

# **“Relief empire”: Racial aphasia, colonial unknowing and international organizations in the global governance of refugees**

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## **ABSTRACT**

International organizations play vital roles in the global governance of refugees, with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spearheading assistance and protection efforts. Yet UNHCR is part of a larger constellation of international organizations—past and present—created by states to govern displacement. This article deploys the concepts of racial aphasia and colonial unknowing to retheorize international organizations’ roles in the global governance of refugees. Racial aphasia (difficulty speaking meaningfully about race) and colonial unknowing (actively sustained ignorance of the historical and contemporary entanglements of colonialism and racism) provide vital lenses for investigating the power and persistence of racialized hierarchies in the refugee regime. While UNHCR—originally mandated to support select European refugees—has ascended to the alpha position in global refugee governance, international organizations focused on non-white refugees have been relegated to lower rungs of the ladder or shuttered and shunted to the margins of history. This article explores this dynamic through analysis of the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA), an international organization charged with responding to mass displacement in the Korean War. Probing the “unknowing” of UNKRA and its institutional failures sheds light on the ways in which racialized hierarchies and racial aphasia actively structure the refugee regime.

## **INTRODUCTION**

International organizations play critical roles in protecting and assisting refugees, but an international organization has never been created to serve the needs of all refugees equally. The touchstone of international refugee law, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is widely recognized as an exclusionary instrument focused on displacement in Europe—a limitation amended through the 1967 Protocol. However, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as well as every other major international organization established to respond to displaced people has been similarly focused on particular groups. These groups are often geographically defined, but in ways that track onto racial and colonial formations. UNHCR’s mandate was gradually expanded by the UN General Assembly, while the International Organization for Migration (IOM) was globalized in 1989. Amongst the largest in the world, these agencies now claim near-universal remits in that they may respond to forced migrants in different regions, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity or race, with the exception of Palestinian refugees, who are served by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). UNRWA is often presented as an anomaly, yet this obscures the reality that in the global governance of refugees, parochial mandates tied to nationality, region and race are not the exception but the rule.

This aspect of the refugee regime’s architecture is largely taken for granted, and is generally assumed to have been resolved through amendments that expanded the missions of major international organizations worldwide. Notwithstanding the ‘universalization’ of agencies like UNHCR and IOM, conceiving international organizations to serve particular populations—and “globalizing” only those focused on white people—has ongoing ramifications for the global governance of refugees. While UNHCR spearheads refugee assistance and protection efforts, it is

part of a larger constellation of international organizations—past and present—that states have used to govern displacement. These include branches of the League of Nations, the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Organization (UNRRA), the International Refugee Organization (IRO), IOM, the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), UNRWA, and the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA). In this article I hone and deploy the concepts of racial aphasia (Thompson 2013, Stoler 2011, Achiume 2022a,b) and colonial unknowing (Stoler 2011, Vimalassery, Pegues and Goldstein 2016, 2017, El-Shaarawi 2025) to retheorize the roles of international organizations in the global governance of refugees.

Racial aphasia (roughly, difficulty speaking meaningfully about race) and colonial unknowing (actively sustained ignorance of the historical and contemporary entanglements of colonialism and racism) provide vital lenses for seeing how racialized hierarchies have persisted and are often taken for granted in global migration governance (Achiume 2022a,b, Bradley 2023). While UNHCR has ascended to the alpha position in the global governance of refugees, international organizations focused on non-white refugees have been relegated to lower rungs of the ladder or shuttered and shunted to the margins of history. I explore this dynamic through analysis of the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA), a little-researched and largely forgotten international organization that, in the early 1950s, was charged (rhetorically at least) with supporting millions of people displaced in the Korean War. Accounts of the early history of the refugee regime point to UNKRA as one of the first agencies focused on non-white refugees, and explain its creation and operations as an expression of bipolar geopolitics and US power (Holborn 1960, 1975, Loescher 2001, Zolberg 1988). In contrast, I show that UNKRA lacked a clear formal mandate to support displaced Koreans, and made negligible contributions to responding to the displacement catastrophe on the Korean peninsula. Originally envisioned as a post-war reconstruction agency, UNKRA was re-tasked with refugee assistance in order to rationalize its activation while the Korean war dragged on. This decision reflected western powers' desire to give a multilateral gloss to the American-led intervention. In practice, however, refugee relief was managed by the US military under the auspices of the United Nations Command (UNC), with an approach that framed refugees first and foremost as a security concern. By probing the “unknowing” of UNKRA and its institutional failures, I unsettle simplistic accounts of the history of the refugee regime that overly rely on geopolitical explanations, unmoored from considerations of the influence of coloniality and race. In this way, I illuminate some of the ways in which racialized hierarchy persists in the global governance of refugees.

This work innovates in several important ways. While there is now extensive interest in the entanglement of race, colonialism and the global governance of displacement, this scholarship has focused primarily on particular states (Mayblin 2017; El-Enany 2020; Sadiq and Tsourapas 2021), or legal instruments (Abuya, Krause and Mayblin 2021; Krause 2021), rather than on international organizations.<sup>1</sup> Further, scholarship on international organizations in global migration governance has concentrated on a small clutch of agencies, particularly UNHCR, IOM and UNRWA (Irfan 2024; Bradley, Costello and Sherwood 2023). In contrast, this work looks at international organizations as a category of actor, concentrating on UNKRA as an under-examined entity. To be clear, my point is not simply that international organizations sometimes behave in racist ways, nor do I claim that they never challenge racism or neo-colonial attitudes. Indeed, these organizations are often assumed to be flagbearers for equality and inclusion, and many people working within them sincerely strive to advance these values. Yet as Stoler (2011, 133) insists, “Racisms thrive, as they long have, in the presence of moral righteousness and abstract rejections of blatantly racist

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<sup>1</sup> For significant exceptions, see e.g. Turner 2021; Crawley 2022; Madokoro 2022; Rahal and White 2022.

claims.” My interest is in how international organizations, even those that aim to counter racism and coloniality, may nonetheless be implicated in sustaining these structures. This work also makes a conceptual contribution by theorizing the relationship between colonial unknowing and racial aphasia, as applied to the refugee regime.

I begin by briefly situating this work in relation to the literature on international organizations, colonialism and race, particularly in global migration governance. Next, I expand on theorizations of colonial unknowing and racial aphasia to grapple with how international organizations bolster racialized hierarchies in the global governance of refugees. I then discuss my methods, before applying the concepts of colonial unknowing and racial aphasia to disinter the history of UNKRA. I close by considering the contemporary implications of this analysis.

## **CONTEXT**

Following Achiume (2022b: 445), I begin from the recognition that “migration governance is also a mode of racial governance.” There has been a recent flurry of interest in how race and colonialism are ensnared in the refugee regime, including in terms of international law (Abuya, Krause and Mayblin 2021; Chimni 1998; Krause 2021; Achiume 2022a,b), and in the policies and practices of states across the global North (Mayblin 2017; El-Enany 2020) and South (Sadiq and Tsourapas 2021). This focus is understandable, as states and legal systems have had major influence on struggles for independence and equality. Yet to fully understand the imbrications of racism and coloniality in the refugee regime, it is also essential to consider the roles of international organizations.

