Mediated Compassion and the Politics of Displaced Bodies

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Abstract

In media's attempt to humanize the impact of war, dramatic images of disgruntled human bodies seeking refuge in faraway lands have become symbols of suffering and calls for humanitarian action. However, some media scholars are claiming that compassion fatigue is desensitizing media audiences to the human cost of war. This article argues that certain images resonate with greater signification that offers new ways of looking at compassion as a form of dialogue. The photo of Kim Phuc, the young Vietnamese girl burned by napalm on the fields of Vietnam stands out in our collective memory. There are many others but only a few attain such iconic status. And as war becomes more politically complex, so too is media's roles in portraying the suffering of children especially in the context of forced migration.

The photographic image of the three-year old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed ashore on a beach in Turkey and the many discourses it engendered represent a new mediated form of human suffering. As Barthes argued, there is a difference between a photograph that 'shouts' and a photograph that 'wounds''. The swift refugee policy changes expressed by some world leaders days after Aylan's image came out in mass media is revealing on many levels. Drawing from online media coverage of this particular media event, this article argues that media's dialogic potential problematizes competing arguments between moral obligation and moral imperialism where culture and race are implicated in policy decisions on refugeehood and cultural integration.

Keywords: mediated compassion, refugeehood, dialogic compassion, displaced bodies, new media

Introduction

In mass media's attempt to humanize the impact of war, dramatic images of disgruntled human bodies seeking refuge in faraway lands have become symbols of suffering and call for humanitarian action. However, some media scholars are claiming that compassion fatigue is desensitizing media audiences to the human cost of war. Given this scenario, this paper argues that certain images resonate with greater signification and depth that offer new ways of looking at compassion as a form of dialogue. Images of children in media war coverage have always had a riveting spot within the compassion radar for most audiences. The photo of Kim Phuc, the young Vietnamese girl burned by napalm on the fields of Vietnam stands out in our collective memory. There are many others but only a few attain such iconic status. And as war becomes more politically complex, so too are mass media's role in portraying the suffering of children especially in the context of forced migration.

In the early days of September 2015, the image of the three-year old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed ashore on a beach in Turkey hit the headlines of both offline and online news media. It is a harrowing image of human tragedy. Some journalists opine that it signifies the failure of humanity to value the meaning of life. Others claim that it emboldens a revisiting of compassion as a human affect. The more jaded ones complain that it is another form of media voyeurism. The swift refugee policy changes expressed by some world leaders days after Aylan's image came out in mass media is revealing on many levels. It problematizes what moral obligation means within the current crisis of human displacement where culture and race are implicated in policy decisions. Drawing from online media coverage of this particular event that articulates multiple and competing discourses, this article asserts that compassion is evolving and mediated by a more profound and paralyzing quagmire upon which the 'war on terror' now resides.

As Barthes (1981) argued, there is a difference between a photograph that 'shouts' and a photograph that 'wounds'. I argue that given the more somber photographic depiction of Aylan, media is performing an act of transgression through visual poetry by opening up wounds that ignite what I call a 'dialogic compassion'. The dialogic potential of this new kind of compassion is premised not only on the political context on which the photo finds its deeper meaning. It is also located on how the poignant visual depiction of a child suffering renegotiates the meaning of compassion.

Does the absence of violence depicted in the photo create dialogue? If so, what forms of human agency does it inspire in the context of humanitarian politics? How do media's dialogic potential help facilitate the shaping of public perception and empathy about the displacement of bodies in the context of war? To what extent does the Aylan image rekindle compassion from the fatigue it has sunk into? Lastly, how is refugeehood problematized given the cultural, political and religious contexts on which the 'war on terror' operates? While I realize that these questions are complex and can only be adequately addressed through a more extensive research, I pose them as starting points for future discussions on mediated compassion. I will discuss the photo as a mediated representation of compassion, what it signifies in terms of meaning and what discourses it engenders as gleaned from editorial conversations in online news media. For my empirical data, I looked at online editorials from *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera*, *France 24*, *The Washington Post* and *The*

Atlantic within a two-week frame after the Aylan Kurdi photo went into online publication

This article consists of four sections. The first section discusses the arguments surrounding the issue of compassion fatigue and the anxieties and temporalities that have come to define what it means in contemporary context. The second section centers on the photo itself, its semiotic resonance as a symbol of human pain and the extent to which its wounding impact provokes media debates on compassion. The third section argues that the rage and anguish that the publication of the photo engendered opened avenues of discourse resulting in what I call a 'dialogic compassion'. The fourth section interrogates the politics of refugeehood and how its renegotiation, as a consequence of the Aylan photo phenomenon, is problematized from a multiplicity of perspectives bringing the conflict over moral obligation versus moral imperialism in closer scrutiny.

