

# Representing Precarity, Disavowing Politics: The Exceptional(ist) Appeal of *Humans of New York*

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**Abstract:** *This article argues that rhetorical engagement on social media involves everyday acts of citizenship that are enmeshed in transnational power relationships. The article analyzes two widely-circulated series of photo-stories about Syrian and Iraqi refugees by the blog Humans of New York (HONY) and audience engagement with the series on social media. Many audience members perceived the series and their engagement with the stories as acts that opposed the racist and Islamophobic discourses in the United States during the 2015 refugee crisis. However, the photo-stories and comments often reproduced the imperialist and racist logics through which Syrian and Iraqi refugees experience precarity and state violence.*

**Keywords:** *Humans of New York (HONY), refugee crisis, Syrian and Iraqi refugees, imperialism, precarity, transnational feminist rhetorics*

I noticed something this week . . . the comments on Aya's story always began very positively. But as some of the posts were shared thousands of times, and began to reach newsfeeds beyond the HONY community, the tone of comments . . . became much more judgmental and prejudiced. And that made me realize how special this community is. The people who follow this page . . . allowed a traumatized young Muslim woman to share her story in a supportive environment . . . in your own way, you provided Aya with a place of refuge . . . thanks to everyone who stood up this week to tell Aya: 'I'm not afraid of you.'

— Brandon Stanton ('Rest day' post following Aya's story)

In September 2015, photographer Brandon Stanton of the blog *Humans of New York* (HONY) traveled through Europe photographing and interviewing refugees from Syria and Iraq, in partnership with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Stanton's two-week trip produced *Refugee*

*Stories*, a set of photo-stories<sup>1</sup> that briefly describe some of the circumstances that these refugees faced, both before and after leaving their homes. About two months later, Stanton featured another series about refugees, titled *Syrian Americans*, in which he interviewed ten refugee families who had been approved for resettlement in the United States, and his interpreter, whose application for resettlement had been denied.

The HONY photo-stories circulate images and stories of hard-working, responsible, family-oriented refugees, presented as ideal neoliberal<sup>2</sup> subjects deserving of sympathy and inclusion in the “national family” (Oswin). Stanton’s photo-stories are examples of human interest stories designed for social media. Rachel Riedner describes human interest stories as “short, everyday, familiar texts that show readers how to act, feel, and participate in social life” (13). The epigraph quotation above illustrates the rhetoric through which Stanton characterizes his audience for the photo-stories as a generous, supportive community. Stanton and his audience see engagement with the refugee series as affective work that counters Islamophobia and racism. *Refugee Stories* and *Syrian Americans* received positive coverage by major news outlets in the U.S. (e.g., CNN, ABC, PBS) and effusive praise from HONY followers, who described the two series as transformational.

Transnational feminist scholars have drawn attention to the circulation of value through neoliberal rhetorics and the importance of situating rhetorical practices within specific configurations of power (Riedner; Dingo; Dingo, Riedner, and Wingard). The following analysis draws on transnational feminist rhetoricians’ work in order to demonstrate the ways that everyday participation on social media involves acts of rhetorical citizenship that are enmeshed in systems of imperialist violence. These everyday rhetorical acts—even when they seem to be doing “good” in terms of civic engagement—do not avoid, but actually *contribute* to the larger systematic logics through which this violence occurs. Taking a case study approach, the remainder of this article analyzes a widely-circulated series of representations of Syrian and Iraqi refugees and the ways that audience members respond to and circulate these representations in order to show that public discourses about the refugee crisis are intertwined with systems of violence and differential protection from violence. I

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1 Short narratives paired with photographs.

2 Neoliberalism refers to both the intertwined economic and political processes that work to facilitate upward redistribution, as well as the “economic logics” that permeate social and public life, placing value on individual responsibility, self-sufficiency, hard work, heteronormative families, and progress (Chari 19-20; Duggan; Riedner).

argue that by disavowing the specific political relationships between audience members and the subjects of the photo-stories, the HONY photo series and its audience foster complicity with neoliberalism and U.S. imperialism. Rather than helping refugees (e.g., by countering racist and Islamophobic rhetoric), many responses to the series actually reinforce the counterterrorist logics through which racialized subjects must prove themselves deserving of protection. Such responses uphold the frameworks through which these Syrian and Iraqi refugees are differentially subject to violence.

Transnational analyses are particularly important in relation to topics such as the refugee crisis, which clearly exceed national boundaries, yet are also taken up rhetorically in specific ways and enmeshed in specific systems of power (e.g., the governmental power of the nation-state, the military and economic power of the U.S. state, the supranational power of the UNHCR). The stories' vexed relationship to the U.S. nation-state is an important factor for understanding the rhetorical work of these series and the complicity of U.S. citizens<sup>3</sup> in the production of precarity for the photo-stories' subjects and for Muslim and Arab people more broadly.

## Aya's Story

"Our family loved America. My father always told me about America. He made us go talk to American soldiers during the war. Other people were afraid of Americans, but he told us they were here to help us and not to be afraid of them. He told us that America was a place where so many different people lived in peace. So many religions. So many communities. We loved America!"

— Aya Abdullah ("Aya's Story, part 10/11")

The politics of Stanton's refugee photo-stories and their circulation are especially visible in relation to the final story in HONY's refugee photo-stories, an eleven-part narrative about a woman named Aya who was Stanton's

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3 While HONY's audience is not exclusively U.S.-American, I focus especially on the U.S. in my analysis because of the blog's origins in New York, the fact that Stanton and many audience members are U.S. citizens, and the ways that the blog and its followers foreground the U.S. and U.S. politics.

interpreter for the Syrian Americans series.<sup>4</sup> In the various segments of her story, Aya discusses her experiences of war in Baghdad as a child, her mother's efforts to support and protect her family, and her family's experiences in Iraq, then Syria, and then Turkey. She talks about doing well in school, making the effort to learn English (including offering gum to American soldiers so she could practice), and volunteering to help other refugees. She also describes her mother's health issues, introduces the audience to her dog, George, and describes how Turkish people's attitudes toward her family changed as more and more refugees entered the country. She then discusses her family's resettlement application and her emotions as she initially misunderstood the language in a letter: she thought her family had been approved for resettlement, and later discovered that their application was denied. Finally, she mentions that her father left her family, and they do not know where he is. In these segments of her story, Aya relates the struggles her family has faced while also demonstrating her deservingness and assimilability through her performance of normative values and affective alignment: hard work, love for her family, and love for America. Her narrative hints briefly at the politics of her encounters with the United States, as she mentions bombing directed at "Saddam" (Hussein) and indirectly refers to the war in Iraq. Yet, as the quotation above shows, Aya's story is quick to praise the United States, even contrasting Aya and her family's orientation toward America with that of Iraqis who feared Americans. Aya's story thus moves to distinguish Aya and her family as especially suitable for citizenship through their positive orientation toward the United States.

Aya's story has much in common with other stories in the *Syrian Americans* series. All of the stories describe hardships faced by the subjects or their family members: health issues; traumatic experiences of fear, violence, and loss; the struggle to support themselves and their families during displacement. Stories also typically include evidence that subjects are hard-working, family-oriented, non-political, or positive about the United States. Aya narrates these values through descriptions of her family's efforts to protect and care for one another, her successes as a student and efforts to learn English, and her hard work and progress during her family's time in Turkey. Her experiences of

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4 Stanton profiled both people who served as interpreters for him. These two profiles are each the longest photo-story in their respective series and the only ones in either series in which we learn the names of the subjects. Not learning the subject's name is typical of photo-stories on the HONY blog, although the depersonalization is especially problematic in this particular context, in which the stories of marginalized refugees are told by a white, male, U.S. citizen for a primarily U.S. audience.

victimization and affective investment in her family and the U.S. make her an ideal subject for the audience's sympathy and inclusion.

