

## Chapter 16

# Hacking the European Refugee Crisis? *Digital Activism and Human Rights*

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All of this talk of a temporary migrant crisis is serving as a rhetorical excuse for postcolonial Europeanization and the redrawing of borders and mythic nationalistic lines that could be recognized as a unique form of twenty-first-century *recolonization*.

—Marouf Hasain Jr., *Forensic Rhetorics and Satellite Surveillance* (2016, 173)

“We are here because you were there.” With this famous statement Ambalavaner Sivanandan pleaded to consider colonialism and migration as part of the same continuum in the 1980s (Gordon and Sivanandan 2014). There is a renewed urgency and relevance to take Sivanandan’s appeal seriously in order to offer an alternative account of the massive human suffering that is the so-called European refugee crisis (Alexander 2015): a phrase typically used to refer to a period beginning in 2015 when an estimated number of one million asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea, but also other migrants from elsewhere, arrived in the European Union by crossing the Mediterranean Sea or travelling overland (UNHCR 2015). The uprisings in Libya and elsewhere—under the heading of the Arab Spring often celebrated and perceived as harmless Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter revolutions—are effectively removed from discussions of Europe’s external migration border-control mechanisms. In addition, Western-coalition military interventions—including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Libyan, Syrian, and Somali Civil Wars—exacerbated regional crises (Madörin forthcoming).

This is not a crisis that belongs to Europe, but it is a life-changing crisis for those who are forced to flee their homes. For those men, women and children

willing to risk their lives travelling to Europe, their situation may only be further exacerbated when being greeted with closed borders, the difficult and time-consuming procedures to claim the right to asylum and the moral panic and media-fueled societal hostility after reaching European soil (Bauman 2016). Furthermore, the mass movement of people only became marked as a European crisis when people started to enter Europe in increasing numbers, although proportionally and numerically much larger groups of refugees currently reside in countries including Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt (Anderson 2017). Somehow the threshold of one million newcomers in 2015 was generally agreed upon in Europe as “too many” to handle, but it is important to keep in mind this adds up to “0.5 per cent of the EU population” (Anderson 2017, 1529), which could have been manageable if there were political will. Thus, the “European refugee crisis” trope constructs abnormality and a state of “interregnum” that allows European governments to take direct actions and extreme measures (Bauman 2018, 2).

In terms of scale, this so-called crisis is the first of its kind in our digitally mediatized age (Ponzanesi 2016). This has implications for the digitalized and datafied workings of state apparatuses and everyday experiences of newcomers to Europe who were forced to flee. Shifting focus away from top-down perspectives that are indicative of dominant ideologies of exclusionary “Europeanism” (Bauman 2004), I focus in this chapter on how ideologies of Europe may be contested from below through digital activism. This is urgently needed, despite EU’s historical foundation to promote and protect human rights, since the peak of the so-called crisis the representation of refugees has rapidly moved from a focus on humanitarianism towards othering and securitization (Georgiou and Zabrowski 2017). Activists in Europe and beyond have actively sought to inverse this development through innovative forms of digital activism.

The postcolonial intellectuals under scrutiny in this chapter are two activist assemblages working inside and outside Europe, who respectively engage with Big and Small Data activism. First, the big-data vision and practices of the Migrants’ Files are discussed. The Migrants’ Files were a consortium of journalists and big data activists from over fifteen European countries who focused on two projects, “counting the death” and “the money trails.” They repurposed “open-source intelligence” (OSINT), a methodology originating in the intelligence services, to combine data sources in order to create open access databases that provide a sense of “the human and financial cost of 15 years of Fortress Europe” (Migrants’ Files 2018). Their awareness raising efforts are hugely important, because the Mediterranean is the world’s deadliest stretch of sea and Europe remains the deadliest migration destiny in the world. The embodied, situated, and rehumanizing example of Migrants’ Files doing “deep data” analysis offers incentive to further think about ways

in which Big Data might be strategically mobilized as an antioppressive knowledge-power system.

