Introduction. Need, Imagination, and the Care of the Self

The interview in the coffee shop had long since become something else; we had been there for hours. She worked hard to get across how trapped she felt in her hospital work, and just in her ordinary, workaday life as a doctor and a woman in Finland. Her desire for the world "out there" and her love of beauty came across as a deep quaking neediness. "Maybe I really was born in the wrong country." She remembered a late friend who, she explained, just wasn't suited to life in his "own" country. He "blossomed like a rose" in the [Middle East]. Before he was killed, they had talked about how, for each of them, "out there in the world" (tuolla maailmalla) *was where they would both thrive. Missions for the Red Cross took her out there.*

In a Helsinki yarn shop on a quiet afternoon, an old woman had picked out her selection of yarns and stood at the checkout counter. She talked familiarly with the shop owner about the "Mother Teresa blankets" she was knitting to send to the needy—via the Vaaka ry organization, or perhaps the Red Cross; she had not decided yet. She talked about other things, too, and a conversation ensued. Finally she gathered her bag of yarn, her beige purse, and her walking stick. Then I was the only customer in the shop. The owner told me that the "elder" (vanhus) *who had just left had knitted scores of blankets for charity* (hyväntekeväisyys)*. She also remarked that the elder did not seem to have much else in her life.*[1]

In recent years, a formidable critical literature has emerged on humanitarianism as a key figure in global politics. Likewise, human rights and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have come to be recognized

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as increasingly important, and sometimes valorized, actors that "provide independent voices" in a politically "murky and dangerous" Global South.[2] Much has been written about the ethics, pragmatics, and politics of humanitarian interventions; how humanitarian interventions help or harm; how they may be hijacked by war machines and by ever more sophisticated tactics of terrorizing; how their work and security are compromised by militaries (including that of the United States) waging hearts and minds campaigns through "humanitarian care"; how idealistic moves to relieve suffering intersect with the so-called realpolitik of international relations and corporate interests; how different institutional mandates may have contradictory or unintended effects in the field; and many other themes.[3] This is a very dynamic field and I hope that this book will be a useful contribution to it. But I also want to shift focus a bit, from humanitarian intervention and its effects on the *recipients* of aid to a more intimate set of questions about "humanitarians" themselves—in this case, Finnish Red Cross aid workers sent abroad on aid and emergency relief missions by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Here, I am most interested not in the *effects* that their interventions produce, or how to assess politically either the value of their work or the problems it raises. Instead, I wish to begin with what seems to me a more foundational question, which is: *Who are these people*? Who wants to work in humanitarian aid and emergency relief, and why? What are their motivations and aims? Who wants to help? What conceptions of help and want circulate in these social fields? And what forms of imagination animate and sustain them? There is, across the Global South, an apparently ubiquitous (and mass-mediated) social presence—a *humanitarian subject* characterized by a desire to help. But what do we really know about this subject? What forms of understanding might emerge from a closely ethnographic inquiry into humanitarian motivation? Of course, the answers will always arise from social and historical specificity.

Some of the results of this inquiry were surprising. The Finnish Red Cross "humanitarians" I worked with were highly trained, experienced, and had each been on numerous missions around the world. In many ways they were very strong. They knew what needed to get done. (This fact made it very frustrating for them when technical or other obstacles to their work came up, as they frequently did.)[4] Professional as these workers were, however, one should not be too quick to assume that help and humanitarian aid always come from a position of unilateral strength, or power. What I found

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was impressive strength and good sense, but also, for many, an undeniable *neediness* that drove people to do their often hazardous work. For them, there was a *need to help* (*tarve auttaa*). Taking that observation seriously meant revising some basic assumptions about who "the needy" are in the humanitarian encounter.

In trying to answer such basic questions—who are they and why do they do what they do?—another, equally vital, set of questions emerged. How did people with such motivations think about themselves?[5] What kinds of relations of *self to self* did they form? How did the self, engaged in work that is often described as "selfless," undergo transformations—in contexts of humanitarian aid and emergency relief in war and violence, and death and grieving? Is there such a thing as selflessness? What does that mean? When is the self undone?

A final question took form: It had to do with the *imagination* in terms of which this humanitarian subject, or self, framed both the world and her place in it. Her subjectivity tended to be strongly internationalist, and a sense of international obligation powerfully shaped her personal trajectory and professional habitus—and her drive to work abroad. Why did the "world outside" (*ulkomaailma*) have such power to enchant my interlocutors? "To be out in the world" (*olla maailmalla*) was a powerful object of imagination for them. This ethical, aesthetic, and affective process of world-making came to matter in a number of ways. The processes and practices of *being* in the world "out there" were also complexly aspirational.

I likewise found that these forms of internationalist humanitarian imagination and practice were remarkably *domestic*—in two senses. In the first sense, key aspects of international humanitarian aid always begin "at home" (as opposed to abroad), *somewhere local and specific*, *even intimate*, in this case Finland. Finnish histories and contemporary cultural and political formations, as well as people's conceptions of themselves as Finns, mattered in both predictable and unexpected ways in the work they did abroad, and key features of the "home" society provided important motivations for this work.

The second sense of the domestic involves practices of care *de facto* often undertaken by women and/or in a home—prototypically, nursing, cleaning, and caring for the young, the old, and the vulnerable, but also such "domestic arts" as knitting and crocheting "for the needy," or participating in "homemade" craft projects organized as humanitarian campaigns (often for fund- and awareness-raising purposes) by aid organizations such as the Red Cross, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and numerous others

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(see chapters 4 and 5). In these later chapters, the focus will be *not* the professional aid workers in the international field abroad but rather other social categories of Finns in Finland with a nonprofessional need to help. I will examine what happens to the relation of self to self, and self to the world, where helping occurs, but no traveling is involved. At stake are conditions of isolation and abjection in Finland, most specifically among aged people, where some engage in "humanitarian handicrafts" in order to find forms of "stranger sociality" (Povinelli 2006) and human connection (even if precarious) that help them to feel like real persons (cf. Muehlebach 2012). This is an account of stark social realities that again inverts our usual assumptions about where "need" is located in humanitarian relations of helping and giving, on the one hand, and receiving, on the other.