Refugee stories, as a genre, are imbricated in systems of power. As Katrina Powell argues, refugees' stories are rhetorical acts imbued with power differentials: narrating one's story is central to the process of obtaining refugee status, and refugees are quite aware of the expectations for their stories (306). Furthermore, there are substantial material consequences hinging on the production of the "right" kind of refugee story: "Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want . . . and if the story is good enough, they can come to the United States for an education" (Deng, quoted in Powell 307). Yet, Powell warns, the publication (and publicization) of refugees' stories "can actually serve to reify hierarchies of race, class, and gender" (308). The material and political consequences of a refugee's "story" shed light on the importance of considering who asks refugees to take up this genre, who hears, circulates, and/or responds to the stories, and what kinds of ideological work the stories and their circulation perform for refugees, their audiences, and the social and political worlds in which they participate.

The broader series of *Syrian Americans* narratives construct the United States as benevolent, offering refugees a chance to live a life free of all the problems they faced at home and during their time as refugees. Every story except Aya's features families accepted for resettlement. The subjects' questions and hopes about the United States (what good things might be available, what life might be like, or what possibilities might be realizable) offer viewers a chance to share in imagining a future for the refugees. For example, in one story, a woman shares a narrative about her life that focuses on her passion for education and the obstacles she's experienced in pursuing postgraduate study, while also discussing her marriage, the loss of her husband, and her daughter's birth. In the final post, the woman shares her daughter's excitement about their upcoming move to North Carolina. Commenters respond by mentioning the many universities in North Carolina, offering the woman their friendship, or suggesting play dates with their children and her daughter. In another example, a young boy shares that his family is moving to Clearwater, Florida, and he hopes that they will have a tree big enough for a treehouse. Audience replies include offers to help build a treehouse, bake meals, and bring the family to Disney World. Through positive exchanges like this, the subjects of the photo-stories and the HONY audience members orient themselves toward a future in which the precariousness of their time as refugees is over, and they are able to build "happy" lives in the United States. The series evokes alignment toward an ideal (away from the precarity of refugee-ness and toward the presumed stability of resettlement in the U.S.) and an alignment towards good feeling among the subject and the audience (Ahmed

“Happy”). The United States becomes associated with the “good,” with what will bring happiness. However, by relying on an idealized notion of the promise of United States citizenship, the series and its audience fail to consider how these refugees will experience the racial and cultural climate of the United States, which, both historically and currently, does not offer equal alleviation of precariousness for citizens across lines of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, for example.

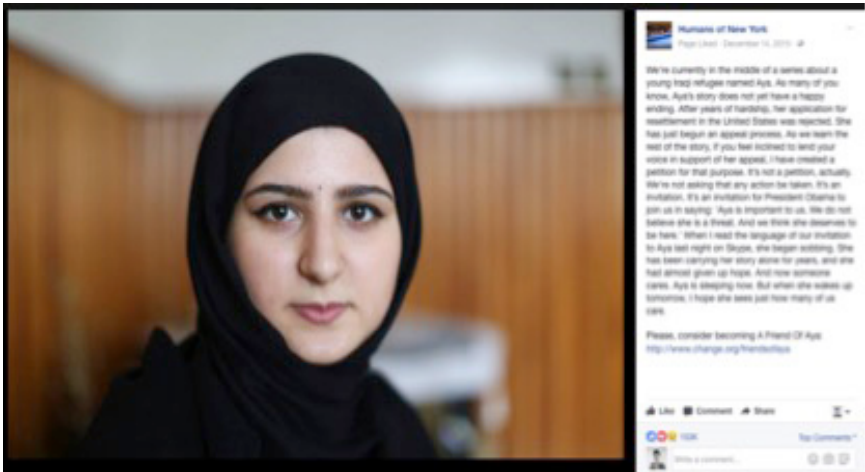


Figure 1: Announcement of Petition for Aya

In addition to sharing Aya’s story, Stanton created a petition in support of her resettlement appeal. In his references to the petition, Stanton appeals to the audience’s affective investment in the stories: “As many of you know, Aya’s story does not yet have a happy ending.” He asks the audience to become “Friend[s] of Aya” by signing the petition, which he then moves to depoliticize, saying “it’s not a petition, actually. We’re not asking that any action be taken. It’s an invitation. It’s an invitation for President Obama to join us in saying: ‘Aya is important to us. We do not believe she is a threat. And we think she deserves to be here’” (Announcement). Stanton goes on to describe Aya’s emotional response to learning about the HONY petition, telling the audience that “she had almost given up hope . . . and now someone cares.” Here, Stanton acknowledges the affective work of the stories, which “hail readers as benevolent subjects who are concerned with others, who are aware of people and events elsewhere, and who actively attend to global inequalities through feeling” (Riedner 8).

Audience members responded to this call as they shared, “reacted,”<sup>5</sup> and commented on the stories. The audience’s emotional responses contributed to the stories’ “spreadability,” as audience members negotiated their identities in relation to these emotional responses and their decision to share, react, or comment on the text (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Nish 2016). HONY and its public (dubbed the “HONY Community” by Stanton and his followers) constructed these series as a counternarrative to the racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic discourses circulating among U.S.-American publics in response to the refugee crisis and shared the stories with the intent of spreading a counterdiscourse. HONY and supporters performed acts of rhetorical citizenship in their engagement with the stories, imagining themselves as a counterpublic that recognizes others’ humanity and cares about their wellbeing. However, operating within the terms and limits of the dominant discourses undermined this oppositional narrative. My analysis draws attention to the responsibility of rhetors and publics for interrogating the power relationships involved in acts of representation and responses to those representations. In HONY’s refugee series, elements of the photo-stories, their context, and the responses of the HONY public reinforced state power, neoliberal values (such as personal responsibility, hard work, and progress) and discourses of U.S. exceptionalism. Celebrating and sharing these photos thus upheld the systems and ideologies that contributed to these refugees’ precarity.

Yet many audience members celebrated the series as “humanizing” and imagined the representations and their circulation as transformative. Although the stories successfully produced individualized emotional experiences for many audience members, they were presented in ways that disavowed politics, rather than engaging in political critique that might have revealed the discursive mechanisms through which U.S.-American lives are privileged over—and at the expense of—the lives of Syrians and Iraqis.

After Stanton introduced the petition to appeal Aya’s and her family’s resettlement application, public comments on the story began to question

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5 By “react,” I am referring to the options provided in the Facebook interface for reacting: like, love, haha, wow, sad, and angry.

whether Aya and her family should be allowed into the U.S.<sup>6</sup> For example, one audience member noted that the victimization of Aya and her family was not enough to gain their support: “Not to deny that the story you’ve shared so far is simply awful, yet I can’t just support her when I do not know why she was denied. I would like to be able to lend my support, but need to understand more” (Staffieri).<sup>7</sup> While the top comments on previous photo-stories emphasized the importance of a positive and welcoming attitude toward refugees, some comments on Aya’s story turned to concerns about security and protection of American lives. Another commenter similarly conveyed her emotional response to the story, but went on to say, “there is probably a back story to this that only the government knows. If they were denied, I have to trust that there really is a security issue” (Porter). The comments fell back on problematic exceptionalist and neoliberal logics, including support for security measures taken by the U.S. government and discussion of the deservingness of Aya and her family. While the epigraph quotation at the beginning of this article indicated that Stanton attributed a negative shift in HONY comments to the circulation of the stories beyond the “HONY community,” a more likely explanation is that he moved from asking his audience to take a philanthropic

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6 My research on the series has included reading journalists’ and bloggers’ responses to the series, as well as the filtered “Top Comments” on Facebook. For each photo, I read the full text of all comments that were visible to viewers without expanding the comment section by clicking on “more comments” or “more replies.” I chose these comments because they are a part of what viewers see when they view the photos on social media, and because the “reactions” and replies that position them at the top indicate that audience members have engaged with these responses and find them salient.