The second case study considers small data activism by addressing social media mobilization around children who became the faces of the “European refugee crisis” and the ongoing Syrian Civil War. The focus is on @Alabed-Bana, the performative social media presence of a now eight-year-old girl who started tweeting from Eastern Aleppo, Syria, before she fled to Turkey. Bana al-Abed’s account is managed by her mum @fatemahalabed, an English language schoolteacher who self-identifies as a “global peace activist” (2017). After joining Twitter on September 23, 2016, the account has posted 833 tweets containing 217 photos and videos and attracted 356,000 followers. Although these figures are modest in comparison with Western Twitterati, *Time* (2017) recently included the account in its ranking of “the 25 most influential people on the internet.” In their coverage of her digital presence, *Time* magazine writes that although the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad dismissed her account as “anti-government propaganda,” it did draw “widespread coverage, turning al-Abed into a posterchild for Syria’s thousands of struggling children” (Ibid.).

## ON HACKING THE CRISIS

Human rights activists have sought to increase the visibility of migrants’ experiences and predicaments in the form of transmedia storytelling, alternative media production, and hacktivist tactics (Costanza-Chock 2014). In digitally advocating for the rights of refugees in Europe, activists go against the grain: refugees speak from the margins of European society, are commonly unintended users of digital technologies and are invisible on the international human rights agenda. In this chapter I approach digital activism as a way to “hack” or bring change to the “representational battlefield” of the “mediation of difference” (Siapera 2014, 149). Digital media technologies and practices actively shape, construct, and control cultural difference, and hackers may expose and subvert this process. In *A Hacker Manifesto* McKenzie Wark defines the intellectual project of hacking as follows:

To hack is to differ . . . We produce new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out of raw data. Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colorings, we are the abstracters of new worlds. (2004, 3–4)

Hacking thus not only revolves around the technical process of computer experts gaining unauthorized access to data networks, disks and drives but

also entails broader world-making practices through subversive digital practices. This is particularly clear from the ethical and ideological orientations of “hacktivists,” the portmanteau word combining hackers and activists. Alex Gekker (2018, 371) notes that hacktivism seeks to intervene in the dynamic interplay among institutions, (social) media, and everyday life: “the logical application of mediatized political action to the world of participatory social media and ‘always-on’ connectivity: a way to engage and challenge political and commercial institutions through toolsets and practices corresponding with users’ habitual web activities.” For example, in his analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement, Nicholas Mirzoeff explores how alongside rallies, smartphones and social media facilitate a new way of seeing needed to hack the uneven “space of appearance” (2017, 95). I understand hacktivist practices as postcolonial intellectual interventions that reveal that European refugee crisis is deeply racialized and allow asking whether “Migrant Lives Matter” can even be thought and imagined against the backdrop of the European border regime (De Genova 2017, 3). I operationalize this perspective by focusing on how digital practices may derive a performative force by allowing people to enact right claims. To do so, I will chart for the subjects under study “how they create openings for constituting themselves differently, how they struggle for and against closings, and how they make digital right claims in or by performing digital acts” (Isin and Ruppert 2015, 178).

Across Europe we have seen an upsurge of ICT4D (ICT for development) and digital humanitarianism initiatives. Born out of technological solutionism, Horn (2015) captures this digital imaginary as follows: “Displaced by civil war? There’s an app for that. Scratch that: There are several dozen apps for that. Which one would you like?” Indeed, hardware providers, network operators, and social media platforms, often together with volunteers, civic organizations, and governments, have collaborated on developing a plethora of apps for refugees. In fall 2015, over 1,500 such online initiatives were listed on the crowd-sourcing website Indiegogo, reflecting a sense of techno-optimism (Toor 2015). These technology-driven solutions are often developed during hackathons (hacking marathons) that bring together programmers and designers. These intensive day-long or multiple-day events may be organized by grassroots organizations, but they often combine a market-driven interest with corporate responsibility. Although well intended, these apps are not commonly used by refugees themselves, which is partly due to factors including short media attention and crowd-source funding cycles; distrust and skepticism among refugees as well as general lack of involvement of target groups in development processes. In sum, standalone technologies are not going to solve the refugee crisis (Horn 2015; Benton and Glinnie 2016).

