



The Theatre of Protection

PERFORMING REFUGEE PROTECTION IN A WORLD OF STRATIFIED COMPASSION

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Abstract

How do temporary refugee protection frameworks reflect and reproduce broader global hierarchies of race, gender, and geopolitical belonging? What alternative frameworks could be envisioned for refugee protection that resist performativity and prioritize justice, accountability, and refugee agency? This article conceptualizes contemporary refugee protection as a geopolitical performance, revealing that mechanisms like Canada's CUAET and the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) operate less as rights-based guarantees than as dramaturgical acts of statecraft. Drawing on a feminist international relations and intersectional theoretical framework, the article develops a four-part dramaturgical lens—script, staging, audience, and temporality—to analyze how refugee responses are choreographed to reaffirm state virtue while maintaining racialized, gendered, and imperial hierarchies. It situates the performative logics of CUAET and the TPD within the historical legacy of the post-WWII refugee regime, showing how moral leadership is performed through selective humanitarianism. Through close textual and policy analysis of

Canadian and EU protection measures, the article reveals how states simultaneously enact compassion and exclusion, offering refuge to some while rendering others invisible. The article concludes by proposing an intersectional feminist framework for non-performative refugee protection rooted in justice, accountability, and refugee agency.

Keywords

temporary protection; performative humanitarianism; feminist international relations; refugee governance; intersectionality

Introduction

As the international community reflects on the legacy of the Second World War and confronts fears of a looming World War III, this article examines how the institutional frameworks born in the ashes of WWII have evolved into a geopolitically selective regime of temporary protection, shaped by patriarchal, racialized, and performative humanitarian logics. The modern refugee protection regime emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, institutionalized through the 1951 Refugee Convention and the creation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (UN, 1951, 1967; Barnett, 2011). Framed as a moral response to the horrors of the Holocaust and mass displacement in Europe, this postwar architecture enshrined international responsibility to protect the forcibly displaced.

Yet more than seventy years later, with global displacement reaching a record 100 million people (UNHCR, 2023), the promise of refugee protection increasingly operates not as a mechanism of justice, but as a theatre of protection. This theatre entails a dual performance: one in which states publicly enact moral authority through gestures of humanitarian care, while displaced people are expected to perform vulnerability, gratitude, and compliance to access aid (Benslama-Dabdoub, 2024). Like any theatre, it involves scripts (of rescue and victimhood), staging (through policies and public spectacle), an audience (both domestic constituencies and international observers), and temporality (where protection is often

limited to a moment of geopolitical expediency). This dramaturgy of care serves not only to reassure global publics of benevolence but also to obscure the conditional, racialized, and patriarchal structures underpinning humanitarian governance.

Building on performance theory and feminist IR, this article conceptualizes the refugee regime as a dramaturgical apparatus composed of four key elements: scripts, staging, audiences, and temporality. Scripts refer to the normative narratives that structure who appears as the righteous protector and who as the grateful victim, often echoing colonial, racial, and patriarchal tropes. Staging entails the institutional, legal, and visual arrangements, such as visa policies, media spectacles, and public rituals, through which protection is made visible and legible. Audiences include both domestic publics (who must be reassured of state virtue) and international observers (whose recognition enhances geopolitical legitimacy). Temporality highlights the time-bounded nature of protection, which is frequently framed as exceptional, provisional, and subject to political withdrawal. Together, these elements help expose how refugee protection functions less as a system of rights than as a geopolitical performance calibrated for moral resonance, not structural change.

This study reveals that contemporary refugee protection regimes function as a geopolitical theatre in which states perform humanitarian benevolence to assert moral authority, while displaced people, especially those who are racialized, feminized, and geopolitically peripheral, are compelled to perform vulnerability and gratitude to access aid. Rooted in the post-WWII humanitarian order, these performances uphold global inequalities under the guise of care. By interrogating this dual performance, the article shows how mechanisms like the European Union's (EU) Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) and Canada's Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) program legitimate exclusion while staging select moments of compassion. In response, it calls for an intersectional feminist reimagining of protection as a rights-based practice rather than a conditional, performative act.

Grounded in feminist international relations (IR) theory, and

particularly Iris Marion Young's (2003) concept of the logic of masculinist protection, this article draws from intersectional approaches to reveal how gender, race, and geopolitical status co-constitute the norms and practices of global refugee policy. Governments position themselves as moral protectors in ways that echo patriarchal and colonial power dynamics, while recipients of protection, especially those marked by racialized and gendered difference, are expected to display deference and compliant gratitude. In this sense, refugee protection is not simply about shelter or safety; it is a stage-managed process through which global inequality is both obscured and reproduced.

The article develops this concept of protection-as-theatre through four sections. It begins with a theoretical framework grounded in feminist IR, intersectionality, critical humanitarianism, and performance studies to conceptualize the gendered and racialized dimensions of refugee protection. It then turns to two contemporary case studies—Canada's CUAET and the European Union's invocation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)—to examine how states perform humanitarian benevolence through scripted, highly visible, and selectively racialized responses. These performances are analyzed using four dramaturgical tools: scripts, staging, audiences, and temporality. Building on these cases, the article reflects on the post-World War II origins of the refugee regime, arguing that contemporary protection mechanisms inherit selective moral logics rooted in Eurocentric and patriarchal foundations. In the final section, the article outlines what a non-performative, feminist, and intersectional approach to refugee protection might require, one that centers refugee agency and rights over state spectacle.