7 Comments on HONY Facebook posts are reproduced here exactly as they appear. I have not corrected errors nor inserted “[sic]” after individual errors because these forms of textual variation are common in internet and mobile communications and do not interfere with understanding.



interest in the photo-stories' subjects (caring and donating money<sup>8</sup> for a problem that is "elsewhere") to asking the audience to take up a political genre (the petition), suggesting that audience members hold some responsibility for Aya's future. He asked the audience to take this political action on the basis of depoliticized rhetoric: photo-stories that focus on individual experiences of refugees without connecting these experiences to the structural violence that fosters their differential vulnerability. Instead of engaging with the ways that audience members are implicated in the precarity of Syrian and Iraqi refugees (i.e., through U.S. citizenship, for many audience members), Stanton and his audience appealed to sympathy for individual people who illustrated their suffering and deservingness through the photo-stories.

While the audience's political relationship to Syrian and Iraqi refugees provides substantial cause to see the petition as their political responsibility, the stories and comments eschewed discussion of this relationship and instead focused on constructing subjects as good, responsible, deserving people. Many audience members responded to the knowledge that Aya's resettlement application was rejected, and to Stanton's call for audience members to sign the petition, by affirming their sympathy and emotional response to Aya's story. However, some audience members also withheld their support for Aya's petition or reaffirmed their support for (and their trust of) the U.S. government's security screening procedures. As one commenter wrote,

I feel for her family. . . but . . . we don't have the full story, all we have is one innocent, young member of the family sharing her point of view, which, while touching - is not the full story. I don't trust the U.S. to get it right all the time . . . but I can't say in good conscious that her family

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8 HONY has sponsored a number of fundraising campaigns that have raised millions of dollars. The first widely-publicized fundraising campaign originating from HONY was for a Brooklyn school, Mott Hall Bridges Academy, after Stanton photographed one of its students talking about the positive impact of his principal on his life. The photo and story received national attention, the fundraising campaign raised 1.4 million dollars, and President Barack Obama also invited Stanton, the student, and his principal to the White House. A photo and story of a Pakistani woman named Syeda Ghulam Fatima taken during Stanton's UN travel also inspired a campaign that raised over two million dollars for Fatima's organization, the Bonded Labor Liberation Front, which fights bonded labor in Pakistani brick kilns. A popular photograph from the *Syrian Americans* series of a refugee nicknamed "The Scientist" drew a comment from President Obama and a visit to the White House, as well as a fundraiser initiated by actor Edward Norton that raised almost half a million dollars.

should be brought in without all the facts (we need them to make an educated decision, and to not an emotional one)." (Haynes)

Aya's story, and the HONY public's response to it, draws attention to the importance and limitations of the emotion-work prioritized in audiences' engagement with the stories. Support for subjects of Stanton's series was linked to their performances of normative and neoliberal values, through which refugees became legible as subjects who could be supported for assimilation into the nation. Comments on Aya's story showed the limits of these representations: for some audience members, Aya and her family were still not sufficiently distinguished from the unknowable, potentially threatening "other" constructed by discourses of counterterrorism (Puar, *Terrorist*).

For others, Aya and her family became acceptable recipients of support because of appeals to the national security measures through which admitted refugees must pass in order for their resettlement claims to be approved. For example, in response to comments that questioned or objected to the petition, Stanton and commenters were quick to reassure objectors by explaining that the petition wasn't asking for Aya to be admitted, but for her application to be reconsidered. One commenter even seemed to simultaneously affirm the notion that refugees are potential threats and point out the racialized logic of this assumption: "The petition is not to make immigration let her in, it's to ask them to re-examine her case. And you can bet that ALL of the refugees will be monitored very, very closely unlike the next US caucasian moron that decides to cause some harm" (Woodnutt). Commenters relied on existing government mechanisms as assurance that they weren't doing anything too political. Through recourse to screening checks and surveillance, Stanton and audience members carefully positioned their cause as one that could do no harm. Another commenter wrote, "no one is being let in due to a petition. Instead, when Aya finally gets cleared to come to the United States, it will be because someone carefully scrutinized her application and decided that she actually poses no security threat after all" (Stephen). These examples show that series' depoliticized, melodramatic rhetoric did not successfully refute the discourses that enable racialized state violence experienced by Aya's family, but actually *upheld* the differential allocation of rights and protection through which Aya and other refugees receive help after proving their deservingness.<sup>9</sup>

Projects like Stanton's elide the audience's specific political relationship to Syrian and Iraqi refugees, in which the security of certain U.S.-American lives is achieved through the production of vulnerability for Others (both those

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9 Aya's petition received over one million signatures, but her appeal was rejected. During the process of writing this piece, she was resettled in Switzerland.

who are not U.S. citizens and those who are “othered”) (Lorey). Without recognizing this relationship, audience members missed an opportunity to rethink their political commitments through a recognition of the refugees’ precarity. Instead, HONY’s refugee series—and public responses to it—disavowed political action and circulated rhetorics of complicity with U.S. imperialism and neoliberalism.

## **Precarity, Crisis, and the Nation-State**

This is going to be one of the most important stories you will tell. To hopefully wake up the eyes of not just European countries, but countries everywhere. To force us all to see past our own stereotypes and ignorance, and actually do something to help these people. No one can pretend this war doesn’t exist any longer. Thank you so much, Brandon, for using your platform for good.

— Jasmine Violette (Comment on photo of plastic boat, emphasis added)

Europeans’ and U.S.-Americans’ identification of a “refugee crisis” in 2015 highlights racialized power relations in Anglophone discourse: while a state of crisis for many refugees had been ongoing for some time, the phrase “refugee crisis” became salient in reference to the experiences of people in Europe and the United States. This “crisis” was part of a larger context of ongoing violence, but widespread use of the term “crisis” framed the discourse about refugees in relation to “the political and affective responses of Europeans and Americans faced with the call to receive into their daily lives the consequences of the wars their states have waged elsewhere” (Naimou 227). These discourses, in which the HONY refugee series and audience responses were enmeshed, reveal the logics that produce precarity. Theorists have used precarity to signify the ways in which protection from our basic human condition of vulnerability and dependence on others (Judith Butler calls this “precariousness”) is differentially allocated. Precarity thus highlights social and cultural relationships that hierarchize populations, and through which, “certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler, *Frames* 25). Precarity involves a state of being especially vulnerable to violence and to being unable to secure protection from that violence. Refugees experience violence from the state and a lack of state protection from violence. Paradoxically, they often need to appeal to the state for protection at the same time that the state is producing the violence they experience (Butler, *Frames*).

