

Queering Protracted Displacement: Lessons from Internally Displaced Persons in the Philippines

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Introduction

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are individuals who are forced to flee their homes due to war-like conditions, but do not cross an international border. Protracted refugee situations (PRS) involve long-term exile exceeding five years, whereby finding durable solutions is unattainable because of continued violations of human rights and economic insecurity. This framework identifies refugees, but we would include IDPs, as 'forgotten groups' and 'objects of policy concern.'¹ To insist on the current definition of PRS denies the non-normative realities of how people move, and the forces of colonialism, capitalism, and the environment that cause people to flee.² It also renders the wide and varied lived conditions of displaced individuals within or outside borders into a singular, temporal, and nation-state directed category of protracted displacement.³

¹ J Hyndman and W Giles, 'Protracted displacement. Living on the edge', in A Bloch and G Dona (eds.), *Forced Migration: Current Issues and Debates*, 1st edition, Routledge, London, 2018, pp. 74–87, p. 74.

² V Nguyen, 'Refugeetude: When Does a Refugee Stop Being a Refugee?', *Social Text*, vol. 37, issue 2, 2019, pp. 109–131, p. 116. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7371003>.

³ K Long, *Permanent Crises? Unlocking the protracted displacement of refugees and internally displaced persons*, University of Oxford, October 2011, retrieved 3 November 2021, p. 5, <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/files-1/pb-unlocking-protracted-displacement-2011.pdf>.

Queer theory is shaped by academic rejections of heterosexuality as the model for sexual formations and political engagement during HIV/AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴ It is a rejection of hierarchical, dichotomous, and categorical knowledge formation,⁵ and instead embraces multiple—and sometimes contradictory—ways in which knowledge, power, and identity are enacted.⁶ Moreover, queer temporality offers alternatives to the conventional linear progression of time.⁷ In this short paper, we employ queer theory to reject the restrictive definition of protracted displacement. Additionally, we seek to destabilise the meanings ascribed by international and national policies on IDPs and their parameters of who is displaced, who deserves protection, and when someone stops being displaced.

Queering Protracted Displacement

We interrogate and challenge the current parameters of PRS on two bases—time from displacement and international human rights legislation's heavy reliance on the nation-state framework and state actors. First, PRS is not a temporal status that forcibly displaced individuals transition in and out of. Displacement is experienced along a continuum; it lingers even well beyond traditional durable solutions of return, local integration, and resettlement. Second, international human rights law necessitates international conventions be negotiated and incorporated into domestic legal systems, affirming 'that all human beings have certain basic human rights, regardless of their legal status',⁸ intended to protect refugees in protracted situations. Despite these international protections, many countries confine refugees in camps, where movements are highly restricted and the provision of necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing are uneven and inadequate.⁹

⁴ A Jagose, 'Queer Theory', in M C Horowitz (ed.), *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 5, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 2005, pp. 1980–1985, p. 1980.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1981.

⁶ M F Manalansan IV, 'Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies', *The International Migration Review*, vol. 40, issue 1, 2006, pp. 224–249, p. 224, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2006.00009.x>.

⁷ J J Halberstam and J Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York University Press, New York, 2005, p. 2.

⁸ E Ferris, 'Protracted Refugee Situations, Human Rights and Civil Society', in G Loescher, J Milner, E Newman, and G G Troeller (eds.), *Protracted Refugee Situations: Political, Human Rights and Security Implications*, UN University Press, Tokyo, 2008, pp. 85–107, p. 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

An important distinction between IDPs and refugees is the crossing of an international border.¹⁰ IDPs are therefore rendered under the protection of the very government(s) that may be responsible for their displacement.¹¹ The reliance on nation-states for organising protection therefore presents unique challenges for IDPs who may be disenfranchised by the same government(s) negotiating their rights. International legal instruments, such as those developed by the UN refugee agency, rely on nation-states to formulate domestic directives, which might do more harm than good in the lives of IDPs seeking protection. We draw on the ‘wide-ranging and unmethodical resistance’¹² of queer theory to reimagine PRS by disrupting its temporal parameters and reliance on nation-states. The stories of IDPs in the Philippines show how queering stories of protracted displacement can reveal a fluidity and complexity of experience that should be accounted for in research and policy solutions.

Longing for Home Where the Mangroves Used to Grow

Our project of queering protracted displacement was inspired by the stories of IDPs in the Philippines. Internal displacement in this nation-state is primarily driven by natural disasters, exacerbated by lingering poverty, rapid urbanisation, and armed conflict struggles, contributing to distinct trajectories of (protracted) displacement within the country. The stories emerged from eleven semi-structured interviews, conducted between July and August of 2021, with women and gender diverse individuals who fled from their homes during the Zamboanga City siege that erupted in September 2013. The participants continue to call Zamboanga City home, while also expressing feelings of prolonged displacement, especially the women who were relocated away from their communities, but also the women who could return.

