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Stranded at Sea: Photographic Representations of the Rohingya in the 2015 Bay of Bengal Crisis

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Abstract

Visual representations can contribute to shaping how the general public perceives and engages with issues of forced migration. In 2015, thousands of Rohingya became stranded in the Bay of Bengal when smugglers abandoned them on unseaworthy boats and regional governments refused their disembarkation. Their ordeal made headlines across the globe and photographs documenting the crisis were widely disseminated. This paper applies visual-social semiotics to four of these photographs from an Agence France-Presse public exhibition. Our analysis suggests that the features in the photographs transcend the conventional "threat versus victim" dualism that typically characterizes such representations, to capture both the suffering and agency of the people at the centre of the crisis. This occurs in two ways: first, the Rohingya are depicted as proactive and enacting agency, and not just as powerless people in need of rescue. Second, the juxtaposition of mundane aspects with more dramatic frames offers a tangible pathway for viewers to connect with the circumstances of the people depicted. These visual representations were effective in triggering international concern and policy responses in 2015. However, such photographs' longer-term potential for shifting public perceptions of displacement and forced migration—and by extension, effective policy measures—remains largely indeterminate.

Keywords
Visual Analysis, Photography, Rohingya, Forced Migration, Visual-Social Semiotics

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Introduction

As the proliferation of mass media has entrenched the 24-hour news-cycle and increased the amount of information people consume, visuals have surpassed text in capturing people's attention and informing audiences on key world events (Lenette & Cleland, 2016; Lydon, 2016). Although recent images of irregular migrants in crisis, asylum seekers and refugees making perilous border crossings have been circulated in abundance, relatively little is known about why certain images provoke stronger public and policy reactions, while others are met with "compassion fatigue." Indeed, photographs in the media are not neutral or purely evidentiary, but rather, are political representations that can privilege certain narratives to the detriment of others (Johnson, 2011; Lenette & Cleland, 2016). This paper aims to explore the potential impact of four photographs of a group of Rohingya stranded on boats in the Bay of Bengal in May 2015. Just like the photojournalists who captured these images (Archambault, 2015; Gacad, 2015) sought to convey the Rohingyas' despair and will to survive to urge politicians to act, we as researchers interested in visual representations of forced migration questioned whether the photojournalists have in fact achieved these goals. By applying visual-social semiotics to four relatively atypical photographs from an Agence France-Presse (AFP) public exhibition as examples, we seek to explore in this paper: *Did photographs of stranded Rohingya move audiences to respond to forced migration more humanely?*

The May 2015 Rohingya Crisis

The Rohingya, a Muslim minority concentrated in Rakhine, Myanmar, have been subject to decades of persecution and discrimination. As stateless people, they are systematically excluded from core institutions like property ownership, forced to live in squalid and segregated camps with minimal access to livelihoods, and receive little to no police protection when communal violence erupts (Archambault, 2015; Brinham, 2012; Ullah, 2011). Consequently, many Rohingya make the perilous journey across the Bay of Bengal. However, the discovery of mass graves on the Thai-Malay border in 2015 prompted the Thai government to crack down on smuggling networks. The crisis unfolded when smugglers, fearing criminal punishment, abandoned unseaworthy boats. This left more than 5000 people onboard stranded when all regional governments refused their disembarkation. After graphic stories of exposed and starved Rohingya made headlines (see Murdoch, 2015), and several deaths were reported (Archambault, 2015), Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia agreed to carry out search and rescue, and provide the stranded Rohingya with temporary protection pending resettlement or repatriation. As the international community pledged financial support, regional governments expressed a shared commitment to address the underlying political and economic deprivation driving irregular maritime movements (Newland, 2015).

The Politics of Visual Representation: Threat or Victim?