The domestic, in both of these forms, is relatively invisible in the predominant representation of humanitarian actors as always already "cosmopolitan." While these forms could easily be (and often are) dismissed as trivial, inconsequential, or irrelevant, each can be surprisingly powerful and even dangerous in its capacity to entangle the self both with very close, intimate (sometimes cruel) realities "at home" *and* with more distant realities that may not only affect it but even invade and undermine it.

Thus, the need to help is perhaps not as "quintessentially cosmopolitan" as some scholars would have it (see, e.g., Calhoun 2008:73–75). The case I studied, at least, suggests that it is not as generic "global citizens," "worldly nomads," or "cosmopolitans" but as specific social persons with homegrown needs, vulnerabilities, desires, and multiple professional responsibilities that people sought to be part of something greater than themselves, to help, to be actors in the lively world. And they found their own, sometimes quite idiosyncratic, ways of doing so at different stages and circumstances in their lives. This sense of the domestic sheds light on how the conduct of the aid workers "out there" reflects their specific culture regions and social contexts—and the way that aid work abroad presents for some a line of escape from the familiar, and sparks urges to self-transformation.

Much of this book, then, is the result of in-depth ethnographic interviews with Finnish Red Cross aid workers who have been deployed internationally, usually with the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross). I interviewed them sporadically, when they were in Finland and not on mission, between 1996 and 2012. Most of the interviews became one-on-one conversations of many hours. All translations are my own. As will become apparent, I worked with people in numerous different occupational fields

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(e.g., transportation, logistics, administration, psychological support), but mostly with nurses and secondarily with doctors. Most were women (like the staff of the Finnish Red Cross more generally), but they tended to refer to themselves in gender-neutral terms as persons or people (*ihmiset*) (Finnish personal pronouns are also gender-neutral).

The earliest 1996 interviews occurred in the long aftermath of the 1994 Rwanda genocide. As I explain later in the book, my original intent was to focus on interviewing specifically those Finnish Red Cross workers who had been posted to Rwanda with the ICRC because I had myself worked with refugees from an earlier genocide in neighboring Burundi. The people I worked with in 1985–86 had asylum in western Tanzania, and were survivors of a genocide where the regime, dominated by people ethnically Tutsi, targeted the majority Hutu population. This meant in practice that I interviewed Finnish Red Cross staff who worked where the roles were reversed, in a genocide where Hutu were the perpetrators and Tutsi (and "moderate Hutu") the victims. The ICRC was on the scene in Rwanda early partly because it already had teams working in Burundi where another underreported genocidal political conflict was under way in 1993. I was just finishing my first book manuscript when the 1994 Rwanda genocide began. My eventual 1995 book, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, includes a long afterword on the Rwanda genocide as it was happening.

I was in Finland when I learned that numerous Finnish aid workers had gone to work on multinational ICRC teams in Rwanda and Goma (Congo, formerly Zaire). Since there had been only a few international aid workers in the refugee camp where I had worked earlier in Tanzania, and since I had focused on interviewing the *refugees* in the first project, I began to think seriously about these aid workers and what it could possibly mean to them to be in the middle of one of the most horrific genocides in modern history.[6] Their motivations were initially opaque to me, except in the most abstract of terms—they were humanitarians. But why did they accept that mission? What, or how much, were they hoping to accomplish? How would they be affected by what they experienced there? How would they fathom the magnitude of the human catastrophe they were working in? How could they? Were they damaged by their professional duties?[7]

I formed my new research project around those questions and specifically around the *aid workers*, and was fortunate to be able to begin research quite quickly. Officials at the Finnish Red Cross headquarters in Helsinki were welcoming and relatively open to researchers, and the aid workers, when

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in Finland, generously gave me their time and thoughtfulness. As I had anticipated, it was easy to talk with the aid workers who had been posted to Rwanda, Goma, and Burundi. They needed to talk—just as the genocide survivors in Tanzania had needed to talk. Many aid workers said it was worth talking with someone who had lived and worked in the general region, and with genocide survivors specifically. There was some shared understanding.

In the end, I wound up interviewing the aid workers not only about Rwanda and Central Africa but also about the numerous other missions around the world they had worked on. Many of them were very mobile—"veterans," as people at the Helsinki Headquarters called them, and as they often described each other. I did not have the opportunity to interview anyone for whom one mission had been enough, or too much.

The most recent interviews date from a time when the ICRC, including delegates from the Finnish Red Cross, were (and are) heavily involved in Afghanistan (see chapter 6). It is striking to me that even after so many other missions—and in the midst of the extremely long, difficult, and controversial mission in Afghanistan, where the ICRC has worked for decades—Rwanda still kept coming up as an upsetting experience and as a kind of reference point. As I discuss in chapter 2, it was a limit experience for many who had worked there. One person called it a "breaking point."

Need

War, genocide, mass killings, mass rape, torture, famine, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods. These words (often in this string-like form) have become globally meaningful terms for identifying specifically "humanitarian need," especially by "the West," or the wealthy North. What is specifically humanitarian about these situations—situations that have come to form distinct, mobile, and unevenly globalized social imaginaries and fields of action? The qualifier *humanitarian* makes the need of those to be helped appear simultaneously somehow elementary (basic) and monumental (superhuman) in scale: "basic human needs" (water, food, medicine, shelter, sanitation) have to be supplied by "the international community" to alleviate the "basic human suffering" of the anonymous masses of "humanity." (All this seems straightforward, of a practical urgency and thus politically neutral, but see chapter 6.)

