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Violent Exceptions: Children's Human Rights and Humanitarian Rhetorics

Wendy S. Hesford

Ohio State UP, 2021, 260 pp.

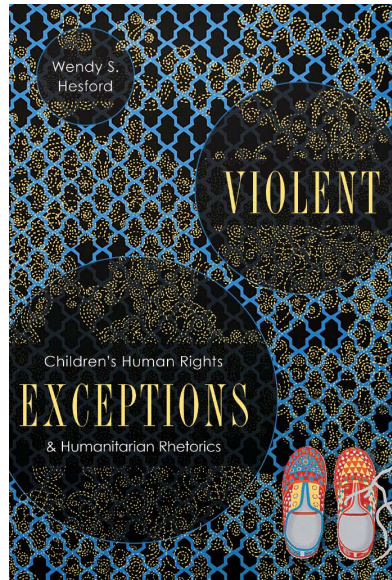
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The tragedy of this book is that it is always relevant: we are continually presented with emergencies that require the keen tools Wendy S. Hesford uses in *Violent Exceptions: Children's Human Rights and Humanitarian Rhetorics*. In this cogent and timely study, Hesford focuses on the figure of the child-in-peril. These are the faces that circulate in news media after catastrophes. Charities depict them to raise money. Politicians invoke their memories to justify policies. Portrayals of imperiled children are powerful humanitarian arguments, coalescing complex, systemic cruelties in the immediacy of embodied innocence. It is precisely this clash between two different chronologies—the systemic and the immediate—that Hesford so expertly unpacks.

When you think of the child-in-peril, what image comes to mind? Hesford's first instance involves ICE detention facilities in Texas. The book's examples multiply with each chapter. There's the Flint water crisis, embodied by the bruise-like rashes covering the face of Sincere Smith on the cover of *Time* magazine. Or the shell-shocked stare and bloodied face of Omran Daqneesh, sitting in an ambulance after the bombing of Aleppo. Or the body of Alan Kurdi lying facedown on a Turkish beach after attempting to escape the Syrian civil war by boat and drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. As I write this review, the Russian invasion has displaced millions of Ukrainian children, and their stories and images are being used for multiple purposes. Who determines what these figurations of the child-in-peril mean? Why does *this* image signify *this* event? How do we unpack how the depictions circulate through various media, and what is at stake? What kinds of power dynamics do these images reveal, and what do they obscure? These are just a few of the compelling questions Hesford's book invites.

One of the key conceptual tools in this study—the origin of its analytic energy—comes from the contrast between human rights and humanitarianism. These two concepts work within distinct temporalities. Human rights tend to work in lon-



ger frameworks and emphasize agency. Humanitarianism works in shorter frameworks and emphasizes passivity. Thus we have a central problem when the figure of the child-in-peril and children's human rights are framed from a humanitarian viewpoint. As Hesford argues, humanitarian frameworks can serve as tools for distraction, focusing attention on the immediate emergency rather than the long-term, systemic patterns that cause the emergency. Humanitarian frameworks, in other words, can characterize a tragedy as an exception when it is the natural outgrowth of national and international policies. The major argument and illumination of Hesford's manuscript explore this central paradox: "how the iconic figure of the child-in-peril erases slow violence—the violence of the ordinary—from which the spectacle of the imperiled child emerges" (20).

Hesford's argument is applied to five rhetorical case studies, analyzing child refugees, child humanitarian celebrities, disabled African child soldiers, African American children and carceral systems, and transgender and intersex children. Drawing on the interdisciplinary work of new materialism, Hesford examines the child-in-peril figure using "material rhetoric," foregrounding "the material and discursive as co-constitutive" (22). Alongside material rhetoric, Hesford uses a genealogical approach, which "focuses on the discursive and material practices through which truths and nontruths or exceptions are constructed" (24). These two methodologies blend well together. In the classroom, professors could assign one of Hesford's case studies to understand her methodology and apply this material-genealogical approach to new scenarios. Readers interested in visual rhetoric and how images circulate in culture will find this book particularly illuminating.

The first chapter focuses on the mediation of child refugee images, from the Syrian civil war to the US-Mexico border, and how arguments build around images to elicit action, conveying the idea that a threshold has been crossed. Two iconic images this chapter analyzes include those of Omran Daqneesh and Alan Kurdi. Hesford points out how, for Syrians trying to flee by boat over the Mediterranean Sea, the sea is technically an option because it is a "free zone," and yet "states monitor navigation and control maritime resources" to such an extent that the journey becomes perilous (58). These images of refugee children-in-peril, mobilized to elicit humanitarian reactions, illustrate a fundamental contradiction: "turning the refugee crisis into a humanitarian matter fails to recognize the problem as a political crisis caused by geopolitics and by economic, legal, and environmental injustices on a global scale" (58). Well intentioned as it is, humanitarianism, according to Hesford, nevertheless places its subjects within a frame of passivity, always the victim in need of rescue and never the agent fighting for rights.