In capturing specific moments, photographers construct a representation and define the relationship among those at the centre of the photographs, photographers, and viewers (Knoblauch et al., 2008). While photographs cannot directly induce political action, they can, by establishing, sustaining or contesting dominant interpretations, set parameters for policy-making (Jurich, 2015; Möller, 2008). Existing studies on photographs of forced migration reveal diametrically opposed portrayals, either as security threats or helpless victims (see Bleiker et al., 2014; Lenette, 2018; Lenette & Cleland, 2016). First, photographs of displaced people usually depict desperate crowds with indistinguishable facial features to convey the magnitude of a crisis while also excluding the particularities of individual narratives, creating distance and depersonalised suffering (Jurich, 2015; Lenette & Cleland, 2016). As western media frequently portrays asylum seekers as masses on boats, major political parties have preyed on the public's fear of amorphous national security threats to justify inhumane refugee policies (Bleiker et al., 2014; Lydon, 2016). Alternatively, photographic close-ups of one to a few refugees in distress, especially those bearing stylistic similarities to the "Madonna and child" (Malkki, 1996; Wright, 2002), commonly appeal to sympathy. The closeness magnifies vulnerability, and viewers are more likely to identify with the person's suffering.

Representing Rohingya

While the literature examines how photographic representations of asylum seekers and refugees influence public perceptions (Mannik, 2012; Szörényi, 2006), and to a lesser degree, policy (Johnson, 2011; Schwartz-Dupre, 2010), none do so in relation to Rohingya crossing borders. During the 2012 outbreak of communal violence in Myanmar, activists posted gruesome images of injured individuals online to trigger political intervention (Brooten et al., 2015). Thousands have since fled Myanmar through southern Thailand, where they were at the mercy of smugglers en route mainly to Malaysia (Archambault, 2015). The focus on eliciting humanistic emotions using photographs, however, may mean that visuals merely stun viewers into paralysis (Szörényi, 2006). At worst, these images are neo-colonialistic and depict victims at the mercy of external, western rescuers (Johnson, 2011; Kurasawa, 2013).

We acknowledge that the context in which images are presented position viewers in particular ways. Unlike media images intended to provoke immediate, collective action, or pictures in fundraising publications that elicit particular emotions, a public exhibition aims to raise awareness. Drawing on Arizpe et al.'s (2014) findings that reading images in schools can increase empathy for intercultural humanitarian situations, we asked whether an exhibition could achieve similar outcomes to shift perceptions of Rohingya to one that recognises *both* their suffering and agency to enact their own decisions. If visual representations that challenge dominant discourses that simplistically depict irregular migrants as either threats or victims can shift public perceptions, they may also influence policy directions (Lenette & Cleland, 2016). Such a challenge may result in policy interventions that are rooted in a genuine ethic of care— one which acknowledges that relational connectedness underpins the human condition— towards one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.

As scholars from migrant backgrounds, we first acknowledge the influence of our own sociocultural positioning in framing interpretations. Jenny is an undergraduate student, first-generation migrant and budding rights advocate for marginalized communities. She pursues a mixture of academic and field opportunities that push her to challenge her own and others' thinking. Caroline is an academic, a first-generation migrant, who teaches and researches the area of visual methods and forced migration issues. By focusing on the visual analysis of media representations in a social science and policy course, Caroline draws attention to photographs' potency to shape and reinforce dominant and largely detrimental ideas about refugees and asylum seekers and identifies ways to challenge these entrenched notions using visual means.

The findings discussed here emerged from Jenny's project conducted under Caroline's guidance. Jenny conducted the analysis, and we mitigated researcher bias by discussing the analysis process when drafting this paper.

Method

The photographs were selected from an AFP exhibition that toured Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta in 2016, with support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), one year on from the crisis (AFP, 2016). The four contrasting images were purposively chosen from the collection because they were widely disseminated in the media at the time of the crisis and reflected the collection's broader perspective. By doing so, we acknowledge the limitations of this non-random approach; however, we aimed to provide a subjective perspective. Our purpose was to focus on the most widely disseminated images, since we wanted to consider their potential impact on audiences.