Much important work has been written about needs-based versus rights-based humanitarianism, but for the ICRC need was certainly the more fundamental category, *the* mandate for action. In fact, one can make the case

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that this must be so in humanitarian work, where the invocation of "human rights," lacking the sanctioning power of a state, so often struggles to amount to more than a pious wish (as Hannah Arendt [1951] 1973 noted long ago), and where it is inevitably evidence of raw, visible *need* (starving, sick, or injured bodies, dying children) that provides an immediate impetus for intervention (cf. Ticktin 2011). Indeed, for all its very real political problems, the language of need often directs our attention to precisely those material conditions of life that, as Harri Englund has observed (2006), abstract commitments to rights can sometimes sidestep or even obscure (see also Festa 2010:15; Rancière 2011:67, 72).

Yet there is a tendency among some scholars in the Global North—as also among the donor public and the thousands of university students and others who want to be aid volunteers—to imagine ("basic") human need with a surprising degree of uniformity, as I have suggested (Malkki 1996), and to see it as somehow essentially located "over there." The "suffering stranger" is still in the main imagined as "distant" (Boltanski 1993; Haskell 1998), socially anonymous, only "basically" human, and usually only momentarily in the aid worker's or volunteer's life.

The historically resonant logics associated with need, suffering, and humanity in humanitarian discourse can end up making some people more basic (read: simple) than others (see Vaughan 1991:115; Englund 2006; and Fassin and Rechtman 2009:183–88, 228–30). Africa has embodied need on a continental scale ever since its colonization was systematized and rationalized. When it comes to the African continent, there is much "basicness," much "simplicity." In the worst case, such views can lead the "needy African" to be imagined as a sort of specimen of "basic humanity" more biological than political—"bare life," as Agamben (1998) and others have argued, more *zoë* than *bios* (cf. Arendt [1951] 1973:267–302; see also Mbembe 2001:1–3; Petryna 2002; Foucault 2003; Biehl 2005; Redfield and Bornstein 2010:18, 23; Rancière 2011:62–75; and Ticktin 2011:14, among others).

In thinking about the depoliticization of *both* rights and needs, Englund cites Alain Badiou, who suggests how

> a universal human subject is split into two modalities. On the one hand, the subject is passive and pathetic, the one who suffers. On the other, the subject is active, the one who identifies suffering and knows how to act[. . . .] "On the side of the victims, the haggard animal exposed on television screens. On the side of the benefactors, conscience and the imperative

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to intervene. And why does this splitting always assign the same roles to the same sides? Who cannot see that this ethics rests on the misery [. . .] the world hides, behind its victim-Man, the good-Man, the white-Man?" (Badiou 2001:12–13, cited in Englund 2006:32–33)

The needy, sick, dirty recipient and the strong, healthy, clean giver: these charismatic figures draw a certain kind of attention—the principal actors in the ever-expanding imagination, documentation, and mediatization of certain kinds of misery and misfortune. The popularly imagined good doctor (from Albert Schweitzer to Paul Farmer), the ever-giving nurse (from Florence Nightingale to Mother Teresa), and their (ideally grateful and well-behaved) suffering, ever-needy mass of patients.[8]

Yet my research with the Finnish Red Cross aid workers revealed a coeval, co-present neediness on the other side, *the neediness of the helper, the giver*. This suggests the possibility of combating the splitting of the human subject that Badiou describes, not *only* (as anthropologists are wont to do) by recognizing the agency, will, and specific motivations of the "recipient" of humanitarian aid but *also* by insisting on acknowledging the frequent weakness, neediness, and non-universality of the humanitarian "benefactor"—the giver who, no less than the receiver, always sets out from a social and existential position both specific and precarious (Butler 2004). The benefactor's own need to help those in need may generate actions that in fact help the benefactor him/herself in surprising and vital ways (see chapter 5).

Through my research with the Finnish Red Cross workers, I came to think of need in ways previously unfamiliar to me. In "Professionals Abroad" (chapter 1), I saw that some of the Red Cross aid workers on international missions sought in their work a partial escape from national belonging—even an escape from their mundane, workaday selves. The safe, well-ordered, and in principle predictable national home, the welfare society that should have met their social and material needs, had become, for some, burdensome and constraining, and emotionally cold. One nurse described it as *ascetic*. The abroad was described by most as more "full of life" and—this is key—as a site of easier human sociality and conviviality, even in the midst of terrible circumstances. This desire for "the world outside" (*ulkomaailma*) was in some interviews so palpable and urgent that it came across as an unmistakable *neediness*. Finland meant safety, progressive social policies, many good things, but also reserve, restraint, and constraint, and, along with it, experiences of social and sensorial deprivation.

