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LOST IN MIGRATION: DIGITALIZING DIASPORA AND DECOLONIZING SYRIAN REFUGEE
NARRATIVES

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BY

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ABSTRACT

LOST IN MIGRATION: DIGITALIZING DIASPORA AND DECOLONIZING SYRIAN REFUGEE NARRATIVES

BY LEIA YEN

Although there are traditional works in print about the Syrian refugee crisis, an unprecedented amount of digitalized narratives demonstrates a shift in the body of diaspora literature towards using internet technologies to convey refugee stories. Mobile devices in the hands of refugees have made the crisis one of the most self-documented in history and yet the most prevalent and influential digital representations of Syria are those created by third parties. How do digital literary forms effect diaspora narratives, especially when the texts are created by distant mediators? I argue that digital narratives of the Syrian refugee crisis create two layers of liminality. The first layer is the migration narrative itself; the second layer, though, is a new type of liminality created by digital spaces in which narratives hybridize as they encounter alternative values, beliefs, and social constructs embedded within the structures of digital texts. My thesis takes the form of a website that deconstructs the design elements of the digital texts “Searching for Syria,” migrant-related selfies and memes, and “Heln’s First Year.” I use these case studies as examples of how synthesizing post-colonial theory with postmodern deconstructivism can work to decolonize digital texts as well as identify the ways in which hypermediacy can be used for ethical design.

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INTRODUCTION

The image of the body of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi, a Syrian child who had drowned with his mother and brother minutes after boarding an overcrowded raft headed for Greece, devastated the world as it circulated social media in 2015.¹ It was an image that defined the Syrian Crisis for those who could not imagine the atrocities committed or the risks that individuals were willing to take to escape them. However, not all images of the Syrian war and refugee crisis evoked the same response. Around the same time, a selfie of a young Syrian woman stepping off her escape raft began circulating the internet with an added caption conveying skepticism: “Poverty stricken Syrian migrant takes selfie with her \$600 smartphone.”² The two images and their contrasting receptions reflect how technology is influencing not only the forms of diaspora narratives, but also the way narratives produced in 21st Century transnational movements converge and conflict.

Digital narratives about the Syrian refugee crisis represent a shift in the body of diaspora literature. While traditional printed works of fiction and non-fiction emerged out of the conflict, an unprecedented amount of digital narratives demonstrates a notable movement towards using internet technologies to convey refugee stories. Mobile devices in the hands of refugees have made the crisis one of the most self-documented in history and yet the most prevalent and influential digital representations of Syria are those created by secondary institutions, organizations, and entities, often in the form of storytelling projects.³ I argue that digital storytelling projects of the Syrian refugee crisis displace the self-representative works of

¹ “How a Photo of a Drowned Syrian Boy Became the Defining Photograph of an Ongoing War,” 100 Photographs: The Most Influential Images of All Time, Time, accessed May 25, 2018, <http://100photos.time.com/photos/nilufer-demir-alan-kurdi>.

² Bill O’Keefe (@thatbillokeefe), “Poverty Stricken Syrian Migrant Takes Selfie with Her \$600 Smartphone.,” Tweet, September 5, 2015, <https://twitter.com/thatbillokeefe/status/640216875163631616>.

³ Ivan Sigal, “Syria’s War May Be the Most Documented Ever. And yet, We Know so Little.,” Public Radio International, December 19, 2016, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-12-19/syrias-war-may-be-most-documented-ever-and-yet-we-know-so-little>.

refugees by remediating them into new narratives. While there is some scholarship criticizing depictions of the Syrian crisis in mainstream print and news media, digitally-born works have received little scrutiny. Rather, critics often applaud digital projects for humanizing the political through interactive, multimedia forms that engage audiences while also communicating first-person testimonies.⁴ The few articles that examine digital storytelling projects only compare them to traditional news media forms (ex. photographs and text) without considering alternative forms of mediation that can be achieved through digitally-born works.⁵ I argue that digitalizing the narratives of the Syrian diaspora creates two layers of liminality. The first layer is the migration narrative itself, the story of refugees crossing geographical, cultural, and political barriers to find asylum; the second layer, though, is a new type of liminality created by digital spaces in which narratives hybridize as they encounter alternative values, beliefs, and social constructs embedded within the structures of digital texts.

Digital storytelling projects of the Syrian crisis attempt to merge the expectations of the West with the experiences of the East, remediating self-representative digital works and re-entrenching Orientalist binaries. Combinations of videos, animated GIFs, images, and text are used to create multimedia webpages that convey refugee narratives, providing audiences with different entry points into the Syrian crisis. For example, professional portraits present human faces for audiences to associate with the refugee crisis; captions containing quotations give displayed bodies personal expression. The digital projects of the Syrian crisis interchange uses of immediacy and hypermediacy to facilitate their storytelling. Immediacy, the “erasure” of a

4 Nicole Aarssen, “Re-Orienting Refugee Representation? A Multimodal Analysis of Syrian Refugee Representation on the Social Media Platform Humans of New York,” *Stream: Inspiring Critical Thought* 9 (2017): 2.

5 Ioana Literat, “Refugee Selfies and the (Self-)Representation of Disenfranchised Social Groups,” *Media Fields Journal: Critical Explorations in Media and Space*, January 2017, 4–5.

medium's presence, is created in moments when users are given "direct" contact with the refugee experience, such as through first-hand accounts, photographs, or virtual reality.⁶ Hypermediacy, the awareness of a medium's presence, is used to contextualize the immediate encounters, such as through informational footnotes, audio descriptions, or lines of commentary.⁷

By presenting "immediate" encounters with Syrian refugees and their experiences, the digital storytelling projects present themselves as bridges over the divides between East and West. However, the framing of interactive, hypermediated structures can reinforce Orientalist binaries in hybridized narratives. Digital storytelling efforts, with their invitation to interact with and remediate Syrian refugee narratives, can create a hyperreality that moves the audience from a position of witnessing to a position of inflicting colonial violence. This thesis underscores how reading practices that adapt to the liminality of digital space can be a method of decolonization. By using *hypermediated reading* to identify the hierarchical mediations that frame digital representations of the post-colonial Other, ethical design practices can also be adapted accordingly.

Read the rest of the thesis here: <http://www.digitalsyria.net/>

Thesis word count \approx 16,000 words

11 J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 17.

⁷ Bolter and Grusin, 33.

DIGITAL SYRIA SITE MAP