Citizenship and the nation-state are thus imbricated in the differential production of, and protection from, violence highlighted by the term “precarity.” Precarity’s differential production is linked to the intertwined processes of racialization, imperialism, and neoliberalism, both generally and for refugees specifically. As Robert Topinka argues, citizenship is a racializing mode of governance, rooted in colonial histories, that regulates the flow of people “by assessing who can be counted as a citizen and who cannot, and whose movements are threatening and whose are not” (448). U.S. imperialism mobilizes citizenship to justify its production of life and death through necropolitical violence. This process of justification has occurred through appeals to emergency and the construction of enemies or a threatening “other” (Pease; Mbembe; Lorey). Imperialist racism is not only about the separation between who will live and who will die, but the relationships of extraction and exploitation through which some must die so that others may live (Hage). As Ghassan Hage argues, when racism “works,” its beneficiaries are able to comfortably separate themselves from awareness of this relationship of extraction. When “crisis” occurs, it is because racism (and the comfortable separation of its beneficiaries from this reality) is not adequately “working.” Refugees’ movement across borders caused a crisis because of the inability of U.S. and European audiences to comfortably separate themselves from precarity as differential and exploitative: certain populations are rendered “disposable” (e.g., Syrians, Iraqis, refugees) in order to produce or maintain security for those who benefit from these racial separations.

Through the public mobilization of people who were outside of state protection, the refugee crisis also called attention to the failures of citizenship as a model for conveying rights (cf. Puar et al.). Refugees are literally outside of state protection, and their legal status renders them, in Lisa Cacho’s words, “*ineligible for personhood*—as populations subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them” (6). Thus, refugees who assemble and move across borders are very publicly exercising a right they do not have because of their citizenship status (Butler, *Precarious v*). In the case of the HONY project and Aya’s story, through discussion of the political legitimacy and moral credibility of Aya and her family as factors that might be used to permit or deny their resettlement in the U.S., commenters accepted the logics that restrict the rights and movement of Aya and her family and reinforced the differential allocation of state protection through citizenship.

The extent of rhetorical attention to the refugee “crisis” also revealed many U.S. citizens’ failure to recognize their state’s political embeddedness in other nations’ problems and the ways that U.S. discourses construct and respond to bodies as “other.” Whereas bodies that remain separated by

borders and national boundaries are systemically written off (e.g., ignored in mainstream discourse or erased through the use of terms such as “collateral damage”), the potential influx of racialized bodies prompts discursive engagement with “othered” bodies and what otherness might do to the (imagined) nation. The consequences of the large-scale displacements of people were already creating strain outside Europe and the U.S. prior to 2015. The number of displaced people who remained in their country of citizenship or prior residence, or in neighboring countries, far exceeded the number of refugees seeking asylum in Europe; comparatively few refugees were offered resettlement in the United States, and these resettlement cases were the subject of disproportionate attention.<sup>10</sup> The recognition of a “crisis” only in relation to refugees’ entry or exclusion from Europe and the United States obscured the systematic violence already experienced by refugees and can be linked to the failure of U.S. and European audiences to comfortably maintain imperial and racial separations.

Citizens of the United States are, and have for some time been, complicated—through their citizenship and their political choices—in the production of precarity for people in Syria and Iraq, including the displacement of Syrian

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10 Most of the world’s 65.3 million “forcibly displaced” people are currently located in Africa and the Middle East (UNHCR, “Global” 2, 15). The category “forcibly displaced” is broader than “refugee,” as it includes those still residing in their country of citizenship, who are “internally displaced” (40.8 million people), as well as refugees (21.3 million people) and asylum-seekers (3.2 million people) (UNHCR, “Global” 2). The focus on refugees can obscure the extent of violence by focusing most on displacement that crosses nation-state borders. The violence of multiple displacements (e.g., Palestinian or Iraqi refugees in Syria being displaced again) is also not registered in these figures. Most refugees are currently located in Turkey (2.5 million people), Pakistan (1.6 million people), and Lebanon (1.1 million people) (UNHCR, “Global” 3). In comparison, the number of people who entered Europe in 2015 was estimated at one million (Clayton and Holland). According to the UNHCR, the United States accepted the highest number people for resettlement in that same year, at 66,500 people (UNHCR, “Global” 3).

The European and U.S. figures pale in comparison to the total numbers of refugees, many of whom will likely not be resettled, given that not all refugees wish to be resettled and resettlement is granted only for people with special needs or for whom threats to their life make it impossible to return home. Given the geographical size, population density, and amount of available resources in the United States, the number of refugees resettled in the US is comparatively low.

and Iraqi refugees, as a result of the U.S.'s exercise of its military, economic, and political power. Regardless of whether citizens intentionally give support to specific military actions, they are bound up in the rhetorical and material processes through which these actions are made possible.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. contributes to differential precarity in Syria and Iraq, as well as the Middle East<sup>12</sup> more generally, through direct forms of violence (e.g., invading Iraq, carrying out drone strikes), as well as support for states or groups that enact regional violence (e.g., Israel) (Lubin and Kraidy 18). The U.S. "War on Terror," (which, of course, includes the 2003-2011 war in Iraq and the more recent U.S. war

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11 Some readers may object to this, feeling that although the government is technically figured as representing the will of U.S. citizens, it does not always do so in practice, and therefore we cannot charge citizens with complicity. Although I believe I understand where this objection comes from, it is precisely this kind of response that I wish to urge U.S. citizens to reconsider. Bracketing off certain elements of U.S. state practice from citizens' sphere of responsibility is part of the process through which, firstly, the production of precarity becomes something that the U.S. invested in (ideologically, financially, and otherwise) despite so much apparent opposition, and, secondly, through which the production of precarity is separated from so many citizens' characterization of their nation. Complicity is a way of understanding this situation that holds citizens accountable for addressing it. Certainly, different citizens, who occupy varied relationships to power themselves, have different resources at their disposal for this work, but it is complicity that connects us nonetheless. Regardless of whether U.S. citizens support the U.S.'s wars, their state's participation in war is something they are complicit in. Global connectivities and the uneven effects of power are two key elements of transnational feminist scholarship and activism; U.S. citizens' complicity in the precarity of Syrian and Iraqi refugees involves both, which is why this series offers an important site for understanding everyday rhetoric through a transnational feminist framework.

12 I recognize that this term is the subject of critique because it includes a diverse range of nation-states and people whose combination is a result of colonial and imperial history; it is a political categorization in meaning and effect. I have tried to limit my use of this term; I retain it in several places because it is a term that indicates the targeting of U.S. power.

against Daesh<sup>13</sup>) is perhaps the most obvious and widely understood way to connect U.S. citizens to the production of precarity for Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Both wars can be linked to Iraq and Syria; their effects are not confined to national borders. For example, in addition to its devastating effects in Iraq, the 2003 Iraq War had an impact on neighboring Syria, both in terms of the political discourses in Syria (through which the Syrian regime asserted its opposition to the U.S. invasion) and through the flow of displaced Iraqis into Syria (Wieland; Doraï and Zeuthen). Additionally, the U.S. has been involved in the Syrian civil war for some time, despite the limited media coverage prior to the April 7, 2017 U.S. missile strike on Syria (Miller). The U.S. and its regional allies have historically opposed the Assad regime and wished to bring about regime change, and have been providing training and arms to Syrian opposition groups, which has prolonged the war ("On ISIS"; Cockburn; Haddad; Londoño and Miller). Still further, international sanctions have influenced living conditions in both countries, including their recent impact on Syrian civilians ("On ISIS"; Cornwell; Lyme; Moret; Nuruzzaman).