This first chapter also exemplifies an organizing structure Hesford uses throughout that eschews overly centralized, linear argumentation in favor of what she calls a "metastructure of juxtaposition," in which she places cases side-by-side and implicitly invites the reader to become an active interpreter of the texts (30). In this way, the book embodies its own argument insofar as it encourages interpretive agency over passivity. This juxtaposition structure leads to chapters with a wide variety of texts, such as the following in the first chapter alone: journalism, photography, speech, art

exhibition, documentary film, memoir, and poetry. Indeed, the juxtaposition structure is so effective at drawing in the reader, inviting analysis, that one feels compelled to pause and study the various examples. For example, after the concrete details of a memoir written by Tima Kurdi—Alan Kurdi’s aunt—the book juxtaposes a long excerpt from Khaled Hosseini’s *Sea Prayer*.

Inspired by Alan Kurdi’s story, the poem consists of a father’s words to his sleeping son the night before an attempted crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Hesford includes it to show both the limits and rhetorical power of humanitarian frameworks, as the poem poignantly portrays the father’s powerlessness, and yet reframes “denigrating taxonomies through the egalitarian ideal of universal humanity” (59). On closer inspection, the excerpt manifests this reframing in multiple ways. The poem declares the refugees’ precarity by dividing the space of the poem along two axes: the horizontal travel that means survival versus the narrator’s overriding thought of nature’s depths: “how deep the sea, / and how vast, how indifferent. / How powerless I am to protect you from it” (59). The system is set up to travel vertically—downward, to death—in a world where survival depends on the horizontal. Prayer becomes the one means of re-inscribing value in a space that devalues life, as the following line transitions the poem from thought to action in a one-line stanza: “All I can do is pray” (59). It’s as if this solitary line, amidst longer stanzas, embodies the sense of helplessness: a string of words lost amidst a sea of adversity. He prays that “God steers the vessel true” when the boat is far from land “and we are a flyspeck / in the heaving waters, pitching and tilting” (59). He declares that his son Marwan is “precious cargo,” and prays “the sea knows this” (59). The clash of meaning between the words “flyspeck” and “precious” further illustrates the radically divergent value systems between his petitionary prayer and the material realities of the sea crossing. There’s a glimmer of hope as the poem embraces the collective pronoun “we”—as if they are going to make it out alive—but quickly fragments into “you” and “I” with the jarring disparity between the words “precious” and “cargo.” “Cargo” is an objectifying word, a nod to the larger political and economic forces that created the situation. This is a poem that starkly dramatizes the power differences that lie at the heart of the book. By ending the poem with a line earnestly praying that “the sea knows this” (i.e. how precious Marwan is), the paternal narrator implies that the poem is working in two frames: the sea is both the materially specific Mediterranean Sea and also a stand-in for any reader who likewise must be converted—via the humanitarian framework—from indifference to knowledge. In his prayer, the sea transforms from a chaotic other to an entity capable of grasping the value of human life. The tragedy is that we already know how the story ends.

Throughout the rest of the book, each case study attentively elaborates—in examples just as striking as the preceding poem—upon the contrast between humanitarian and human rights frameworks. The second chapter shows how women impacted by Islamic terrorism, such as Malala Yousafzai, are transformed from victims into politically passive humanitarian celebrities. Hesford contends that media’s focus on these exceptional female figures commodifies them in the end, and this commercialization acts as a smokescreen for the political situation causing suffering in the first place.

According to Hesford, “media, government, and corporate stakeholders have tamed Malala’s rhetoric by translating her resistance into stock neoliberal narratives of girl empowerment” (99). The third chapter, focusing on disabled African child soldiers, argues that an international focus on human rights violations distracts from domestic violations. Hesford shows how the resilience of child amputees becomes a useful narrative allowing the powerful to once again frame “systemic problems and injustices as isolated emergencies” (132). This chapter focuses in particular on the prosthesis, which becomes more than the physicality of a limb replacement, and more of a symbol of humanitarianism’s politically neutralizing intervention. As Hesford writes, “within the neoliberal humanitarian imaginary, the Sierra Leone child amputee’s lost limb is configured as a ‘negative space, a space of absence’ that calls for the presence and ‘gifting’ of Western humanity and futurity” (123-124).

The fourth chapter analyzes how racialized state violence places African American children outside the category of child. Think Trayvon Martin and the way, as his story circulated through the media, his identity narrowed such that he was denied “the legal status of child” (154). As Hesford elaborates, “Focusing on humanitarian negations of the human rights of Black children and the consequences of these negations for Black communities in the US, this chapter exposes the political limitations of the humanitarian paradigm of human rights recognition for addressing systemic inequities arising from racial capitalism” (140). The fifth chapter examines how humanitarianism frames queer children’s rights as “exceptional, even when the circumstances that condition these rights violations are systemic and everyday” (172). Analyzing three documentary films—*Growing Up Coy* (2016), *Getting Out* (2011), and *She’s Not a Boy* (2019)—to better understand the withholding of children’s rights, Hesford analyzes what she calls “the optics of *queer liminality*” (171). This term refers to “the in-between spaces and identities that challenge the stability of the heteronormative gender binaries that undergird the tolerance threshold and its figuration of the child-in-peril” (171).

Overall, these five case studies capture the dynamism of intersecting power structures as images circulate through culture, positioned by different entities for different ends. Although primarily useful for rhetoric, communication, and human rights scholars, Hesford’s materialist methodology and wide range of case studies make the book valuable for community-engaged writing studies scholars and other scholarly approaches, such as feminist, disability, childhood, literacy, and literary studies.