Intersectional Feminist Perspectives on the Patriarchal Logic of Protection

The concept of protection has long occupied a central, if under-examined, place in international relations. Traditionally framed as a sovereign duty or humanitarian imperative, protection is often imag-

ined as apolitical: an altruistic response to vulnerability. Feminist scholars have challenged this assumption, arguing that protection is deeply entwined with racialized, gendered, and geopolitical hierarchies (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This article adopts an intersectional feminist lens, drawing on feminist IR, Black feminist thought, and postcolonial critique, to analyze how refugee protection regimes function not merely as shelters from violence, but as instruments of global stratification.

Intersectionality, as theorized by Crenshaw (2006), reveals how systems of power such as racism, patriarchy, and legal precarity intersect to produce differentiated experiences of marginalization. Structural intersectionality captures how multiple axes of subordination (e.g., race, gender, immigration status) compound to produce systemic disadvantage. Political intersectionality exposes how dominant policy discourses often erase those situated at the intersections. Both forms are salient in refugee governance: displaced women of color often face heightened barriers to protection, while dominant humanitarian scripts render them legible only through performances of suffering and gratitude.

A foundational account of this asymmetry comes from Iris Marion Young's (2003) concept of masculinist protection. Young argues that the protector-protected relationship is not one of mutual obligation, but of dominance and dependence. The protector—cast as rational, virtuous, and sovereign—is masculinized, while the protected is feminized, passive, and dependent. Transposed to global refugee governance, states perform as benevolent saviors, while displaced people, especially women from the Global South, must perform compliant vulnerability to receive aid. This performance reproduces colonial scripts of rescue and reinscribes patriarchal hierarchies under the guise of care.

Humanitarianism, as Barnett (2011) argues, has long functioned as a form of paternalistic governance rooted in imperial logics, casting aid as a gift from morally superior protectors to passive recipients. De Lauri (2019) extends this critique by theorizing “humanitarian militarism,” the fusion of aid and security logics. These dynamics manifest in the visual, legal, and symbolic staging

of refugee protection: visa policies, media spectacles, and “rescue” rituals operate as props in a geopolitical theatre that reaffirms the authority of powerful states while depoliticizing displacement.

This moral economy of deservingness demands that refugees, especially women, perform vulnerability in ways legible to host societies. Expressions of trauma, humility, and gratitude are often prerequisites for support (Crawley, 2022; Lê Espiritu & Vang, 2024). Those who deviate by asserting agency or dissent risk erasure or sanction (Omata, 2024). States, too, perform: their humanitarian gestures serve not only displaced people but also domestic and international audiences, reinforcing claims to moral legitimacy while obscuring the racialized and temporary nature of their commitments (Ticktin, 2011).

The post-WWII refugee regime was never neutral. Its early focus on white Europeans fleeing Communism excluded gendered and colonial forms of persecution (Chimni, 2009; Freedman, 2007). Despite reforms, refugee women remain cast as symbolic figures, grateful victims whose protection is conditional, temporary, and depoliticized. Feminist IR scholarship (Enloe, 2004; Tickner, 2001; Young, 2003) shows that international institutions privilege masculinized and militarized notions of security, sidelining justice- and care-based alternatives. Within refugee governance, this translates into expectations that displaced women conform to feminized scripts of passivity and gratitude to access protection (Crawley, 2022; Lê Espiritu & Vang, 2024). Protection is thus extended not as a right, but as a favor, selectively distributed and dependent on legibility within dominant narratives.

Building on these insights, this article advances a dramaturgical framework to interrogate how refugee protection is enacted, recognized, and strategically withdrawn. Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) foundational work, and later developments in international relations and cultural sociology (Weber, 2006; Alexander, 2006; Wilcox, 2014), the dramaturgical lens allows us to read refugee governance as a performance. Migration and security scholars have long noted the performative dimensions of border control and humanitarianism, where states stage moral authority through rituals of aid and

exclusion (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011; Aradau, 2008). More recent critiques emphasize the role of affect, spectacle, and deservingness in shaping protection practices (Crawley, 2022; Schwöbel-Patel & Özkaramanli, 2017; Omata, 2024).

This article builds on and systematizes those insights by offering a dramaturgical framework composed of four interrelated tools: scripts, staging, audiences, and temporality. Scripts refer to the normative narratives that cast states as protectors and refugees as victims. Staging captures the institutional, legal, and visual arrangements through which protection is made legible. Audiences include domestic publics and international observers whose recognition legitimizes the performance. Temporality reveals how protection is framed as exceptional and provisional—offered in crisis, withdrawn in normalization. These tools, grounded in intersectional feminist theory, enable a critical reading of refugee protection as a geopolitical spectacle: one that legitimizes exclusion even as it appears to offer care.