A number of scholars and critics have also written about the links between U.S. violence and the formation of Daesh in order to argue for the U.S. as either directly or indirectly linked to Daesh's existence. These arguments typically suggest that the U.S. has contributed the rise of Daesh (as well as its predecessor, Al Qaeda) by fostering anti-U.S. sentiment and creating the power vacuums in which these groups function (Milne; Norton; Stern and McBride). Narratives link the U.S. to these circumstances through a range of examples, including the CIA's backing of Mujahideen in the 1980s in Afghanistan, the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War, the 2001 war in Afghanistan, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and U.S. support of Syrian opposition groups in the current Syrian civil and proxy war. The United States has thus contributed to the differential precarity experienced by Syrian and Iraqi refugees via violence, material resources, and political power; yet many public conversations about refugees fail to engage with these national projects and their effects.

Given the strong political framework for tying the U.S. and its citizens to current conditions of life for people displaced from (and within) Iraq and Syria, one might expect the HONY photo-stories to prompt discussion of U.S. war and its effects. However, as Jeremy Engels and William O. Saas have persuasively argued, the new rhetorical architecture of war involves not only efforts to cultivate assent, but also, and perhaps more perniciously, acquiescence: "authorities tell us, *don't worry, we've got this*, just go about your everyday

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13 "Daesh" is another name for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL) that comes from the Arabic acronym for the group's name.

business . . . *acquiescent rhetorics* aim to disempower citizens by cultivating passivity and numbness" (231). This is especially relevant when commenters shift the brunt of responsibility for responding to refugees onto state security processes. Still further, the cultivation of selective sympathy, in which "innocent" victims are positioned against the shifting threat an ever-present, racialized, terrorist Other (yet not against the threat of the U.S. state) is also a form of propaganda that acquiesces to "ends-less" war.

HONY's photo-stories present "good" refugees as deserving victims toward whom the audience is expected to develop affective responses and offer individualized support (sympathy, changed minds, monetary donation), while constructing the United States and its ideal citizens as benevolent distributors of state protection and charitable support. The photo-stories, and responses to them, thus draw on the myth of U.S. exceptionalism, through which U.S. citizens identify with a fantasy of the United States as an ideal nation. Donald Pease has described American exceptionalism as "a political doctrine as well as a regulatory fantasy that enabled U.S. citizens to define, support, and defend the U.S. national identity" (Pease 11). Particularly relevant to my analysis of the HONY series is Pease's description of exceptionalism as a state fantasy through which citizens construct desire for the existing national order: "A state fantasy becomes symbolically effective when it produces a relation with the order it legislates that makes it seem an enactment of the will of the individual national subject rather than an imposition of the state" (Pease 6). Many members of Stanton's audience experience such individualized alignment with the will of the U.S. state. Despite audience claims that the series is transformational, the transformation often remains limited to an expression of feeling by the individual audience member, rather than a transformation of their perceived political relationship to Syrian and Iraqi refugees. As such, any "transformative" effect fails to challenge the relevant structures of power – the state in general, and the imperialist, neoliberal U.S. state in particular – through which refugees' precarity is reproduced. On the contrary, a number of audience members respond by confirming their faith in the U.S. government and its security structures.

In the United States, exceptionalism is linked to the rhetoric through which U.S. military and police violence is justified in the service of precarity: "*precarious* is what we feel, or would rather not feel, and its analysis has to be linked to the impetus to become impermeable, as so often happens within zones of military nationalism and rhetorics of security and self-defense" (Butler, in Puar et al. 169). Since 9/11, politicians in the U.S. have facilitated and utilized such affective responses to precariousness to justify foreign policy and military intervention, such as the invasion of Iraq. These policies and actions result in the differential production of precarity for those in the areas targeted by this



violence while claiming to reduce precarity for U.S. citizens through state protection. This rhetoric produces precarity for people who live in places like Syria and Iraq that are deemed to contain “threats” to U.S. security, as well for those who experience the effects of amplified Islamophobia and racism directed at Arab and Muslim people in the U.S. (including people who are not Arab or Muslim, but are read as such). The Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Stanton’s series are subject to this violence. Exceptionalism and precarity shape both the discourse about refugees and the political and material conditions of refugee life: in policy formation, in the availability of support and resources, and in shaping the attitudes of the people that refugees encounter during periods of both movement and pause.

The 2015 “crisis” signaled a moment with productive potential for addressing these issues, but what rhetors and audiences do with such moments is important. The presence and visibility of refugees in mainstream public discourses presented an occasion that might have prompted U.S. citizens to recognize their complicity in the U.S. state’s production of precarity for people in other places. At the very least, the refugee crisis might have called attention to the violence of immigration and refugee policies and the performances they require for subjects to be granted state protection (Hartelius; Powell). Instead, political and public discourses about the 2015 refugee crisis often shifted responsibility onto refugees, mobilized fears of difference, and separated refugees into categories of “deserving” and “undeserving” (Holmes and Castañeda 13). In the context of the refugee crisis, support for refugees tied the neoliberal distribution of care and compassion to successful performances of vulnerability and normativity.

Neoliberalism is both an economic theory and set of policies and practices that facilitate the upward redistribution of capital and the reduction of the state’s role in regulating markets and providing public services. However, a critical part of the “work” of neoliberalism is the process through which it “extends market relations ever deeper into social relations” (Riedner and Mahoney 19). Through this process, neoliberalism has come to “[refer] not only to market-centric polities, free trade, and the spread of global capitalism but also to how individuals ought to act . . . [it] manifests within particular values: entrepreneurship, competition, individual choice, self-interest, and self-empowerment” (Dingo 10). Neoliberalism is intricately connected to American political discourses and systems of value. As Riedner indicates, neoliberal values shape our rhetorical practices: “neoliberal rhetorics appear to offer recognition, freedom, and incorporation through participation in capitalist markets. In so doing, they traffic in melodramatic and sensational feelings, shaping and orienting our affective energies toward the authority of institutions and the nation-state, as well as toward value of ‘freedom’ of global

markets" (xii). Neoliberal policy causes the differential production of stability and instability globally through the imbrication of U.S. military power and capitalism (Duggan; Lubin and Kraidy).

The war in Iraq highlights the intertwined political and economic motives underlying the exercise of U.S. military power. As Alex Lubin and Marwan Kraidy note, U.S. foreign policy has historically been tied to economic interests: during the Cold War, U.S. military power was used in the "Third World"<sup>14</sup> to attack communist and socialist formations, but also to "expand existing, and to open new, American markets" (13). After the Cold War, policymakers argued that "the United States' role in foreign affairs must revolve around the promotion of political and economic freedom abroad" and identified regime change in Iraq as "a means to assert American control of the Middle East, its oil, and most importantly, the global price of oil," a goal realized during the Bush administration (Lubin and Kraidy 14).

The exceptionalist rhetoric used to justify U.S. military operations in the Middle East has included appeals based on spreading American values and ways of life (such as Bush's desire to "reform" the Middle East), as well as appeals to protect U.S. citizens and their values (by attacking Daesh on the grounds that it threatens both) (Lubin and Kraidy 20). Contrary to exceptionalist fantasies, U.S. engagement with the Middle East is not benevolent; it is politically and economically motivated. Further, the neoliberal values underlying U.S.-Middle East relations also permeate the rhetorics through which U.S. national identity is constructed and through which stories in the HONY series engage with their subjects and audiences. Neoliberalism facilitates the narrative through which the U.S. and other international powers "[pose] as the harbingers of peace and prosperity for the global masses . . . in fact creat[ing] peace in some places and war in others, prosperity for some and ecological destruction and poverty for many more" (Duggan 12). Through instances such as the 2015 refugee crisis, U.S. and European audiences struggle to maintain their distance from imperial violence, a distance enabled by neoliberalism and exceptionalism.