Compassion fatigue: Anxieties and temporalities

The tragic impact of war, natural disasters, famine, disease and human rights violations has made distant suffering of 'faraway others' closer to the more fortunate ones because of mass media (Thomas, 2011). Images of human suffering of whatever contexts have proliferated not only in news media but also in fictional cinematic representations magnified with more intense emotionality and special effects. However, the barrage of media representations of human suffering is bound to take its toll on media audiences' capacity for empathy. Donating material support may seem easy to perform. But sustaining a commitment to a deeper form of empathy and compassion that connects audiences to the suffering of others on a deeper level may not be as easy, which as Moeller (1999) asserts, is the main reason for compassion fatigue (Haavisto & Maasilta, 2015; Hariman, 2009; Lohoff, 2015; Tester, 2001).

According to Moeller, the tendency for media audiences to get overwhelmed is but a natural reaction. In 1991, the world saw a spate of tragedies happening in many parts of the globe; earthquakes, cholera epidemic, cyclones, famine, civil war that left relief organizations loss for any hyperbole to describe what was happening (Moeller, 1999, p. 7). When a plethora of human disasters happen simultaneously, with each human suffering competing for attention and humanitarian responses, a deficit of compassion is likely to happen (p. 11). Moeller reveals that the reasons for compassion fatigue are multiple and complex. As emotional attachment to certain humanitarian causes wears out easily, sustaining compassion for long durations of time is not only challenged by the temporal nature of compassion as a human affect. It is also challenged by the way media frames human suffering for media audiences.

Moeller interrogates the repetitive nature of a kind of formulaic journalistic framing of disaster reporting where audiences are made to feel that they have seen such crises before (p.13). Wright (2004) calls this kind of reporting as 'TV codes' where disaster stories aimed at inviting humanitarian action are framed using predetermined formula that borders on sensationalism and shock effect, especially if they are framed within the constraints of 'Western concerns' (p. 100). Chourialaki (2010) chimes in by saying that such framing strategy establishes a kind of social distance where the 'contrast between the bare life of distant sufferers and the civility of healthy bodies in the West' are imprinted in the minds of media audiences (p. 111). It is a relationship

that endangers compassion into becoming a stagnant element within the politics of humanitarianism that stifles human agency. This western 'colonial gaze' is particularly apparent in the way the Afghan refugee crisis was framed in the aftermath of 9/11 (Wright, 2004).

Lohoff (2015) and Thomas (2011) both argue that mainstream journalism's formulaic depiction of human tragedy stems from the profession's strong adherence to the principles of 'objectivity' which makes human suffering part of a commodified section in news programming categorized as human interest. As Tester (2001) also notes, such formulaic framing leaves audiences helpless with lingering questions like "what else can we do?" Such questioning tone leads to a sense of guilt. Guilt leads to a lowering of self-regard. A low-self regard can lead to a lack of regard for others resulting in numbness and compassion fatigue (p. 79). It is against this seeming crisis of guilt and compassion fatigue argued by the abovementioned scholars that this article locates its main argument in how the Aylan Kurdi photo renegotiates the crisis of compassion fatigue.

The boy on the beach: The photo that wounds

In Barthes' (1981) semiotic analysis of photography, interpretation of meaning is shaped by the viewer's subjective engagement with the image. Meaning can be decoded denotatively by the way an image extends knowledge that resonates with the trained exposure of the viewer to reality because of context, history or culture. This kind of interest in meaning production is what Barthes calls in Latin *studium*. But a less literal decoding of meaning is one that 'punctuates' or 'disturbs' the viewer, the *punctum*. For Barthes, the *punctum* is the element that 'rises from the scene' like an arrow that pierces the emotion (pp. 26-27). This element of an image is the tragedy that 'wounds' the viewer in profound ways. It is also the element that induces different modes of seeing where the temporalities of meaning allow the sovereign consciousness of viewers to interrogate their own subjective positionalities as images are reproduced through media (Paakspuu, 2009; Ventsel, 2010).

