# Women Without a Nation: Deromanticizing Humanitarian Photography and Exploring Self-Representation

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**Abstract**
Photography has the ability to provoke ethical reflection and to provide an emotional connection to the reality of individual suffering (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016). Therefore, given the importance of visual communication in covering humanitarian crises, this short paper aims to problematize humanitarian photography practice and reflect on alternative ways of framing representations of refugee women's life experiences outside mainstream media. I propose here an initial conversation regarding my doctoral research that focuses on the self-representation of refugee women. I aim to investigate how self-representation can challenge methods of documenting refugee women's life experiences by constructing their exiled memories through visual narration. The objective of this paper is to deromanticize the idealized model of humanitarian visual representation by reflecting on the photographer's role in the field and by exploring alternative photographic practices that frame nations affected by crises. The word "crisis" governs my work not only because refugee women are victims of a global refugee crisis resulting from armed conflict, natural disasters, and diseases, but also because of the daily subjective crises that these women face in lands that they now call home. Through self-representation, they can construct their stories beyond the problematic representation of conflicts. By reflecting on the activist potential of the self-representation of refugee memories it is possible to consider new opportunities to make their struggles visible in times of crisis.

**Keywords**
Photography, self-representation, humanitarian approach, refugee women.

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The United Nations considers massive displacement—refugee crisis—to be the most intense humanitarian crisis of the century. According to UNHCR Canada (2021), 82.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of conflict, persecution, human rights violations, and violence1. Within this worldwide humanitarian crisis, it is possible to notice that gender inequalities are rooted in the refugee system, hence, refugee women are among the most vulnerable and face the most traumatic effects of a conflict. For instance, Afghan women made up 80% of the 250,000 Afghans forced to flee their country since May 2021 (UNHUCR, 2021). These women, in addition to dealing with the narrow interpretation of Islamic law that restricts their rights, also suffer the consequences of visual representations shaped by a problematic humanitarian discourse that do not provide justice to the refugee's cause.

Given this global context of crises and the pervasiveness of visual coverage of these events, this paper offers a brief critical reflection on the state of humanitarian photography by defining this practice and questioning the photographer's role in the field. Additionally, I discuss alternative practices that aim, first, to overcome the photographic depiction of violence and, second, to challenge determinations of Western newsworthiness. In particular, I interrogate visual representations that frame woman[2] as a gendered humanitarian symbol of victimization and charity, and I problematize the agency of photographers in the field, who reproduce colonial dynamics in the ways that they visually document a humanitarian crisis. I propose, instead, to use participatory photography practices as a method for self-representation by refugee women (i.e., Afghan women newcomers in Canada). I urge scholars and practitioners to seek out subjective refugee life experiences that go beyond a problematic visual representation of displacement. My intention with this approach is to also develop an early understanding of how these visual narratives can engage social reflection about the construction of refugees memories.

## Humanitarian Visual Representation

Photographs are essential to reflect on the past, as well as to create visual memory and global awareness by offering an intimate relationship with reality (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016). This relationship between photography and the perception of reality raises questions regarding the role of this medium in confronting violence in its different facets, since most humanitarian crises are not the product of a single factor or event, but the interaction between natural risks, armed conflicts, and human

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[1] More information: https://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/refugee-statistics/. Accessed: 25 August 2021.
[2] In my study the word *woman* refers to any individual who identify themselves as a woman; it includes various subjectivities and ways of being a woman (Butler, 1999).

vulnerability. Thus, the visual representation of these crises encompasses distinct aesthetic approaches and, consequently, different relationships between the photographs, subjects, and viewers. On one hand, scholars assume that photographs that deploy the shock effect of violent imagery can provoke in the viewer either a perverse pleasure or compassion fatigue, both of which inhibit political action that would reduce the suffering of others (Moeller, 1999; Sontag, 2001; 2003). On the other hand, Hariman and Lucaites (2016) advocate for an understanding of photography that goes beyond the idea that negative images promote violence, suggesting that the aesthetic of shock can also provoke thoughtful reflection about contemporary social problems.