Public rhetorics about the refugee crisis and its significance draw attention to this process of distancing, as well as the ways that rhetoric enables differential experiences of vulnerability based on relative positions of privilege and power. The elision of political specificity in texts such as HONY's refugee series reinforces a situation in which many U.S. citizens do not seem to recognize or appreciate their complicity in the violence and instability in Syria and

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14 While this term is, appropriately, the subject of critique, I retain it here because it is the term used by Lubin and Kraidy and the term used in Cold War policy.

Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Moments such as the 2015 refugee crisis, in which U.S. publics were confronted with precarity in the flood of images of refugees, have potential for calling attention to, and fostering discussion of, this complicity. The HONY photo-stories are a site for rhetorical citizenship; through the photo-stories, comments, and their circulation, a discourse about the United States and its citizens is formed, one which shapes the nation and constructs its boundaries. For U.S. citizens, the photo-stories' engagement with the refugee crisis was a missed opportunity to recognize the material consequences of U.S. foreign policy, and to connect these material consequences to the discourses that foster their support for, and the production of, such policy.

## Stanton's Politics of Humanization

I always felt that HONY portraits were a really 'humanizing' form of art. And I always wondered what it would be like to apply it to a place that had been vilified.

— Brandon Stanton, "I am Brandon Stanton" (2013)

In addition to the stories and comments, another aspect of the series involves the ways that the HONY community is constructed as a site for doing (or not doing) "political" work. Brandon Stanton's self-representation is a part of this. Followers of the blog know him by name and regularly address him in the comments (as in the previous section's opening quotation), and he occasionally departs from posting photo-stories to address his audience personally. Stanton has presented himself as "neutral" or "apolitical"; an example comes from early 2016, when Stanton published an "Open Letter to Donald Trump" several months after publishing the photo-stories of refugees. He opens with the following:

Mr. Trump, I try my hardest not to be political. I've refused to interview several of your fellow candidates. I didn't want to risk any personal goodwill by appearing to take sides in a contentious election. I thought: 'Maybe the timing is not right.' But I realize now that there is no correct time to oppose violence and prejudice. The time is always now. Because along with millions of Americans, I've come to realize that opposing you is no longer a political decision. It is a moral one.

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15 For example., an October 2016 Pew research poll indicated that a majority of registered voters did not believe that the U.S. has "a responsibility to accept refugees from Syria" (Krogstad and Radford).

Here, Stanton rallies the opinion of millions of Americans behind his assertion that opposition to Trump is a moral decision. This ease with which he draws others in as backing his statement is important to note, given his work with refugees (more on this below). Further, claiming to avoid politics is itself a politics, and it is a performance that Stanton can so easily claim because of his various privileges: performances of neutrality are accepted from Stanton because he is a white man in the United States. Being political, for him, means “to risk . . . personal goodwill.” The position in which personal goodwill is only at stake if one explicitly announces her political stance is unavailable to many marginalized people, whose bodies are read as intrinsically political. The ability to choose when to be political and when to claim apoliticality is often an effect of one’s position within structures of power. On a community level, the HONY public’s engagement with politics (or claims to lack, or limit, such engagement) might also be read as a sign of structural power.

Stanton goes on to build his moral stance on authority he has gained through some of his work on the blog:

I am a journalist, Mr. Trump. And over the last two years I have conducted extensive interviews with hundreds of Muslims, chosen at random, on the streets of Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan. I’ve also interviewed hundreds of Syrian and Iraqi refugees across seven different countries. And I can confirm – the hateful one is you.

Stanton might be taking up a well-supported position of opposition to Donald Trump. However, he opposes Trump by drawing on agency that comes from his position of privilege while claiming legitimacy gained through his encounters with the “other” (his experience interviewing Muslims and Syrian and Iraqi refugees). He is drawing authority from his interactions with people who represent groups that are marginalized, oppressed, or subject to violence by the United States (both within and outside of the U.S.) without interrogating the power relations involved in his interactions.

In another example of Stanton’s willingness to speak for others, he tells fans about a trip to Iran by attempting to make Iran and Iranian people relatable to his U.S. audience. He says: “Of course there are people who are going to be less than welcoming anywhere. But the vast, vast majority of Iranians love Americans. And they hate their government. Most everyone you meet will do two things: 1) Bitch about the government 2) Ask about America” (“I am”). Stanton’s comfort level in describing the “majority of Iranians” and their view of the United States after one two-week trip to Iran is troubling, and again signals the ease with which he speaks for others in his work. In the same interview, he also speaks of applying the “humanizing” work of HONY portraits to a “vilified” place (quoted at the beginning of this section). Stanton and his

audience seemed to consider his refugee series to be doing similar work – humanizing a vilified population through representations of “othered” bodies. However, these representations are not neutral. In the quotation about Iranians, Stanton hints at the perspective he brings to this work, simultaneously reinforcing hegemonic U.S. politics (opposition to the Iranian government) and assuring U.S. citizens that they and their country are loved. In the refugee series, the representations do not simply offer exposure to the people and places in the series; Stanton and his audience also generate a particular image of the United States and U.S. citizenship. This work of national imagining is key to understanding how the series and its circulation support U.S. power.

Linda Alcoff argues powerfully for the importance of interrogating the power relations involved in acts of representation. Unfortunately, Stanton and his audience do not engage substantively with the power relations and political effects of the photo-stories; instead they rely on their individualized responses to the stories as evidence that their discourse is beneficial to refugees. Several commenters announce that they have changed their attitude toward refugees as a result of the stories, and are now in favor of helping refugees or allowing their resettlement in the U.S. However, this focus on tolerance and humanitarianism still elides the political relationships between refugees and U.S. citizens. Because of its failure to engage with power relations, HONY reproduces imperialist attitudes, positioning the United States and its citizens as benevolent and reinforcing the notion that people within the U.S. have the authority to evaluate whether refugees are sufficiently victimized and non-threatening to be granted entry to the U.S. and protected from violence.

Stanton and his audience construct Trump and others who object to resettling refugees in the U.S. as the “bad guys” who represent a particular kind of discourse to which they oppose themselves. The effect of this opposition is that the audience can then congratulate themselves for being human and for recognizing the humanity and subjectivity of normative “others.” One commenter succinctly summarizes this position when she says, “I wonder where I’ll be when my grandchildren ask me about the Syrian refugee moment and where I stood. I’m proud to say I’ll be able to tell them I was on the right side of history” (Johnson). Johnson’s response strives for mastery through her eagerness to position herself as “correct” in a historical narrative. As Alcoff writes:

the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. And the effect of the practice is often . . . erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national and other kinds of hierarchies. (29)

Stanton's practice of speaking for and about others is a practice that reinscribes such hierarchies. His audience feels that they too are able to achieve the mastery of "championing a just cause" through their ability to respond to his stories with the "correct" emotional responses and recognition of others' humanity.

