

Digital Transience: Emplacement and Authorship in Refugee Selfies

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In the summer of 2015, I met a man named Amer* at a restaurant in a popular tourist area of Istanbul. Amer is a bright-eyed twenty-three-year-old who holds a college degree and has aspirations of being a theater director. He is also one of an estimated five million Syrian refugees who have been displaced by the ongoing Syrian war.¹ At the time of our meeting, Amer recounted how his family has been dispersed over a number of different countries since the war began, and informed me that he had been living on his own in Istanbul for the past two years.

A few weeks after I left the city, Amer contacted me through Facebook to let me know that he, like thousands of others, was leaving Istanbul to seek asylum in Germany. For the next month, I followed his journey across the continent through the photos and status updates he posted online. Yet despite the very real dangers refugees like Amer face when migrating without any legal documents, Amer's selfies contained nothing of the spectacular or gut-wrenching imagery of overpopulated rafts or barbed-wire fences that many have grown to associate with the "refugee crisis" of 2015. Rather, they tended to be mundane photos of Amer in front of unremarkable buildings or in idyllic scenes of nature. Interestingly, Amer's Facebook posts were also often accompanied by geotags that indicated his specific location.

As I watched Amer's personal movement digitally unfold, I began to wonder what might be motivating his and other refugees' production and dissemination of images that directly map their movements. While there is certainly a valuable indexical quality to refugees' selfies, in that they assure

family members of their loved ones' relative safety and health, what interests me here is the impulse among refugees to share these images with the wider public through social networking sites. In what ways do refugees choose to make their images discoverable, and what are the implications of the potential for public consumption of such images? What is the relationship of refugee selfies to selfie culture more broadly? How might refugee selfies influence or disrupt our understandings of place, and what might these selfies tell us about the particular experiences and subjectivities of refugees?

Journalists have written a number of articles over the past year about refugees using smartphone applications to plan and execute their migrations to Europe; however, the focus of these articles has largely been on the practical uses of social media for migrants. Smartphones have been described as "a lifeline," "more important than food for Syrian refugees," and as a source of comfort by a number of journalists writing about refugees and technology.² *The New York Times* reported in August of 2015 that "Migrants depend on [social media] to post real-time updates about routes, arrests, border guard movements and transport, as well as places to stay and prices, all while keeping in touch with family and friends,"⁴ while *Vocativ* suggested that the act of taking selfies among refugees stems from a desire to make memories.⁵ Yet little has been written about the phenomenon of refugees *sharing* their selfies online, and none of the limited articles on refugee selfies fully explore the political and affective implications of refugee-created media within the larger discourse on refugees. Nor do these articles delve into the potential ramifications of such media being locationally tagged beyond the obvious usefulness of geotags for creating maps that later groups of refugees can follow.

In this paper, I use a small subset of publicly shared selfies as a platform for considering the larger significance of refugee-authored digital photography. The selfies I discuss here are all discoverable through their geotagged locations on Instagram, and were posted to the social media site during the summer of 2015. Throughout this paper, I refer to the selfies as "refugee selfies;" however, their status as refugee-authored can admittedly be made only through inference, and some uncertainty inevitably remains as to whether these photographs were taken by refugees, migrants, or even tourists. Though not all migrants are officially recognized as refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Instagram profiles of the users sharing what I call "refugee selfies" reference a Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi, or other national identity associated with a high refugee population,

and the physical trajectory of the user's geotagged photographs reflect the subject's movement across multiple national borders in Europe, following recognizable routes taken by most refugees headed toward Germany. For this reason, I have decided to use the term "refugee" rather than migrant, as these selfies participate in a particular discourse about Europe's "refugee crisis" regardless of whether or not their authors are ultimately recognized as having refugee status. Building on recent scholarship about selfies and locative media, I suggest that refugee selfies are best conceived as a form of *digital transience* that, while providing the refugee with a sense of emplacement in a particular location, along with an archive of his or her movement across locations, also prompts outside viewers of the image to contend with the precarity of the refugee's existence in *any* location through a disruptive affective charge. Although I believe refugee-authored media provides a rich area for study that is necessary to undertake in order to fully understand the refugee crisis, I remain wary of the ethical implications of reproducing refugee selfies outside of their original contexts. Consequently, I rely primarily on description, and have chosen to share only a few photos taken by Amer and another contact of mine, Nassim*, who is a twenty-five-year-old refugee from Iraq. Both Amer and Nassim have given me consent to share their images.