Taking digital practices as an entry point runs the risk of a neocolonial, technodeterministic, and decontextual celebration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as agents of change. For this purpose, I draw on a non-digital-media-centric approach, and seek to situate examples in offline embodied, intersectional practice. In addition, engagement with the subversive deployment of technologies is of great importance to shed light from the bottom up on their dominant oppressive but largely invisibilized workings. Top-down processes of governmentality such as border control and migration management increasingly rely on digital technologies and databases. Measurements include predictive analytics and risk assessments, social media deterrence campaigns, biometric identification and data-driven deportation, mining individual social media profiles and smartphones during asylum procedures, militarized and dronified surveillance of the Mediterranean, using radars, robots and sensors to send migrant boats back to sea, among others (Forensic Architecture 2012; Hasain Jr. 2016). The EU increasingly draws on high-tech and Big Data for so-called Green and Blue Border Surveillance, meaning control over 60,000 kilometers of land, sea and air borders and nearly official two thousand entry points (Broeders and Dijkstra 2016). The social sorting of human beings is increasingly datafied, and biometrical details are processed and stored in centralized databases including Schengen Information System (SIS), the Visa Information System (VIS) and the European Dactyloscopy (EURODAC). Decisions over whom Europe retains, detains or relocates are increasingly made by machines rather than human government officials, algorithms increasingly distinguish between privileged lives worth living and unprivileged or even “bare lives”: noncitizens who may be subjected through digital and physical deportability (Leurs and Shepherd 2017).

These processes remind us also of the military-industrial complex from which the internet originates. Still, cybernetic control remains the internet’s basic logic, which is nowadays referred to with the abbreviation “c4istar (command, control, communication, computers, intelligence, surveillance, targeting, acquisition, and reconnaissance)” (Hoofd 2018, 229). Furthermore, the trope of the digital is also mobilized to dehumanize refugees as others, as non-Europeans. In news coverage of the “crisis,” journalists do not often focus on the numerical details, motivations, history, contexts or individual experiences of flight of forced migrants, but prefer to turn the gaze to one apparently striking detail: refugees arriving to Europe carrying smartphones and their taking of selfies upon arrival (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2018). The British tabloid *Express* (2015) illustratively published a photo with the caption “A group of Syrian men pose for snap using selfie stick,” using the following headline:

Migrant crisis: Are these happy young men really timid souls fleeing war and persecution? They aren't quite the heart-rending image of dishevelled, traumatized refugees fleeing the horrors of their war-torn home country one might expect.

As an example of dehumanizing High-Tech Orientalism (Chun 2006), journalists framed the appearance of digitally connected refugees as incompatible with Eurocentric expectations of suffering, poor refugees fleeing from war, and atrocities. Here migrant-related selfies are made to function as acts of “symbolic bordering” (Chouliaraki 2017): the dichotomy of bodies naturalized and alienated from owning and using smartphones betray the neo-colonial geographical, gendered, and racial discrimination that technologies continue to uphold. Even through a protracted situation, the frame of crisis suspends European hospitality. Illustrative of the workings of the ideological formation of “white innocence” (Danewid 2017, see also Wekker 2016), it precludes Europeans from having to come to terms with structural, underlying conditions and hierarchical relations between the Global North and South shaped by neoliberalism and historical racialized imperialist power relations. Can digital activists, in terms of Engin Isin in the preface to this anthology, become transversal political subjects making right claims through “crossing borders and orders, constituting solidarities, networks, and connections?”

## BIG DATA ACTIVISM: THE MIGRANTS' FILES

On October 3, 2013, more than 360 boat migrants drowned off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa. By then little was known about how many men, women and children actually lost their lives on their journey towards Europe. There was no organized central registration of deaths at land borders or deaths at sea. Aside from European government agencies *excluding migrants through registration*—through the collection of biometrical information including fingerprints government agencies decide upon the future of “irregular border crossings”—migrants dying on their journeys were not counted, they were “excluded from registration” (Broeders 2011, 59). Under the heading “The Migrants’ Files,” a collective of European data activists and journalists committed itself to systematically assembling and analyzing the data on migrant deaths of Europe through crowd-sourcing. They initiated the project “counting the dead,” inviting fellow internet users to contribute to an open-source database titled “events during which someone died trying to reach or stay in Europe” (see figure 16.1).

Their hacktivist tactic, to “publicly release the data” (Gekker 2018, 373), revolved around a publicly accessible Google Document spreadsheet, which

was last updated in the summer of 2016 when funding dried up. It was a macabre success in aggregating 3,193 entries of events from January 1, 2000, through June 20, 2016. During this span of time, a total number of 34,861 people died or went missing. This historical database offers detailed and contextualized descriptions for all events as well as data that can be aggregated including dates, confirmed intention of going to Europe, longitude and latitude geographical markers, migration routes, and links to sources. Deaths and missing people are categorized with headings including “authorities related death,” such as being shot by police; “violent accident (transport, blown in minefield),” such as being hit by a car or truck; “suicides” and “drowning or exhaustion related death,” such as drowning and lack of medical care; “malicious intent related death/manslaughter,” such as dying in a detention center due to fire; and “other” and “unknown” (Migrants’ Files 2016).