Rather than seeing the photo-stories in relation to something structural or systematic—that is, through references that might allow us to contest the conditions that have led to refugees' situation—most commenters focus on their own inner development. For example, one commenter responds to a story of a man's arrest, beating, and imprisonment with the following comment:

This morning, leaving the house very early to go away for a weekend trip, I said to my husband how cold and hungry I was. Then I thought of this man standing in the jail, hungry and cold, for ten long days. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and felt grateful for everything and everyone I have in my life. HONY has made me rethink everything. Thank you Brandon. (Padrissa)

While inner development is not necessarily always a problem, the HONY public's focus on these kinds of responses precludes the kinds of political work necessary to addressing refugees' precarity. Stanton addresses the followers of his blog as a community that is characterized by a framework of humanitarian charity, in which politics involves caring for others and offering financial contributions. The problem with these modes of engagement is not necessarily with care or financial contribution per se, but with the ways that these forms of engagement involve the construction of separate groups of people: those who help and those who are aided. These separations have a political history and are bound up in the imperialist discourses through which some nations or people are figured as those who help, and others as those who need 'saving' (Flaherty; Grewal; Puar "Feminists"). Stanton congratulates his audience for their engagement, which he links to individualized participation such as interacting with the photo-stories, compassion, and donation:

So many of you choose to routinely engage and participate in the community. You've created such a unique and supportive culture in the comment section. And you've donated nearly \$5 million to our fundraisers in 2015. I think the HONY community is largely composed of people who try to choose compassion over cynicism, and that's why we've been able to accomplish so much this year. In short—this is a group of people who 'shows up.' (New Year's)

Stanton often refers to the community as a supportive and positive space. Followers, too, characterize the discourse this way: "You know what I love

about HONY? Every comment I ever see is understanding, empathetic, and shows a deeply caring individual" (Kennedy). Another commenter declares that HONY is "one of the only places on the internet where it's safe to read the comments" (Mastropasqua). These participants clearly value what they see as a supportive and positive environment on the blog and its comments. However, and importantly, this environment's primary function is to support and maintain HONY and the HONY audience, despite the appearance of an orientation toward refugees in these two series.

This characterization of the space and the people in it as exceptional or special, and as nicer than the rest of the internet, is also troubling because the comment section is moderated in order to maintain these qualities. Stanton has expressed his desire to use moderation to maintain positivity: "I have some moderators who do their best to weed out the really nasty comments. HONY's positive culture is one of my greatest sources of pride. I'll work hard to maintain it" (Stanton, "I am Brandon Stanton"). At least one blogger, writing under the title "Chocolate, Pomp, and Circumstance," has argued that she was banned from commenting on HONY photos for critiquing a subject's racist stereotyping despite her attempts to follow the "rule" of not attacking subjects. This blogger's experience calls to mind Sara Ahmed's description of "affect aliens" as affectively resisting orientations toward good feelings and getting along ("Happy" 50). For Ahmed, affect circulates between subjects and objects, accumulating value and shaping the surfaces of collective bodies ("Affective"). She has written about the ways that emotions work to align individuals with collectives; such alignments also produce differentiations between "us" and "them." For example, affect circulates in ways that shape an imagined national body, and that justify particular responses to "others" that are read as potential threats to that body.

Reading the HONY community through Ahmed's work highlights the affective dimensions of inclusion and exclusion through which the HONY public functions. HONY's affect aliens are not insiders who are out of alignment with collective sentiment; their misalignment makes them outsiders. Instead of calling HONY's comments section a positive and welcoming space, HONY might be better characterized as a space that welcomes those-who-are-positive. This emphasis on positivity requires boundary policing. Those who contest the dominant sentiments of the community become out-of-line and may be excluded. This happens through Stanton's moderation of the page, but also in the comments section. Stanton has stated that no one is banned or blocked from viewing the page and the photos, but commenters who attack the subject of the photograph will be blocked (Comment section). However, when the comments veer into disagreement with a "story" that represents the subject's

politics through narration of their experience, the line between attacking the subject and discussing their ideas may not always be clear.

Stanton isn't alone in doing this work: as one commenter writes, "we do choose compassion over cynicism, so much so that when 'outsiders' try to decry those interviewed or another commenter, we rise to the occasion to keep it positive. The world has had enough of that, we must do what we can in our own little corners to be a force for good" (Pierre). The community is able to maintain itself as inclusive and positive in relation to the "rest of the internet" by policing its boundaries. However, as Ahmed argues, an emphasis on affirmative, positive, and good feelings or orientations can obscure histories of injustice (50). Unwillingness to align with the collective can be a politically useful position: "[a] concern with histories that hurt is not then a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return. If anything we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some forms of joy, as an alternative model of the social good" (50). This boundary-policing is not just about protecting the photo-story subjects, but about maintaining a community that sees positivity as a useful goal. Following Ahmed, though, the appeal to getting along may actually reduce the political potential of the HONY community to combat the injustices of racism and Islamophobia to which these series presumably respond.

Lisa Duggan & José Muñoz argue that "bad sentiments" can contain opportunities for transformative politics, as they are "critically redeployed and function as refusals of social control mandates that become transformative behaviors" (278). According to Duggan and Muñoz, such sentiments can offer a means toward collectivity and political change because they resist complacency. HONY's appeal to positivity, then, might be read as a move toward political complacency (or at least as a sign that support for his work is a more pressing concern for Stanton than meaningful political change). While audiences read and discuss HONY as though it performs consequential political work, Stanton and his public disavow politics through the blog and comments in ways that are important to our understanding of the series' rhetoric and public engagement with it.

## The Politics of Attention and Circulation

An important narrative arc is created for the HONY audience through the succession of these two refugee series. The first, from September 2015, shares sixteen stories of varying length that personalize the struggles refugees face, both in their countries of origin and after leaving. The focus in *Refugee Stories* on a broad selection of subjects highlights refugees' generally precarious circumstances. *Syrian Americans* followed several months later, focusing on longer stories of refugee families approved for resettlement in the United States and



their hopes for the future. In following the short narratives of *Refugee Stories* with stories of resettlement, Stanton's successive series effect a hopeful narrative which "creates assurances that public discourse has been reformed and reconfigured to recognize previously excluded others" (Riedner 3). The stories grant subjecthood to those refugees whose stories fit the neoliberal values of the audience, fostering the appearance of inclusion. In this way, the photo-stories recreate the familiar narrative patterns of human-interest stories, through which certain racialized bodies are "saved" from violence and death and become "included" in national and neoliberal discourses. This effectively elevates citizenship and national belonging in general, and the United States in particular, as "good" and displays the nation-state as bringing happiness to deserving refugees through their resettlement in the United States. However, the repetition (and repetitive circulation) of such narratives of progress and inclusion also "reproduces failure to recognize non-valued parts of the narrative" (Riedner 7). Still further, the repeated celebration of specific kinds of stories requires certain kinds of performances in order to achieve value, producing a "counternarrative of respectability" in which processes of inclusion and exclusion reinforce the production of "normalized and docile patriots" through their opposition to an unknowable and threatening "other" (Puar and Rai 135).

Neoliberal texts often include fragments of discourse that do not fit dominant narratives. Riedner characterizes these fragments as sites of potential, offering opportunities to "consider how textual fragments that are inside the story but outside recognition could be reconfigured, reimagined, or rewritten" (4). In the HONY series, these discursive traces point to the specific, political connections between audience members in the United States and the subjects of Stanton's photo-stories as the place where the series might have potential for the transformative effect that Stanton's audience imagines. Aya's story comes close to highlighting these connections through indirect references to the U.S. war in Iraq, illustrating the potential of the series to draw attention to the effects of neoliberalism and U.S. imperialism. This potential was undercut, though, by a failure to engage with concrete political circumstances or reflect on the power relations through which the stories were produced and circulated.