Defining the Refugee Selfie

Before discussing refugee selfies more closely, it is useful to review some of the ways selfies have been theorized by scholars thus far. Selfies are generally understood as amateur and often mundane self-portraits taken by the represented subject with a cellphone camera and shared on social networking sites.⁶ Paul Frosh further defines the selfie as a reflexive and "gestural image" that encourages interaction and response from viewers. Frosh argues that the selfie "foreground[s] the relationship between the image and its producer [and] says not only 'see this, here, now,' but also 'see me showing you me.'"⁷ For Frosh, the indexical quality of the photograph combines with the gestural quality of the author's imaged self to create a "communicative action" that encourages a response through likes, shares, and comments from viewers engaging with the selfie.⁸ Similarly, Alise Tifentale writes that the selfie constitutes an active performance and enactment of the self, "as cases of self-fashioning take place within the limitations of the genre and with a specific audience in mind" both at the moment that the photograph is taken and later, when the subject decides which selfies to share on social media.⁹

In the case of refugee selfies, the curated, gestural, and self-enacting qualities of the selfie are amplified by the refugee selfie's relationship to photographs of refugees and migrants taken by journalists and European civilians. Unlike the intimacy fostered by refugee selfies, in which the refugee returns the camera's gaze, these outsider photographs often times depict groups of refugees from afar, showing what appear to be overwhelming masses of people crowding camps, border zones, and rafts. Many photographs taken by journalists are taken from an aerial point-of-view or high angle, imbuing the photographer—and by extension the viewer—with a kind of authorial presence over the refugees represented. While such photos can garner shock and sympathy from the public, they also distance the viewer from the refugees, who become difficult to imagine individually.

The stripping of refugees' individual identities is further exacerbated by the language used in many news reports, and by a number of European politicians, which have described refugees' movements across Europe with such dehumanizing terms as “influx,” “occupation,” “invasion,” “flood,” and “flow.”¹⁰ This language effectively stokes fear in European populations while obscuring European states' own role in creating political and economic instability in the greater Middle East region through arms trading, wars, economic sanctions, and austerity measures. By labeling refugees as an incoming occupying force and taking photographs of refugees from a distance, political leaders and the media both serve to deepen the perceived divide between the citizen and non-citizen, and “East” and “West.” When closer, more intimate photographs are taken of refugees by journalists, they tend to emphasize women and children in moments of distress or despair. Though the risks refugees are taking to reach Europe certainly speak to their desperation, framing refugees in this manner alone reduces them to images of permanent helplessness and may suggest that they will remain dependent on outside aid for survival indefinitely. Thus, refugees are discussed either as imminent and uncontrollable threats to the nation, or in more liberal treatments, risk being seen only through the lens of victimhood rather than as potential citizens capable of contributing to their host countries economically and socially.

Within the highly mediated context of the refugee crisis, I contend that refugee selfies become a way for refugees to reassert narrative control and claim authorship over their own stories. Refugee selfies do not just say “see this, here, now” or “see me showing you me,” but rather emphasize “see *me*, I

am *here, I exist.*" The gesture of the refugee selfie, then, in which the refugee returns the camera's gaze, is about more than receiving the reaction of a digital "like" or "share;" it is a demand to be seen as human rather than threat, and as having agency rather than being purely a victim. The everydayness of the refugee selfie, despite the precarious context in which it is taken, not only carries with it a sense of authenticity, but also accentuates the refugee's relatability, signaling to viewers that perhaps the only thing differentiating the refugee from the citizen is legal recognition. It seems to both say, "I am like you," and "you could be me," reminding non-refugee viewers of the photos that becoming a refugee is not something that one willingly chooses, but rather something that is forced onto those whose homes are made unlivable by war, political instability, or economic despair. In this way, the refugee selfie has the potential to make refugees legible in a fashion that the sensational images propagated by the mainstream media cannot.