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Humanitarian work abroad of course meant encountering people with severe needs on a monumental scale now unknown in Finland. But the interviews I did with Red Cross people while they were in Finland (and not on mission abroad) workers also eloquently spoke of giving and helping as alleviating their *own* neediness, allowing them "to be a part of something greater than themselves." I encountered other nonprofessional relationships to need as well. In "Bear Humanity" (chapter 4), I write about "Aid Bunnies," "Trauma Teddies," and all manner of soft toys as "humanitarian devices" for framing human need for the general *donor public* to imagine. And what is more "human" and "innocent" than a child in need? The child is the "exemplary human" (see chapter 3). The 2006–7 Finnish Red Cross Aid Bunny campaign for volunteers to make and donate hand-knitted bunnies—intended to comfort children hurt by political conflicts and natural disasters, but also used as a domestic consciousness-raiser about the special needs of children caught in complex emergencies—framed the specific kind of need that could be imagined and alleviated. It was a thing the domestic donor could *imagine* "doing something" about; it was particular and of a *humanly graspable scale*, and sensorially pleasurable (see Tsing 2005:58).[9] One could say that the Aid Bunny had "the deep present of physical things" (Mitchell 2001:180) that animated it in an enchanting way (Gell 1988). The social imagination of the Finnish knitters (thousands of them) was often charged by an intimate, personalized link to the imagined "play-age" (*leikki-ikäinen*) child somewhere out there, "out there in the world" (*siellä maailmalla*), who would play and be consoled by the Aid Bunny. The suspension (if not erasure) of the child's parents, siblings, grandparents, and other relatives, and also friends, teachers, and neighbors, was a striking feature in the imagining of the needy child (cf. Bornstein 2001, 2012). The children's own proclivities and desires, subjectivities and social embeddedness, fears and plans, were off-frame. The faraway children's need, as understood from a great distance, in the specific social context of Finland, generated an often bubbly, extravagant online playfulness in the practices that people used in making, naming, animating, blogging about, and sending as gifts the Aid Bunnies they had knitted (cf. Allison 2004). It is as if the bunnies, too, became children for a while, and their makers childlike, or sometimes maternal (see Winnicott [1971] 2005). Although clearly meaningful to their makers in a number of different ways, the bunnies were to other eyes the very embodiment of the trivial, and, worse, the offensive, in the face of "the real needs" of people awaiting emergency assistance (even if it was never, of course, the case that people in dire

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circumstances received bunnies *instead of* emergency relief). But it has to be said: one need that the bunnies demonstrably answered at home in Finland was to provide badly needed *sociality*—whether face to face or virtual—to what were sometimes very lonely people. The most evident need here—a need for belonging and imaginative sociality—was the knitters'.

In "Homemade Humanitarianism: Knitting and Loneliness" (chapter 5), I focus on a theme that runs throughout the book: again and again, international aid seems to involve the domestic arts such as knitting or other handwork (*käsityö*) (see also chapters 3 and 4). The need to help through international service has, as I mentioned, roots in specific structural features of the "home society," of Finland, that create the deep *need to help*, and to become thereby *connected to something other and greater than oneself*—to be connected to "the world" (*maailma*). It is against a background of unremitting social and affective neediness that the people whom I call "the old women" knit. Many do so in an effort to "keep busy" and "useful" in a world that sees them as useless (or simply does not see them), and to have the *dignity of giving* something to an anonymous person somewhere in the world (*jossain maailmalla*) who may need it—or not (cf. Kelley 2003; Muehlebach 2012). Volunteers who knitted "Mother Teresa blankets" (a project like the Aid Bunny), for instance, accomplished several things: they alleviated their own, possibly keenly felt, sense of uselessness and they engaged in activities that required human contact (in going to the yarn shop, for example, as was noticed by the owners of many such shops). The blanket was a gift *of* the self to an imagined other, but also a gift *to* the self. It is possible, then, to interpret the process—including both the making and then of the giving away—as a form of intimate "affect management" and *care of the self* (Foucault 1986; Mazzarella 2009:298).[10]

The Relation of Self to Self

It is through writing about need that I came to think about the relation of self to self. Humanitarianism is often associated with selflessness and self-sacrifice, but less often with other things that came, in my work, to seem more important: self-escape, self-loss, dehumanization, self-humanization, self-transformation, the care of the self, the relation of self to others, and the relation of self to the world (*maailma*). For selflessness, the simplest initial task was to make a mental list of all the famous humanitarians whom history has dubbed "selfless servants to humanity" and who, some of them,

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still get fed to elementary school children (Henri Dunant, Clara Barton, Florence Nightingale, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, among others). This sort of selflessness—selflessness as *self-sacrifice*—the professional Red Cross people had *no* use for, as I will show throughout (cf. Kester 2004:78; see chapter 6). Indeed, I was often told that an aid worker bent on self-sacrifice was not only foolish and inexperienced but also a possible danger to herself and others on her team in the field.

But selflessness is not entirely irrelevant here, and often figured less as sacrifice and more as a kind of self-*escape*. Self-escape emerged as a good descriptor for many of the international aid workers' motivations. Their personal desires to get a break from the safe predictability and routinization of their work life in Finland, and perhaps especially to find a self-conscious respite from *how they themselves were in Finland*, were definitely factors in their decisions as to whether to accept an international mission or not. This is obviously not to say that the specific nature of the emergency call they received was insignificant to them, or that they did not have highly developed senses of ethical obligation.

If such self-escape could be thought of as a kind of selflessness, it was of a decidedly nonsacrificial kind. *It was not as saints but as experienced professionals that they sought their line of escape.* For many, such selflessness became most powerfully articulated as a desire to lose themselves in the intensity of sustained demanding work. In those moments, they did not have awkward selves to manage or what they sometimes described as an encumbering Finnish self-consciousness getting in the way; they experienced, I think, a kind of pleasurable *self-loss*. I would interpret those as moments of a lithe freedom, perhaps even transcendence. Musicians know what this is; it is when they are "playing over their heads" (see, e.g., Berliner 1994).

Another of the possibilities I saw in the relation of self to self was self-transformation. The most memorable figure in this connection is perhaps a doctor I discuss in chapter 1, whose missions were definitely about work (no mistake about that), but who was also sensually captured by the places to which she was posted and "vicariously possessed" by the people (especially women aid recipients) whom she met there (Piper 1991:735–37; chapter 1). She articulated very clearly how she in fact *sought* continual self-transformation through her missions and even through the *materia* of her ever-changing surroundings. She reminded me of Adrian Piper's contention that "empathy must be carefully calibrated between the extremes of self-loss and self-absorption."[11]

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It is, of course, common to be transformed by experience, but in Red Cross work, people's spatiotemporal sequence of presences and absences in/from Finland seemed to make such transformation more noticeable. As I mention in chapter 1, people often returned from missions abroad feeling somehow changed, their hearts full and eager to share their experiences—only to find that no non–Red Cross friends or colleagues were truly interested in understanding, or willing to listen for very long. Everyone had their *own* lives and concerns to attend to, after all.

