly debated in newspapers or carried out in open sessions of parliament but made behind closed doors, among a small group of people surrounding the president, and then announced as fiat. Other decisions directly affecting the IDPs were also made abruptly, with little transparency or open discussion. In August 2009 hundreds of IDPs in Tbilisi who were holed up in an old Soviet army hospital awaiting government-sponsored housing were suddenly informed that they would be evicted in five days, forced either to move to provinces in the remote western part of the country, far from jobs and relatives, or to end up on the streets alone. There was no consultation, no warning, no information. Just a decision that came out of the blue in the same way the Russian bombers had, throwing the IDPs once again into the void. Even for the IDPs in the settlements, the eviction of their compatriots from the collective center in the hospital stood as a reminder of the mysterious and unseen forces around them that had the power to disrupt anything at any time.

Life as beneficiaries of humanitarian aid thus held the IDPs in a field of power, pinned between mystery, chaos, death, and return. They were four alternatives, each equally likely, that rendered the present incomprehensible and the future unforeseeable. And in the center, the place where people were held immobile by these conflicting forces, there was absolute zero, the point at which all energy was drained from the IDPs, leaving them absolutely para-

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lyzed. They had "pre-traumatic stress," enormous anxiety about a future that they could not control.[40]

Because they were incapable of envisioning the future or doing anything to create it, they were impeded from becoming active subjects—some-ones—and instead were left as no-one. "The situation is completely chaotic," Nodar Vatcharadze, a gray-faced man with an edge of frustration in his voice, told me. "How can we make any plans for the future? We can't. All we can do is wait to return. We can't make any plans until there is peace." Stuck at absolute zero, he was frozen in both space and time, unable to return to the past, move forward into the future, or even go anywhere different in the present. He was trapped in a state of permanent temporariness and enduring liminality.[41] Because he was left with nothing—nothing to own, nothing to do, and nowhere to go—he was relegated to being no-one. Like all the IDPs, he was assigned a stigmatized status in Georgian society, one in which his primary economic, political, and social function was to symbolize the losses of war and to wait. So, like the other IDPs, he sat in the camps, spending time talking aimlessly in knots of other men on the corners of the dusty roads in the settlement, getting drunk or watching endless hours of television, doing nothing more than waiting to see what catastrophic event might happen next to disrupt the situation and force all of them to begin again.

Refugee camps and settlements for displaced people are spaces profoundly marked by absence. In daily life they are organized around the absence of home, familiar belongings, and daily activities. They are the sites where displaced peoples' former occupations are absent and where many of the people with whom they had daily contact are gone. On a broader geopolitical level, they are defined by the absence of a homeland and so kept eternally deportable.[42] They are also characterized in many ways by the absence of the state. In the case of refugee camps, they are marked by the absence of both the refugees' state of origin and, when the camp is run by UNHCR or another international agency, the host state.[43] But even IDP camps, in which the government must cede partial sovereignty to foreign donor countries and to international agencies and the NGOs they fund, are marked by the absence of the state.[44] These absences profoundly shape the lives of the world's more than forty-five million displaced people.

In Georgia the artifacts that humanitarianism brings and the new spaces it creates constantly evoke not only what the IDPs themselves have lost but the territorial integrity lost by the nation as a whole.[45] Rather than becoming sym-

40. Frederiksen, "The Would-Be State."

41. Adam Ramadan, "Spatialising the Refugee Camp," *Transactions of the Institutes of British Geographers* 38, no. 1 (January 2013): 65–77.

42. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 361.

43. Ramadan, "Spatialising the Refugee Camp," 74.

44. Mariella Pandolfi, "Contract of Mutual (In)Difference: Governance and the Humanitarian Apparatus in Contemporary Albania and Kosovo," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 369–81.

45. Peter Kabachnik, "Wounds That Won't Heal: Cartographic Anxieties and the Quest for Territorial Integrity in Georgia," *Central Asian Survey* 31, no.1 (February 2012): 45–60.