International organizations have often been imagined as bulwarks against states’ jingoism. They have also been perceived as technocratic utopias, and vectors for socializing states to adhere to international norms (Steffek 2021; Chelotti, Dasandi and Mikhaylov 2022). However, their roles are often much more ambivalent, not least because they use their power to try to help some people while excluding others, expressly or tacitly. The growing body of international relations (IR) scholarship on race in international organizations shows how international organizations unravel but also backstop inequalities, contributing to social stratification from local to global levels (Brown 2024; Oksamytna and von Billerbeck 2024; Fehl and Freistein 2020, 2021; Mazower 2009). Existing research underscores that European experiences and institutions are often assumed to be the “generative site of universal models” despite the well-documented problems that arise from attempts to copy and paste institutional models across different contexts (Yao 2022, 901). However, “there has been limited attention on why European institutional models are so compelling in the first place” (Yao 2022: 902).

The need for further research in this vein is particularly apparent in relation to the refugee regime. To date, there has been strikingly little explicit analytical attention devoted to the fact that there has never been a universally-mandated international organization created to work on refugee and migration issues, and that the dominant international organizations in this field stem from agencies that were initially tasked (de facto, if not de jure) with serving white refugees and other migrants, and the interests of so-called ‘white men’s countries’ (Lake and Reynolds 2008) that control the creation and financing of international organizations concerned with mobility and displacement. In the early 1950s, the International Labour Organization (ILO) attempted to acquire an operational mandate for migration but was shot down by western powers due, in part, to concerns about the organization’s universality (Karatani 2005). Building on seminal work from scholars such as Chimni (1993, 1998, 2009), a growing group of scholars are delving into how race and coloniality figure in the work of international organizations involved in migration

governance, but this literature focuses primarily on UNHCR (Turner 2021; Crawley 2022; Madokoro 2022; Rahal and White 2022), IOM (Bradley 2023), and UNRWA (Irfan 2023), with less attention devoted to other agencies.<sup>2</sup> International organizations involved in the refugee regime are often analyzed in isolation, yet many of these agencies have intertwined histories, with ideas, staff and everyday practices circulating between them (Bradley, Madokoro, Erdilmen and Chanco 2022; Robson 2017, 2023b). It is thus important to analyze not only particular agencies, but also international organizations as a *type* of actor involved in the global governance of refugees. Looking at agencies tasked to engage with non-white refugees can provide insight into the privileging of whiteness in the refugee regime, underscoring that the universalization of international organizations focused on white populations is not a neutral move without broader consequences. As Achiume (2022b: 445) argues, “The default of liberal borders is racialized inclusion and exclusion that privileges ‘whiteness’ in international mobility and migration. This racial privilege inheres in the facially neutral legal categories and regimes of territorial and political borders and in international legal doctrine.” It also inheres in the creation, evolution and work of international organizations—a dynamic illuminated through the concepts of colonial unknowing and racial aphasia.

### **KINDRED CONCEPTS: COLONIAL UNKNOWING AND RACIAL APHASIA**

Building on Foucault, Stoler (2011, 141) honed the concepts of colonial aphasia and unknowing to illuminate the “foundational myths” of contemporary France.<sup>3</sup> Transposing her insights to the sphere of global governance, the kindred concepts of aphasia and unknowing can be used to illuminate the foundational myths of the refugee regime, including the notion that the system is now universal, and that failures to provide equal responses to different groups are merely localized shortcomings, not a sequelae of the system itself. Engagement with these concepts also shows that geopolitical explanations alone are insufficient to apprehend the origins and evolution of global migration governance.

#### ***Racial aphasia***

Aphasia is, in Stoler’s (2011, 153) terms, a “political disorder.” Racial aphasia makes it difficult to perceive and speak openly about the racial logics that thread throughout colonial and post-colonial life, and become part of the warp and weft of governance in many areas. Diagnosing and treating it requires examination of “the conceptual processes, academic conventions, and affective practices that both elicit and elude recognition of how colonial histories matter and how colonial pasts become muffled or manifest” (Stoler 2011, 122). Stoler’s theorization of aphasia is fertile in part because of this insistence on looking at both sides of the coin, considering acknowledgement and silence, presence and absence.

At first glance, it may seem that the international organizations concerned with refugees and migration could not possibly be afflicted with racial aphasia, in that many of them talk openly about race. UNHCR, for example, often addresses race-based persecution as grounds for recognition under the 1951 Refugee Convention. IOM has called out overtly racist discrimination against some migrants, such as African students fleeing Ukraine after the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. International organizations involved in the pursuit of durable solutions for

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<sup>2</sup> For exceptions, see e.g. Robson 2023b on UNRRA.

<sup>3</sup> In this discussion, I follow Thompson (2013) and Achiume (2022a,b) in focusing more on racial aphasia than colonial aphasia. The theoretical significance of the shift from colonial to racial aphasia merits further discussion, but is outside the scope of this project.

refugees lament how racism undercuts access to resettlement and local integration (Nandi et al 2025), and UN agencies vocally oppose discrimination in aid distribution. Sincere as they may be, these practices can mask deeper failures to perceive and speak out about how racialized and even racist rationales infused the creation and expansion of key international organizations in the first place, the globalization of only select organizations serving primarily white refugees, and the naturalization of this choice. In this sense racial aphasia is perhaps best understood not so much as a “collective inability to speak about race” (Thompson 2013, 135) at all, but as difficulty speaking *meaningfully* about race—a condition that may rear its head and then appear to recede, but persists under the surface. Just as a person with aphasia may sometimes be able to articulate themselves, an organization afflicted by racial aphasia may speak about race in some instances, but at other points will be unable to communicate legibly about race. That is, they may struggle to recognize and speak cogently about racialization and racism, in their differing forms.

Aphasia, particularly in the context of governance regimes, is not only about the ability to speak. It also entails categorical errors and the dissociation of particular realities from the vocabulary most appropriate to describe them. In Stoler’s words, aphasia entails “a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things” (2011, 12). As Foucault (1966: xviii) describes it, aphasia involves “creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, [and] frenziedly beginning all over again.” In simple terms, aphasia is an inability to tell it like it is. At UNHCR and IOM, this manifests for example in references to the original restrictions on their mandates, and the 1951 Refugee Convention, as geographic and temporal, rather than recognizing them for what they also are: race-based limitations. This is not just obfuscation: actors afflicted by aphasia struggle to see an issue as it is, and name it accordingly. This precision is important to perceiving how racial aphasia works. As key actors in the refugee regime, international organizations often speak about race, but only in certain ways. They often misunderstand the meaning and scope of race and colonialism as categories, such that only certain incarnations of racism and neo-coloniality are perceived and addressed. Forms of racism and neo-colonialism that the regime itself is complicit in perpetrating are often occluded. For instance, the profusion of different labels and categories for people forced from their homes is a hallmark of the contemporary refugee regime, with international organizations intimately involved in creating and policing these categories (Zetter 1991, 2007). Racial aphasia is evident in much of this categorizing work, in that the actors involved in applying different labels to people—and the labels themselves—are influenced by racialized hierarchies and categories, which often go unseen and unacknowledged. Where race is recognized, it is often misconstrued as an immutable social fact, rather than as a set of constructed, hierarchically organized social categories which are constantly in flux.

As a theoretical tool, the diagnosis of racial aphasia “links our racist pasts to the still racist present” (Thompson 2013, 135). These connections manifest not only through abuse and structural inequality, but also in the silences surrounding how the refugee regime was constructed on a foundation of racialized hierarchy. Far from an inevitability, this was an active choice on the part of the regime’s architects, with contemporary reverberations that are best apprehended by connecting the concept of racial aphasia to its wellspring in colonial unknowing.

### ***Colonial unknowing***

The metaphor of aphasia only travels so far. As Stoler (2011, 153) stresses,

We need a better understanding of how occlusions of knowledge are achieved and more insight about the political, scholarly, and cognitive domains in which knowing is disabled, attention is redirected, things are renamed, and disregard is revived and sustained. At issue is both the occlusion of knowledge as a political form and ‘knowing’ as a cognitive act.