Of course aid work is something like anthropological fieldwork in that both can be transformative life experiences that engage affects, the senses, and the imagination—the whole person—for better and for worse. Both can be creative and re-creative (see "The Imagination," below), and both can result in what Foucault and others have called limit experiences, in other words, experiences that "[wrench] the subject from itself" (2000:241). But while in the traditions Foucault wrote and lived from, the limit experience was systematically sought and explored (see Foucault 1991, 2000; Lacan quoted in Evans 1996; Bataille 2000; and Blanchot 1993), I discuss (in chapter 2) limits and impasses from which there was no clear way forward, where there were no good choices to be made, where things had become impossible.[12] The person was transformed by the experience, but in a damaging way that diminished and troubled the self. Maybe this could also be characterized as a kind of self-loss. The disaster zones in which the Red Cross people worked of course involved limit experiences of this kind for the people who were in need of the emergency relief, but sometimes the same kinds of limits were encountered by the "helpers" themselves.[13]

The relation of self to self appears in another guise in chapter 5. Against a backdrop of often stark and dehumanizing social isolation (Biehl 2005), volunteer work, (as I described under the heading "Need," above) often amounted to a kind of "care of the self" in circumstances sometimes verging on desperation (Foucault 1986). Associational life—as toothless as it may seem against some of the bleak scenes to come—made it possible for many people to be part of something other and bigger than themselves, to *imagine* themselves—through their own handwork and volunteer work—as members of a greater "community of generosity" and help, even as they also gained more mundane forms of intersubjectivity and social connection in the process (see Muehlebach 2012:7). The Red Cross was one socially important and truly nationwide institution that made it possible (even for people in very small towns and villages) to enframe their lives differently and to open

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themselves to new kinds of social and affective experiences that they might not have found otherwise. Getting training to help others was important to people, and provided new possibilities in the relation of self to self.[14]

The Imagination

The imagination has emerged, in an unanticipated way, as an important element in each chapter of this book. Humanitarianism is an object of imagination, and aid projects engage in many imaginative practices. Consider again the figure of the child. So vital to humanitarian appeals, it always has to be not only seen but also imagined in order to be socially effective, to matter. The historically deep practice of fundraising with the picture of the child in need goes on around the world (Vaughan 1991). One might think it so cliché that it is in danger of losing its life. It is junk mail. One ignores it with a twitch of irritation. But then it turns out (as will become clear in chapters to come) that the postcard of the child in need finds a more generous and considered reception among categories of people who become imaginatively invested for reasons of their own. They may be lonely and/or aged. The child in need interpellates, hails them, as "persons who can help" (Althusser 2007; Evans and Hall 2007). The imaginative work of the child in need is to allow "an ex-person," someone "socially worthless," the dignity of giving (Biehl 2005; Muehlebach 2012). The postcard of the child may do more: it may produce an enchanted child then "made real" through surprisingly involved, affective processes of the imagination.

Danger. The aid worker in the field suddenly senses that she herself is in danger, and is then privately embarrassed that she was not after all—embarrassed that she had had time to imagine her own personal crisis or even demise. The practice of emergency relief often involves risks and those risks inevitably engender imaginative scenarios, even when in principle it is part of one's professionalism to *not imagine, not think, just do*. Loss and grief. These may be witnessed and imagined in clinics and hospitals in the field every day, among patients so little known as to leave great spaces for guesswork and the imagination. Wounds. Certain kinds of wounds may confront the aid worker as evidence of a sadistic imagination.

Danger, loss and grief, wounds, and one's place on the scene of a disaster or in the world as a "humanitarian," are dynamically imagined, especially when they become relevant to one's own life, and in encounters and relationships with others. Sometimes they "imagine themselves in you," even

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against your will (pace Sartre).[15] As James Engell, following Kant, has suggested, some forms of imagination are discretionary and volitional, while others are unwilled; and often these coexist (Engell 1981:135–38; Kant 2008). How humanitarian needs and challenges are imagined is important. Often there are ways of making them *be*, and, then, of making them *not* be. Sometimes there is no such choice. Some problems aid agencies can fix and make *not be*, for example, while others are utterly unaffected by their volition. And the technologies of humanitarian advertising can similarly make things be and not be. Some disasters fade quickly for donor publics though long ongoing, while other newer problems are "made be." One powerful way of making be is "the logic of the one" (visualize one singular child, one singular benefactor): this can enter the imagination and leave one feeling *responsible* (see Bornstein 2003, 2012; Suski 2009; and chapters 2 and 3). This can happen to anyone—even aid workers. Is the responsibility "real" or "imagined"? What is the difference, exactly? Ethics can be thought of as an imaginative practice, and imagination as an ethical practice (Mittermaier 2011), and both of these can be—often have to be—improvisational practices (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007:164–79).

