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## RESEARCH ON HUMAN RIGHTS



**Principal Investigators:** Amy Shuman and Wendy S. Hesford, Department of English

In June 2016, Professors Amy Shuman and Wendy S. Hesford took a team of undergraduate students to the Columbia University Human Rights Archives and the New York Human Rights Watch Film Festival. The students learned how archival materials are collected, processed, and catalogued and were given the opportunity to conduct research on migration, political asylum, and human trafficking.

The students examined documents about gendered sexual violence to better understand the trajectory of representations, both narrative and visual, and the arguments made for them in debates about international security. Each student explored documents from a human rights organization for a particular part of the year.

Shuman and Hesford's examination of archival documents focused on the affective, relational, and structuring logics of human trafficking and terrorism. They were interested in how the bodies of women in proximity to state and pseudo-state structures are differentially rendered vulnerable, and how these bodies become legible through their organization into narratives of sexual violence. Specifically, Shuman and Hesford's research examines news media coverage of conflicts surrounding the rise of the Islamic State.

The research from this trip resulted in a co-authored essay, "Precarious Narratives: Media Accounts of Islamic State Sexual Violence," forthcoming in the edited volume *Precarious Rhetorics*, to be published by The Ohio State University Press. In this essay, Hesford and Shuman elucidate the cultural and political work that representations of ISIS's enslavement and rape of Yazidi women and girls perform in the U.S. national and international human rights imaginary.

Among the questions that they consider are: What ideologies and rhetorical contingencies make the Yazidi women's and girls' narratives legible to us, and how do we imagine them as legible within Yazidi culture? What facilitates and inhibits the circulation of these narratives? To what degree does the embedding of Yazidi women and girls rape narratives in U.S. news media reports about ISIS and the War on Terror reproduce occidental ideologies?

Beginning with a *New York Times* article on the trafficking of Yazidi girls, Shuman and Hesford document how rape and trafficking discourses have changed and how those changes can be understood within the larger contexts of visual and narrative representations of human rights violations. They refer to international human trafficking laws, the emergence of anti-trafficking campaigns, and discourses that contextualize trafficking as a dimension of modern-day slavery.

Shuman and Hesford, along with Jennifer Suchland, took a second group of students to conduct research at the Columbia University Human Rights Archives and to attend the New York Human Rights Watch Film Festival in June 2017.



Besides examining representations of gendered sexual violence, students also researched the consequences of political asylum policy and the mass migration of people fleeing state conflict for international security. They focused on the kinds of data that are used to compile country reports on matters such as persecution of religious, political, and social communities; corruption; and failures of the state to protect particular groups.

Shuman and Hesford also plan to co-author another essay for publication based on their research this summer. In addition, undergraduate research has become a major part of the Human Rights in Transit program, as students develop a yearlong research project, work with a human rights organization in a service learning capacity, and prepare their own research for the undergraduate Denman competition.

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1501 Neil Ave., Columbus, OH 43201

Phone: 614-292-1681 | Fax: 614-292-2407

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