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Transformations of Free Movement: Syrian Refugee Rights within Neoliberal Signal Territories

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Research Panel: Framing Rights: Narratives and Advocacy

Presenter: Jordan Hayes, University of Pittsburgh

Title: Transformations of Free Movement: Syrian Refugee Rights within Neoliberal Signal Territories

Abstract:

Alongside representations of the fractious civil conflict in Syria, our media frequently depict victims of forced displacement using their smartphones. In October 2015, *Time* published images of refugees taking selfies after making the journey from the Turkish coast to Lesbos, Greece. These images show refugees using mobile devices to enjoy human rights like the freedoms of expression and movement. Absent is the state sanction implied by UN compacts such as the 1951 Refugee Convention.

This paper situates these representations, recent scholarship, and my own fieldwork with Syrian refugees sheltering in the Kurdish Region of Iraq within an analysis of human rights and neoliberal signal territories.

Media scholar Lisa Parks describes signal territories as regions defined not by sovereign jurisdiction but the broadcast capacity enabled by telephonic infrastructure. The massive investment that created this infrastructure was incited largely by neoliberal deregulation of national communication regimes. Even holdouts like Syria's state-controlled cell provider, Syria-Telecom, an enduring source of income for the Assad regime, can at times be accessed by refugees lingering across the border in Jordan. How might neoliberal signal territories impact forced migration, especially in recent and ongoing cases of Syrian refugees traversing state bounds?

As feminist theorist Brooke Ackerly has noted, human rights may be transformed in practice. Inspired by her work, I argue that refugees' use of mobile technology within signal territories suggests a way of rethinking features of the UN framework from the ground, and infrastructure, up. We are facing not the neoliberal foreclosure of rights, but shifts in embodied social practices enabled by technology. How might refugees' use of mobile devices suggest the transformation of their, and therefore our, human right to freedom of movement?

About the presenter:

Teaching in San Francisco Bay-area community colleges motivated me to start a PhD at the University of Pittsburgh with a composition emphasis. My background includes a master's in English literature and graduate certificates in the teaching of composition and postsecondary reading from San Francisco State University. My master's thesis examined the photojournalistic contestation of South African civil religion during the apartheid era. Before coming to the University of Pittsburgh, I completed a fellowship with the Stanford Human Rights Education Initiative, an experience that greatly impacted my future teaching and scholarship.

My current academic interests include human rights writing, rhetorics, and learning, especially as they pertain to refugee rights and advocacy; mobile technology and infrastructure studies; literacy studies, digital literacy, and information fluency; and pedagogy and teacher training.

I volunteer with BCAP (Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh) as an English and civics instructor on behalf of the University of Pittsburgh chapter of FORGE (Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment). I am also the co-founder of Hello Future, a nonprofit organization working to promote global civil society and provide mobile connectivity to refugee youth.