The polarized debate about the potential of photography to generate either empathy or moral anesthesia is also extended to problematize the aesthetic of positive, which rejects the imagery of the sufferer as a victim and focus on sufferer's agency and dignity (e.g., refugees participating in a development project). Chouliaraki (2010) and Boltanski (1999) mention that the positive imagery approach is accused of glossing over the misery of suffering. Positive image appears to empower distant sufferers, but it ends up disempowering refugees by appropriating their otherness in Western discourse of agency and rendering them as "perpetual objects of our generosity" (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 113). The positive imagery points out to a more pragmatic risk of misrecognition resulting in an increasing compassion fatigue for positive images (Chouliaraki, 2010). Both, aesthetic of shock and positive imagery share a reliance on photorealism and focus their visual narrative in the power of emotions. These visual representations guided by Contemporary Western politics and a universal conception of welfare—which consist of the articulation of justice with pity (Boltanski, 1999)—confront audiences with distant suffering in two forms: shocking destitution and hopeful self-determination.

The emerging aesthetic resulting from a post-humanitarianism discourse distances itself from the universalism to focus on particularities of each cause. According to Chouliaraki (2010), this approach disincorporates the representation of suffering from its discourse by proposing that actions depend on each person's judgment. However, the post-emotional aesthetic is also interrogate because it draws on the resources of the media market in which humanitarian organizations are currently operating. Post-humanitarianism may be reinforcing dominant Western culture, "where de-emotionalization of the suffering of others goes hand in hand with over-emotionalization of our safe everyday life" (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 122). Therefore, humanitarian visual depictions seem to be under a constant threat of delegitimization as there is no manner of representing distant others that seems to do "justice to the moral claim of suffering" (Chouliaraki p. 107). These problematics regarding the

representation of the other in vulnerable situations that moves between emotional-oriented narratives to post-emotional brings us closer to the concerns surrounding humanitarian photography practices itself.

In this context of witnessing "distant suffering" (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2015; Moeller, 1999)—which I define as the suffering of people outside one's sphere of influence— humanitarian photography not only confirm, document, and represent a crisis but also seek to generate a connection between viewers and photographed subjects. As mentioned above, this practice is oriented to make audiences feel for and respond to those in need based on moral universalism or particularities of the cause (Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015). Within this situated perspective of humanitarian photography to raise funds for interventions, the woman is framed in photographic compositions as an ideal universal symbol of disaster victims (Droga, 2011). These images do not just dehumanize subjects, gloss over their suffering, and/or follow a commodity logic, but also replicate gender stereotypes in problematics ways. For instance, according to Bleiker and Hutchison (2019), woman-and-child is considered a gendered humanitarian symbol as it translates the customary notion of motherhood and the idea of being prone to the circumstances surrounding them. "Women are thought to provide a humanizing face for what is often large scale, distant and dehumanizing disaster" (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2019, p. 235). Therefore, humanitarian photographic practices guided by the idealized model of humanitarian representation ends up documenting "a range of cultural assumption that reflected European prejudices of colonial 'subjects'" (Bleiker, 2018, p. 27) and reinforcing traditional visual representation of gender roles, mainly, woman as vulnerable and powerless.

Drawing on this, Azoulay's (2020) work points out that it is necessary to study photography by considering the imperial context that it emerged in and acknowledge that the camera shutter is an imperial technology. Azoulay (2020) asserts that the "operation of a shutter commands zero degrees of neutrality" (p. 42) and to consider it to be politically neutral is an exercise of imperial violence. In a split second, the brief camera's operation transforms an individual rooted in the life-world into mere representation of 'the refugee'. "Whatever comes from [camera's] operation is already stripped bare of its singularity, its singular way of being part of the world." (Azoulay, 2020, p. 52). Thus, to overcome the representation of refugee women as a mere object and/or as gendered humanitarian symbols placed in a photographic scene, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the photographer, photographed, camera and context. In the coverage of a humanitarian crisis, the act of framing the Other in a vulnerable situation raises complex issues regarding the right of the photographer to denounce inhumane situations and barbarity, but at the same time, the need to respect the Other's space of pain and their agency.

