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Refugees, Narratives, or How To Do Bad Things with Words

"How odd I can have all this inside me and to you it's just words."

— David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*

ABSTRACT. This paper addresses and critiques the anti-refugee rhetoric and policies, as well as their uncritical uptake, which developed around the candidacy of Donald Trump. My intent is to examine some of this election's cruelest, most violent, and most racist rhetoric, reserved for Syrian (and other) refugees, and to consider some possible responses to such speech in the future. To that end, I problematize the representations and treatment of refugees within the United States from three distinct groups: European Jewish refugees of the Second World War; the Eastern Bloc refugees of the mid- and late twentieth century; and the current Syrian, largely Muslim refugees. I begin by defining the concepts of homelessness and moral luck. Second, I examine the three varying histories of refugee policies in the context of these two notions. Finally, I conclude with a combination of despair and hope: First, I offer a few observations about the role of language in the recent presidential election; second, I propose alternatives to the resulting linguistic and political violence by extending Hilde Lindemann's notion of "holding" into sociopolitical contexts.

I.   INTRODUCTION

The American election of 2016 was, in its vitriol, polarization, and outcome, unlike any in recent memory. This paper addresses and critiques the anti-refugee rhetoric and policies, as well as their uncritical uptake, which developed around the candidacy of Donald Trump. My intent is to examine and confront the fact that some of this election cycle's cruelest, most violent, and most racist rhetoric was reserved for Syrian (and other) refugees, and to consider some possible responses to such speech in the future. This anti-refugee rhetoric, I suggest, both contributed decisively to Donald Trump's victory and created potentially lasting toxic, nativist narratives about who matters and who does not; about who gets to survive, and whose survival is doubtful at best. And before we simply answer that American (and more generally Global North) refugee policies, and Americans (and more broadly Westerners) themselves, have simply always tended toward isolationism and suspicion of the outsider, I argue that we ought to consider that historically, there were notable exceptions to this rule. I examine the checkered history of refugee-related policies, and contrast and problematize the representations, perceptions, and treatment of refugees within the United States (and in a more limited way, Western Europe) from three distinct groups: European Jewish refugees of the Second World War era fleeing Nazi invasion; the Eastern Bloc refugees of the mid- and late twentieth century fleeing Soviet totalitarianism and anti-Semitism; and the current Syrian, largely Muslim refugees fleeing war, poverty, and other oppressions. And while the paper emphasizes public, political speech, my motivations are also personal: My own experiences as a Soviet refugee, and as a beneficiary of politically motivated American openness to the refugees of my generation, move me to problematize the distinctions between the political narratives that shaped my own flight and those developing presently. This is a paper, then, that insists that we pay closer attention to how and why the powerful nations of the Global North create, shape, and undo the identities—indeed,

the *lives*—of refugees through historically situated public narratives that in turn create policies often determining nothing less than life or death.

By "refugee," I mean, broadly, people who are directly or indirectly forced to flee their homes with no reasonable prospects of returning in the foreseeable future. In this, I am largely following Michael Walzer, who argued that refugees differ from immigrants in general because of the moral dimension of their claims. Refugees, he writes, "make the most forceful claim for admission. 'If you don't take me in,' they say, 'I shall be killed, persecuted, brutally oppressed by the rulers of my own country'" (Walzer 2008, 163, quoted in Parekh 2013). These are people whose moral claims "cannot be met by yielding territory or exporting wealth, but only by taking people in" (Walzer 2008, 48, quoted in Parekh 2016). I am also following the definitions established in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which (together with its 1967 amendment) states that refugees are persons outside their country of origin because of a "well-founded fear of persecution" at home, and to whom the host state is obligated to offer asylum. Refugees cannot be sent back to a place where their lives or freedom would be at risk from persecution (UK Refugee Council 2001). Refugees, then, are fundamentally "homeless" people whose legitimate moral claims can be met only by admission to a state—to a new home.