Shurkus (2014) however asserts that the *punctum* argument articulated by Barthes can be a misleading proposition. This is because it grants a photograph the sole power to activate a wounding effect as if such effect is inherently endowed to the image leaving the viewer outside of wounding experience. But according to Shurkus, Barthes is also quick to correct himself by saying that the *punctum* is a creation of the viewer and differs from individual to individual. The attention invested by the viewer to the image produces a life force from which *punctum* erupts creating what Shurkus calls a 'phenomenological experience' between the image and the viewer (p. 72). Such experience is further expanded by Alpert (2010) endowing Barthes' semiotic analysis of a photographic image another layer of symbolic power. For Alpert, the *punctum* is the wound that erupts in reality that in closer and in more engaged viewing becomes reality itself (p. 331). Alpert's statement is resonant in the way the Aylan photo became a wounding reality that dominated both the online news media landscape and current discourses on the 'war on terror'. It is a wounding reality that opened new conversations and dialogues about compassion.

In his *New York Times Magazine* article, Homans (2015) opens with a question, "Why this boy?" The photo depicted on the online article reveals Aylan's dead body being

carried by a Turkish policeman on the coastal town of Bodrum, Turkey. The photo is one of two that proliferated in news media and has come to remind readers of the Syrian refugee crisis. The other one features a more close-up shot of Aylan's body washed ashore on the beach depicting a pose like he was just sleeping. Homan states that the photo has an unusual place in the current trend of compassion fatigue about human suffering of 'others' in that the image sends out an experience of 'awful closeness' making a distant, unfathomable war closer again to viewers' wounded souls. Homans intimates that by looking at the photo over and over again, one is tempted to wake Aylan for him to get up. This is because taken separately, this photo suggests a different context like that of a small boy who fell asleep while wandering in your backyard, Homans insinuated. But since the photo operates in a set of meanings in a specific historical accident, it disturbs at the same time that it informs.

Several journalists have compared the Aylan photo with other photographic images that have reached iconic status. Juxtaposing it with those of the 'napalm girl' of the Vietnam War era or the Sudanese child's 'vulture-stalked' image of famine in Africa offers a closer examination of compassion and pity (Homans, 2015). Their compositional framing evokes different aspects of emotional distance. The nakedness of the 'napalm girl' and emaciated body of the Sudanese boy suggest a more distant affinity to emotional pain because of their visually abhorrent nature. Their status as a 'faraway other' is magnified by a mediated compassion making their pain emotionally riveting and yet tolerable, ephemeral or even unstable as claimed by Sontag (2003).

Sontag states that compassion for images of human suffering is unstable. It has to be translatable into forms of action to sustain a viewer's compassionate threshold. Otherwise compassion fades out (p.101). But for compassion to be translatable into action, a viewer has to be invested in a photo not only emotionally but also cognitively, which for Sontag is only possible through words (p. 29). Words have the power to alter the meaning of a photograph especially if they reside in the hands of those in positions of power such as governments, even media. The refusal of the Bush administration to name the Abu Ghraib photos 'torture' and some world leaders' avoidance of using 'genocide' to describe the massacre of 800,000 Tutsis in Rwanda are classic examples of how words add or subtract meanings in photographic images (Sontag, 2004). Using Sontag's argument, the photo of the 'boy on the beach' accompanied by the many stories and opinions expressed through online media expanded its potential to produce multiple meanings that can inspire action. The addition of words as suggested by Sontag not only expands meaning attached to the Aylan photo but also strengthens its phenomenological significance (Shurkus, 2014) as it helps bring back the tragic past of children's bodies caught in the quagmire of war such as that of Kim Phuc. Does this mean then that the photo cannot stand on its own merits without the power of words? That the wounding reality that both Alpert (2010) and Barthes (1981) assert in relation to the *punctum* becomes irrelevant?

In a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, Ken Burns, a well-known American documentary filmmaker posits a counter-argument to Sontag's endorsement of the necessity of words to allow photographic images to elicit compassion. Burns states that the power of the Aylan photo is vested on its ability to convey complex information even in the absence of words (Pensiero, 2015). Butler (2009) echoes a similar critique arguing that photography frames its own interpretive narrative that can 'unsettle' the viewer (p. 67). As a single image, Aylan photo's arresting impact interrupts humanity from

the stupor it has fallen into. Pensiero suggests that such interruption creates new awareness driven by the photo's disquieting or piercing affect (Barthes, 1981). Extending this argument further leads to Paakspuu's (2009) assertion of photography's 'hypertextual' potential where new practices of signification within the viewing experience create moral and ethical spaces (p. 193). Organic in these moral and ethical spaces lies the power of images to construct its own historical reality (Ventsel, 2010). Ventsel argues that such power becomes hegemonic especially when an image's particularity and hypertextuality transgresses into a metaphor.