Stanton's photo-stories fit a problematic pattern of discourses and practices through which a select group of bodies constructed as "other" in dominant narratives about the U.S. receive sympathy and become eligible for assimilation into the nation through their performances of victimization and a normative version of citizen subjecthood. As Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai theorize, "the production of the radical other, as monster" is imbricated with "the practice of producing normalized and docile patriots" (135). The photo-stories function enthymematically, participating in the "disciplining agenda of patriotism" while

eliding mention of the “terrorist-monster” that refugees must prove themselves not to be in order to be deemed citizen material (Puar and Rai 131). This is not only a problem of production: the proliferation of certain stories among global audiences is connected to both the choice of which people are represented as well as what information is included.<sup>16</sup> By highlighting stories with which U.S.-American audiences can comfortably align, popular representations elide political specificity in problematic ways. The same characteristics that make something more likely to achieve popular support (e.g., a less specific message that can be “read” in multiple ways, and thus supported by a wider range of people) also make it politically problematic. Representations that lack political specificity allow viewers to support contradictory messages or enable audiences with very different political interests to support the same rhetorical enactment.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, such representations marginalize those whose politics do not align with U.S.-American audiences and elide the variety of factors influencing the choices of people in Syria and Iraq (Szanto).

Discourses of U.S. exceptionalism work to exempt many U.S. citizens from experiencing the effects of military conflict and produce a myth of the U.S. military and U.S.-sponsored actions and programs as agents that “fix” regional instabilities (rather than produce or exacerbate them), ensuring that the “homeland” is kept safely isolated from violence. The extent to which the refugee crisis has disrupted public discourse-as-usual suggests that visible reminders of the consequences of violence in Syria and Iraq (in which the United States plays a role) have not been salient for many people in the United States. This disruption offers an opportunity to take up Rebecca Dingo’s call to engage in practices of networking arguments in ways that identify their place within a “complex matrix of connections between people, nations, economies, and the textual practices present” (544). Such networking practices might shed light on the specific and material conditions through which refugees’ homes have become unlivable while Europe and the United States have remained stable or livable. Understanding the connections between the HONY audience and the subjects of the photo-stories would offer audience members a more

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16 For example, Edith Szanto has described the ways in which a text’s focus on the victimization of *some* groups of Arab and/or Muslim women can elicit “viewers’ sympathy, as well as their financial and military support” as long as the stories are compatible with Euro-American politics (308).

17 As in Edith Szanto’s example of a documentary about a battalion of Kurdish women fighting ISIS, which “works toward a positive reception not only by supporters of the Russian government but also by Euro-American viewers who oppose ISIS” (309).

productive way of responding to the photo-stories. As Dingo argues, “Linking the macro and the micro is not just an analytic but also a material practice that offers a new sort of productive agency that asks readers to address scales of oppression that include how they themselves may be complicit with trans-global power relationships” (548). Rhetoricians can respond to Dingo’s call by highlighting the ways that rhetorical citizenship occurs through the representation, circulation, and deliberation that takes place on social media. For many members of the HONY audience, support for Syrian and Iraqi refugees was not linked to transnational power relationships that would highlight their own complicity. Commenters often failed to challenge—and sometimes actively supported—the neoliberal and imperialist logics through which the U.S. contributes to Syrian and Iraqi refugees’ precarity.

These popular representations are especially important as U.S. public discourses engage with the knowledge that specific racialized populations are marked as threats by the U.S. government, subject to increased state violence, and offered limited or no state protection. This kind of public discourse was especially visible in the U.S. during the first months of the Trump presidency, in response to Trump’s “Muslim Ban” executive orders. However, the problem did not emerge with the Trump presidency. While U.S. foreign policy is presented uniquely through Trump’s talking points and his partisan affiliation, the differential recognizability through which Syrian and Iraqi bodies are positioned as either threats to the nation or recipients of its benevolence is a phenomenon that is not limited to one political party or presidential administration, but that can be traced through multiple presidents and across party lines. While it is important to oppose the Trump administration’s attempts to normalize hateful, violent ideologies, rhetoric, and policies, it is also important recognize the elements of Trump’s policy that are continuous with the work of the previous administration and would likely have continued into our current administration regardless of the 2016 election outcome. For example, multiple commentators have noted that the list of countries included in Trump’s initial “Muslim Ban” can be traced to visa waiver restrictions put into place during Obama’s presidency (Harvard; Greenwald). These failures exceed partisan politics because they are about statehood, citizenship, and the ways that imperial states support or destroy life by differentially enacting violence and offering protection from violence: a formation that is not specific to Trump, despite his especially objectionable persona and rhetorical presence.

The refugees represented in Stanton’s series become legible to Stanton’s audience not because of the onset of violence in Syria and Iraq or the start of U.S. intervention in the Middle East, but because of the influx of large numbers of refugees into the European Union. Stanton’s series highlights the ways in which responses to that legibility can so easily conform to existing modes

of subjectivity and political participation. HONY's refugee stories reproduce imperialist discourses by positioning the subjects of the photo-stories as "objects of knowledge" from whom U.S. viewers can learn what it means to be a refugee and why refugees need sympathy and assistance. Those viewers can accomplish this without interrogating their complicity in the discourses and practices that produce refugees' precarity (Alcoff). Public responses to the stories show the limitations of circulating and celebrating certain kinds of neoliberal rhetoric (those that elide political and material specificity and reproduce existing logics of imperialism and oppression). Commenters read the photo-stories in opposition to the anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism and congratulate themselves for recognizing the subjects as human beings, but the target of the audience's dismay is often framed abstractly in terms of ideographs, such as "the world," "humanity," "mankind," or "war." The stories rarely suggest a concrete problem or political structure toward which the audience might direct its energy in ways that go beyond individual affect and financial contributions.

The series does not engage with the ways in which the lives of U.S. citizens and the lives of Syrians and Iraqis have been constructed as oppositional to one another, so that the preservation of lives in the United States has been used to justify continued violence against people in Syria and Iraq. In HONY's case, the photo-stories of refugees and audience responses to them typically fail to engage with the ways that U.S. state violence has contributed to the refugees' displacement and to the varying factors that affect the choices of men and women in Syria (to leave, to participate in the conflict, etc.). Instead, the photo-stories rely on the fantasy of U.S. exceptionalism through which viewers find comfort in imagining a better future for those refugees who have been deemed deserving of U.S. citizenship on the basis of their performances of victimization and assimilability.

A number of feminist scholars have argued persuasively about the racialized and gendered narratives used to build support for U.S. wars, as well as the ways that war disproportionately affects people along axes of oppression such as gender, class, nationality, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. In reading rhetoric such as the HONY photo-stories through transnational feminist lens, rhetoricians can encourage modes of rhetorical citizenship that engage with the systematic and racialized logics through which precarity is differentially experienced and according to which rights and protection are granted. My critique of the HONY photo-stories and audience responses is an effort at "describing, and demobilizing, the rhetorics used to promote acquiescence" (Engels and Saas 231). Transnational feminist rhetoricians can continue this work through critical engagement with the contemporary enactment of citizenship through processes of representation, circulation, and deliberation on

social media. Through this work, rhetors might find ways of engaging with their complicity and challenging the structural violence through which precarity and state protection are differentially allocated.

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