Paired with racial aphasia, the concept of colonial unknowing provides a more complete theoretical apparatus for analyzing these dynamics.

Whereas aphasia is a political malady that is not explicitly intentional, colonial unknowing involves individual, institutional and social choices. In this sense, racial aphasia may be understood as a consequence or symptom of colonial unknowing.<sup>4</sup> Vimalassery, Pegues and Goldstein (2016, 2017) conceptualize colonial unknowing as the “active and sustained ignorance of the historical and contemporary imbrication of colonization and racialization, facilitating the reproduction and naturalization of these relationships.” Colonial unknowing “render[s] unintelligible the entanglements of racialization and colonization, occluding the mutable historicity of colonial structures and attributing finality to events of conquest and dispossession” (Vimalassery, Pegues and Goldstein 2016). By framing colonialism as something that is relegated to the past, and thus impossible to change, colonial unknowing camouflages the ongoing impacts of colonial relationships on racialized inequalities, and the pervasive reach of colonial and imperial power (El-Shaarawi 2025). Although “unknowing” may suggest passivity, this is not a mere matter of ignorance of history. Rather, colonial unknowing is concerned with how the “act of ignoring” is “aggressively made and reproduced, affectively invested and effectively distributed in ways that conform to the social relations and economies of the here and now” (Vimalassery, Pegues and Goldstein 2016).

Colonial unknowing involves not only individuals, but also organizations and societies, which are drafted into the production of “sanctioned ignorance” (Spivak 1988: 6). Such sanctioned ignorance is, Spivak (1988, 6) stresses, “inseparable from colonial domination.” Unknowing is achieved through concrete choices, from high-level policy to everyday practices, that shroud the colonial past and its present resonances. In this sense, colonial unknowing is an epistemological project that valorizes some questions and ways of knowing over others, ignoring or delegitimizing some forms of knowledge, and some knowledge-holders (Vimalassery, Pegues and Goldstein 2017, 1042; Stoler 2011). In the refugee regime, colonial unknowing has privileged the knowledge of international organizations and their state backers, over and above refugees’ knowledge. Refugees’ knowledge cannot simply be reduced to the box of “lived experience,” although this is certainly one element of it. Alongside refugees’ personal knowledge of what it is to be displaced, they carry and impart knowledge of their own histories, values and other forms of expertise related for example to their livelihoods, professions and life plans. Reflecting the power of colonial unknowing, this knowledge is routinely excluded or trivialized in international organizations’ archives.

## **METHODS**

I came to this study from the starting point of early professional aspirations to work in support of refugees with an international organization like UNHCR. As I gradually learned that the international humanitarian bureaucracy was not for me, my brief experiences working with the UN allowed me glimpses of an organization that was not quite how my idealistic, younger self had

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<sup>4</sup> Not all racialized hierarchies stem primarily from colonialism and empire. I focus here on those that do, as they are particularly germane to the refugee regime.

imagined it: I saw commitment and concern for refugees, to be sure, but this co-existed alongside deep suspicion and inequity, whether intentional or inadvertent. Learning more about refugees' experiences with international organizations convinced me of the need to question these agencies' histories and roles, not cynically but in order to understand their orientations, contributions and limitations.

This article is informed by archival research on international organizations involved in global migration governance that I have been conducting since 2016, in the UN Archives and Records Management Section (UNARMS) (including digitized archival material from UNKRA); the United States National Archives and Records Administration (US NARA); Library and Archives Canada (LAC); and the United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA). The documents that I draw on include reports, memos, policies, official correspondence, and day-to-day communications between officials.

My work in these archives underscores the analytic traction that the concepts of colonial unknowing and racial aphasia bring to the historicization of refugee governance. Much of the history of how race and colonial relations shaped the creation and operation of these international organizations has been actively unknown. This is evident in the fact that some organizations such as IOM do not keep formal, public archives, and even when official archives are maintained, refugees' perspectives are virtually non-existent in many of these collections. Racial aphasia is also evident in archival materials showing how many early western architects of the international refugee regime were unable or unwilling to openly recognize the role of race and colonial relations in shaping these institutions. When such concerns were raised by bureaucrats and diplomats, it was usually to caution superiors or commiserate with peers about how awkward it would be for international organizations' western backers if newly independent states were to call them out in public forums for the exclusionary and inequitable nature of these agencies.

Working in these archives, and analyzing the materials I gathered, thus required attention to and interpretation of archival silences (Franco and Mustafa 2019). This proved more nerve-racking than I expected archival research to be. Exploring colonial unknowing and racial aphasia in the global governance of refugees requires assessment of what is *not* being said, and *not* being done. In conducting this work, I had nightmares (truly!) of finding boxes of material that would disprove what I have concluded by reading between the archival lines, drawing on earlier scholarship (McMahon 2017), and placing what I found and did *not* find in the context of racialized and colonial power relations. I don't believe these phantom boxes are hiding in the corner of an unexplored archive. Yet I recognize that this work is an act of interpretation in which I relay what I learned by examining UNKRA's history and its unknowing across multiple archival sites. As ever, complete certainty remains elusive.

### **UNKNOWING UNKRA**

To the extent that it addresses UNKRA at all, refugee studies scholarship presents the organization as if it were a dedicated refugee-serving agency akin to UNRWA. Influential accounts of the early years of the post-1945 refugee regime flag UNKRA alongside UNRWA as a refugee-focused agency created in line with US interests, to support refugees outside the remit of the 1951 Convention, and the mandates of UNHCR and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) (today's IOM).<sup>5</sup> For instance, Louise Holborn (1960: 343) writes,

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<sup>5</sup> Article 1.B of the 1951 Convention gives signatories the option to interpret the refugee definition as applying to “(a) events occurring in Europe before 1 January 1951” or “(b) events occurring in Europe or elsewhere before 1

Following its pacification of the Palestine War, the United Nations established an operational agency in 1949 called the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA); and after the police action in Korea, it established in 1951 [sic] the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA). In both cases the tasks of the agencies were limited to providing food, shelter, health services, and such schooling and assistance to refugees as were necessary to enable them to become self-supporting.

Loescher (2001: 57) likewise suggests that as with UNRWA,

the UNKRA provided a similar limited service to the millions of people displaced by the Korean War and assisted South Korea to relocate refugees from Communist North Korea and to repatriate Koreans from Japan. Although the 1951 Refugee Convention only applied to Europeans and therefore excluded Koreans, Korean refugees nevertheless benefitted from a massive UN relief effort. The provision of material assistance to those who had fled from North Korea or who had been displaced by the war was perceived to be integral to the anti-Communist war effort. Like the Palestinian refugee situation in the Middle East, the plight of Korean refugees had the foreign policy attention of the United States, and a special UN organization, outside of the UNHCR, was created to administer to their needs.

While recognizing that UNKRA was not involved in resettlement or protection, Holborn (1960: 343) praises the organization, indicating that, “By the time UNKRA's operations were terminated on June 30, 1959, the agency had aided nearly 700,000 refugees to build new homes or to rebuild war damaged ones and had extended relief to many more.” Zolberg (1998) also alludes to large amounts of American aid channeled to Korean refugees through UNKRA: “While withholding all financial support from the UNHCR until 1955, the United States poured millions into the regional agencies, UNRWA for Palestinians and UNKRA for Koreans driven from their homes during the war.”