A great deal has of course been written about the imagination, and the real and the irreal; I will work here with only a few texts to clarify my uses of the term throughout this book. Cornelius Castoriadis makes a forceful argument for the importance of the theorization and understanding of the imagination. In "The Social Imaginary and the Institution" (1975), Castoriadis rightly argues that "representation, imagination, and imaginary have never been seen for themselves but always in relation to something else—to sensation, intellection, perception, or reality—*submitted to the normativity incorporated in the inherited ontology*, brought within the viewpoint of the true and the false, instrumentalized within a function, means judged according to their possible contribution to the accomplishment of the end that is truth or access to true being, the being of being (*ontos on*)" (1997:197, emphasis added).[16] I think his point is still important, for all the current, often market-driven, profit-focused valorization of "imagination," "innovation," and (especially) "creativity" today (Ricoeur 1994:119). In fact, it is newly and differently important now.[17] And yet the very old distrust or contempt for the imagination still also persists today. "In this way," continues Castoriadis, "there has not been the slightest concern with knowing what *making/doing* [*faire*] means, what the *being* of making/doing is and what it is that making/doing *makes be*, so obsessed have people been with these questions alone: What is it to

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do good or to do well, to do evil or to do badly. Making/doing has not been thought because no one has attempted to think of anything other than two particular moments of making/doing, the ethical moment and the technical moment." Castoriadis stops to observe how much of the social-historical is thought through the imposition of the "inherited logic-ontology" in the West (1997:197, 198, emphases added; cf. Bachelard 2005:xxvi).[18] He goes on to say that the things that are "irreducibly in excess or in deficit" of the inherited schemata become "scoria, illusion, contingency, chance—in short, unintelligible" (1997:198). They might be ignored as inessential to the real matter at hand: just noise and babble. Dross. Distraction. Or, as will emerge here, "the mere." The mere is not "political," nor relevant to "real" theoretical debates. It is that which is "appropriately" ignored. The concept of the mere is developed throughout the following chapters, and also concludes the book.

This mistrust of the imagination has ancient origins, and its force still has a surprising degree of caution, distancing, and even contempt around it now (see Kearney 1991; Crapanzano 2004; Bachelard 2005:xxvi).[19] Even as the imagination is thought the font of the next possible insight or invention, its wildness is not always instrumentally "useable" and it becomes vulnerable to pathologization, as Emily Martin (2009) has powerfully demonstrated (see also, e.g., Beckett 1966, Sass 1992, and Weller 2009). Nigel Thomas (n.d.:n.p.) writes about how, in ancient and medieval conceptions, the "imagination, although recognized as indispensable to cognition, was usually profoundly distrusted. Unless strictly disciplined by reason it would soon lead us into concupiscence and sin." This mistrust was compounded in European history by the iconophobia following the Reformation and its long afterlives (Belting 1994; Ricoeur 1994:119; Heinänen 2006).[20] But as Susan Sontag (like Thomas n.d.) has observed, "philosophers since Plato have tried to loosen our grip on images by evoking the standard of an image-free way of apprehending the real"—Plato's cave ever a warning (2007:80). And as Amira Mittermaier further suggests in *Dreams That Matter*, "the imagination was eyed with suspicion throughout the history of western philosophy because it might not merely transmit images but could also play with sense impressions, creating images of nonexistent things—a danger that could be circumvented only by reason's firm grip on the imagination" (2011:16; cf. Sartre [1940] 2004). The modern category of art emerged, in some sense, as a way not just to acknowledge the power of the imagination but also to contain its danger (Belting 1994). Harri Englund, in conversation with Cas-

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toriadis, makes a further interesting point: "No longer situated within the confines of 'a psychological or ego-logical horizon' (Castoriadis 1997:245), not to mention its reduction to the domain of the arts, the imagination assumes a profoundly social character, an inter-subjective sphere of experience and argument within which alternatives to dominant perspectives can attain collective purchase" (Englund 2011:15–16).[21] Gilles Deleuze (1997) develops parallel thoughts in *Essays Clinical and Critical*, noting that the most relevant distinction is not always that between the real and the imagined: "A real voyage, by itself, lacks the force necessary to be reflected in the imagination; the imaginary voyage, by itself, does not have the force, as Proust says, to be verified in the real. This is why the imaginary and the real must be, rather, like two juxtaposable or superimposable parts of a single trajectory, two faces that ceaselessly interchange with one another, a mobile mirror" (1997: 62–63).[22] Giving an example from Aboriginal Australia, Deleuze writes that there people link "nomadic itineraries" with "dream voyages" (1997:63). "At the limit, the imaginary is a virtual image that is interfused with the real object, and vice versa, thereby constituting a crystal of the unconscious" (1997:63). I would emphasize in response, with Englund, how often the imagination is intersubjective and profoundly social—and processual.

Doubts about the imagination became a prominent issue in my first fieldwork for *Purity and Exile* (1995). As I will describe in chapter 2, I did research in the mid-1980s with survivors of the 1972 genocide in Burundi who had been granted asylum in Tanzania. During the fieldwork with the Hutu refugees, I was warned by officials there not to "imagine things" as I listened to the refugees' accounts of their violent pasts, and their circumstances in exile. The refugees' (genocide survivors') accounts, often dismissed as grossly exaggerated—and, especially early on, as "hysterical"—were refused any solid reality or rationality.[23] Similarly, I, as researcher, was often regarded as gullible, too vulnerable to the refugees' "stories."[24] I was wasting my time and then letting my imagination run away with me. (Tragically, many of the grotesquely violent events and practices of which I was told at that time would then be repeated in well-documented detail in the 1994 Rwanda genocide.)

Now, what would it have looked like for the refugees to remember their experiences of the genocide and their flight in a "purely" non-imaginative way? What would it have looked like for them to produce a technical, dispassionate record of the "real" events, editing out what was so outlandish that it *must* be "irreal," or a nightmare? (cf. Mbembe 2001; De Boeck 2004; Ashforth 2005). But they themselves strove for painstaking technical accuracy

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and thoroughness. How could they accurately represent experiences that were as if from the most perverted and sadistic of horror films? *Why did they talk so much about this, wherever I went?*[25] But accurate records: this was what they were trying to deposit with me so that I might "inform the world" about them—they imagined that "the international community" would act to help them if only they had the correct information, the *true* historical record. I also expected accuracy and a (situated) thoroughness of myself (Haraway 2013). I could sense their sincerity, and my own; usually that just took us further into the relations and processes of imagination and memory. It was hard to take these accounts for real at times, so terrible were they. Their very power made them seem unreal. They made *me* feel unreal (see Mbembe 2001:145).[26]