## Photographing Distant Suffering

Within the Contemporary Western politics context that involves the promotion of social causes and the denunciation of calamities, we must also consider the fundamental role of the photographer who responds to the model of witnessing suffering. Western photojournalism, according to Kennedy (2012), was shaped by the idealization of culture, documentation to support colonizing purposes, and the promotion of compassion as an appropriate response to the suffering of others. While taking *good shots* to sell to the press, the photographer privileges the aesthetic of shock to follow the standards of newsworthiness. In this photographic composition, human suffering becomes mere information—a commodity—that stars on social media, on TV or in newspaper columns (Paglamidis, 2013, Moeller, 1999).

The photographer in the field experiences a fine line between taking an unauthorized photo and the journalistic principle to inform (Ribeiro, 2019). However, even in the face of this privileged informative position, the photographer's role should not be perceived as neutral as they make choices that have ethical and political implications for others' lives. Ribeiro (2019) suggests that the postures of certain photographers in the coverage of a humanitarian crisis are endowed with a violent or predatory instinct and that this instinct is specialist in cruelty. Photographers tend to frame violent scenes that, in a simple and unmistakable way, translate the messages about a humanitarian crisis. These negative images aesthetically foreground misery, hunger, disease, and death. However, according to Ribeiro (2019), the photographs that frame suffering do not add value to information; rather, they end up following the canonical standards of the visual representation of crises that portray different situations in equal ways, reproduce clichéd images, and promote stereotyping.

Given this context, when reporting on an experience photographing Syrian refugee women with their children at Al-Yasmin camp in Lebanon (2018), Ribeiro (2019) questions his own acts as a photographer: "Wouldn't it be a violence to point the camera at the refugee lady in Lebanon and take a photograph of her without talking, without asking if she would like, or could, be photographed?" (p. 4) .[3] To address this question, Ribeiro proposes *dialogical photography* as a way to get closer to a humanitarian approach. Dialogical photography is defined as placing the human being at the center of the process and goes against reporting the other as a mere object (Ribeiro, 2019). That is, the author suggests that photographers renounce their privileged and vertical

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[3] Original: Não seria uma violência apontar a câmera para a senhora refugiada no Líbano e arrancar-lhe uma fotografia sem dialogar, sem perguntar se gostaria, ou poderia, ser fotografada? (Ribeiro, 2019, p. 4)

position and establish a horizontal and collaborative relationship with the photographed subject. For Ribeiro (2019), photographers must be committed to human rights and the preservation of their subjects' dignity.

An example of dialogical photography is Karin Garcês's work titled *Experiencing Childhood as Refugees* (2019)[4]. Garcês frames the everyday of the Palestinian children in refugee camps by respecting their individuality and, before taking pictures, seeking to know their life stories and dreams. Garcês creates a photo narrative depicting children playing and smiling to draw the attention of the international community regarding the responsibility it has in the face of the harsh reality of war and the lack of basic rights to which children are subjected. The construction of her visual narrative is centered on the children's daily activities and on the dialogue that she establishes with them. Garcês' visual project aims to raise funds for the Palestinian community, but also to create an archive for the Palestinian childhood memories in order to help these children consolidate their exiled identity; these children are not just reported numbers or bodies visually represented in the media. Palestinian children, who are born refugees, are bearers of stories, desires, and dreams.

Drawing on the idea of dialogic photography, I propose to look critically at the model rooted in a Western perspective that idealizes the positive possibilities of humanitarian photography. If photographers are witnesses who keep memories of survivors, wars, and victims, then, what is the best time to *take shots*? How might photographers documenting refugee experiences do justice to their subjects? I believe these questions might never find a conclusive answer; however, what can be done is to recognize photographers' limits in representing the other as a way to challenge the settler-colonial model of visual representation (Rajagopal, 2011) through dialogical photography or other photographic narratives that aim to look beyond violent scenes, idealized positive imageries, and oppressive gendered narratives.