Counting the dead was set up as a way to lobby for nonexistent migrant “necrovisibility” (Madörin, forthcoming) by mobilizing previously missing data on atrocities and mass loss of lives. Their “data activism” (Milan and Van der Velden 2016) also involved plotting events on a scalable interactive map (see figure 16.2). This map was reused by a variety of news outlets, by artists, NGOs, activists and governments alike. Since the Migrants’ Files published its first results in 2014, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has started data collection in collaboration with UNHCR and national governments under the heading *Missing Migrants. Tracking Deaths along Migratory Routes*. According to IOM, in 2015 alongside a registered 1,000,573 sea or land arrivals, 3,735 people died or went missing. In 2016,

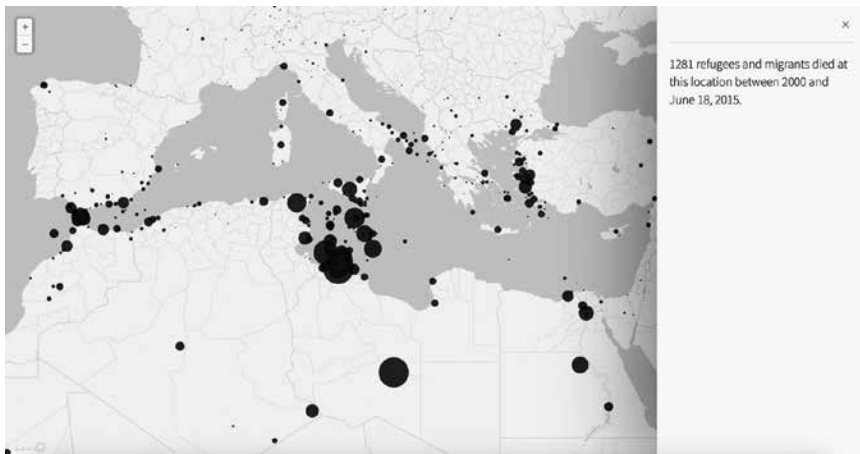


Figure 16.1 Screenshot Migrants’ Files Open Source Database “Events during which someone died trying to reach or stay in Europe.” Migrants’ Files 2016.





relational and nongeographically fixed interpretation of Europe. In sharp contrast (see figures 16.3 and 16.4), IOM presents deaths and missing people as either happening in “Europe,” based on a visualization focused on a European territory bounded by its geographical landmass, or “in the Mediterranean,” which includes the Mediterranean Sea and North African countries. Based on this false demarcation, IOM visualizes that in 2017 (up until November 24) eighty-six deaths happened in Europe, while 2,993 happened in the Mediterranean. In the visualizations, the numbers of death and missing migrants are imprinted on European and North African soil respectively, removing attention for the in-between space of the deathly sea.

In speaking for migrants who died on their journey towards Europe, the Migrants’ Files data activism project claimed migrants’ rights for recognition, exposing there are limits to whose bodies deserve to be mourned. The situated and contextualized entries on deaths and missings in the open-source database are performative gestures, hacking the space of appearance of Europe’s border regime. That of Migrants’ Files is a posthumous critique of Europe’s suspension of boat migrants’ right to claim shelter, protection, and asylum. In co-opting the Migrants’ Files initiative in their own data visualization, IOM renounced these appeals to solidarity by installing a falsely constructed, more innocent image of the EU. We know Europe’s governmentality of undesired migration is increasingly extending beyond its territories well into North Africa and the Middle East. Libya and Turkey have become the de facto detention centers for Europe much like Mexico in the United States. These visualizations illustrate the moral imperative behind the off-shoring and outsourcing of the burden of migration management and border control (Bialasiewicz 2012). Effectively neutralizing the intellectual hacktivist work



Figure 16.3 Missing Migrants Regions in Focus, Screenshots Taken on November 24, 2017. (IOM 2017b).