My particular experiences in Tanzania are not surprising given that the imagination has been "equated with the unreal throughout much of Western history. This verdict became remarkably pronounced in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre according to whom the imagination is 'an incantation destined to produce the object of one's thought, the thing one desires, in a manner that one can take possession of it'" (Mittermaier 2011:17). This is the (imaginary) unreal in the service of the safely real—no intrusive imaginings or involuntary thoughts here. Sartre's formulation is possible because the boundary he erects between the real and the imagined, at least here, is so solid (see Kearney 1991:54, 67).[27] "The act of imagination . . . is a magical act" (Sartre [1940] 2004:125). This conception is discussed by Elaine Scarry in *Dreaming by the Book*:

> Sartre identifies freedom as the imagination's great endowment to us: "[In the act of the imagination] there is always something of the imperious and the infantile, a refusal to take distance or difficulties into account. Thus, the very young child acts upon the world from his bed by orders and entreaties. The objects obey these orders of consciousness: they appear." Sartre returns to this attribute continually. We will the images into being: we will the images out of being. "Thus I can stop the existence of the unreal object at any moment, *I am not dragged along despite myself* to the specification of its qualities: it exists only while I know it and want it." We start it. We stop it. *It never takes us "by surprise."* (2001:32–33, emphases added)

This conception seems curious to me; and it is profoundly inappropriate to the analysis of the social context of (and my work with) the Hutu refugees

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in Tanzania. There my imagination did "drag me along despite myself" and continually "took me by surprise." And even after all the research, I understood very little of what the refugees themselves—children, teenagers, men, women, and elders—had been dragged through. It was, in J. M. Coetzee's words, an "imaginative horror" (2001). This is important: the imaginary is "not false . . . nor illusory. *The imaginary is not a mode of unreality, but indeed a mode of actuality*," as Michel Foucault has written (1986:70, emphasis added; cf. Deleuze 1997:63; Mittermaier 2011:17–19). And it seems much more accurate to say, with Mittermaier: "Diverging from an objectivist mode of observation," an imagination "is not enclosed within an individual author-figure but instead creates a *dialogical in-between space* in which the visible and the invisible are intertwined" (2011:239, emphasis added; cf. Englund 2011:15–16).

Filip De Boeck (2004:12–13), describing conditions of life in modern Kinshasa, also writes about the imagination and experience in a way that directly helps to express the circumstances of the Hutu refugees in Tanzania at the time of my research with them. De Boeck's central question is: "[W]hat happens when people's material conditions of life become so incredibly hard that their very conceptions of what constitutes reality is affected[?]" He describes an "overproduction or an 'overheating' of meaning that gives expression to a disturbing unmooring of the social imagination" (2004:12; and see Achille Mbembe 2001:145). People, in all their complex interrelations with other people, face a kind of ontological "indiscernibleness" and uncertainty (2004:29).[28]

Yet the *volitional imagination* that Sartre described does have explanatory power in other contexts in this book, especially among donor publics motivated by a need to help alleviate human suffering in faraway catastrophes. In chapter 4, I will consider a 2007 Red Cross call to the public to knit Aid Bunnies to psychically assist children in conflict zones or natural disasters. Little did the Red Cross know that this project of making/doing would enchant thousands of eager knitters or that Aid Bunnies would eventually almost deluge its national logistics center. These bunnies were conjured by their makers. They were willed into being in just the way Sartre described. It is interesting that the bunny was always envisioned by the knitters in an intimate, exclusive relationship, not as one toy among many that groups of children could use. It was imagined, following the logic of the one, as the "special friend" and comforter of a single, special child in need of help and solace.

Kant's conception of the imagination was quite different, and useful in the present context. "When [Kant] says that the imagination is 'the faculty

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of representing in intuition an object that is not in itself present,' [h]e does not mean that it is the capacity for the mental imaging of absent objects. His view is rather that imagining involves two moments: immediate sensory awareness, or empirical intuition, and the taking or construing of that awareness as the awareness of something other, or something more, than what immediately appears" (Young 2009:142). Michael Young reiterates Kant's point thus: "it is not the capacity for mental imaging, but rather the capacity for construal or interpretation, that Kant characteristically has in mind as he develops his view of imagination" (2009:142, 155).[29]

What I find particularly helpful here is Kant's position that there are two general (usually coexistent) forms of imagination: the reproductive, combinatory, or re-creative imagination and the productive, or creative, imagination. (This is, of course, parallel to Castoriadis's formulation.) By reproductive imagination Kant means a function that is "empirical" and based on "association"; thus one may reproduce some combination of things one has encountered before (Young 2009:155; cf. Bachelard 2005:13). But this is what is of particular interest here: "while Kant holds that imagination and understanding are distinct faculties, he also believes that they may nonetheless come to be *intertwined* as we employ them" (Young 2009:155, emphasis added). Pauline von Bonsdorff writes along the same lines that reproductive imagination is an effort (only an effort) to make oneself as one with the position of the other (2009:29).[30]

As Mittermaier notes, Foucault has remarked on the consequences of such a blurring. "Shifting our attention from what the imagination *is* to what it *does*, Foucault describes an erasure of the sharp line between subject and object, between the absent and the present. The imagination makes me what I imagine. The 'like' is erased. Signifier and signified become one" (Mittermaier 2011:18; see also Foucault 1986).[31] The Finnish Red Cross very explicitly trains its outgoing teams to be professional and to manage the line between self and other. But as I show in chapter 2, despite solid professional experience and self-monitoring, this does not always work. Something unexpected gets to you. Often this something is an ill young child who crosses your path in a hospital or refugee camp. Through the daily intimacies of caring for the child, the aid worker might come to feel, "it's almost as if I were this child's parent." In a flash, she might suddenly imagine, just for a fraction of a second, "I *am* his mother." "I am *responsible!*" The "like" is erased. The aid worker starts imagining, even planning, possibilities of adoption, and envisioning the child's prospects for life in an arctic Finland wary of "for-