In contrast to the picture of humanitarian largesse and accomplishment painted by these accounts, UNKRA's engagement with Korean refugees was in significant part a bureaucratic mirage. Retracing UNKRA's institutional history, I show how the agency was not in fact “created to administer to [refugees'] needs,” as Loescher (2001, 57) suggests, but re-tasked with this job and then denied the power to do it in an active warzone. Using the concepts of colonial unknowing and racial aphasia, I explain how UNKRA came to be glossed as a refugee agency, and how its failures in relation to displaced Koreans were forgotten, sanitized in institutional archives, or even recast as a success for the early refugee regime by leading scholars such as Holborn, Loescher and Zolberg. UNKRA was not, I contend, an early rebuff to the refugee regime's discriminatory privileging of white people. Rather, UNKRA had at most a very weak role in assisting displaced Koreans. In a flailing attempt to make a reconstruction agency relevant as war continued unrelentingly on the Korean peninsula, UNKRA was given largely rhetorical responsibility for refugee relief. Aid for refugees was in fact administered primarily by US military forces, with UNKRA accomplishing little of practical importance for the millions of Korean refugees in dire need of help. In this way, I contend, the seeming *inclusion* of Korean refugees in the early

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January 1951.” Although many signatories did opt for option (b), the emerging refugee regime, and the perspectives of its most powerful state backers, coalesced around option (a). See Rahal and White (2022, 332).



architecture of the refugee regime through a dedicated agency became another way of affecting racialized *exclusion*.

### ***UNKRA's creation and the displacement context***

With the end of World War II, 35 years of Japanese colonization of Korea gave way to the division of the Korean peninsula along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel into two occupation zones, with the USSR overseeing the north and the United States the south. War broke out between Communist forces in North Korea and western-aligned South Korea on 5 June 1950. From January to August 1950, the USSR boycotted the UN Security Council (UNSC), in protest against UNSC members' refusal to seat a representative of the newly established Communist government of the People's Republic of China. The United States and its allies capitalized on the USSR's absence to pass a resolution authorizing collective military action in support of South Korea, which the Soviet Union would normally have vetoed. With the expectation that the armed conflict would end quickly, UNKRA was established by the UN General Assembly on 1 December 1950, through Resolution 410. Per Resolution 410, the agency had a dual purpose: UNKRA's creation was "necessary both to the maintenance of lasting peace in the area and to the establishment of the economic foundations for the building of a unified and independent nation" (UNGA 1950, Brady 2018, 352). UNKRA was to generate and implement reconstruction projects under the auspices of the United Nations Command (UNC) and the United Nations Civil Assistance Command—Korea (UNCACK). UNC was the military arm of the UN mission; UNCACK had military and civilian staff. Both bodies were fully under US military control, a reflection of the "neocolonial relationship between South Korea and the US" in this period (Kim 2022, 435; Brady 2018: 352).

The quick conclusion of active combat anticipated by UNKRA's architects did not come to pass. Instead, intense armed conflict characterized by massive, pre-emptive and retaliatory violence on all sides resulted in more than 2 million civilian deaths and the near-complete destruction of all Korean cities (Kwon 2020, 5). Fighting continued until the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed on 27 July 1953, resulting in a cease fire that continues to hold, with the conflict itself unresolved. Owing to the active conflict, UNKRA was unable to commence its reconstruction work as planned. Instead, in the early 1950s its backers searched for a new *raison d'être* for the organization, which was deemed valuable for its performative multilateralism: although the agency was American-funded, directed by an American, and operated under an American-led military intervention, UNKRA was supposed to demonstrate that the UN mission in Korea was not an entirely US-run show (Kim 2022). As British diplomats expressed it, UNKRA was needed to ensure that the "Soviet[s] may not be able to argue that United Nations aid is merely a cloak for United States aid designed to secure a stranglehold on the Korean economy."<sup>6</sup> UNKRA's proponents, particularly in the US State Department, landed on a plan to preserve UNKRA's relevance by charging it with assisting Korean refugees.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, the peninsula faced a massive displacement crisis, which unfolded in two main waves. The first began with the North Korean offensive in June 1950 and lasted for approximately two and a half months, resulting in the displacement of an estimated two million people within South Korea.<sup>8</sup> The second wave followed the 4 January 1951 (1.4 Hut'oe) retreat of South Korean and UN forces from Seoul, and involved a combination of refugees fleeing North Korea, and

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<sup>6</sup> UKNA, Telegram from Foreign Office to UK Delegation to the UN, 20 August 1953, FO 371/107117: UNKRA.

<sup>7</sup> On Korean terms for different forms of displacement, see e.g. Kwon 2020, Moon 2025. I use the term "refugee" in a broad sense, to refer to those forced from their homes during the Korean war.

<sup>8</sup> On displacement preceding the war, see Moon 2025.

further displacement within South Korea, with approximately six to eight million uprooted (Kim 2017: 107). Displaced people within North Korea fell entirely outside the UN gaze. As Kim (2022: 439) points out, “Unlike the Vietnam War, the Korean War did not end with a massive evacuation or exodus of refugees outside the Korean peninsula.” Rather, according to UN estimates, the displaced population began to diminish rapidly, falling to five million in 1952, and 2.9 million by June 1953 (UN Department of Public Information 1955; Lee 1996: 32). These reductions did not indicate the achievement of “durable solutions” in the contemporary sense, but rather progress in the construction of make-shift homes. Basic needs and human rights violations remained dire.

In this context, UNKRA was informally charged with addressing the refugee crisis, and the US government accordingly recruited J. Donald Kingsley, the former head of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) to serve as UNKRA’s first Agent General. He was backed up by retired US Army Lieutenant-General John Coulter, also a former senior IRO leader. Kingsley was the US candidate to be the first UN High Commissioner for Refugees, but lost to the Dutch candidate, Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart. Kingsley initially turned down the invitation to run UNKRA, as he wanted to focus more on refugee issues—reflecting the limited extent to which refugees were presented as a core concern for UNKRA at the outset. As US officials wooed Kingsley to accept the job, they rhetorically reframed their proposals for the agency, making refugees more central (McMahon 2017: 21, 71-72). McMahon (2017: 211) suggests that “Kingsley explicitly had limited interest in the ‘K for Korean’ part of UNKRA. He joined, rather, for the allure of the other letters — and, probably, the possibility of continuing a grand UN project *à la* the IRO on a new international organization canvas.” Soon after taking on his UNKRA post, Kingsley hankered to return to his work with European refugees and vied unsuccessfully to be the first Director General of the Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe (PICMME), the precursor to today’s IOM.<sup>9</sup>

UNKRA officially started work on 7 February 1951. However, UNKRA’s new refugee assistance mission was mismatched with its founding document, and the practical structure of the US-led, UN efforts in Korea. The only reference to refugees in UNKRA’s mandate comes in Article 13, paragraph 16(8) of Resolution 410, which states that

Measures shall be taken to ensure that the special needs of refugees and other distressed groups of the population are met through appropriate public welfare programmes, and accordingly the sale of relief supplies will take place only in justifiable cases and under conditions agreed upon with the United Nations Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea.

UNKRA’s broader reconstruction mission, articulated in Resolution 410, was relevant to the resolution of Korea’s refugee crisis insofar as economic reconstruction was necessary to support displaced Koreans in rebuilding their lives. At the same time as US officials hoped to preserve UNKRA’s relevance by cloaking it with a refugee mission, Washington also remained interested in UNKRA’s potential role in promoting capitalist economic prosperity in South Korea, as a buffer against Communist expansion (Lyons 1958).