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bols of the care and attention that the Saakashvili regime paid to its citizens, the new settlements for the IDPs from South Ossetia remain visible wounds, "anxiety-producing irruptions of politics that cannot be contained."[46] At the same moment the Georgian government is trying to build a new state, and aid agencies and donor nations seeking to exercise "soft power" through humanitarian aid, these projects are constantly undermined by an omnipresent void that consistently points not to a bright future but the absence of the state and the grief of a lost past

In this article, I have explored the existential effect of absence. But I have also redefined absence, an essentially negating term that indicates that something does not exist. The void is not just what people have when they have nothing—an empty space left by the cataclysm of war that can be refilled with new objects, meanings, and routines, provided by humanitarians. Nothingness is not the condition that humanitarian aid alleviates. Rather, nothing is something actively produced by humanitarianism and the lifeworld it creates. It is not merely the result of violence but also the result of care; not merely the remnant of destruction but also an effect of construction. By creating anti-artifacts, black holes, and absolute zero, humanitarianism produces the voids that lead to people having nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing.

Nothing, in this context, has immediate practical consequences. Because it constantly points to what has been lost, and because it creates an uncertain situation in which taking action is nearly impossible, nothingness leads to "the interminable insomnia of exile," the state of limbo that characterizes displacement.[47] This void is why, after millions of dollars and countless man-hours spent by humanitarian agencies, so many of the world's thirty-three million internally displaced people fail to "socially reintegrate" in the ways they are supposed to.[48] Instead, more than 66 percent of people in what is called "protracted displacement" end up in relations of dependence to governments and international aid agencies which last for years, decades, and even generations.[49] It may be that exile, as Edward Said wrote, is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" whose "essential sadness can never be surmounted."[50] But understanding how the very aid meant to help heal that existential wound actually exacerbates it is, arguably, key to understanding why displaced people find it so difficult to leave life in the humanitarian condition.

Understanding the dilemma of protracted displacement and the ways it

46. Paul Manning, "The Hotel/Refugee Camp Iveria: Symptom, Monster, Fetish, Home," in Kristof Van Assche, Joseph Salukvadze, and Nick Shavishvili, eds., *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi: Where Europe and Asia Meet* (Lewiston, 2009), 319–49.

47. Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government* (London, 2011).

48. Beth Mitchneck, Joanna Regulska, and Peter Kabachnik, "'Post'-Conflict Displacement: Isolation and Integration in Georgia," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 5 (November 2009):1022–32.

49. James Milner and Gil Loescher, "Responding to Protracted Refugee Situations: Lessons from a Decade of Discussion," *Forced Migration Policy Briefings* 6 (January 2011), at www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/policy-briefings/RSCPB6-RespondingToProtracted RefugeeSituations.pdf (last accessed 26 December 2013).

50. Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), 137.

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is produced existentially offers the foundation for a more general theory of absence. By following Badiou's argument that we know the world as a coherently structured set of elements, it is possible to see how socially constituted voids in that structure produce not only nostalgia or regret for things lost but also confusion, meaninglessness, stasis, and even nihilism. Establishing a theory of nothing, though, requires not only asserting its concrete existence but specifying its types and characteristics and understanding the ways the specific features of nothingness act in historically and culturally specific contexts. The concepts of anti-artifacts, black holes, and absolute zero are meant as first forays into characterizing the material, spatial, temporal, and conceptual dimensions of nothingness in a post-Soviet, postwar setting.

A theory of nothing is a theory of an existential dilemma: how people seek to recreate themselves and rebuild their lives in situations in which there are multiple sovereign powers, fragmented material worlds and structures of meaning, and a plethora of new actors, objects, and politics to account for. But it is also a theory of how people become stymied in their attempts to build and occupy places for themselves in a wider society and how they experience being hindered or thwarted in these efforts. By looking not only at what is present but also what is absent, it is possible to understand the social experience of enduring liminality.

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