Hyacinth,¹³ who now lives on stilt houses in Masepla where mangroves used to grow, wished for nothing but to return to her first home, even though it has been razed by fire, and could not be reconstructed because it was in an informal settlement. She explained, ‘we were not allowed to go back because we did not

¹⁰ P Orchard, ‘The Contested Origins of Internal Displacement’, *International Journal of Refugee Law*, vol. 28, issue 2, 2016, pp. 210–233, p. 210, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eev031>.

¹¹ W Giles, ‘Women Forced to Flee: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons’, in C Cohn (ed.), *Women and Wars: Toward a conceptual framework*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 80–101, p. 82.

¹² Jagose, p. 1980.

¹³ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

have tagging.¹⁴ We begged for mercy but [they]¹⁵ still did not let us.’ She calls Zamboanga City home because she ‘could not do anything’ and ‘since [we are] here, we will call Zamboanga beautiful.’ Despite being relocated, Hyacinth continues to live a life in prolonged displacement because she yearns for a home in the past, a home she longs to return to.

The imagination of home ‘as being in the present’¹⁶ does not ‘come to an end when people find/build a shelter...it is more related to the extent people regain a sense of home’.¹⁷ Ivy, a former IDP, whose house had been reconstructed, described a lingering feeling of being a *palaboy* (homeless). Returnees such as Camellia also expressed a similar feeling of abandonment: ‘when we returned home, I felt something unexplainable. Some of the members of our family were no longer living here because they transferred to another city, and some of my siblings left. Just like that.’ Camellia, along with others who shared their stories, continue to live in imminent danger following the Zamboanga City siege. Ambrose explained that he is ‘more alert just in case there will be another war,’ and he constantly prays that ‘the tragedy does not happen again in Zamboanga City.’

The Fluidity and Complexity of Displacement

The stories shared by IDPs in the Philippines signal the fluidity and complexity of protracted displacement as a status and identification. Their imagination of home extends beyond its physical and temporal location. They continue to construct an image of themselves in the past, sometimes poignantly when they felt ‘at home’ or in the future in terms of where they see themselves. These narratives are at the heart of our critique of temporally restrictive (exceeding five years) definitions of PRS, which we call to be extended to IDPs. Furthermore, the practice of *tagging* is one example of state mechanisms that exacerbate the vulnerability of IDPs with a tenuous relationship to the nation-state organising their protection. Any consideration of traditional durable solutions of return, local integration, and resettlement, that fails to recognise and account for the fluidity and complexity of displacement does not end forced displacement. Such durable solutions cannot capture the enduring violent and tragic lived realities of displaced persons (within

¹⁴ This refers to IDPs who are eligible for the reconstruction housing project or permanent resettlement project of the City’s Social Welfare and Development (CSWD). IDPs who did not stay in evacuation facilities or were unaware that they had to register with the CSWD were designated as untagged.

¹⁵ Refers to the local government unit in Zamboanga City.

¹⁶ L E Perez Murcia, ‘“Physically Sheltered but Existentially Homeless”: Losing Home in the Aftermath of Conflict and Displacement’, *Migration Studies*, vol. 9, issue 3, 2020, pp. 1361–1379, p. 1364, <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnaa020>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1364.

and outside of national borders) and their agency in coping with their experiences and rebuilding their lives.

Queering protracted displacement permits a broader and more complex enactment of identities, behaviours, and practices, including the lived experience and imagination of home. Just as the participants in the study, displaced persons occupy diverse social locations based on gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, and age. The combination of these markers can inform their experiences and inform possible solutions. By queering displacement, we are encouraging a rethinking of displacement as a continuum, but we are careful not to claim that IDPs are always in exile and/or in need of rescue. Additionally, we call attention to the reliance of international conventions and bodies on a nation-state framework and state mechanisms to categorise and organise protection.

In this brief interjection in an important and timely special issue, we propose a queer imagination of protection that rejects false dichotomies and hierarchies and embraces unruly and unstable identifications. We seek a reimagination of PRS that draws parallels between displaced persons who may or may not have crossed an international border, thus rendering IDPs' conditions of prolonged displacement, and their experiences of harm and violence, legible under the human rights framework. This reimagination would also make room for considerations of agency and resistance of displaced persons and the varied roles, activities, and potential of non-state actors in organising protection. Further research on prolonged displacement and designing of durable solutions should consider the messiness of categories and its material effects on those excluded.

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