Because so many narratives about refugees touch upon broad notions of home, this is also a paper about homelessness. By that, I mean the kind of estrangement that disempowers and denies the moral worth of those who are not storied as claim-makers against others. I say "storied" because I take the differences in the rhetoric of how the various groups of refugees are defined to be both identity-constituting *and* born of historical accidents, circumstances, and socio-political climates that have little to do with the actions or agency of the migrants themselves. In other words, how refugees are viewed, how their moral agency is construed, have

a lot to do with moral luck: the blaming or praising of agents who possess little or no control over an action or its outcome.

Yet American policymakers and the media held wildly differing attitudes toward three groups of oppressed people: World War II-era European Jewish refugees were regarded as potentially dangerous and "other"; Russian Jewish refugees of the 1970s–1980s were held as courageous and defiant; and the current generations of Syrian and other Muslim refugees, in an era marked by a "war on terror," are painted as morally suspect and dangerous. This, then, is a paper about the power of moral luck to create and undo personhood, for it is the luck inherent in the vicissitudes of history that can constitute existentially-perilous public narratives about those least empowered to formulate or control them. I claim that by challenging the dangerous certainties of the current Western sociopolitical rhetoric about refugees, we might generate new narratives, and thus new policies, which may move us toward helping vulnerable populations not merely survive, but find some measure of belonging, well-being, and agency.

The paper is composed of three parts. I begin by briefly defining the concepts of homelessness and moral luck. Second, I examine the three varying histories of refugee policies in the context of these two notions. I argue that an existential, as well as a sociopolitical, homelessness that robs refugees not only of a sense of physical and psychological security, but of a sense of themselves as persons, is very much a matter of luck (good or bad). I suggest that because the narratives employed by those empowered to shape the fates of the refugees have shown to be powerful creators of not only public attitudes but of outcome-determinative policies, the historical contingencies that seem to govern these responses ought to be made clear. Finally, I conclude with a combination of despair and hope: First, I offer a few observations about the role of language in the recent American presidential election; second, I propose alternatives to

the verbal and political violence designed to exclude by extending Hilde Lindemann's notion of "holding" into sociopolitical contexts.

II.   HOMELESSNESS AND MORAL LUCK

a.   Homelessness

I began by noting that refugees are fundamentally homeless. While this might seem like an obvious claim to make, I want to clarify what I specifically mean by homelessness here. For this, I turn to Hannah Arendt.

Arendt observed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that citizenship (a kind of a social, political, and emotional home) uniquely grants to human beings the "right to have rights"—that it is a prolegomenon to any other discourses about state membership. Homeless, stateless persons, however, are different: they are not merely home-less in the sense of not having a place to call their own, but in the sense of not having the right to demand it (Arendt 1968). In other words, they have lost the possibility of making a claim on others for an opportunity to regain a home.

This loss of claim-making is crucial: Refugees are not only fleeing violence and persecution, but socioeconomic deprivation, racism, sociopolitical ostracism, and many other barriers to a minimally acceptable existence. Thus, even before they are relegated to the status of non-citizens, they are already one step removed from being fully at home in the land of their origin. Being thus estranged from their home in ways that are independently de-centering and destructive, they are unable to begin again. The rejection by their intended destination is thus not merely social or political—in losing their home without regaining one, they lose their story. And the closing of the door that they hoped would be open also destroys the hope that the story could

continue. The self becomes the self-in-exile—physical, emotional, psychological, political, without a reasonable possibility of rebuilding.

Thus, homelessness can be understood as a kind of liminality, a state of permanent non-belonging. One is no longer of a rejecting place of origin, and one is not of any other place, either. What remains is an unending process of transition, where uprootedness is a permanent condition. The homelessness of today's Syrian refugee, therefore, is twofold: First, there is the loss of one's home and one's identity as a rightful citizen—a rightful member—of one's community of origin. Second, there is the lack of any reasonable ground on which to re-build one's new identity. Thus, the newly homeless, stateless refugee has lost access to her familiar moral and political spaces in which her agency was once enacted and granted uptake without replacing it even with an ersatz home. In this way, these refugees are liminal not necessarily in

> that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion…but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. . . . They are deprived, not of the right to freedom, but of the right to action; not of the right to think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion. (Arendt 1968, 295–296)

This pariah-like status not only places these newest refugees in physical danger, but also does something else: it renders them homeless in that deep Arendtian sense of being deprived of an appeal—of being existentially disowned not just by a particular nation-state, but by the global community itself.

b.   *Moral Luck*

Refugee homelessness does not happen in a moral and political vacuum. Sometimes, one's mere presence in particular circumstances tragically seals one's fate. I will now consider what this means for refugees, both lucky and unlucky.