In practice, however, UNKRA had little opportunity or ability to directly contribute to emergency relief or longer-term reconstruction in support of Korean refugees, particularly in its early years. Under the terms of engagement for the UN mission in Korea, US forces were

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<sup>9</sup> LAC, Despatch from N.F.H. Berlis, Migration Conference, Brussels, to SSEA, Subject: Brussels Migration Conference, 10 December 1951, 74-V-I-40 Pt 2.1.

responsible for aid through UNC and UNCACK, and military leaders were reluctant to permit non-military officials to operate freely in the war zone (Cha 2021: 105; Martin and Ferris 2017). As a senior British diplomat reported to Whitehall following US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' visit to South Korea in 1953, the US government "has agreed to assist direct in reconstruction and to by-pass the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency."<sup>10</sup> In its own public outreach on UNKRA, the UN alludes to the agency's marginalization, indicating that

On 1 December 1950 the General Assembly established UNKRA under an Agent-General to 'assist the Korean people to relieve the sufferings and to repair the devastation caused by aggression'... When UNKRA was first set up, the most urgent needs of the Republic of Korea were for food, shelter and medical treatment for hundreds of thousands of men, women and children dislodged from their homes by the invasion. The task of providing immediate care rested mainly with the United Nations Command, and UNKRA contributed to its work by lending skilled staff for disease control, relief and welfare. At the same time, UNKRA began the groundwork for long-range reconstruction. (UN Department of Public Information 1955)

As I discuss below, UNKRA's lack of access to displaced Koreans, UNC's dominance in the relief effort, and disconnects between UNKRA's official reconstruction mandate and its unofficial mission to support refugees created tensions that stymied much of its work.

### ***Coloniality and UNKRA's limited engagements with refugees***

In this section, I map out the limited ways in which UNKRA did engage with Korean refugees, and the infusion of coloniality in this work. As McMahon (2017, 83) argues, the US State Department's push for UNKRA to reorient its mission towards refugees "reflected a larger bureaucratic desperation to somehow, in some fashion, make the Agency relevant in early 1951." Concern with the refugee crisis was shared by the South Korean government and other states involved in the UN mission, generating support for the decision to "rhetorically place greater weight on potential UNKRA aid to refugees" and recruit Kingsley to head UNKRA (McMahon 2017: 93). The notion of UNKRA spearheading the international response to the Korean refugees gained some high-level recognition. For example, in her efforts to convince US President Truman to support Dutchman Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart as the new UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Queen Juliana of the Netherlands appealed:

Next year, if no other measures are taken in time, the only international cooperation [in support of refugees] will be found in the activities of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva who is in charge of no more than the legal protection of the IRO refugees and certain groups of Germans in Austria, the United Nations Relief Work Organization, which gives care and maintenance to Arabian refugees (UNRWA) and a similar United Nations organization for the refugees in Korea (UNKRA).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> UKNA, Letter from Sir George Beresford-Stooke to Blomfield, 11 August 1953, CAOG 14/178, United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency: Policy, 1953-1962.

<sup>11</sup> LAC, Background information supplied by the Netherlands Embassy, Washington in connection with letter from H.R.H. Queen Juliana to US President Harry S. Truman, 11 September 1951, 74-V-40 Pt 4.2.

The refugee crisis was in full force when UNKRA became active in 1951, yet UNKRA's role was largely illusory. The "scope of the Agency's newly refugee-focused mission rapidly collapsed" as UNKRA's efforts were extraneous to the military-led response through UNC and UNCACK (McMahon 2017, 108).<sup>12</sup> This was a "bureaucratic disaster for UNKRA, a staggering blow from which the Agency and its leadership arguably never quite fully recovered" (McMahon 2017: 83).

UNKRA staff nonetheless strove to enable an international refugee response. Indeed, Agent General Kingsley was known to have great ambitions for UNKRA as a reincarnation of the IRO in Asia—a vision far beyond the United States' limited and vacillating intentions for the agency. Despite its hobbled status, Kingsley hoped UNKRA could be transformed into a permanent specialized agency and a template for operational responses to refugees elsewhere (McMahon 2017, iii, 6-7). Yet to the extent that UNKRA engaged with refugees, it was not primarily focused on refugees' own needs and rights: refugees were seen first and foremost as carriers of disease and concealment for Communist combatants. Much of the initial response was therefore focused on controlling refugee movements and containing disease through inoculation, to limit risks to troops (Kim 2022, 439).

The perception that Communist fighters were hidden amongst the displaced led to numerous massacres of refugees, including by US forces. At the height of the conflict the US Eighth Army, which commanded the war effort, ordered all refugee movements to halt, and authorized troops to "fire at everyone trying to cross the lines" (Kim 2004, 530). The largest massacre, at Nogun-Ri, unfolded from 26-29 July 1950, five months before UNKRA's creation. In this instance, columns of some 400 North Korean refugees who had entered South Korea were strafed by US warplanes, and pinned down by US machine-gun fire for three days. 10 of the 400 survived (Kwon 2020, 5). Massacres of refugees continued apace after UNKRA's founding; for instance, in 1951 US forces dropped napalm outside the entrance of a cave in Yeongchun, where hundreds of refugees were sheltered, killing more than 200. With no protection mandate and no mention of refugees' rights in Resolution 410, I found no evidence that UNKRA staff raised public concern about refugees' rights, even in the face of such massacres. Many of these atrocities became public knowledge only in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> That UNKRA's leading benefactor was involved in perpetrating some of these atrocities presumably chastened would-be whistleblowers. UNKRA's activities thus reflected a clear colonial mentality in that they were not motivated by concern with the wellbeing of individuals subject to (neo)colonial power, as much as with tempering risks for colonial agents.

In addition to disease and mobility control interventions, in its first years UNKRA was also involved in fundraising. In this context, UNKRA presented the refugee problem not so much as a human rights or humanitarian concern, but as a threat to economic stability and security. For instance, in a 1953 letter to UK Secretary of State Anthony Eden, senior UNKRA official Arthur Rucker argued that the "economic consequences" of the war's

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<sup>12</sup> For archival documentation of the US State Department's decision to push UNKRA to engage with refugees, see for example US NARA, Acheson to Amembassy Paris, 3668, 12 January 1951, 357.AD/1-1251, Box 1376, Central Decimal Files, 1950-1954, RG59; and US NARA, Department of State to AMCONSULT Geneva NIACT 584, "For Roseman pass Kingsley from Hickerson," 12 January 1951, Box 1376, Central Decimal Files, 1950-1954, RG59 (cited in McMahon 2017).

<sup>13</sup> On massacres of refugees in the Korean war, see e.g. Conway-Lanz 2006.

destruction and injury have been made worse by the influx into South Korea of a large number of refugees from the North. There can be no doubt that, now that actual fighting has stopped, reconstruction must be carried out on as wide a scale and as rapidly as possible. If this is not done, there is a grave risk, so serious is the economic position, of losing in peace all that the UN Forces have won in war.<sup>14</sup>

Because UNKRA was seen as a multilateral agency (in contrast to UNC and UNCACK, which were understood in international circles to be US entities, despite the UN label), it proved modestly useful in raising funds from donors who did not necessarily want to contribute directly to American enterprises. However, UNKRA was little more than a clearing house, in that donors could pledge funds to UNKRA and then shift their money to refugee response through the military-run relief effort (McMahon 2017, 72, 96).