Figure 1. Amer in Serbia and Germany,

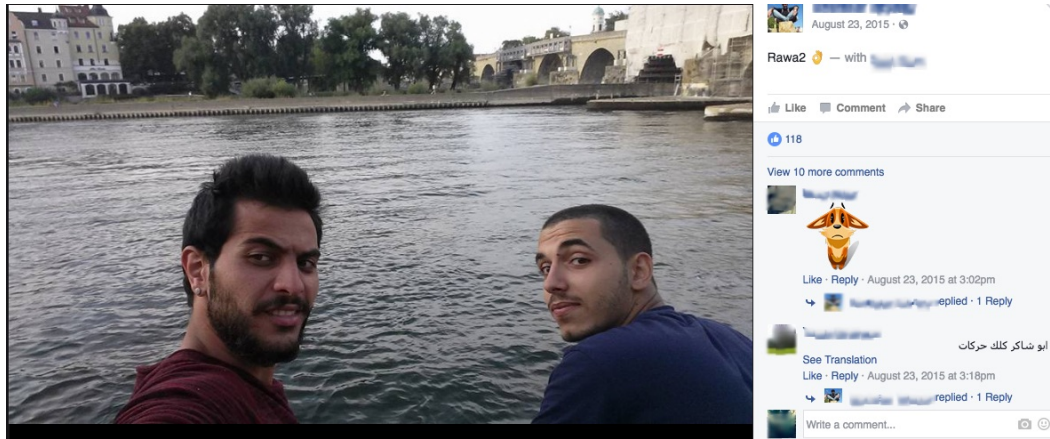


Figure 2. Amer in Serbia and Germany.



Figure 3. Amer in Serbia and Germany.

Discovering the Refugee Selfie

Although publicly shared refugee selfies are certainly in dialogue with the many other photographs taken of refugees traveling through Europe, finding these selfies is not always easy. Many refugee selfies are not hashtagged, and if they are, it is rarely with such tags as “refugee” or “migrant.” When hashtags do appear, they are often in non-European languages such as Arabic and Farsi, making language a potential barrier for European citizens and researchers searching for images related to the refugee crisis as well. However, I have noticed a trend in refugees geotagging their selfies on Instagram, and this practice offers a rich opportunity for scholars interested in theorizing the political and social import of locative media. With the exception of Amer’s selfies, all of the refugee selfies I have located thus far have been found by using the “Explore Places” feature of Instagram. In the application’s search bar, I entered European locations that have been frequently mentioned in news articles about the refugee crisis, such as the Greek island of Kos, Macedonia, Serbia, and specific sites in Hungary including Röszke and Bicske. Generally, the “Explore Places” tab in the Instagram app allows users to search any location and sift through the public photos tagged with that location. The upper half of the search results show the user a select range of “Top Posts” from the location, while the lower half displays the “Most Recent” Instagram photos under the particular geotag. The “Most Recent” section organizes the photos in reverse chronological order, but scrolling through it is unlimited, meaning users can potentially look through every photo linked to the site that interests them.

Refugee selfies emerge interspersed with other photographs associated with a given place. Sometimes, the refugee selfie is so inconspicuous that it might not be immediately associated with refugees at all. This was the case when I searched through photos taken in Kos and found a refugee selfie among the hundreds of photos of tourists and locals enjoying what otherwise seems like a beachside paradise. The selfie shows two young, attractive men posing together at night, with their immediate surroundings unclear. Both are smiling and one gives the thumbs up; there is nothing particularly telling about the photograph itself, which easily could have been taken by tourists or local residents. However, it stands out among the other photos that surround it in the search results, both because it is the only photo taken at night, and because unlike the other photographs that focus on the sand and sea, this selfie does not reveal anything about the subjects’ environment. Still, it is not until clicking on the actual selfie and looking through the user’s

profile that one might speculate that he is a refugee. In this case, the efficacy of the photograph in disrupting a viewer's sense of place depends on the viewer's willingness to click on the user's profile and search through more of his posts.