## Looking Beyond Violent Scenes

To get closer to visual representation that distances itself from the problems of media sensationalism and challenges settler-colonial prejudice, it is necessary to humanize the statistical data and to value the characters of the narrative as the protagonists. However, in this brief article, I propose to go beyond the representation of others through professional photographers' eyes. I intend to highlight how photography can translate refugees' subjective life experiences through self-authored visual narratives.

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[4] More information: http://www.retratosdeumconflito.com.br/. Accessed: 31 ago. 2021

Discussing self-representation by individuals affected by crisis, Graham (2014) investigates images of humanitarian conflict in the Republic of Congo and the representation of Congolese people. The author conducts anthropological research to understand the meaning that surrounds photographs of individuals affected by conflicts. Photography involves more than just the image itself. It also encompasses the context in which the photograph was taken, the photographer's decisions about how to photograph their subject, the demands of the camera, and the agency of the person pictured. As a result, Graham (2014) highlights the important role of vernacular photographers who create everyday portraits of life in Goma, an area affected by a humanitarian crisis caused mainly by natural disaster. The photos are produced by Congolese people and portray Congolese people. Here, self-representation challenges the image created by "victim photography" (Rosler, 2004, p. 178)[5], since, for years, images of the Congo crisis have influenced the way the world views the region. Focusing on the context behind the photographs that include the daily life of an affected nation provides another understanding of crises. The idea of representing daily life challenges the system behind news criteria and proposes representing refugees beyond the problematics of a humanitarian crisis. For instance, Everyday Africa[6] is a project in which local African photographers complicate shared mainstream photographs that focus heavily on conflict and famine by portraying African people's daily lives, activities, and cultural traditions.

Following the same line, Bleiker and Kay's (2007) study proposes transgressing the representation and stereotypes shared by mainstream media through a practice called *pluralist photography*. For the authors, pluralist photography seeks to validate local photographic practices in an attempt to overcome the stereotyped images of communities as passive victims (Bleiker & Kay, 2007). By generating multiple and creative ways to represent communities' social and political issues, pluralist photography helps viewers to recognize that the "process of representation is inherently incomplete, and thus inevitably political" (p. 141). In short, this local photographic practice proposes that the people who would be represented in mainstream media are the ones who reproduce the visual narrative; victims of a conflict are the people who report and represent their life struggles.

Inspired by these approaches that place vulnerable communities in the center of the visual narrative—and as narrators of their own stories—my research aims to

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[5] The term victim photography, explored by Rosler (2004), criticize documentary photography that paints its subjects as pathetic victims by asserting that in a photographic scene, the subject is "victims of the camera—that is, of the photographer" (p. 178).
[6] More information: https://www.instagram.com/everydayafrica/?hl=en. Accessed: 31 ago. 2021

discuss how the self-representation of refugee women through photography can be beneficial for the (re)construction of their identities and memories. I am particularly interested in understanding the activist potential of self-representation, that is, to what extend self-authored visual narratives of refugee women can add political and aesthetic complexity and first-person perspectives to the humanitarian photography scholarship. The practices of self-portraiture that participatory photography solicits are valuable for academic insights, but also to offer means of self-knowledge, holding the potential to help women in vulnerable situations reconstruct their marginalized life stories and silenced subjective experiences.

## Framing Refugee Women's Memories

I consider refugee women's acts of photographing their own reality—self-representation—a way to (re)construct their life stories. In this sense, I understand memory itself as narrative, and I use the memory approach presented by Pollak (1989), who emphasizes the importance of narration for memory consolidation, whether through oral, written, or visual stories. Pollak (1989) presents the political issues of framing memory and the dispute for space within official narratives. For example, the author postulates that a Holocaust survivor recalls the memories of traumatic experience in the present, reinterpreting the past. Hence, by privileging the analysis of people who are excluded, marginalized, minorities, or victims, their life stories, which were silenced for so long, emerge in the public space and therefore vindicate their rights. These marginalized stories, called *underground memories* (Pollak, 1989), take shape in documentaries, documents, museums, and photographs. Through visual narratives, these marginalized memories gain visibility in the present. In the case of my work, this role is played by participatory photography, which provides a way to visually articulate memories that have been marginalized by (re)discovering the past and offering it a new look.