Performing Protection: Racialized and Gendered Scripts in Humanitarian Governance

The international refugee regime operates as a “theatre of protection,” in which both states and displaced people perform predefined roles. States enact the part of benevolent protector, projecting humanitarian virtue through staged policy gestures and symbolic acts, while refugees are expected to perform vulnerability, passivity, and gratitude in order to access aid. This dynamic extends the patriarchal logic of masculinist protection: as Young (2003) argues, the protector–protected relationship is not one of reciprocity, but of dominance and dependence. In the global humanitarian order, states appear as rational saviors, while refugees, particularly women and children from the Global South, are cast as feminized, helpless victims.

This performance is deeply racialized and gendered. As Crawley (2022) notes, white Western narratives routinely depict “women

from the Global South” as disempowered and in need of saving, a framing that casts their male counterparts as threats and reinforces colonial imaginaries. The resulting binary, white masculine protector versus vulnerable non-Western woman, legitimizes selective compassion and structures who is seen as “deserving.” These scripts persist in humanitarian practice, shaping both policy responses and public perceptions.

The post-Holocaust humanitarian order, institutionalized after World War II, contributed to this dramaturgy by aligning refugee protection with moral redemption and geopolitical strategy. The 1951 Refugee Convention, while a landmark in international law, was grounded in Eurocentric assumptions and initially applied only to Europeans (UN, 1951, 1967; Barnett, 2011; Chimni, 2009). As Western states extended protection to those fleeing Communist regimes, humanitarianism became a performance of liberal virtue, selectively enacted to affirm political identity. This logic endures: as Ineli-Ciger (2022) argues, the European Union’s embrace of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 contrasted sharply with prior pushbacks of Syrians and Afghans, revealing a racialized hierarchy of suffering. Humanitarian benevolence thus functions as geopolitical stagecraft, elevating certain groups as sympathetic victims while rendering others invisible or threatening.

Canada’s response to Ukrainian displacement reveals a parallel script. Hyndman (2023) conceptualizes it as humanitarian nationalism: a state-led performance of compassion that fuses national identity, geopolitical allegiance, and emotional spectacle. Through banal but affective symbols (e.g., flags, commemorative stamps, public messaging), the Canadian state staged itself as a morally righteous actor, offering refuge (albeit temporary) to white European civilians while excluding those subject to securitized scrutiny, such as Afghans, Syrians, or Tamils (Hyndman, 2023). Humanitarian nationalism, in this sense, reinforces the theatre of protection not as a universal ethic but as a racialized script calibrated to generate domestic approval and international acclaim. As in all theatre, audiences matter: domestic publics and global observers do not passively

watch but provide the moral validation that gives the performance its political utility.

This dramaturgy also scripts the behavior of refugees, particularly women, who are expected to perform legible vulnerability and compliant gratitude. International organizations frequently present “Refugee Women” as a homogenous category defined by suffering and dependency (Crawley, 2022, p. 368). While this framing may reflect genuine compassion, it also serves strategic purposes: it renders refugees legible as apolitical victims and helps depoliticize humanitarian action. Visibility is staged through media imagery, legal classifications, and humanitarian infrastructures that choreograph who qualifies for care and how. Women who embody trauma, humility, and appreciation are more likely to receive aid, while those who express dissent or agency may be labeled ungrateful or uncooperative (Omata, 2024).

The expectation of gratitude plays a central role in this performance. As Nayeri (2017) observes, refugees are often expected to repay protection with deference, even at the cost of silence. This demand is particularly acute for women, whose social legitimacy within humanitarian spaces depends on their performance of both need and humility. Lê Espiritu and Vang (2024) describe “ungratefulness” as a form of political refusal, an act that disrupts the savior narrative but risks sanction. Aid organizations frequently interpret deviations from expected behavior, such as using aid in unexpected ways, as failures of character rather than expressions of agency. Refugees who improvise or resist are often pathologized, with terms like “refugee syndrome” invoked to reframe dissent as dysfunction, or even a threat (Omata, 2024; Gatter, 2023).

Humanitarian imagery further reinforces this moral economy. As Malkki (1996) argues, refugees are often portrayed as “speechless emissaries,” whose suffering authorizes humanitarian intervention but whose voices are excluded. Otto et al. (2013) and Schwöbel-Patel and Özkaramanli (2017) note the contradictory demands placed on refugee women: they must be simultaneously grateful and entrepreneurial, passive yet resilient. This neoliberal fantasy—the figure of the deferential but self-sufficient refugee—serves host states

by justifying generosity while maintaining control and deflecting critique.

An intersectional feminist perspective reveals that refugee protection is not only unevenly distributed but also regulated through scripts of identity and moral legibility. Women who fail to embody acceptable femininity or who articulate politicized grievances may be denied aid or rendered invisible. As Crawley (2022) emphasizes, protection is extended not as a universal right but as a conditional favor, granted to those who align with racialized and gendered expectations. Even well-intentioned humanitarian programs thus reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to redress.

These dynamics are not incidental, but instead foundational to the dramaturgy of the refugee regime. Protection operates not as a neutral instrument of justice, but as a staged performance: scripted by states, enacted through policy and spectacle, sustained by audience recognition, and bounded by a temporality of crisis. This section has shown how protection is extended through racialized and gendered scripts of deservingness. The next section turns to the empirical staging of these performances, examining how Canada's CUAET and Europe's TPD rearticulate post-WWII humanitarian ideals in ways that both reaffirm and recalibrate global hierarchies.