In the other search results, refugee selfies more easily give themselves away by showing larger groups of men hiking through empty fields or sitting together wearing bright orange lifejackets. Refugee selfies also make themselves apparent when they appear in close proximity within the search results to other photos of refugees or refugee camps taken by civilians. Interestingly, all of the publicly shared refugee-authored selfies I have found thus far have been of men, adding another dimension to the relationship between refugee-authored digital photography and photographs taken by European civilians or journalists. While there are many selfies taken *with* refugee women and children on sites like Instagram, these selfies tend to be posted by aid volunteers rather than refugees themselves. The impulse of aid workers to share selfies they have taken with the young children and women they meet while volunteering is perhaps reflective of the added value the media has historically placed on images of women and children for generating sympathy from viewers. In fact, images of women and children are so effective that the Hungarian state-run television network M1 was instructed not to show children in its reporting on refugees crossing the border so as to avoid cultivating sympathy among the Hungarian public.¹¹ In this context, the sharing of refugee selfies taken by young men works to disrupt the threatening images of male refugees "infiltrating" Europe. The benign images of men camping, hiking, or waiting in places of transit offer viewers an opportunity to see these men on equal terms, as persons also deserving of safety and support.



Figure 4. Nassim in Serbia and Austria.



Figure 5. Nassim in Serbia and Austria.

The “Explore Places” tab on Instagram offers a kind of experiential map to viewers, in that it provides viewers with any and all images associated with a space or place. Jason Farman notes that “maps are signifying tools for how we think about the world” as well as “representations of the way we *want* to practice the world.”¹² With this in mind, the images that are tagged with locations on Instagram do more than emplace the individual subject represented in (and taking) the photo. When viewed in relation to all the photos tagged with the same location, these geotagged photos create a broader sense of how people believe a certain place should be imagined. Thus, searching for Kos primarily brings up photographs of sunny days on the beach, while searching for Macedonia brings up a number of photos of rivers and hills at sunset. These search results suggest that even when a visual map of a location is created through hundreds of subjective, individually produced photographs, this map still “tends to some bodies more than others.”¹³ The discovery of the refugee selfie has an undeniably disruptive affect on this public imagining of space and place. Its presence reminds viewers of what ostensibly should not be there, and forces viewers

to engage with the refugee's subjective experience of migration. Yet the question still remains: what drives refugees to produce, geotag, and share these selfies in the first place?

Digital Transience: Thinking through the Affective Impacts of Refugee Selfies

A number of scholars have written about the role of the selfie in enacting or performing the self and authoring a personal narrative, while the process of geotagging media has been noted for its ability to create new and shared meanings of particular locations.^{14 15} For Larissa Hjorth and Sarah Pink, locative media is best understood by conceptualizing the producers of this media as “digital wayfarers.” The digital wayfarer “entangles online and offline as they move,” creating “an emplaced visibility [...] that is part of place and makes place, and [...] traverses and connects the material-physical with the digital-intangible.”¹⁶ Hjorth and Pink's notion of emplaced visibility is particularly helpful when considering the function of refugee selfies for both producer and consumer; however, the idea of the wayfarer is perhaps too leisurely a concept to speak to the underlying urgency of the refugee condition. For this reason, I propose the term *digital transience* to describe the digital content created by a social media user whose life conditions force a different and less stable relationship to place, both symbolically and materially. This unstable relationship to place is perhaps one of the reasons taking selfies has become so popular among refugees.