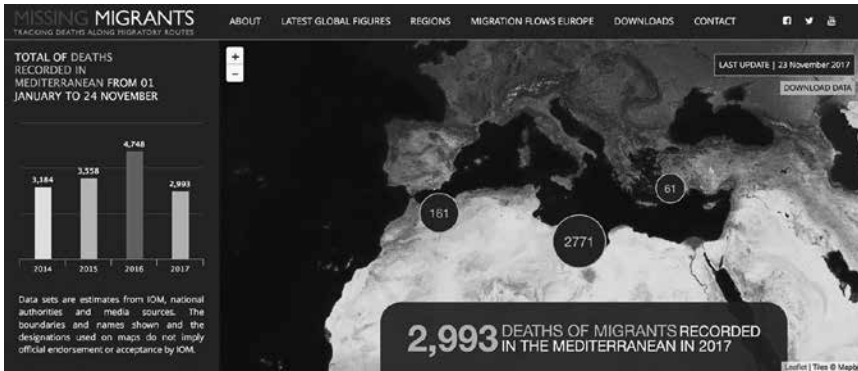


Figure 16.4 Missing Migrants Regions in Focus, Screenshots Taken on November 24, 2017. (IOM 2017b).

of the Migrants' Files, Europe averts the gaze to avoid responsibility, and by doing so removes the ethical base for humanitarian action.

### SMALL DATA ACTIVISM: @ALABEDBANA, "OUR ERA'S ANNE FRANK"

@AlabedBana is the key protagonist of the last section of this chapter. Euro-American mainstream media embraced this digital activist, stating this "7-year-old Aleppo girl on Twitter became our era's Anne Frank" (Gibson 2016). This provocative comparison between the Holocaust (with an estimated death toll of six million Jews) draws attention to the scale of human suffering of the Syrian civil war with an estimated five hundred thousand deaths, but also on the micropolitical level of intellectual labor it draws attention to how Anne Frank's diary writing practice corresponds to contemporary digitally mediated forms of self-representation and witnessing. In this section, I turn my attention to how refugee subjects themselves possibly impact upon the mediation of cultural difference through circulating digital self-representations.

Responses to Bana al-Abed's heartbreaking appeals resonate with social media outpouring over three other young children: pictures that went viral of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian-Kurdish drowned boy who was found washed ashore on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey, on September 2, 2015 (Vis and Goriunova 2015); five-year-old Omran Daqneesh from the al-Qaterji neighborhood of Aleppo, who became the subject of a viral video after the Aleppo Media Centre, a Syrian opposition activist group, released footage of him sitting bloodied and dazed in an ambulance on August 17, 2016; and

the three-month-old baby Karim, who lost one of his eyes and his mother in a bombing in Hammuriah, East of Damascus, on October 29, 2017. I chose to focus my analysis on @AlabedBana as she seems to appear as an active subject with a say over her digital self-representations (De Leeuw and Rydin 2007), which stands in sharp contrast with Kurdi, Daqneesh and baby Karim, who all were made passive symbols of resistance and human compassion and had no say over their representations. This does not mean I uncritically buy into the Western celebration of online participatory culture and profit-oriented social media platforms as was prevalent in the coverage of the roles of Facebook and Twitter during the Arab Spring. I explore to what extent @AlabedBana's digital cultural production aligns with the roles "Arab Techies" played during the Arab Spring as part of Tunisian and Egyptian social movements to "challenge existing power relations by creating holes within the communication system, which is also a power system" (Della Ratta and Veleriani 2016, 79).

Bana al-Abed is a young girl from Aleppo, Syria, currently living in Ankara, Turkey. She has become an active spokesperson for the rights of refugee children and Syrian children still living at war. Her apps of choice include Facebook, Instagram, and PSCP live broadcasting, but she is most known for her Twitter activism. In the signature of her Twitter account, @AlabedBana is described as follows: "8 years old refugee girl. Survivor of bombs and war." Al-Abed's profile image shows a girl confidently looking into the camera, with piercing eyes and her mouth closed. The camera angle is slightly tilted, so we are meeting al-Abed's defiant gaze from below, full of a disposition to challenge and resist (see figure 16.5). Bana al-Abed's account is managed by her mum, @fatemahalabed, so the digital presence of @AlabedBana is a collectively produced one. The profile image of Fatemah, an English teacher and self-proclaimed peace activist, prominently features her daughter sitting behind a microphone at what appears to be a press meeting. Bana and Fatemah posted their first tweet on September 24, 2016, with the singular message: "I need peace." They started posting detailed status updates, photos and vlogs from Eastern Aleppo. They documented the siege of the city and managed to get attention from audiences in the West, at a time when journalists had little access to the region. Media outlets became interested in al-Abed, who was "literally tweeting for her life" (McCarthy 2016). It is important to recognize for whose gaze posts, photos and videos were tweeted. From the outset, @AlabedBana performed intellectual labor in English and repeatedly addressed "Dear World" as her audience. Rather than targeting fellow Syrians or internet users in Arabic, her use of English is indicative of "online power relations" as it meets the postcolonial "online lingua franca" (Franklin 2004, 176). Her intended transnational audience concerned people from the West.