Methodological Framework

To examine how the “theatre of protection” operates in practice, this article adopts a qualitative case study approach grounded in feminist, intersectional, and critical humanitarian analysis. Two contemporary cases of temporary protection are selected for close examination: the European Union's activation of its Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for Ukrainians and Canada's launch of the Canada–Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) program. These cases were chosen because they represent highly visible and politically celebrated responses to displacement following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Their prominence offers a revealing contrast between the performative embrace of select refugee groups and the routine exclusion or neglect of others.

Methodologically, the analysis draws on a purposive selection of policy documents (including Council of the European Union decisions and Government of Canada communications), official statements from political leaders (such as those by Ursula von der Leyen), and public media reporting (e.g., CBC News, Global News). The analysis also incorporates insights from relevant academic literature and NGO reports to situate these materials within broader critiques of humanitarian governance. These sources were selected for their visibility, rhetorical centrality, and their role in shaping public and institutional understandings of protection.

The article employs critical discourse analysis to trace how protection is framed through dominant narratives of rescue, moral duty, and gratitude. Particular attention is paid to how these discourses activate racialized, gendered, and geopolitical tropes that cast certain groups as inherently more “deserving” of care. This approach aligns with feminist interpretive methodologies, which prioritize the interrogation of symbolic structures and power-laden narratives rather than positivist measures of effectiveness. Building on critiques of humanitarianism as a form of paternalistic governance (Barnett, 2011) and its entanglement with security and state power (De Lauri, 2019), the article treats refugee protection not as a neutral policy instrument, but as a historically embedded and ideologically saturated practice of managing mobility and difference.

Guiding the analysis is a dramaturgical framework composed of four interrelated conceptual tools: scripts, staging, audiences, and temporality. Scripts refer to the moral narratives through which states are positioned as benevolent protectors and refugees as passive victims. Staging captures the institutional, visual, and legal arrangements, such as visa policy, border rituals, and public displays, which make protection legible as a humanitarian act. Audiences include both domestic publics and international observers, whose recognition reinforces the legitimacy of these performances. Temporality highlights the crisis-bound and provisional nature of protection, which is often framed as temporary, exceptional, and strategically reversible. Together, these elements enable a critical reading of protection not as a rights-based entitlement, but as a

geopolitical spectacle calibrated for moral resonance and political expediency.

In what follows, each case study is examined to illustrate how these performative logics materialize in concrete policy contexts, and how they reproduce hierarchies of race, gender, and global belonging even in moments of apparent generosity.

Europe's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for Ukrainian Refugees

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the largest refugee exodus in Europe since WWII, and European states responded with an unprecedented invocation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD). Within days of the invasion, EU Justice and Home Affairs ministers signaled unanimous support for activating the long-dormant 2001 TPD, which was formally approved on 4 March 2022 (Ineli-Ciger, 2022).

This measure gave immediate, collective protection to Ukrainians fleeing the war, granting them residency rights, access to jobs, education, and welfare across the EU without undergoing individual asylum processes (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). Since March 2022, over 4 million people from Ukraine (overwhelmingly women and children) have received shelter and support in Europe under these provisions (Council of the European Union, 2025). On the surface, this swift and unified action was a triumph of humanitarian goodwill, a demonstration that Europe stands by those in need of protection and that “all those fleeing Putin’s bombs are welcome in Europe” (European Commission, 2022). The outpouring of aid and solidarity, from volunteers at border train stations to rapid policy coordination in Brussels, projected a powerful image of the EU as a compassionate protector of the vulnerable (Saito, 2022; Sikorska, 2022). This carefully orchestrated response functioned as a dramatic staging of humanitarian virtue: press conferences, public declarations, and train station aid scenes were not only policy outcomes, but acts in a larger performance designed for both domestic and global audiences. In this sense, the TPD activation was not only a

legal mechanism but also an opening scene in a geopolitical theatre meant to affirm Europe's role as a moral actor on the world stage.

This swift embrace of Ukrainian refugees also echoes the post-World War II legacy of selective humanitarianism that shaped the early refugee regime. Just as Cold War-era policies centered white, anti-communist Europeans as the archetypal refugee (Chimni, 2009), the TPD's activation reanimates this racialized and geopolitical script. The moral redemption of Western states after the Holocaust depended in part on showcasing care for "deserving" victims whose identities aligned with dominant Euro-Christian norms. In this sense, the TPD is not a break from past refugee politics but a continuation of the postwar performance of virtue through the protection of those seen as racially and culturally proximate: white, Christian, and European.

Analyzing the TPD through a dramaturgical lens makes visible how refugee protection was activated not just as a legal measure but as a carefully staged performance. Scripts of innocence and deservingness, symbolic staging through border rituals and official messaging, the presence of domestic and international audiences, and the short-term temporality of "emergency" response all worked together to produce a spectacle of European virtue. These four tools—script, staging, audience, and temporality—reveal how the politics of protection were orchestrated for strategic recognition and moral legitimacy.