In “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said argues that “exile, unlike nationalism, is a fundamentally discontinuous state of being” and that “exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives.”¹⁷ He also points to Simone Weil's articulation that “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”¹⁸ The geotagged selfie offers an opportunity for the refugee to re-inscribe himself into place after becoming stateless. On every individual user's profile, Instagram offers a map function that overlays all of the user's geotagged photos on a world map, showing the subject's various movements over time.¹⁹ This map is interactive, and as viewers zoom in to different areas, Instagram will reveal more of the users' photographs to the viewer. For the refugee, this map function not only becomes a way to archive his specific migration, it also provides a way of understanding himself in relation to space during a time period in which he may have no legal legibility to nation-states. As Arjun Appadurai argues, migrants and refugees are often driven to create various

archives as a means of preserving and making sense of their memories and experiences, as well as to challenge the narratives created for them by members of their host societies. For Appadurai, “Media plays a critical role in the construction of the migrant archive” which is “increasingly characterized by the presence of voice, agency, and debate, rather than of mere reading, reception and interpellation.”²⁰ The migrant archive, which increasingly exists online, “becomes a doubly valuable space for migrants [where] some of the indignity of being minor or contemptible in the new society can be compensated [and] in which migrants can define the terms of their own identities and identity-building.”²¹ The Instagram Map, as one of many tools through which migrants and refugees can create an archive, becomes a way to see the history of one’s movement, and perhaps, to make sense of it, to find respite in the fact that there is a way forward and a way to survive. Viewing the Instagram Maps of other refugees also offers encouragement and comfort to those who are at the start of their journeys, and have no way of knowing what their migration attempt will bring.

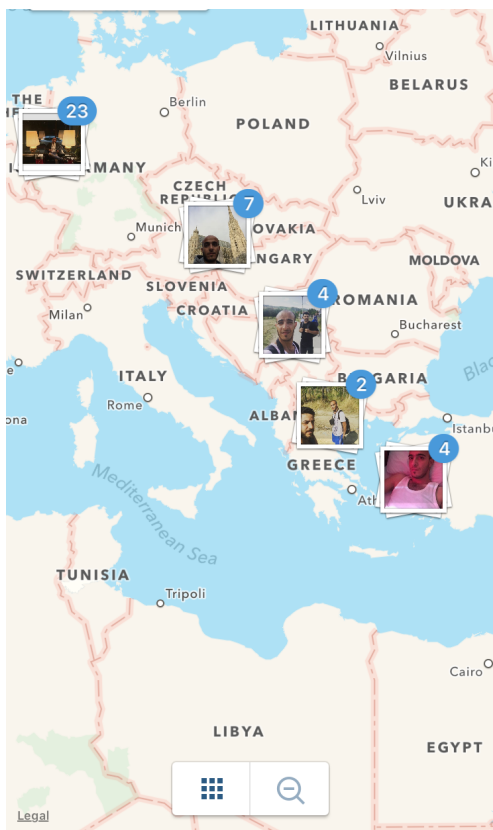


Figure 6. Nassim’s Instagram map.

Continuing mundane activities like posting on social media is also perhaps a way to retain a sense of normalcy during a period of extreme uncertainty. As Heidi Rae Cooley argues in her book *Finding Augusta: Habits of Mobility and Governance in the Digital Era*, the pervasiveness and accessibility of mobile devices encourages constant self-documentation at the level of habit rather than conscious and deliberate decision making.²² Still, while taking photographs may be impulsive, posting photographs to social media sites requires making a number of conscious decisions. The user must settle on which photo to post, whether or not to manipulate the image with a filter, and so on. The process requires an active engagement with and curation of one’s digital self, and takes time to complete, suggesting

intentionality behind the shared image. With this in mind, I would like to suggest that to see one's own self reflected back on screen and emplaced in a location, to see one's journey mapped out, and to share this movement with the global online community is to make a public claim to existence, to claim agency over the authorship of one's own refugee story, and to resist the essentializing discourses of victimhood and allegations of criminality, terrorism, and threat laid against oneself by powerful state actors.