People can be lucky, and their luck can also run out due to factors beyond their control. One person trips over a curb while walking and texting, landing on a small child, while another, engaged in exactly the same activity, happens to lift her foot a quarter of an inch higher, thereby stepping over the curb and avoiding harm. And seemingly counter to a Kantian ethic of an unconditioned will, we judge the former harshly, while letting the latter go without much note. When we are speaking of moral luck, then, we usually mean that a particular set of circumstances, one's luck, makes a difference in how we perceive, and evaluate, one's actions—how one is viewed as a person. Thus even though our intuitions might suggest that (good or bad) moral luck ought not make a difference in our judgments of how good, blameworthy, or responsible a person is, the phenomenon of moral luck suggests that it indeed does. Nothing less than a person's moral standing rides on the presence or absence of such luck (Williams 1982; Nagel 1993).

But moral luck does not occur in an epistemic or social void, and those whose lives are affected by its vagaries are already located in circumstances that make such luck more or less likely. Or, put more simply, moral luck has a lot to do with what agents can, and cannot, control—and not all agents are situated in the same way in regard to levels of control. As Margaret Walker has noted, when we are talking about moral luck, what we really mean is that our "responsibilities" have "outrun [our] control" (Walker 1991, 247). That is, regardless of our actions and intent, we might still nevertheless be held responsible. Claudia Card, in *The Unnatural Lottery*, noted that all human beings are vulnerable to moral luck, and the role that

moral luck plays in the options available to oppressed moral agents might leave them only with bad ones (Card 1996). Lisa Tessman, in part adopting Card's account, offers another conception of moral luck: "systemic" luck that comes from "circumstances that are systematically arranged and that tend to affect people as members of social groups" (Tessman 2005, 13). In this way, "systemic" luck is distinguished from "natural" or "accidental" luck (Tessman 2005). For my purposes here, I build on Tessman's distinction within the broader moral luck paradigm between "systemic luck" and that which is non-systemic or accidental.

I call my version of Tessman's systemic luck *refugee systemic luck*. This turn to systemic luck as a way to talk about the moral luck of refugees might at first seem odd: After all, if one of my contentions is that refugees are precisely not in control of the *unpredictable* circumstances that determine their fates, why would I rely on a conception of moral luck that is grounded in an idea of systemic social arrangements that are not at all accidental?

The short answer is that the deepest sense of unpredictability and historical accident of their circumstances is experienced by the refugees as an already-oppressed class of people. From their perspective, the chances of success of escape might very well seem to be more like the vagaries of the weather: some get a storm, and some get fair skies. But there is also the other side of the equation—the systemic one. The fate of the refugees has to do with the actions of those empowered to help or to reject them. That is, my claim is that refugee systemic luck traps refugees in a two-tiered system of oppression: While an unpredictable and uncontrollable bad-luck force acts on an already-oppressed people by making their flight existentially necessary, a more systematically and deliberately enacted luck-making one takes over once they are homeless and stranded between an impossible home and an uncertain future.

This second force is the socio–political and economic circumstances of their intended destination, and how it reacts to its own circumstances. What this means is that on the one hand, no nation to which the refugees flee can be said to systematically arrange and control *every* policy (for they inevitably inherit the domestic and foreign policies of their predecessors). On the other, these (usually Western, more well-off) nations do have agential control over how they approach the historical circumstances that they have been dealt. And it is in how they respond to the political and moral dilemmas before them that these leaders and government representatives create the systemic luck of those whose lives are bound by their decisions.