Yet the TPD's activation was not a radical reimagining of refugee law: it was a carefully de-limited, reversible legal script. As Carrera et al. (2023) describe, the TPD was not designed as a permanent protection mechanism, but as a short-term crisis management tool. Its invocation thus allowed the EU to perform generosity while maintaining legal distance from the more permanent, rights-based commitments required under international refugee law (Carrera et al., 2023). This flexibility was key to its political acceptability: by granting temporary status en masse, the EU could offer immediate protection without opening the door to future claims of permanence or full integration.

Nevertheless, as feminist and postcolonial critics point out, this

very spectacle of solidarity revealed a double standard in who is deemed worthy of protection (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). The enthusiastic embrace of predominantly white, Christian Ukrainians starkly contrasted with Europe's fortified approach to refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia in recent years. Observers noted that the same Polish border forces cheerfully assisting Ukrainian women and children, carrying their luggage, offering hot drinks and warm smiles, had only months before been brutally pushing back Syrian and Afghan asylum seekers into the frigid woods on the Belarus border (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). Across Europe, politicians and media openly acknowledged the special status of Ukrainian refugees in language laced with Eurocentrism. Ukrainians were described as civilized, like us, European people with blue eyes and blonde hair, and therefore not the normal kind of refugee who would be met with suspicion (Mayaleh et al., 2025). This racialized hierarchy of suffering, in which war and displacement are seen as aberrant and intolerable when experienced by Europeans, but as quasi-normal for Others, underpinned the moral theatre of the TPD response.

European leaders performed the role of principled protectors rallying to save their "neighbors." The EU's official messaging stressed pan-European kinship and duty: "We will provide protection to those seeking shelter and help those looking for a safe way home," declared European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (European Commission, 2022). Such rhetoric evoked the patriarchal trope of gallant Europe rescuing women and children from the (male) aggressor's violence, casting the EU in a heroic light on the world stage. At the same time, this generosity was geopolitically selective. The Temporary Protection mechanism, long dormant, had pointedly never been activated for prior refugee crises, which means that the script of European generosity is not consistently applied, but selectively performed. Its sudden deployment for Ukraine suggests a rehearsed script lying in wait, ready to be enacted when the right protagonists appeared: white, Christian, proximate. Notably, the TPD was never activated for the 2011 Arab Spring upheavals or the Syrian civil war, despite years of pleas as boats of Syrians arrived on European shores (Ineli-Ciger, 2022).

Only when “displacement from Ukraine,” a conflict directly impacting Europe’s strategic interests and involving victims who “look like us,” occurred did all EU members unanimously agree to open their arms. Critical analysis suggests the reason is plain: Ukraine is acknowledged as a European country and the Ukrainians are white Christian Europeans, factors which instantly galvanized sympathy and political will for protection that other groups have been denied. Furthermore, the geopolitical interests of EU member states only reinforced the need to help with the forced displacement from Ukraine. In a way, Europe’s performance of humanitarianism was dependent on a racialized construction of the “deserving” refugee. This is further evident in the fine print of the TPD decision itself: the Council’s eligibility criteria mainly covered Ukrainian nationals and a narrow category of others, excluding most third-country nationals who had been resident in Ukraine (such as migrant students and workers from Africa or South Asia). Those excluded, many of whom also fled bombs and violence in Ukraine, fell through the cracks, left to seek asylum through regular channels or face return, revealing how even in moments of inclusion, legal exclusions are embedded by design. The activation of the TPD for Ukrainians simultaneously entailed the deliberate exclusion of most third-country nationals residing in Ukraine, particularly migrant workers and students from the Global South, thereby institutionalizing a racialized hierarchy of mobility (Carrera et al., 2023).

From an intersectional feminist lens, the TPD case illustrates how protection is staged as both benevolent and hierarchical. The public narrative centered on sheltering women and children (implicitly vulnerable and grateful), reinforcing a gendered script that helped rally support for the policy. Indeed, because Ukrainian men of military age were largely barred from leaving Ukraine, the refugee flow was overwhelmingly female and underage, making it easier for host states to present their efforts as “saving innocent women and children.” This spectacle of virtuous masculinity in international politics, with European countries acting as chivalrous guardians, burnished the EU’s moral credentials. But it simultaneously obscured ongoing structural violence at Europe’s borders. As

numerous human rights reports documented, even as Ukrainians flowed in, refugees from the Global South continued to be detained, pushed back, or left to drown at sea, far from the TV cameras (Carrera et al., 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2025, pp.163-170). The EU's temporary protection for Ukrainians thus operated as a political performance with a dual audience: domestic European publics, who witnessed a virtuous tableau of care that affirmed national values, and the international community, to whom Europe restaged its post-WWII role as the moral guardian of human rights. These audiences were crucial to the success of the performance: without them, the humanitarian script loses its geopolitical utility.