While the geotagging of the selfie attempts to re-inscribe a connection to place, it also makes the refugee's transience even more visible and pronounced. In regards to public consumption of such selfies, one must consider the affective impact of refugee selfies when they are discoverable in amalgamations of photos all tagged under the same location. What does it mean to see the refugee enacted and emplaced on screen when the refugee selfie shows up amongst hundreds of photos of European citizens or non-migrant tourists? What does it mean to understand that the refugee is likely no longer in this place, and his or her whereabouts and wellbeing might be entirely unknown to friends and family? By sharing selfies, the refugee at once stakes a claim to existing in space and also forces the viewer to acknowledge the precarity of the refugee's existence. To see refugees' migrations mapped through the personal intimacy of selfies requires us to think beyond faceless statistics; instead, we are asked to hear and see refugees on their own terms, and to reckon with the magnitude of their situation by engaging with the particular, the personal, and the mundane. Photography produced by refugees constructs new meanings of place not visible in the photographs of the civilian digital wayfarer. The citizen's discovery of the geotagged refugee selfie among mundane selfies posted by other citizens from the same location creates a moment of disjuncture—forcing the viewer to make sense of the overlapping, merging, and entangled worlds of the citizen and the stateless in both physical and digital realms.

On the legal level, geotagging of refugee selfies raises questions about whether such admissions can be seen as incriminating and used by governments to deny asylum claims. Since 2003, the European Union has followed a set of procedures laid out by the Dublin Regulations for receiving asylum seekers and refugees. These regulations dictate that a person seeking asylum must do so in the first European country they enter, and cannot leave that country until his or her claim has been decided. Though some measures exist that allow refugees to seek asylum in countries where they already have family members, in many cases, refugees are deported back to their point of

entry if it is discovered that they have been fingerprinted or otherwise registered in another European country.²³ Germany stated over the summer of 2015 that it would suspend the Dublin Regulations; however, the suspension only applied to Syrians seeking asylum.²⁴ In March of 2016, the EU and Turkey reached an agreement that stipulates any new “irregular migrant” who arrives in Greece after the 20th of March, 2016 will be deported back to Turkey. In exchange, the EU has promised to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees currently in Turkey over the next five years, and has said it will expedite the lifting of visa restrictions on Turkish nationals traveling to Europe.²⁵ However, only two months after its implementation, Germany’s *Der Spiegel* reported the confusing agreement was already failing, and a number of other European countries have signaled that they will either continue operating under the Dublin rules or refuse to accept refugees altogether.^{26 27} Here lies the danger of refugees geotagging their selfies: the Instagram maps clearly show the refugee’s whole trajectory of movement. To date, I have found no reports of social media being used as evidence against an asylum seeker. However, one wonders if refugees with pending asylum applications in northern or western European countries *could* be deported on the basis of these maps alone.

Although refugee selfies enact a kind of public claim to existence, they are not necessarily created with European or western audiences in mind. The fact that many of these photos are primarily discoverable through geotags rather than hashtags suggests that these selfies might serve the purpose of self-affirmation more than a call for public recognition. In the case of my informants Amer and Nassim, many of their social media posts deliberately made use of the location “check-in” feature on Facebook and Instagram to notify friends and family of their whereabouts and safe arrival to a new city. Their purposeful use of locational tagging suggests that it is likely that many refugees are using these features primarily to update their social circles. At the same time, the refugees who have been interviewed by journalists about their photographs tend to give similar reasons for taking them; they feel that these photos preserve their memories and help share their stories.^{28 29} These sentiments were echoed by Amer and Nassim when I asked them why they took selfies during their migrations. When I asked Nassim whether he worried his public Instagram posts would compromise his safety, he replied by saying “I don’t worry about the details of this situation. Yes, it was a dangerous journey, but danger is only felt by those who live it. I left Iraq because it was dangerous, and now I’m safe.”³⁰ Nassim added that taking photos in each new country he passed through was a way to retain optimism,

while Amer noted that taking selfies is a form of entertainment for him and his friends.³¹ Such responses affirm that there is a pleasure in seeing oneself represented on screen and crafting one's own digital image; however, in the case of refugees, these pleasures are arguably amplified by the heightened precarity of the refugee's existence. Refugee selfies become a way of seeing oneself in relation to space and time, as well as in relation to others both in the physical and digital realms, and thus work to affirm the refugee's survival, existence, and resilience. To feel that one has a story and history to tell, and to have access to a medium that allows one to tell it on one's own terms, as and when one wishes, is perhaps one of the driving impulses behind documenting one's migration through public selfies.

Notes

* As of November 2016, both Amer and Nassim have received temporary asylum in Germany. They asked that their real names not be used for this article.

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