To the extent that Aylan's photos attained a metaphoric stature can be seen in various formations. Objectivity in journalism was renegotiated as evidenced by the dilemma of the British newspaper *The Guardian*. According to Fahey (2015), the poignancy and emotional power of the photographs confronted the editorial staff into debating journalistic policies bringing the current political and cultural attitudes towards refugees across Europe into sharp focus. As a result, the photo of the Turkish policeman carrying Aylan's body was printed on the front page while the close-up shot of the boy faced down on the shore was printed as a secondary image in the inside page. In a parallel scenario from recent past, the German magazine, *Der Spiegel*, experienced a similar journalistic dilemma when faced with the printing of photos of Iraqi children in hospitals destroyed by bombing. To avert revulsion from readers, the photos were published in black and white instead of color (Lohoff, 2015).

Although both photos were used in the case of Aylan, the decision was carefully analyzed in an effort to strike a balance between public sympathy and anger. Fahey (2015) notes that the growing animosity expressed by British citizens on social media over Britain's role as a mere bystander in the midst of such tragedy has caught the attention of the office of Britain's Prime Minister. Public sympathy over the little Syrian boy's arresting image and public anger over his tragic death forced the British leading newspaper to renegotiate what journalistic objectivity means in a time when more displaced bodies are flocking to Europe to escape the tragedy that unwittingly the Aylan photos became symbolic of. It is no coincidence that the sudden change of tone of David Cameron's refugee policy happened a day after the Aylan photos went viral becoming the top trending image on Twitter with a hashtag #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik (humanity washed ashore), Fahey intimates. For *The Guardian*, the urgency and the emotionality engendered by the photos were palpable enough to convince the news organization that this is not the time for censorship (Homans, 2015).

The photos provoked multiple debates and conversations expressing emotional outbursts ranging from anger, revulsion, empathy, activism as well as critique of media coverage. Compassion seems to have gained a form of rebirth as online discussions emanating from the photo not only gave rise to an outpouring of rage and condemnation about the failure of humanity to save innocent children's lives. It also resurrected the revulsion against the failure of First World countries to address the refugee crisis and to act upon a war that seems to have no end in sight. Kristof (2015) asserts a bigger moral failure that humanity has to face where issues of 'xenophobia and demagogy' are opening up new discourses allowing the Aylan photo a kind of agency that forces world leaders to engage in a dialogic exchange about compassion, morality and obligation.

The photo that speaks: Dialogic compassion

Reflecting on Barthes, the wounding effect of Aylan's photos disengages readers' trained familiarity with the 'war on terror' away from bloodied bodies and military drones as symbols of violence. The poetic calmness and non-violent thrust that the Aylan photo evokes create a new symbol of compassion. It is a dialogic one in its potential not only to unsettle public mood and state policies. It is also dialogic in the way it engages an interrogation of 'other socially located languages' within existing discourses on compassion (Dentith, 1994; p. 196). In the novelistic form, Dentith articulates a Bakhtinian perspective on dialogism by asserting that language as symbol and a dialogic tool gains new meaning when reproduced in 'competing and conflicting worlds' (p. 196) where interpretative and internalized constructions of meaning both collide and coalesce around and within differing points of view.

Xu (2013) echoes the same Bakhtinian dialogic thought by emphasizing the interplay of different ideologies and contradictory discourses from which intercultural and inter-subjective dialogues emerge (p. 386). However, Xu also asserts that the emergence of such dialogic potential is influenced by context where inter-culturality and inter-subjectivity are problematized. Context in this scenario is not only defined within the social or political realities upon which competing discourses are created. It is also defined by a subjective introspection of the self from a post-humanist view that critiques Heidegger's (1962) view of the self as a 'self sufficient subject' (Xu, 2013; p. 384). In Xu's dialogic argument, the self is self-awakened by the context of the other, a dialectical relationship defined by a sense of ethical responsibility. Such subjectivity and responsibility place the awakening of the self to human suffering in a dialogic context fused with competing cultural and political discourses which, in the case of the Aylan photo, are caught within the growing fatigue of and compassion for the impact of forced migration.