We then applied an analytical process using visual-social semiotics, an unobtrusive qualitative method often applied to still-images to understand how they convey particular meanings to audiences (Harrison, 2003; Van Leeuwen, 2004). Each photo underwent a two-step Barthian deconstruction as part of the visual-social semiotics approach, which means that first, the *denotative* meaning was uncovered by describing each image in detail, then the *connotative* or subjective meaning was revealed by examining what values or ideas people, places or things represented in each image signified (Van Leeuwen, 2004). Deconstructing these layers involved considering surrounding captions (included with each photograph as provided by AFP; Nöth, 2011) and the broader sociopolitical context in which the photographs were produced (Page, 2006).

Critics of semiotics either claim that such analysis is too impressionistic and unsystematic, or that researchers rigidly apply classifications from their own interpretations. Here, sufficient contextual information was gathered about each photograph for a retrospective analysis (see Lenette, 2016). Further, the semiotic tools from a structured Barthian approach

were used to highlight a field of possible meanings (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004). Here, rather than seeking to produce "reliable" results, the interplay between manifest, dominant meanings, and latent, oppositional meanings was emphasised (Macnamara, 2005). As subjectivity was embraced in this process, readings generated were deeper, more nuanced, and suitable for research that questions how public perceptions are shaped. By uncovering the visual features that convey embedded meanings (Gurri et al., 2010), visual-social semiotics helped demonstrate that portrayals which appeared to have a neutral reality were in fact constructed representations that could influence public perceptions and by extension, policymaking.

Turning to ethics, there are issues that apply to visual methods, such as gaining consent before photographing individuals in identifiable ways. Recently, organisations including the Ethical Journalism Network (2016) have revised guidelines about ethical media coverage of refugees and migrants. However, many of these issues were not as relevant to our secondary visual analysis since we used photographs that were already published and exhibited with support from UNHCR & ECHO. Nevertheless, considering that the Rohingya depicted were in a position of dependence relative to those holding the camera, their capacity to give consent freely, telling interviewing photojournalists that they wanted to be identified so their families could know they survived (Gacad 2015), needs to be questioned (see Wiles et al., 2011). Even though identifying individuals in photographs can uphold their agency (see Lenette, 2016, 2018), in the sense that they may wish to own their stories rather than remain anonymous in narratives that concern their circumstances, a commitment to anonymity should prevail if identifiable information in photographs taken for international dissemination results in heighten risk of harm (Lydon, 2016). There were no such risks in this case and so we proceeded with using identifiable publicly available photographs and information.

In the next section, we first present the denotative and then the connotative meaning for each image individually. Stepping back in the final section, we examine the relationships these images have with one another, and draw out two key themes to discuss their potential for shifting public perceptions of forced migration.

Results

Through a Barthian-deconstruction, it appears that select features in Image 1 echo conventional, dehumanising representations of refugees discussed above. A denotative analysis shows a military helicopter carrying food rations flying overhead. As the deck of the boat in the foreground is packed with hundreds of Rohingya, the helicopter can only drop life-saving rations into the ocean. To stop them drifting off, men dive from the boat into the water. In this long shot, individuals are mere specks with no discernible facial features, and the helicopter hovers in the top part of the frame. A connotative deconstruction highlights that the power differential between these two groups is captured symbolically in dichotomous terms—the more powerful rescuer, the "Thai army helicopter" on top, and the "desperate passengers" (see caption), the ones needing rescue at the bottom. Further, the dominant presence of the military gives the impression that the anonymous corporeality of those stranded is deviant, that only those wielding superior physical force are able to intervene without jeopardizing their own safety.