In *Syria Speaks*, Mala Halasa, Zaher Omareen, and Nawara Mahfoud (2014, vii) detail a range of artistic practices that “challenge the culture of violence in Syria.” Like fellow Syrian protesters who are part of the revolutionary movement engaging in dissident expression, @AlabedBana took to Twitter as a “semi-public space in which to voice dissent” (Alshaab alsori aref tarekh and Bank, 2014, 67). @AlabedBana has tweeted at the United Nations, the Russian president Vladimir Putin, U.S. presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, Canadian president Justin Trudeau, German chancellor Angela Merkel, UK prime minister Theresa May, and Syrian president Bashar Assad. Through hashtags she locates her activism in relation to her own city #HolocaustAleppo, #MassacreInAleppo, #StopAleppoMassacre; events in her country #Idlib #EndSyriaWar, #SaveSyrianChildren; and global concerns #WorldChildrensDay, #InternationalWomensDay, #MuslimBan. By directly targeting world leaders in her tweets accompanied by selfies, photos and videos of everyday struggle, and through hashtag activism, she engages in digital right claims on the three levels of “legality, performativity,



Figure 16.5 Screenshot @AlabedBana Profile on Twitter (January 10, 2018).

and imaginary,” distinguished by Isin and Ruppert (2015, 27). She refers to international human rights standards, and through digital practices articulates herself as a political being and by doing so potentially hacks a hole in the dominant exclusionary mediation of cultural differences. The question arises how her intellectual labor, which revolves around making human and migrant rights claims through digital expressivity, is received by her intended audience, the Western English-speaking community. This is an urgent question, because little is known about “the opportunities and constraints for refugees and migrants to speak of their own histories and trajectories, against the representational order that assumes a homogeneity of agency and experience” (Georgiou 2018, 45).

The performance of this Western-oriented practice of digital activism demands to be analyzed through an intersectional lens, acknowledging how gender, generation, religion, and location variously intersect. The account attracted attention from Western news media exactly because the posts, photos and videos were coming from a young girl living through a war situation. As such, it offered an attractive potential to possibly overcome Western audiences’ compassion fatigue with “distant suffering” (Chouliaraki 2006). Indicative of a unique moment of institutional recognition of migrants’ rights, after al-Abed tweeted “World leaders must stand up for peace now,” the president of France, Emmanuel Macron, responded to @AlabedBana by tweeting in the plural as if offering a response on behalf of the West: “We hear your voice @alabedbana. I stand with you for peace. Take care.” This spurred a heated debate among Macron followers in Europe and beyond who either sided with or opposed al-Abed.

@AlabedBana is a paradoxical digital activist figure that in her hypervisibility both strategically exploits victimhood and childhood vulnerability as well as makes claims to voice, authority, and recognition by siding with certain power holders, including heads of state and international institutions. The account does so by drawing on emotional, personal storytelling, which triggers diverging affective responses in the bodies of people encountering her content. The account offered snapshots of what it is like to be living at war, personal testimonies and forms of citizen journalism. Zizi Papacharissi has theorized how such innovative forms of digitally networked personalized storytelling may generate mediated solidarity by shaping “affective publics”: “networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnection through expressions of sentiment” (Papacharissi 2016, 125). @AlabedBana’s insertion into everyday social media circuits triggered a wide range of responses, ranging across a continuum of connection with and disconnection from fellow humanity.