Interactions between UNKRA and its donors also reflected racial hierarchies and colonial logics. For instance, when UNKRA officials attempted to fundraise in the Persian Gulf, British officials vehemently objected, with a diplomat in Bahrain fuming,

I should not myself have thought that they [Kuwaiti leaders] would be interested and suggest that it may be desirable to confine such appeals to charities nearer home such as the Arab Refugees. In any case I am strongly opposed to Rucker's coming here to make the appeal. We are assiduous in impressing on the United Nations that they must communicate with the Sheikdoms through us. If once the United Nations contact the Rulers direct, the latter may reasonably deduce that they are at liberty themselves to approach the United Nations direct.<sup>15</sup>

The United Kingdom managed its own contributions to UNKRA through the Crown Agent for the Colonies, guided by the 1950 *Handbook for Colonial Municipalities, Native Administrations, and Other Public Authorities*.<sup>16</sup> British archival records on UNKRA primarily address the possibility that UNKRA could be a vehicle for creating a new market in South Korea for British goods, with the Crown Agency functioning as a purchasing agent for UNKRA. "It is hoped," the Crown Agent wrote, that "by assisting UNKRA in this manner, the Korean people who are generally unfamiliar with British manufacturers, will be given an opportunity of becoming acquainted with a considerable range of British-made equipment."<sup>17</sup> A Crown Agency official involved in evaluating UNKRA requests wrote to his counterpart,

It will amuse you to learn that one request for instruments for the Korean Symphony Orchestra was marked in the three categories: (i) Most urgent (ii) Urgent to some extent

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<sup>14</sup> UKNA, Letter from Arthur Rucker, Chief, European Regional office of UNKRA, to Anthony Eden, 11 December 1953, FO 371, 107118, UNKRA.

<sup>15</sup> UKNA, Telegram from Bahrain to Foreign Office, 22 September 1953, FO 371, 107118.

<sup>16</sup> UKNA, Letter from J. Donald Kingsley, Agent General, UNKRA, to Sir John Calder, KCMG, Crown Agent for the Colonies, 28 April 1953, CAOG 14/178, United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency: Policy, 1953-1962.

<sup>17</sup> UKNA, "Reconstruction in Korea: Opportunities for British Trade" (no date), CAOG 14/178, United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency: Policy, 1953-1962.

(iii) Not urgent but needed. In a later request a fourth category was added: (iv) Not urgent but badly needed.<sup>18</sup>

It is perhaps a darkly humorous indication of the extent to which UNKRA had lost its bearings that it was, in the midst of a displacement catastrophe, requesting musical instruments. However, read in the context of a colonial archive, the implication is also that what is “amusing” for the Crown Agents is not just the disconnect between the request and the circumstances, but that Korea had a symphony at all.

Beyond fundraising, UNKRA also supported the refugee response through staff secondments. UNKRA was staffed by many international “experts” in refugee response who came from the IRO with Kingsley and Coulter. Unable to use their skills at UNKRA, several were seconded to UNCACK, where they assisted with information gathering, analysis, planning and logistics for the refugee response (Kim 2021, 250). UNKRA’s staff contingent reflected well-known problems in international organizations pertaining to the under-representation of non-white officials. UNKRA had only two Asian senior staff members, amongst an international staff contingent of 343 in 1953. About 2000 Koreans worked as local staff for UNKRA, but rarely in posts that involved any decision-making authority (McMahon 2017, 79-80). Unsurprisingly, the agency attracted criticism for having so many staff members, particularly in its early years when it was hardly operational (McMahon 2017, 211).

Following the Armistice in June 1953, UNKRA was able to start implementing a more active reconstruction program, but the connection between this work and the predicament of Korean refugees was often tangential.<sup>19</sup> Coupled with Kingsley’s departure as Agent General, this signaled UNKRA’s reversion to its original, General Assembly-endowed mandate. Western observers hoped this would “infuse fresh vigour into a rather torpid organism.”<sup>20</sup> From mid-1953 to its closure in 1958, UNKRA spent some \$127 million (approximately \$1 billion today—a drop in the bucket compared to the massive scale of destruction in South Korea) on 260 programs addressing issues such as the reconstruction of housing, education and health care facilities, the agricultural sector, and industry (Kim 2021, 249; Brady 2018, 360). Much of this work reflected a developmental approach that was rooted in colonial mentalities under which refugees and Koreans more broadly were seen as reliant obstacles to progress. For instance, a British diplomat critiqued UNKRA for not doing more to control its unruly subjects:

by trying to do a little of everything UNKRA is probably dispersing its energies wastefully. Deforestation, for instance, is a major problem; but by planting a few seedlings, while nothing is done to prevent the peasants from hacking down every piece of vegetation on the hillsides, UNKRA will not seriously contribute towards a solution.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> UKNA, Letter from A.J.E. Davis, Representative in North America for the Crown Agents for the Colonies, to F. Blomfield, Crown Agent for the Colonies, 29 April 1953, CAOG 14/178, United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency: Policy, 1953-1962

<sup>19</sup> Under an agreement between UNC and UNKRA, primary responsibility for relief and reconstruction would remain with UNC for the first six months following the conclusion of hostilities. Consequently, UNKRA’s operational work really only gained pace in late January 1954 (Lee 2020, 13).

<sup>20</sup> UKNA, Letter from Walter Graham, British Legation in Korea at Pusan, to E.R. Warner, UN Department, Foreign Office, 11 June 1953, FO 371 107117: UNKRA.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Like the refugees and other poor Koreans, the South Korean government was also seen as an obstacle to progress. While the South Korean government provided rations to “destitute refugees,” it would, in the assessment of a British UNKRA interlocutor, “be a long time before most of the refugees have found jobs and are earning enough to keep themselves.”<sup>22</sup> The South Korean government was dismissed by UNKRA funders as “maddeningly uncooperative, inefficient and corrupt,” with the same official lamenting that “the idea that the Aid Agencies should become a ‘super government,’ giving orders to the ROK Government, is [not] really to be considered these days. Some sort of partnership must be arranged” (O’Donovan 1953). While the ROK government was hardly a paragon of efficiency or anti-corruption, there is an irony in the complaint coming from a British official whose own government was responsible, at the time, for inefficient and corrupt dealings across the dwindling British Empire. Writing for *The Observer*, journalist Patrick O’Donovan (1953) contended that while UNKRA had for years been “kept in a state of living death, confined to planning,” it had at least “resisted Korean demands that they be given the money and be allowed to spend it for themselves. Korean plans for reconstruction tend to run to tractors, power fishing boats and clover-leaf cross-overs for their cities.” Yet O’Donovan (1953) also recognized that those gains that had been made were achieved not by UNC or UNKRA, but by Koreans themselves:

...the country has been justified in expecting more of them [UNKRA]. There has been some visible recovery—the pitiful restoration of small, smashed houses, shed shops filled with cheap metal ware and glasses made from the troops’ discarded beer bottles, a brewery and some flimsy furniture. But most of this is the work of Koreans using what they could salvage from their ruins; the recovery that we promised has not yet begun.

UNKRA was complicit in perpetuating, but also sometimes challenged, the neocolonial and flagrantly racist attitudes about Koreans that had wide currency in the west in the 1950s. For example, in a December 1951 article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, journalist William Worden presented UNKRA as plagued by “inefficiencies and extreme waste because South Korea was socially, politically, and economically backward” (Cha 2021, 99). In Worden’s account, a UN official stated that Koreans must “help themselves or we’ll never get anything done in Korea. That means forgetting customs and seeing that even the men do some of the work” (Cha 2021, 99). This statement reflected the common western stereotype of Korean men as lazy and exploitative of women, and the presumption that western colonialism advanced the cause of gender equality.<sup>23</sup> Yet, as Cha (2021, 106) demonstrates, UNKRA also sometimes pushed back against these ideas, with its most successful projects being those that rested on Koreans’ self-reliance and promoted Koreans as “hardworking and full of good character, just like Americans.”