This is a textbook case of humanitarianism as alibi: showcasing mercy toward some as a way to legitimize the exclusion of others. In sum, Europe's response to Ukraine has been both laudable in scale and laden with contradiction. It shows how quickly protection can be extended when beneficiaries fit a preferred profile, and how precarious that protection becomes when the political script shifts. Plans are already underway to phase out the TPD by 2025–2027, encouraging Ukrainian refugees to either integrate via other visas or return once the war subsides (Council of the European Union, 2025). This planned wind-down reflects the TPD's design as a form of “temporary exceptionalism,” not a pathway to durable reform. The temporality of the response (emergency-based, time-limited, and politically contingent) reveals the fragility of protection when it is performed rather than institutionalized. The policy was never meant to restructure Europe's approach to displacement: it was a geopolitical spectacle, carefully staged for resonance and short-term legitimacy. The protector's magnanimity, it seems, comes with an expiration date. Like a limited-run production, the TPD response was always meant to be dismantled once the audience's applause faded and strategic interest waned.

Canada's CUAET: Emergency Embrace of Ukrainians

Across the Atlantic, Canada's response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis offers another telling example of performative protection. Traditionally celebrated for its refugee generosity, Canada's asylum system is also marked by deep structural selectivity (Epp, 2017; Hathaway, 1988). The CUAET initiative, while framed as a humanitarian success, offers a revealing case of what this article terms performative protection: a carefully staged display of compassion that obscures racialized exclusions, economic interests, and patriarchal scripts.

Analyzing CUAET through the dramaturgical lens introduced earlier reveals how Canada's gesture was not simply a bureaucratic mechanism, but a performance. It relied on racialized and gendered scripts of deservingness, was staged through symbolic and policy gestures, targeted both domestic and international audiences, and was defined by a temporary horizon calibrated to crisis. Each of these four tools—script, staging, audience, and temporality—exposes how emergency refuge was choreographed to maximize moral authority while minimizing structural change.

Canada's selective embrace of Ukrainian refugees is not new, but part of a longer postwar arc in which humanitarianism has functioned as a tool of moral self-fashioning. In the decades following World War II and the Holocaust, Canada rehabilitated its global image by selectively offering refuge to white, European, anti-communist refugees, while excluding racialized and colonized populations (Epp, 2017; Hathaway, 1988). The CUAET program echoes this legacy: a highly visible gesture of moral leadership that aligns protection with whiteness, geopolitical alliance, and cultural proximity. In this sense, CUAET is not a departure from past refugee policies, but an updated script in a post-Holocaust performance of benevolence.

In the face of Ukraine's plight, the Canadian government moved with uncharacteristic speed and generosity to create the Canada–Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) in

March 2022. Less than three weeks after the invasion, Canada opened this special program, which allowed any Ukrainian national (and their immediate family) to enter Canada as a temporary resident for up to three years, regardless of whether they had pre-existing ties to Canada (Government of Canada, 2023a). Non-Ukrainians without ties to Ukrainian nationals were excluded from this visa program (Falconer, 2022, p. 7). This extraordinary response also echoed a longer arc of Canadian humanitarian self-fashioning rooted in post-Holocaust moral responsibility, a legacy through which white, European victims are more readily embraced as worthy of rescue, allowing Canada to reaffirm its liberal identity without confronting the structural exclusions embedded in its asylum system.

Officials implemented extensive support measures for those admitted. According to Government of Canada sources, CUAET beneficiaries were offered free charter flights from Europe to Canada, temporary accommodation, and immediate access to work permits, health care, language training, and income assistance, including a one-time cash payment of \$3,000 per adult and \$1,500 per child through a dedicated support initiative (Government of Canada, 2024a, 2023b). In short, Canada constructed a parallel fast-track system to fast-forward Ukrainian evacuees into safety, bypassing the often years-long processing that refugees from elsewhere endure (Hagigi, 2024). The political messaging around CUAET highlighted compassion and “extraordinary measures” for a European ally in distress. Ukrainians were often depicted as model refugees: resilient, eager to work, and profoundly grateful. This reflects a racialized and gendered script: a group composed largely of women, children, and the elderly, performing the role of innocent victims of war.

The impact of CUAET has been massive. Over a two-year period, Canada received nearly 1.2 million applications from Ukrainians under the program, of which 962,000+ were approved (an approval rate of about 81%) (Hagigi, 2024). By April 2024, approximately 298,000 Ukrainian refugees had arrived in Canada, a scale of intake unprecedented in modern Canadian history (Gov-

ernment of Canada, 2024b). This remarkable wave was achieved not through formal refugee resettlement quotas but via the ad hoc emergency pathway that effectively invited an unlimited number of Ukrainians to come temporarily.

In performative terms, the public celebration of arriving Ukrainians was striking: media coverage featured tearful airport reunions, government press releases highlighted Canada's leadership, and ministers posed for photo-ops with Ukrainian newcomers (McSheffrey, 2022; Edwards, 2025). Many families were indeed met with warmth and tangible support, often facilitated by community volunteers and personal networks, reflecting the strength of Canada's Ukrainian diaspora (Hyndman, 2023). Yet these material gestures, while undoubtedly meaningful, reinforced a protection regime grounded not in rights but in conditional access. The welcome was a temporally bounded performance, leaving the underlying asylum infrastructure intact. These events were not merely acts of care but elements of a broader staging of humanitarianism. The audience was dual: domestic publics, for whom the spectacle reaffirmed national values of compassion and multiculturalism, and international observers, to whom Canada reasserted its image as a liberal humanitarian leader.