Image 1: Desperate passengers swim to collect food supplies dropped by a Thai army helicopter after they jumped from a boat (R) drifting in Thai waters off the southern island of Koh Lipe in the Andaman Sea on May 14, 2015. Source: *AFP - Christophe Archambault.*

In contrast, the mist rising around the boat evokes a mythical quality, suggesting that something unusual may be taking place. A closer denotative analysis of Image 1 reveals that the bow of the ship creates a vector from right to left. This disruption to the usual reading path slows viewing and exposes the unexpected—that people are "swim[ming]" (per captions) in the vast, open ocean alongside floating rations. From a connotative angle, the difficulty of differentiating between the two (i.e. people and rations) symbolises the fragility of human life, namely that people are as dispensable as objects. In such bleakness, the focus on people's endurance as they proactively take calculated risks to swim for survival, seems more prominent.

The kind of paradox between helplessness and initiative taking captured in Image 1 is echoed in Image 2. A denotative analysis shows people—mostly men—packed onto the open deck of a boat, peering eagerly at the centre. A few are clambering overboard, reaching down as others in the water pass up rations. The collective gaze, the column of unnaturally positioned bodies in action, the visible bones of a man's back and his outstretched, empty hand, all convey urgency. In connotative terms, the skinny open hand is emblematic of refugees in dominant portrayals—a passive recipient of aid. Nevertheless, what is poignant and different from Image 1 is that help comes from below, from "others" who have endured the same harrowing conditions while "drifting in Thai waters" (see captions). The interaction embodies a somewhat unexpected sense of solidarity in this situation of crisis as people, all equally desperate, exercise agency to help one another.

Image 2: Rohingya men pass food supplies dropped by a Thai army helicopter to others aboard a boat drifting in Thai waters off the southern island of Koh Lipe in the Andaman Sea on May 14, 2015. Source: *AFP - Christophe Archambault*.

Image 3a: see caption for image 3b.

Image 3a distills the distress and affliction wrought by forced migration. Denotation shows that the four people in the foreground have unkempt hair, with collarbones protruding, two of whom are shirtless. They stare directly at the camera, and by extension, at the photograph's viewers. The close-up shows that their expressions are a mix of blank exhaustion

and despondent pleading. Behind them, in softer focus, the boat seems overcrowded. Applying a connotative analysis, their emaciated bodies serve as uncontestable testimony to weeks of starvation and exposure to the elements. On top of physical weariness, the deluded gaze from two of the people depicted in particular captures the mental fatigue flowing from a constant fear of drowning, starving, and waiting in limbo for days. By making eye contact, the people depicted both in the foreground and background seem to be pleading directly for help. Consistent with conventional humanitarian photographs, this close-up image of a small group freezes the weeks adrift into a single moment of agony. By compelling viewers to imagine their ongoing suffering, the photograph effectively evokes pity.

Image 3b: This combination photo shows a file picture of Rohingya men from Myanmar (L to R) Muhammad Rubail, 14, Hasyik, 20, Najibul Hasan, 15, and Yusuf, 22, on a drifting boat in Thai waters off the southern island of Koh Lipe in the Andaman Sea on May 14, 2015 and (bottom) Rohingya (L to R) Muhammad Rubail, 14, Hasyik, 20, Najibul Hasan, 15, and Yusuf, 22, sitting together at the shelter in Bayeun district in Indonesia's Aceh province on May 28, 2015 after Indonesian fishermen rescued about 400 Rohingya and Bangladeshis from the boat on May 20, 2015 off the eastern coast of Aceh. Source: *AFP - Christophe Archambault and Chaideer Mahyuddin.*

Image 3b portrays the same men as Image 3a (see caption), though remarkably transformed to the extent they are barely recognizable at first glance. In doing so, the image underscores the universal human struggle to forge a better life even where circumstances are precarious (theme explored further in discussion below). Applying denotation, we note that "Muhammad Rubail, Hasyik, Najibul Hasan and Yusuf" (see caption) now have their heads shaved and pose in full sets of fresh clothing. Hands on their thighs and knees, they face the camera squarely. Three wear a stoic frown, while the youngest man smiles shyly. In contrast with the stereotypical victimhood depicted in Image 3a, a connotative analysis highlights that this group of men have a platform to enact agency. The frontal angle and their posture conveys a sense of determination, and clean clothes symbolise regained dignity. Concurrently, the desolate backdrop and the uniform plastic wristbands they all wear signify geographical dislocation and threats to their unique identities. The men's different facial expressions thus

encapsulate an unresolved tension—while grateful to have survived the voyage, they remain apprehensive as their ability to forge a dignified future remains largely uncertain.