In this light, my research aims to explore the method of participatory photography, which uses the alternative photographic techniques presented above. Participatory photography is a practice used to (re)construct and reflect on the identity of people from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts, from communities formed by ethnic and social minorities (Meirinhos, 2012). I am interested in the community of Afghan refugee women newcomers in Canada, due to the current situation of Afghanistan under the Taliban regime [7]. Within the number of Afghans seeking refuge, women

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[7] According to the UNHCR (2021), more than 400,000 Afghans have been forced to leave their country since the beginning of the year; this number adds to the more than 2.9 million who have been internally displaced across the country since the last record at the end of 2020 (UNHCR, 2021). More

represent the largest percentage, as the Taliban government directly threatens the basic rights of women. Afghan women are not only looking for a new home to protect themselves from armed conflicts, but also to have access to school, work, and to be able to recognize themselves as a woman without fear. Thus, I intend to integrate Afghan women, who are currently living in Calgary, as co-authors of the research[8]. Because my project is framing visual activism, it provides a site for negotiation rather than the idea of 'giving' voice (Fairly, 2018) to refugee women. That is, I do not intend to give voice to these women, but provide them a space to talk.

Additionally, a participatory photography practice is necessary to expand from the notion of speaking out to incorporate, as Fairly (2018) suggests, a complex conception of listening. Participants are negotiating self-authored visual narratives to find a voice for themselves, but also looking for 'listeners/viewers'. Thus, I propose creating a digital platform to share the photographs captured by the participants and a short documentary film that will result from the fieldwork experience. The participants will be involved in editorial control and ethical considerations will be followed[9]. I build on Fairley's (2018) approach to participatory photography because she also critically reviews this method by challenging and complicating the romanticised assumption that photography empowers the community. My research does not aim to suggest that self-representation is a better method in framing the refugee subjective experiences, rather I intend to study, as I mentioned above, to what extend can participatory photography add political and aesthetic complexity and first-person perspective to humanitarian representation and visual activism practices.

To meet participants, I will engage in a pre-process in which I will volunteer with an Afghan refugee women's project. My goal with immersion in the community is to be able to get closer to these women's issues, so that my research meets ethical, human, social, and academic expectations. Therefore, my research aims to invite refugee women to introduce their perceptions to the camera, so that they can build their subjective and personal mnemonic framework. My role in this process, as a critical media researcher, is to experience this process of translating lived experiences into a

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information: https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2021/8/611617c55/unhcr-warns-afghanistans-conflict-taking-heaviest-toll-displaced-women.html

[8] The fieldwork stage will be employed from Fall 2022 to Fall 2033. This article outlines an evolving research project; therefore, I recognize that it might change over my doctorate trajectory.

[9] The ethical sets include several layers: (1) participants consent prior to the start of my research process; (2) participants maintain ongoing consent during the process and can withdraw from the study at any time; (3) participants are required to get consent forms from non-research participants in case a non-research participant is portrayed in a photograph; and (4) participants will be asked to give consent at the end of the fieldwork stage if they want their photographs to be used in the digital platform and documentary film (Brigham et al., 2018).

photographic composition together with these women and to provide a space for their voices to be heard through visual narration inside and outside academia.

## Conclusions

Critically reviewing photographic practices, especially deromanticizing practices rooted in a colonial gaze, is necessary to provide alternative ways of narrating refugees' life experiences beyond the problematics of displacement. Thus, I hope that by bringing the refugee women community as co-authors of my research, I can provide a more comprehensive reflection on the practices of photographic representation and on the social responsibility of research in the field of communication. Within the major undertaking of my doctoral research, my biggest objective is expanding my research beyond academia to effectively return my findings to the community.

As an International Student, migrant, woman, researcher, and amateur photographer, I feel connected with studies that involve cultural apprehensions, self-knowledge, and discussion around memory through activist visual documentation practices. My interests involve discussing critically practices of self-portraiture that translate social problems and challenge mainstream media representations. Therefore, my final consideration in light of this brief argumentation is that research ought to change paths and discover new opportunities regarding activist representation in time of crises, but also to find, in new scenarios, chances for social metamorphosis.

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