### ***UNKRA reconsidered***

US foreign policy interests can help explain why UNKRA was created. But it is only with an eye on power dynamics surrounding coloniality and race—apprehended through the conceptual lenses of colonial unknowing and racial aphasia—that we can more fully understand how UNKRA shifted from a mandated focus on reconstruction to a theoretical focus on refugees, and ultimately accomplished remarkably little in support of the millions displaced in the Korean war. These

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> For a fascinating investigation of this assumption in the context of military sex work and the neocolonial relationship between the US and South Korea, see Moon 1997.

theoretical tools are also vital to understanding how this failure has come to be forgotten, with accounts of the early years of the refugee regime giving the impression of the Korean displacement crisis standing amongst the few that were taken seriously and accounted for in the regime's emerging institutional architecture. Indeed, some scholars go so far as to suggest that by their very existence, UNKRA and its purported parallel, UNRWA, protected refugees' rights, even without a mandate to do so. "Because they were protected by other UN agencies," Goldenziel (2016, 35, emphasis added) writes, "Palestinians and Koreans were excluded from the definition of 'refugee' that was eventually adopted in the 1951 Convention...Both the Palestinians and Koreans were *given* Agencies" while other groups such as displaced Indians and Pakistanis were left out in the institutional cold. The presentation of UNKRA as a gift that is assumed to be inherently beneficial belies the historical reality of the agency's failure to provide meaningful protection or assistance to the vast majority of displaced Koreans. This misconception has, for decades, gone largely uncorrected—a state of affairs that merits interrogation in its own right.

What factors may have influenced the unknowing of UNKRA, by scholars as well as policymakers and practitioners? As McMahon (2017, 10) acknowledges, UNKRA is "now barely remembered." In Kim's (2021, 248) words, UNKRA and its counterpart UNCACK "are largely forgotten by both Koreans and non-Koreans."<sup>24</sup> To the extent that it is remembered by scholars concerned about the relationship between South Korea and the UN, UNKRA is recalled for its contributions to rebuilding the Korean economy, rather than for its work with refugees (Pak 2000, 7). The agency's short-lived existence is part, but not all, of the story. Unknowing is also facilitated by the sanitization of UNKRA's history by the UN archives. For instance, in a video overview of UNKRA, based on a selection of archival records, the UN Archives and Records Management Section (UNARMS) obfuscates by suggesting that UNKRA could not commence operations as planned in 1951 because the military situation was "still delicate"—a diplomatic reference to a surging war that, in 1951, saw thousands of refugees scattered, strafed and doused with napalm. The UNKRA archives, especially as synthesized by UNARMS, say little about refugees, and shy away from forthright recognition of how militarization and institutional turf battles undercut multilateral humanitarian support for Korean refugees. Instead, these refugees had little choice but to seek aid from US military forces in a position of neocolonial dominance.<sup>25</sup> This is reflected, for instance, in UNARMS' (n.d.) introduction to UNKRA, which indicates,

The movement of refugees and displaced persons, destruction of hospital and medical facilities and equipment, the damage to water works and sanitary facilities created health, sanitation and welfare problems of vast proportions. Emergency help was offered immediately by the Unified Command...it was early jointly decided that UNKRA activities should be concentrated rather on the rehabilitation or development of permanent health and welfare facilities.

This language of "joint decisions" and "emergency help" sidesteps the tensions swirling around UNKRA, as well as the problems associated with US army leadership in aid delivery, when the primary aims of armed forces are not lifesaving but the achievement of military objectives.

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<sup>24</sup> On Koreans' experiences of forced migration, and strategies adopted by uprooted Koreans themselves to navigate their displacement, see for example Kim 2010, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> I do not wish to imply that power inequalities and even neocolonial dynamics are absent from interactions with other UN agencies. These dynamics were, however, even more pronounced in refugees' interactions with the US military through UNC and UNCACK.



As Brady (2018, 352) observes, “UNKRA was fully integrated into the larger UN war effort.” In this sense, it stands in contrast to iconic refugee-focused agencies like UNHCR that are identified in their own statutes as humanitarian and “non-political,” and strive to uphold principles such as neutrality and impartiality. UNKRA’s history and that of other refugee-focused agencies created in the early 1950s such as ICEM, are uncomfortable in that they point to the entanglement of refugee relief, even through international organizations, with military power and warmaking.<sup>26</sup> This reality sits in tension with the altruistic conceptions of the field advanced by traditional humanitarian actors.

UNKRA’s failures have perhaps also been forgotten because South Korea’s recovery is seen as a remarkable success. Refugees from North Korea were integrated into the ROK, and those displaced from their homes within South Korea were generally able to return to their communities or integrate into new ones. South Korea achieved remarkable development gains in short order. As Kwon (2020) compellingly shows, these spectacular successes have effaced the subtler ways in which war and displacement continue on the Korean Peninsula. In the absence of peace and reunification, refugees and their descendants who were displaced from homes in North Korea have been unable to return or reunite with family. At the same time, the massive, ongoing displacement and internment of North Koreans has been violently unknown by the Northern regime’s reclusive dictators. Indeed, in discussing UNKRA’s forgotten failures vis-à-vis Korean refugees, it must be recognized that efforts to address the displacement crisis only ever extended to forced migrants in the South. Those displaced in North Korea were beyond the pale of international assistance from the perspective of western powers and the United Nations, not to mention North Korea and its Communist backers.<sup>27</sup>

More broadly, UNKRA’s unknowing has been entrenched by a tendency in some scholarship, and popular myth-making on the United Nations, to see international organizations as quasi-utopic bastions of equality, expertise and justice. In particular, from the 1950s onwards, the UN became a key staging ground for anti-colonial struggles (Mazower 2009). Yet UNKRA is part of a constellation of UN entities that not only preserved but actively enabled (neo)colonial domination—in this case by the United States in South Korea. Recognizing the Janus-faced nature of the UN’s role in decolonization does not mean downplaying the extreme human rights abuses inflicted by North Korean leaders and their allies during the war. However, as the UN and its proponents have fought to preserve and strengthen the organization and its role in global governance, it has sometimes been more convenient to “unknow” such vexed periods.

How does racial aphasia figure in this story? As Foucault stresses, aphasia is not simply about an *inability* to speak. Rather, it involves the inability to say the right thing (or at least the intended thing), at the right time, and a propensity for categorical errors. Racial aphasia, then, involves not only an inability to speak about race (Thompson 2013), but a tendency to make categorical errors as they relate to racialized hierarchies. What counts as an error depends on an actor’s stance in relation to racialized hierarchies as socially constructed systems. For the white, western architects of the international refugee regime, rebranding UNKRA as a refugee-serving organization gave some credence to the notion that the refugee regime was not exclusively preoccupied with displaced white people. Agent General Kingsley and his senior staff took this a

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<sup>26</sup> ICEM was led by former military men seen to have the logistical chops required to orchestrate the movements of hundreds of thousands of “surplus” refugees and migrants, and sometimes used military vessels to transport refugees (Bradley 2025). On uncomfortable colonial entanglements in the refugee regime, see Ballinger 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this study, the concepts of colonial and imperial unknowing may help explain the effacement of North Koreans’ displacement.