News coverage rarely embrace her paradoxical character: they either centre on victimhood or emphasize @AlabedBana’s digital practices as an act of

powerful agency (Coleman 2017). For example, an image of the helplessness of female passive victims in war situations is constructed by quoting tweets containing emotive and pleading language, such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* do with the headlines: “DEAR WORLD, WE ARE DYING” (Knox 2016), and: “PLEASE STOP THE BOMBS . . . TRAGIC TWEETS OF GIRL, 7, IN BESIEGED ALEPPO” (Coleman 2017, 26). Alongside these headlines, photographs are included that emphasize an apparent gendered vulnerability. In *The Sun* example, decontextualized photographs are displayed of Bana al-Abed sitting at a table reading a children’s magazine accompanied by a white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed doll dressed in pink; an image of two dead children wrapped up in carpets accompanied by a pink backpack; and an image of a mother dragging her two crying children along in an outdoor scene. These framings illustrate how coverage is adjusted in such a way that it meets expectations of a Euro-American “spectatorship of suffering” (Chouliaraki 2006). What news consumers are getting is a humanitarian pornography that triggers self-congratulatory forms of solidarity. When consuming these stories, readers feel good to care about suffering individuals but are not offered the means to couple individual stories with “grand narratives,” including the history, context, and actors involved in the war (Chouliaraki 2013, 9). Moreover, foregrounding the powerlessness of the young girl and her mother under threat by the civil war and Daesh<sup>1</sup> resonates with historically dominant tropes of gendered violence, where women are depicted as sufferers rather than active agents: in conflicts women are commonly framed as weak, dependent and suffering from male aggressors, perpetrators, and decision makers (Ponzanesi 2014). Furthermore, they allow Euro-American governments to justify once again that neoimperial interventions are needed to liberate oppressed women: a process Gayatri Spivak critiqued with the statement “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 2010, 48).

Other news outlets single out @AlabedBana as an active, brave subject. For example, CNN described the account as “the Syrian girl who gave a voice to Aleppo” (Karadsheh and Khadder 2017), while *The Guardian* focused on how the account mobilized social media as a platform to appeal for human rights by selecting tweets including “I need peace,” “why is the world not hearing us? Why is nobody hearing us?” and “We want the world to hear us” (Shaheen 2016). This oppositional reading recognizing the agency and subversive potential of digital activism is supported in recent scholarly analyses of digitally networked feminist activism. Personal, ritualistic, everyday narrative forms are central to feminist discursive resistance circulated online (Clark 2016), reflecting how new forms of personalized digital storytelling can be used for advocacy and civic engagement. Alongside explicit human rights claims, @AlabedBana shares politicized selfies accompanied by her feelings

and thoughts, and by doing so she weaves together a complex narrative, providing insight in her distinctly situated lived and embodied experiences (see figure 16.6). Challenging dismissive criticism of narcissism, networked self-portraits have the potential to perform political acts in the form of “selfie-citizenship” (Kuntsman 2017). It is in the Small Data hacktivist practice of @AlabedBana that the feminist adage of the personal is political rings true. She brings into relation “the individual and the collective, the deliberate and the spontaneous, the marketized and the grassroots” (Kuntsman 2017, 14). The figure @AlabedBana gained recognition and exposure also because of strategic marketization. J. K. Rowling was among the global audience that read @AlabedBana’s tweets and sent her digital copies of the entire *Harry Potter* book series after Bana complained about the lack of access to books. A blurb by Rowling is on the cover of Bana al-Abed’s recently published book *Dear World. A Syrian Girl’s Story of War and Plea for Peace*. This book, published under her anglicized name Bana Alabed, has also allowed her to travel for a tour in the United States and to visit the United Nations and Twitter offices. “I love @Twitter so much. My big family @TwitterNYC are the best & I love you all. I will never forget you my friends.” In her book she also confronts



Figure 16.6 Screenshot Twitter Post @AlabedBana (November 11, 2017).

criticisms; for example, by explaining the family used “solar panels so we could charge our phones and my iPad” (Alabed 2017, 126).