However, compassion fatigue may not be as paralyzing as it is claimed to be by some scholars. Hariman (2009) offers another perspective on the issue of compassion in the electronically-mediated world. As all breathing and living things suffer, compassion by nature is ephemeral and therefore negotiable as any human affect can be in a given social context. Compassion is a human impulse shaped cognitively and emotionally (Haavisto & Maasilta, 2015) by social conditions that operate within hierarchies of ethical and moral judgments that form what Hariman calls 'human relationality' (p. 202). Relationality in Hariman's definition locates the self as ethically and morally implicated in the suffering of others echoing Xu's (2013) post-humanist argument on dialogism.

This idea of relationality locates media viewers as not socially isolated but rather connected to a network of human values that are not intrinsically barren in moral terms or eternally fatigued by acquired indifference, especially in the context of 24-hour news media. Feelings of indifference and fatigue are just as ephemeral and depending on how media frames human pain, a more compassionate way of seeing can always emerge. But according to Hariman, such compassionate seeing has to be cultivated both by media and those around it. It has to reach a level of dialogue across various communication platforms and geopolitical boundaries to induce action as suggested by Sontag (2003).

Freedland (2015) notes that Aylan Kurdi's drowning did not present a new horror. The world has seen it before. Compassion fatigue has made media audiences look the other way despite having sympathy. War has become so complex and abstract until we are confronted not with a mass of displaced bodies but with a single body, a small body of a child. And not until we zoom into those little shoes and bare legs caught in the sand upon which his whole body is faced down that we realize something is getting pierced in our hearts and in our minds (Barthes, 1981; Freedland, 2015). The image of one body was enough to inspire a collective sigh of compassion that galvanized both media and government institutions to heed a call to action.

According to Freedland (2015), the softening of tone on British Prime Minister David Cameron's position on refugee policy is a strong response to the public mood in light of Aylan's photo media coverage. Private citizens in the UK and Iceland started initiating their own housing projects to welcome Syrian refugees to augment their own government efforts days after the photo's publication. Through Facebook, Icelander novelist Bryndis Bjorgvinsdottir gathered 11,000 Icelanders willing to house Syrian refugees (Freedland, 2014). On the Canadian side, media debates animating Canadian national election are forcing candidates to revisit refugee policies in terms of quota and resettlement programs because of Aylan's photo (Austen, 2015). Germany has also taken the lead to increase refugee intake as German volunteers wanting to help refugees from Middle East have also soared.

To what extent did the Aylan media coverage put pressure on member countries of the European Union to renegotiate their policies on refugees is anecdotal for now. However, for the first time in EU history, a much broader dialogue on immigration, asylum and refugeehood is being redefined and is now front and center of foreign policy debates (Harding, Oltermann & Watt, 2015). On a more theoretical level, the world is being confronted with defining what moral obligation means given the volatile historical trajectories some countries have had with the impact of war. The geopolitical implications of forced migration are opening up attitudes about war refugees not only within the economic disparity discourse between rich and poor nations, but also within inherent nativist tendencies that have cultural, racial and ideological implications (Douthat, 2015).

The refugee discourse: Moral imperatives of displaced bodies

As suggested in the previous chapter, the dialogic compassion inspired by the Aylan media coverage placed refugeehood at the center of foreign policy debate. This is not to say however that refugeehood as a topic of debate is new in the current politics of war. Rellstab (2015) states that even before the Aylan photo came out, the debate about war refugees has become a controversial political issue especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions in North Africa. Issues of asylum and migration policies became politicized as a result of 9/11 and the many social protests that placed the Middle East at the center of political conversations in media. Rellstab argues that negative stereotypes of asylum seekers mostly Muslims have spawned a kind of 'differential racism' in certain parts of Europe also because of media (p. 110). This perpetrated a biased view of Arabs that could explain why Syrian refugees who are fleeing by hundreds of thousands are stigmatized, including children.

Simply looking at the photo of Aylan reveals no hint of prejudice. The boy's identity is hidden in the seeming innocent perspective by the manner his entire body is framed within the four corners of the photo. The aura of the photo suggests calmness. It almost has a poetic quality of an innocent child cradled to sleep by the gust of the wind and the soothing sound of the sea. But the social context in which the photo was taken speaks of another dimension. It speaks of violence. The violent historical and political context against which the serene quality of the photo is juxtaposed suggests a conundrum where a new sense of compassion is re-evoked.