The CUAET was framed not as conventional asylum but as an extraordinary, time-bound gesture: application fees were waived, requirements streamlined, and no intake cap imposed (Government of Canada, 2023a; Hyndman, 2023). This fast-tracked protection was staged as exceptional virtue, yet its legal architecture was tightly constrained by temporality. Temporary protection confers no permanent residency and often leaves refugees in precarity (Jeziorek, 2024). By designating CUAET as a temporary residence pathway, and not a refugee stream, Canada maintained strategic control while avoiding long-term obligations (Bejan & Bryan, 2023). Had Canada waived visa requirements, Ukrainian nationals could have arrived independently and claimed asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention, thereby accessing permanent protections. Instead, the logic underpinning CUAET was not durable refuge but provisional-

ity, a scripted embrace calibrated for symbolic effect and policy flexibility.

The racialized script was further evident in the near-total absence of securitization. As Hyndman (2023, p. 4) observes, Ukrainian displacement was treated as an “exceptional case” in which refugees were “unencumbered by securitization considerations”. Unlike Afghan, Syrian, or Tamil claimants, frequently framed through discourses of fraud, extremism, or threat, Ukrainians, as white, Christian, and predominantly female, were presumed innocent. As Crenshaw’s (2006) notion of structural intersectionality reminds us, multiple axes of identity—race, religion, gender, geopolitical affiliation—interact to shape access to protection. Where some bodies are read as safe and sympathetic, others are preemptively cast as deviant.

Critical analysis reveals that Canada’s extraordinary embrace of Ukrainians also casts a spotlight on those left outside this circle of care. The selectivity in Canada’s humanitarianism became evident when comparing the response to other contemporary refugee groups. While virtually any Ukrainian fleeing war had unconditional access, refugees from crises like Afghanistan or Palestine faced far more restrictive measures. In late 2023, amid the Gaza war, Canada initially offered only 1,000 slots (later modestly raised to 5,000) for Palestinians, and even those came with stringent eligibility criteria (such as family ties to Canada) and a mere 16% approval rate (Hagigi, 2024). By October 2024, fewer than 300 Palestinians had been admitted to Canada, versus nearly 300,000 Ukrainians (Hagigi, 2024). These contrasts expose how Canada’s humanitarian stage privileges certain groups while others remain in the wings, excluded from the performance entirely.

From an intersectional feminist perspective, the CUAET case reinforces the notion of refugee women as symbolic actors in a national narrative. Ukrainian women were empathized with and celebrated for their labor contributions, but under a tacit bargain: safety in exchange for gratitude, adaptability, and silence. Their roles were clearly scripted: be diligent, deferential, and temporary. The program’s temporality ensured a state of contingent belonging,

welcomed but not entitled. As the emergency phase passes, the curtain is closing. Applications ended in July 2023, with the final arrivals required by mid-2024 (Government of Canada, 2023b). Benefits have been extended to 2026, but the stage is being dismantled.

In effect, Canada's grand humanitarian gesture was a time-limited show. The red carpet for Ukrainians and the barricades for others support the article's central claim: refugee protection today operates as a geopolitical theatre. Canada's CUAET policy reveals how compassion is scripted, staged, and timed for strategic ends, producing a performance of care that reaffirms, rather than disrupts, global hierarchies.

Beyond the Theatre: Toward an Intersectional Feminist Refugee Protection

To conclude, the case studies of Europe's TPD and Canada's CUAET exemplify how refugee protection today often amounts to a stage-managed performance, well-intentioned in appearance, but selective and conditional by design. Understanding protection as "theatre" is not meant to cynically dismiss the tangible aid some refugees receive. Rather, it exposes how protection becomes a performance, one that privileges certain lives, demands staged gratitude, and reaffirms the authority of benevolent patriarchs on the global stage. Crucially, these theatrical dynamics did not arise in opposition to the postwar refugee regime, but were seeded within it. The early architecture of protection, built on Eurocentric and patriarchal foundations, offered a template for selective moralism disguised as universal care. Dismantling this structure requires not more compassion, but a rethinking of the very scripts that govern protection. Having unveiled the patriarchal, racialized, and performative logics at work, the pressing question is: how might we move toward a non-performative, intersectional feminist approach to refugee protection? In other words, what would it take to transform the system from one that stagecraft compassion to one that institu-

tionalizes justice for all displaced people, across gendered, racialized, and geopolitical lines?

A starting point is to center refugee rights and agency rather than state beneficence. An intersectional feminist protection paradigm rejects the notion of refugees as passive wards grateful for rescue, and instead recognizes them as rights-bearing agents with situated knowledge. This implies designing policies that are accountable to refugees themselves and not to the audiences of humanitarian spectacle. Practically, this means meaningfully involving marginalized refugees in decision-making about assistance programs, camp governance, and resettlement criteria: treating them as partners, not props in others' narratives. It also means protecting space for dissent, critique, and refusal without jeopardizing access to aid. As Lê Espiritu and Vang (2024) argue, the radical act of ungratefulness, a refusal to perform gratitude or deference for conditional refuge, can function as epistemic disobedience, disrupting the colonial and racialized scripts that underwrite humanitarianism. Embracing these refusals requires reorienting aid cultures to welcome protest and leadership from refugees, not just compliance. In a non-theatrical protection regime, those who flee violence would not need to perform despair or docility to prove worthiness; their human rights to safety and dignity would be reason enough.