step further, aspiring to use UNKRA as a staging ground for the creation of a “permanent relief empire.”<sup>28</sup> The imagined “fire service” could “be kept for turning on to any refugee problem as it arose.”<sup>29</sup> Auguste Lindt, the second UN High Commissioner for Refugees, harboured similar ambitions for the expansion of his own institution, discontent to be the “High Commissioner for European refugees only” (Loescher 2001, 56). The categorical error here was on the part of Kingsley and his staff, who—by the racial hierarchies underpinning the global governance of refugees in the 1950s—miscategorized Korean refugees as a population of equal concern and importance to European refugees, such that a Korean-focused institution could conceivably be universalized. UNKRA’s donors vehemently rebuked UNKRA staff, with the UK government for example seething that it was “‘violently’ opposed to...a long term programme.”<sup>30</sup>

A second miscategorization is evident here on the part of scholars who have uncritically presented UNKRA as a counterpart to UNHCR and UNRWA. This is a miscategorization in that UNKRA was not fundamentally focused on refugees in practice. Such scholarly miscategorizations involve *racial* aphasia in that this scholarship generally makes the jejune assumption the creation of an agency to serve non-white refugees was a sign of progress and inclusion, pushing back against the exclusion of non-Europeans from the remit of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the UNHCR Statute. In contrast, the history of UNKRA’s (non)engagement with refugees suggests that rhetorically charging an international organization with assisting a particular racialized population—without any concrete accountability measures—can foster their *exclusion* rather than *inclusion*.<sup>31</sup> While scholars such as Cheong (2024) have delved into the dynamics of racialized exclusion by bureaucratic omission, UNKRA shows how bureaucratic inclusion can exacerbate racialized exclusion by creating the impression of needs being met, and of international support for at least some non-white refugees being materially significant and not merely peripheral or rhetorical. At a time when international responses to refugees were manifestly *not* universal, UNKRA initially appears to be a sign of progress, with the predisposition to see UN engagement as positive itself reflecting a degree of colonial unknowing of how the UN was initially a vehicle for preserving rather than dismantling colonial power (Mazower 2009). Perhaps the story would have been different if UNKRA had been given a robust formal mandate to protect and assist Korean refugees. But this counterfactual would never have come to pass, in that the powerful states which created UNKRA would never have bestowed such a mandate on the new entity.

Rather than real interest in meaningful protection and assistance for individual refugees, UNKRA’s rhetorical rebranding as a refugee-serving agency was motivated by broader political and security calculations in the “hot” Cold War: for the US and its allies, it was desirable to buff the intervention’s multilateral sheen by operationalizing UNKRA. As the conflict persisted and reconstruction was delayed, re-tasking UNKRA with supporting refugees legitimized its activation, without sustained, tangible commitment to Korean refugees actually being required. Scholars of the early refugee regime have typically presented UNKRA as a matter of US interests. For example, Zolberg (1988: 674) recognizes that US refugee policy in the 1950s was premised on a “discriminatory national-origins system,” but argues that “US refugee policy was

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<sup>28</sup> US NARA, Dudley to Corley Smith, 28th August 1951, US 1711/118, in FO 371/95844 (cited in McMahon 2017, 75).

<sup>29</sup> US NARA, Beith to Dudley, 8th March 1951, 12/48/51, US 1711/26, in FO 371/95839 (cited in McMahon 2017, 75).

<sup>30</sup> UKNA, Note on UNKRA, 10 September 1953, FO 371, 107118.

<sup>31</sup> This is also abundantly clear in relation to UNRWA (Irfan 2023).

overwhelmingly governed by foreign policy considerations” tied to the emergence of bipolar politics (Zolberg 1988: 675). Such explanations reflect racial aphasia in that these dynamics were enabled by racialized hierarchies through which entire populations could be deemed worthy or unworthy of western interest on the turn of a dime. These hierarchies were not peripheral to the construction of the early refugee regime, but cut to its core. In this sense UNKRA could perhaps be considered a success by some parties to the Korean conflict, in that it provided a multilateral gloss to the management of the humanitarian disaster in South Korea in the 1950s, while allowing UNC’s security-oriented approach to dealing with the refugees to continue apace. Racial aphasia and colonial unknowing are further evident in the highly limited body of scholarship on UNKRA, in that the inequitable and overtly racist aspects of this situation—and the agency’s very existence—are rarely unacknowledged.

## **CONCLUSION**

What is the point of excavating a forgotten failure in the global governance of refugees? Almost seven decades after its closure, it may be tempting to think that UNKRA no longer matters. This work has, I hope, shown that this is a mistake. Presenting UNKRA alongside UNRWA in accounts of the early years of the international refugee regime makes it seem like the seeds for the inclusion of non-white refugees were planted early on. Yet as I have demonstrated, UNKRA failed to meaningfully serve Korean refugees; furthermore, this was never its real *raison d’être*. Origin stories matter. How the early years of the refugee regime are presented primes awareness or neglect of certain biases and problems moving forward (Gross-Wyrtzen and Gazzotti 2021). As Stoler (2011) writes, “History in an active voice is only partly about the past. More important, it is about differential futures.” By using the analytical tools of colonial unknowing and racial aphasia to question how UNKRA has been presented in histories of the refugee regime, we can gain insight into how certain populations are recognized, valued, remembered and forgotten—historically and in the present. Indeed, for the growing number of scholars interested in the ways in which coloniality and racialized hierarchies infuse the refugee regime, UNKRA is a vital part of a “colonial genealogy of the present” (Stoler 2011).

By determinedly re-knowing UNKRA, we can, I have suggested, learn more about the power and proclivities of international organizations in the refugee regime. As examinations of coloniality in the global governance of forced migration continue, it is essential to consider not only the colonial and racialized origins of the legal instruments that serve as touchstones for the protection and management of displaced populations, but also the work of international organizations, which may serve as extensions of state’s colonial power. In the refugee regime, international organizations may serve as vehicles through which the “gift of freedom” is delivered (Nguyen 2012, Kim 2022). As Nguyen (2012) argues, imperialism—particularly US imperialism—purports to enable freedom for others, but in so doing the empire indebts those subject to its power. This results in the creation of the figure of the “grateful refugee” who must continually genuflect to show her worthiness, thus undercutting the possibility of real freedom. Conveying this “gift” through an international organization may downplay the demand for gratitude to the imperial power, but the obligation remains. With its multilateral veneer, UNKRA advanced efforts to unknow the brute reality of the United States’ ongoing neocolonial control in South Korea, and the UN’s role in enabling it. The notion that UNKRA would assist Korean refugees provided a convenient rationale for its operationalization, and an opportunity to demonstrate that the UN’s involvement in South Korea was not primarily an American venture—despite considerable evidence to the contrary. UNKRA’s history shows that in order to grapple

with coloniality in the refugee regime, including through the instrumentalization of refugees, it is also important to consider the roles of international organizations.

To close on a personal note, this article has been percolating for many years. During this time I had a stroke, the condition most closely associated with aphasia. I was fortunate not to have aphasia amongst my symptoms, and recall laughing, however darkly, with friends in the hospital about the absurdity of having a stroke while working on this theme. However, the experience left me with some disquiet with this terminology and how it is used by scholars like Foucault, who often present aphasia as an unalterable medical curiosity. My experiences in stroke recovery have primed me to the importance of recognizing that while aphasia is sometimes permanent, it can also be treated and sometimes improves. Just as in the aftermath of a stroke, overcoming racial aphasia involves slow and painstaking rehabilitation. In the context of the refugee regime, this requires acknowledging and challenging the unknowing of the colonial aspects of international organizations, in turn enabling scholars, policymakers and practitioners alike to better recognize racialized hierarchies and reject their perpetuation.

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