Discussion

Visual representations of asylum seekers and refugees in the media play a critical role in shaping how the general public perceives and engages with issues of forced migration, particularly in politically stable contexts. The AFP photographs discussed here are distinct, as they transcend the conventional "threat versus victim" dualism to capture the agency and humanity of those caught at the centre of such a hellish journey.

To produce this more nuanced representation, photographers rely on two key tropes. First, the display of *atypical* shocking images captures the public's attention without necessarily silencing those depicted. Broadly, conventional photographs seek to shock by portraying people in harrowing physical conditions (as in for example Image 3a). This has, however, led to widespread de-sensitisation and compassion fatigue (Möller, 2008; Sontag, 2003, as cited in Jurich, 2015), or left viewers to mourn their own powerlessness to intervene in yet another distant crisis (Szörényi, 2009). While Images 1 and 2 do show severely malnourished stranded migrants, the images are different because these migrants are depicted as capable of taking urgent action and exercising agency in a situation of despair. While such action does not substantially transform the oppressive external environment, it enables people to survive under extreme vulnerability (Cheung, 2011). And so, unlike dominant portrayals that erase asylum seekers' and refugees' unique histories, treating them as a homogenous category of victims waiting for handouts and rescue (Malkki, 1996; Sulaiman-Hill et al., 2011), the people depicted here are surprisingly proactive, willing to brave the dangers of open-ocean swimming (Image 1) to collect rations for each other (Image 2). Portraying them as purposive actors by focusing on acts of agency and resistance in the direst of situations challenges the apathy generating and negative notions entrenched in dominant visual representations of forced migration situations. Images that privilege these subjective narratives craft an emancipatory discourse that challenges established neocolonial representations depicting "the west" as expert rescuers in times of crisis.

Second, unlike conventional publications that only show dramatic images, the AFP series balances the dramatic with the "mundane" to evoke empathy. The emaciated bodies of the Rohingya in Image 3a distinguish them as people who have endured more hardships than most. Though factually true, this construction predisposes viewers (who do not have access to personal details of those depicted) to dismiss the extreme suffering as something that only befalls distant others (Mannik, 2012; Szörényi, 2009). The fact that Image 3a is presented as a combination shot with 3b—the latter, a non-exceptional shot of the same people but on firm land two weeks later—is consequently critical. Challenging stereotyped assumptions of what forced migrants look like, the young men as represented in 3b are individually named, bear no visible bodily scars, and express determination that most viewers can relate to. The juxtaposition between 3a and 3b thus demonstrates that the decision people are forced to make to cross borders is not outrageous, but rather driven by a universal human desire to forge a better life. Instead of producing spectacle, mundane aspects unearth the common hopes and fears of each individual bearing the refugee or asylum seeker label, enabling viewers to empathise with them (see Gacad, 2015, for further examples). Visual representations can therefore shift public discourse away from mere pity or charity towards victims (Kurasawa, 2013; Lenette, 2018; Manderson, 2015), to one that provokes self-reflexivity, compassion and acknowledges the ethical responsibilities we as humans owe one another.