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eigners." Then she imagines his future *here*—wherever here is—a refugee camp in East Africa perhaps. It may seem morally and ethically very wrong to sever the connection with that child when the mission is over. These kinds of cases, many of them, haunted the aid workers I have interviewed.[32] They have had to face painful and sometimes humiliating ethical and affective impasses—"limit experiences" of a kind. Anthropologists, as I write in chapter 2, often face comparable situations. These difficulties are a clear reminder that the imagination is not only a plaything: "*Einbildungskraft* is specifically a *power* [*voima*], not just a capacity or ability [*kyky*]. The difference is clear: the power can sweep you along, whereas a capacity is controlled."[33]

Alongside the re-creative, reproductive, or combinatory form of imagination is, of course, the productive, or creative, imagination. As Kant said, the two modes of imagination are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This is important. But for a very long time the creative—making/doing something quite new, being/doing newly, breaking molds, thinking completely otherwise—has been, and is still, considered "higher" in many contexts, and productive of more highly valued results than those of the reproductive imagination (as if *both* were not intersubjective social practices, as if both did not also depend on the imaginative work of others who have gone before). As I suggest in "Homemade Humanitarianism" (chapter 5), this is abundantly clear in the endless, predictable dismissals of the re-creative, "reproductive" imagination in gendered humanitarian handwork. Classified as the domestic arts, "handicrafts," "amateur crafts," or "hobbies," these are often assumed to be "merely" repetitive, "just copying" from predesigned models and patterns—and not even mimetic with any of the potential that that term opens up (see Taussig 1993; Frank 2000). They are nice "confectionaries" (Kester 2004:19, 33); they are "decorations" (Loos [1910] 2000; Kant 2006:108, 110–11)—mere *supplements* to "art" in Derrida's sense.

Challenging such dismissive attitudes, Grant Kester writes appreciatively about an aesthetic imagination that, in fact, looks once more like Kant's reproductive imagination (cf. Bourriaud 1998). Drawing the contrast with the old modern figure of the singular autonomous artist, Kester argues that a "dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different image of the artist, one defined in terms of openness, of *listening* . . . , and of a willingness to accept a position of dependence and *inter-subjective vulnerability* relative to the viewer or collaborator" (2004:110, emphasis added). This sounds very much like the process of ethnographic fieldwork. Kester continues: "It is in the nature of dialogical projects to be impure, to represent a practical negotiation (self-

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reflexive but nevertheless compromised) around issues of power, identity, and difference, even as they strive toward something more" (2004:123). Similar practical negotiations are necessary in the impure project that is anthropological fieldwork, and also in the imaginative work that I have suggested is so central to humanitarian action.

Perhaps the "productive" imagination is more present in the spheres I have been discussing than at first appears. For the term *re-creative* can also be translated as "to create again," which *is* related to artistic imitation or mimesis. "Mimetic imitation is not slavish copying, but the repetition of a thing differently, representation, that reaches for and at its best reaches some central features without necessarily looking the same, for example. . . . Looked at through art, the creative and the reproductive are perhaps not very far from one another, or even separate" (von Bonsdorff 2009:29–30; see also Taussig 1993). The numerous handwork projects I discuss in chapters 4 and 5, from the Aid Bunny to the Mother Teresa blankets, usually involved re-creation and not simple copying; things were made from resourcefully re-purposed yarn, reclaimed fabric, found millinery in projects that were often some combination of individual and collective agency—and surprise. Instead of mechanical imitation there was a flow with a back-and-forth movement between the near automatic gesture of knitting and the aesthetic decision—and perhaps deliberative conversation and collaborative imagination.

Examined through ethnography, things look very much the same: the re-creative and the creative are both present in the dialogical, intersubjective social processes of interviews, the close listening, the seeing and envisioning, the making/doing with others, and other practices through which basic anthropological understanding emerges, both in the field and in the writing.[34] And, again, the parallel can be extended to emergency relief and aid work, as I learned from the Red Cross people I interviewed. I never heard an aid worker describe a mission as "more of the same old same old." Quite the contrary, international missions were occasions for personal and professional learning, and for pushing oneself. There was an anxious need to do things *really well*. This was not just a matter of doing what one was being paid to do. There was, I think, an expectation of putting one's "heart and soul" into one's work in the field. The professionalism required discipline, coordinated teamwork, following procedure, the management of affect, but, as with any mission, people also got entangled with risk, the necessity of improvisation and fast decision-making, and, continually, working with aid recipients faced with extreme circumstances. The imagination of the worlds

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(and the dangers) around them as they worked, ate, took breaks, washed, and slept, and the subtle changes to the self that were demanded in daily working with people (often in cultural contexts very different from their own) involved forms of both re-creative and creative imagination. These worlds in the field formed a certain kind of “dream space” that was, for many, good to inhabit and hard to relinquish when a mission came to an end (Tsing 2005).

So, to return to the beginning: Who are these people? Who are these aid workers? I will attempt to show through intersubjective, ethnographic engagement with them what I came to understand about their need to help, their need for “the world out there,” their experiences of domestic attachments, the creative and re-creative processes and practices they became engaged in through their work in disaster zones of many kinds, and the transformations (willed and unwilled) of the relation of self to self that they experienced. Later in the book, I will also *make be*, in order to make meaningful, the worlds of loneliness and even abjection that the nonprofessional domestic humanitarians—old knitters and others—lived in. The forms of voluntarism and help that they offered to the needy involved creative and re-creative processes that were important to try to understand. They, too, needed a connection to the world “out there,” elsewhere.

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