Another key element is the consistency and universality of protection. Moving beyond performance demands dismantling the racialized and geopolitical hierarchies of deservingness that currently dictate who receives refuge. An intersectional feminist vision of global justice would advocate for non-selective humanitarianism. For instance, applying emergency protection or expedited entry procedures equally to civilians fleeing conflict in Africa, Asia, or the Middle East, not just Europe. This calls for a reckoning with the racism, neo-imperial assumptions, and securitized discourses embedded in refugee policy. It also means confronting how terms like "risk" and "security" are often weaponized to exclude racialized others, and reformulating protection frameworks to de-militarize borders and expand safe, regularized pathways to mobility.

The patriarchal logic of protection, as Young (2003) theorized, rests on an asymmetry between the strong protector and the vulnerable protected. While her analysis centers gender, it offers a broader invitation: to challenge all hierarchical logics—gendered, racialized, and imperial—that structure global displacement. Protection must be reconceived not as a performance of charity or a tool of statecraft, but as a relational obligation rooted in solidarity and shared responsibility. Internationally, this means strengthening legal commitments, such as expanding the refugee definition to include gender-based and intersectional forms of persecution, gaps still glaringly absent from the 1951 Convention (Freedman, 2007). It also requires formal mechanisms for equitable responsibility-sharing: automatic triggers for protection, rather than discretionary political gestures, so that refuge is not dependent on proximity, whiteness, or geopolitical value. Feminist IR scholars emphasize ethics of care and interdependence: protection must be institutionalized not as dramatized virtue but as an ongoing, collective duty rooted in our shared humanity (Enloe, 2004; Robinson, 2011).

Crucially, a non-performative approach requires accountability from those who claim to protect. In the current theatre, powerful states claim moral credit for offering refuge even as they perpetuate the very conditions that force people to flee—through arms exports, extractive development, and militarized interventions. Research has shown that these practices have displaced tens of millions globally and contributed to environmental degradation, land dispossession, and civilian harm (Vine et al., 2020; Scheidel et al., 2023; Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2020; Amnesty International, 2024). An intersectional feminist lens insists on linking protection to prevention and structural justice. This means asking: Are we addressing the root causes (e.g., armed conflict, patriarchal violence, climate catastrophe) that compel displacement? Are we holding accountable those, including ourselves, who benefit from and reproduce displacement economies? Without such interrogations, protection risks becoming a moral façade for maintaining the global status quo. A truly principled protection regime would integrate with broader efforts to resolve conflict, advance social and environmental justice,

and undo the global inequalities that render some lives eminently movable while others are shielded from disruption. This also means resisting the tendency to treat refugees as a temporary inconvenience: instead, host societies must recognize them as neighbors and equals, entitled to long-term inclusion when return is not viable. Temporary protection must not become indefinite limbo. Refugees' long-term futures should be shaped by their own needs and aspirations, not the political optics of host states.

Finally, embodying an intersectional feminist approach means transforming the narrative terrain of protection itself. Humanitarian stories should not center saviors and victims, but justice and shared political agency. This includes amplifying refugee voices not just as survivors of trauma but as organizers, caregivers, and knowledge-holders. It also means recognizing and valuing the everyday forms of care, resistance, and protection enacted within refugee communities themselves—what Malkki (1996) called the “speechless emissaries” must become audible political subjects. In this spirit, the goal is not simply to take the stage away from states but to reimagine who gets to script protection, and to build systems rooted in participation, mutual care, and structural change. This might mean expanding community-led initiatives, participatory policy design, and transnational solidarity networks led by displaced people.

In conclusion, the “theatre of protection” metaphor shines a harsh light on the precarious façade of the current refugee regime. The selective embrace of Ukrainian refugees illustrates both the height of humanitarian possibility and the depth of its inconsistencies. Far from an aberration, such spectacle reflects a longer genealogy in which humanitarianism has functioned as both moral performance and geopolitical strategy, legitimizing global hierarchies under the guise of care (Barnett, 2011). Today, these performances are increasingly enacted through securitized rituals of control, what De Lauri (2019) describes as “humanitarian militarism,” the fusion of benevolence and border enforcement. This paper has shown how the dramaturgical elements of protection—its scripts of rescue and deservingness, its staging through law and spectacle, its audiences both domestic and international, and its

temporality of strategic exception—work in concert to uphold systems of racialized, patriarchal, and imperial domination.

An intersectional feminist approach calls us to dismantle this performance piece by piece. It means rewriting the scripts that cast refugees as passive victims and states as benevolent saviors; transforming the stage by embedding care and justice into institutional design, not emergency optics; de-centering the audiences of humanitarian recognition in favor of refugee-led priorities; and rejecting the temporality of conditional refuge in favor of sustained, rights-based protection. From performance to practice, from conditional charity to universal justice, and from patriarchal saviorism to egalitarian solidarity, the path forward demands more than inclusion: it demands structural transformation. Dismantling the logics of performative protection is essential if we are to honor the post-WWII promise of “never again”—not through selective acts of compassion, but through a radically inclusive protection regime that refuses to subordinate rights to gratitude or safety to spectacle.

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