As photographs can spatially condense a sequence of actions and relationships, they powerfully convey emotions and ideas words alone cannot, particularly in mass media

(Lenette, 2016). The photographs discussed here destabilise the duality characterising common visual representations, by incorporating both shocking and mundane features. These unusual elements slow viewers' habits of consumption, giving them more time and a different frame to think deeply about the extent of horrors they are witnessing. Though Sontag (2003 cited in Szörényi, 2006) and Kratz (2002) claim that spectators viewing images in the comfort of galleries always occupy positions of privilege, the AFP collection reveals a more empowering vision for photography. By carving out a space for viewers to empathise and develop connections, and portraying displaced people with agency, together the images exhort viewers to join those depicted in *their* resistance. The images bind the people in the photographs, the photographer, and viewers, into what Azoulay (cited in Jurich, 2015) terms a civil contract. Where human rights are infringed, the act of looking—and seeing—hence becomes a type of protest against state violence.

Despite this optimistic reading of the AFP photographs, their ability to trigger shifts towards more humane policies remains contested. Demonstrating the short-term policy influence visuals can wield (see also Lenette & Cleland, 2016), the publication of such photographs in the media in May 2015 played a key part in pressuring governments to end boat pushbacks. Two years on, however, the photographs have had little impact on pushing politicians and policymakers at high-level regional meetings to find durable solutions to expand the protection space for Rohingya.

This impasse not only shows that many complex, intervening factors affect policy, but also that images, in conveying meaning through a system of signs derived from social practices, generally substantiate perspectives that viewers are predisposed to (Jurich, 2015; Wright, 2002). As non-interference and national security remain core norms in the region (Southwick, 2015), viewers may be less sensitive to the inclusive, rights-based message discussed, and instead readily accept border security or crime-control approaches governments have taken to eliminate trafficking and smuggling (see Petcharamesree et al., 2016). In other words, atypical visual representations of displaced people are more likely to move viewers to advocate for humane policies *if they already possess the sociopolitical awareness to support such a reading*. Where this precondition is absent, photographs may still shift perceptions—albeit to a lesser degree—as each photo gives photographers an opportunity to persuade audiences to consider and accept a more just and empowering vision. The longer-term potential for shifting public perceptions though remains largely indeterminate.

The analysis of four contrasting images reveals that displaced people can be depicted in ways that transcend the conventional threat versus helpless sufferer binary. Considering images in the media are highly accessible to a broad audience base, and that journalists are often able to give voice to those photographed through interviews, our research is a useful starting point for understanding how visual representations can reconstitute people's engagement with issues of forced migration. To explore this topic in greater depth and nuance, future research may employ different methods. For instance, researchers may conduct photo-elicitation interviews to gain varied perspectives on how different people actually respond to images, discursive analysis to investigate the interactions between photos and text, or quantitative content analysis to track changes in visual representations over time. To minimize the likelihood of researchers and journalists invariably suppressing participant voices through their questions, more participatory visuals methods such as photo novella (Oh, 2012; Robertson et al., 2016) or public art practice (Berman, 2016) are also valuable as they make people at the centre of the issues expository agents of their own complex lived experiences. Reiterating our earlier point that most people consume visuals in the 24-hour news-cycle, there is an impetus to deploy participatory visual methods like photo-elicitation more systematically in qualitative and mixed-methods research with marginalized communities like asylum seekers, as an excellent pathway to convey first hand perspectives directly to audiences. This approach can

counter the un/intentional "silencing" that can result from media depictions of people in precarious situations (see Lenette, 2018).

By applying visual-social semiotics to four photographs from a public exhibition, this paper suggests that images can transcend the dominant binary to generate more humanistic portrayals. While the shock effect is used to highlight the agency of Rohingya caught in a grim ordeal, their resilience and strengths are also acknowledged. Further, since the mundane-balancing-the-dramatic positions viewers to empathise, viewers are no longer mere voyeurs of others' distant suffering, but invited to join their resistance. In an increasingly visual culture, this qualitative visual analysis of media images enriches our understanding of how atypical photographic exhibitions can create opportunities for interrogating assumptions and reconstructing conventional narratives. Photography and the politics of viewing show the potential to move people to intervene against violent state policies on forced migration.

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