It is particular the blurring of the boundaries between personal and political, local and global, grassroots and institutionalized settings caused by the success of @AlabedBana, which have triggered increasingly hostile responses. They are also apparent in the backlash fellow postcolonial intellectuals featured in this anthology have experienced. Accusations range from @AlabedBana being a puppet of “America’s unelected deep state power structure” (Johnstone 2017); an account set up to “promote the NATO narrative of the Syrian War” (McKenzie 2016); and an example of how jihadists engage in child exploitation to “whitewash terrorists” (Bartlett 2017). The account also gave birth to a now-defunct parody Twitter account @AmenaShaladi, whose Twitter profile read “I have 4 years. I am refugee Syria. Many bombs and war is sad. My mom help me with writings” (Johnstone 2017). Criticisms must also be understood in the heavy circulation of fake news surrounding the Syrian civil war, where other social media accounts, such as that of an openly lesbian woman tweeting from Damascus, revealed to be authored by a forty-year-old American male (Bell and Flock 2011). Furthermore, like the counting the death Big Data initiative that was co-opted by the International Organization for Migration, Bana’s digital presence has been criticized to have been co-opted by state actors alongside social media moguls like Twitter, most notably by the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. She and her family fled from Aleppo to Turkey in December 2016, and they currently live in Ankara. In May 2017, they obtained Turkish citizenship, which @AlabedBana announced with the tweet “I am a Turkey citizen now.” @trpresidency, the Twitter account of the Turkish president, also posted news about the family being handed ID cards, accompanied by a photo of Bana being hugged by Erdoğan. This is of course a highly ironic gesture, coming from a government that is known for fiercely opposing and occasionally blocking social media platforms like Twitter. Therefore, the progressive political potential of @AlabedBana digitally challenging the politics of representation surrounding the refugee crisis can only be understood as a relational dialectic, which results are not stable or given but fleeting and in need of reiteration.

## CONCLUSION

Acknowledging that the so-called European refugee crisis is a postcolonial remnant, this chapter explores how digital activists may hack the figure of refugees in the European context to change the “mediation of difference” (Siapera 2014). Hacking the crisis is approached as a way of making digital right claims in a changing public formation. Conceiving hacking as a way



“to differ” (Wark 2004) and in particular “hacktivism” as a social justice-oriented intervention in the mediatized institutionalization of everyday life (Gekker 2018), the focus is on digital practices articulated from below against the increasingly datafied top-down governmentality of migration. Through this lens two collectives of postcolonial intellectuals are brought into focus. The first case study revolves around the Migrants’ Files, a Big Data activist project that demonstrates the potential of data activism as “making sense of data as a way of knowing the world and turning it into a point of intervention” (Milan and van der Velden 2016, 63–64). This consortium of journalists and activists established an open-source database of migrants who died and went missing in their journeys to Europe. Previously, details about deaths and missings were not centrally registered nor archived, and as such those that lost their life to Europe were effectively “excluded from registration” (Broeders 2011). Through data activism the collective questioned whose lives are worth living and mourning. The initiative also demonstrates that this form of contemporary political engagement calls for the development and a mobilization of new digital literacies. There is great urgency to equip ourselves with the critical tools to read against the grain of datafication, to contest the exclusionary workings of data visualizations, and to create alternative digital data narratives.

Secondly, the social media presence of @AlabedBana, an account maintained by a human-rights activist and her eight-year-old daughter from Aleppo, was analyzed to chart how digital self-representation of refugees may contest from below exclusionary ideological formations of European-ness. Although the chapter foregrounds internet-born initiatives, it seeks to offer an affirmative critique of digital networking that originates and bears traces of the exploitative and surveillance logic of the military-industrial complex from which the internet originates. Dominant popular and scholarly imaginaries make us feel we are living in a paradigm-shifting era. However, Appadurai warns that a preoccupation, in the United States and Europe, on the “screenification of social practices” exacerbates a global academic digital divide: most new digital technologies hail from the West and trigger academic reflection from there, creating an exclusionary “business class for theory” (2016, 8). As it is also demonstrated in the multiplicity of postcolonial public intellectual labor featured in this anthology, it is important to remain attentive to modes of social interaction, aesthetics, and interventions beyond the screen, algorithm, and network. The specifically digitally and geographically situated interventions shared by the intellectuals under study allow for the establishment of new connections between concerns previously isolated as pertaining only to refugees and our global collectively shared predicament. Giving the interlocked challenges of coming to terms with postcolonialism, global warming, climate change, technologization and growing

forced migration, this relational perspective is much needed particularly as hegemonic Western and European dominant culture and politics foreground the neoliberal individual and backgrounds the fate of humanity (Balibar 2016; Castles 2017). The Migrants' Files and @AlabedBana offer open invitations to reconsider "what kind of Europe we would like to live in" (Huggan 2013, 556).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A word of thank you for Sandra Ponzanesi and Adriano José Habed. I greatly appreciated their critical questions and comments. Thank you, Madhuri Prabhakar, for your editorial support. The author discloses receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this chapter: the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) Veni grant "Young Connected Migrants. Comparing Digital Practices of Young Asylum Seekers and Expatriates in The Netherlands," project reference 275-45-007 (2016–2019).

## NOTE

1. Daesh is the acronym used in the Arabic-speaking world to refer to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Islamic State (IS).

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