As the word 'refugee' is now tainted with negative connotations related to terrorism, the rhetorical framing of which comes from world politicians themselves magnified through media (Hanson-Easy & Moloney, 2009), identifying Aylan Kurdi as a Syrian refugee complicates the refugeehood discourse even further. In an *Al Jazeera* editorial, Ott (2015) states that the fear that hounds the issue of refugehood in the context of the Syrian migration is the possible 'Islamization of the West' – a phrase now tainted with extremist connotations. Ott reveals that the rise of protest actions from Neo Nazi and right wing groups and violent threats against refugee camps and homes of host families are becoming more like a daily reality in Europe (Paterson, 2015). Blatant display of xenophobic opposition to Syrian refugees complicates social problems related housing, job opportunities, language adoption and cultural integration programs.

German Prime Minister Andrea Merkel's 'open door policy' initiative while praised by some world leaders, has also been attacked by some EU leaders for imposing 'moral imperialism' (*France 24*, 2015; Morgan, 2015). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has accused Merkel of dominating the moral debate on the issue of refugees by imposing an imperialist stance on morality. Orban, who is also supported by the less affluent countries of the Eastern bloc, asserts that EU member nations should be allowed to determine their own refugee policy especially as it relates to quota allocations. Orban contends that rich nations like Germany or France should not have the monopoly of the moral imperative that determines what refugee policies the EU should adopt. The richer nations of the world especially those directly engaged in the 'war on terror' should carry the heavier weight of moral obligation. In this context, compassion and morality are now power brokers in foreign policy decision-making. The EU is now beset by a confounding debate between moral obligation and moral imperialism (Morgan, 2015).

While the rest of the world is trying to make sense of how compassion can invoke new lessons as a result of the drowning of the 'boy in the beach', religious extremists are using the same photo to promote its own agenda. The appearance of the Aylan photo in an article printed in *Dabiq*, the Islamic State group ISIS's official magazine gains new meaning. To counter the outpouring of compassion and support for the death of Aylan, the media savvy ISIS positions the photo as a warning to Syrians and Iraqis not about the dangers of fleeing their countries but the fatal consequence of abandoning Islam in favor of Christianity, atheism and liberalism (Paraszczuk, 2015). Paraszczuk notes that the main argument of the *Dabiq* essay is focused on the idea that allowing Arab children to reach the West, which ISIS labels as the land of 'infidels', binds them to threats of 'fornication, sodomy, drugs and alcohol'. In Paraszczuk's article published on the online version of *The Atlantic*, a photo taken in Sorocaba, Brazil features a graffitti of Aylan's faced down body suggesting how the

image itself has been transported across transnational borders and reappropriated to serve an entirely different and conflicting dialogic discourses (Dentith 1995; Xu, 2013).

Conclusion

The image of Kim Phuc became the bitter reminder of the horrors of the Vietnam War. It spoke to a generation of media viewers limited by television, film and the print media. The Aylan Kurdi photo speaks to a different generation. It communicates a different kind of compassion made possible by a media universe whose moral imperatives are as varied as they are dialogic emotionally and cognitively. The aesthetics of the Aylan photo, its visual framing with the boy's face hidden and his entire body devoid of any expression of pain speaks to a different kind of compassion. The absence of violence in the frame incites an inner monologue that in a post-humanitarian sensibility suggests a kind of self-introspection (Chouliaraki, 2010) that is dialogic without the desensitizing impact of guilt and pity. Aylan looked like an ordinary child cradled to sleep, an affinity to a humanity we are all familiar with. His status is transposed from being a 'faraway other' to a child you are inclined to wake up from slumber in your living room floor. The mediated compassion it engendered inspires a kind of dialogue whose power and agency are vested both on the poetics of photography and the interactive potential of new media where morality and compassion are constantly renegotiated.

The 'dialogic compassion' this article asserts is premised within the ongoing tension that animates, emotionally and discursively, the debate between moral obligation and moral imperialism now expressed in mediated forms. That world leaders and citizens are forced to redefine attitudes and policy lines on refugeehood, migration, asylum and cultural integration on a global context is a hegemonic privilege and a dialogic potential quite different from those attained by the napalm girl and the Sudanese boy imaginaries. The extent to which the Aylan photo is paradigmatic of proposing alternative ways of compassionate dialogue is one for media researchers to explore in the near future. Such dialogic potential is crucial especially in light of how media itself has opened new doors for extremist ideologies and violent messaging against humanity, endangering necessary mechanisms to save displaced bodies caught in the quagmire of forced migration, especially children.

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