Thus, refugee systemic luck can be understood in two steps: First, the refugees are thrown into historical, geopolitical circumstances not of their choosing. Second, they must contend with the actions and the powerful master narratives of those who may, or may not, offer them asylum. A system of luck is thus created: some refugees are storied as undeserving and unwanted, and thus experience refugee homelessness via systemic (bad) luck; others are storied as wanted and deserving, and thus can begin again via refugee systemic (good) luck. I argue in the final section of this paper that other choices and responses to the refugee's needs are possible. I now turn to a consideration of what this refugee systemic luck looks like in practice.

III.   "MODEL" REFUGEES

Part of my argument about the relationship between moral luck, public narratives, and the fate of refugees is predicated on the claim that some refugees, such as the Soviet Jews of the 1960s–1980s, were model refugees— "model" not only in the sense of being (mostly) well-educated, European, and ready to assimilate, but also in the sense of being wanted by their intended destinations. My point, however, is not to make a blanket statement about particular

ethnicities, educational levels, or faiths as being outcome-determinative. Instead, I take the happenstance of one's historical moment to be at the heart of the presence or absence of one's moral luck.

What follows is a reminder that a lack of moral luck has worked against a population very similar to the one that was welcomed decades later. Just before (and certainly after) the outbreak of World War II, it became increasingly difficult for (mostly Jewish) refugees fleeing Nazi persecution to leave: the combination of fewer passenger liners crossing the Atlantic Ocean, SS-generated prohibitions, capricious, expensive, and complicated visa requirements, and other barriers stood in the way of European Jewry's escape westward, and away from the growing Nazi threat (Lind 2017). Moreover, fearing the possibility of Nazi spies and saboteurs who could pose as refugees, the American State Department put great pressure on its diplomatic consuls in Europe to screen potential refugees carefully, and to reaffirm strict admission quotas, especially from southern and eastern Europe. Add to this fear of sabotage ongoing anti-Semitism and the generally isolationist, xenophobic posture of the United States, and a picture emerges of a nation that was neither willing nor ready to receive the tens of thousands desperately attempting to flee a nightmare (US Holocaust Museum 2017).

But this is how refugee systemic luck works. Given the background politico–historical conditions, the public messages of those in power were getting through: In July of 1938, *Fortune* magazine asked its readers whether European refugees should be allowed to come to the United States. Fewer than 5 percent of Americans surveyed believed that the United States should raise its immigration quotas or encourage political refugees fleeing fascist states in Europe (Tharoor 2015). Two-thirds of the respondents agreed with the proposition that "we should try to keep them out" (Tharoor 2015). Similarly, a 1938 article in the *Daily Mail* warned of "German Jews

Pouring into This Country." It began with: "The way stateless Jews and Germans are pouring in from every port of this country is becoming an outrage" (Tharoor 2015). The people were clearly listening.

But that was another time, with differing domestic and international political priorities, bringing with them different fears, different alliances—and different narratives about who was deserving of rescue and who was just an "ugly" refugee. When, decades later, the descendants of those European Jews again turned toward the West for asylum, a very different narrative shaped their flight. With the Cold War at its apex, images and articles depicting the flight of the persecuted Russian Jewry appeared in the Western press on a regular basis, storying them as defiant of a failed social system, of a failed economy, as well as of political and cultural totalitarianism—and most importantly, of an unrelenting, cruel anti-Semitism. Calls for support of the newly arrived and wanted citizens-to-be were loud and growing throughout the 1970s and 1980s, especially in the United States (Beckerman 2010). This was, of course, not universal, as anti-Semitism and general xenophobia were a part of the general background hum of the Western world. But, importantly, this anti-Semitism and xenophobia were not a part of the *official* master narratives about Soviet refugees: the stories heard on the radio, seen on television, and printed in most major newspapers set both the tone, and the policies, of collective openness. Officially, these refugees were welcome from the frozen totalitarianism of the Soviet gulag, and American policymakers and the media storied them as the educated, the intellectual, the courageous. And for most of these new refugees, that was enough to begin again.

And here is where the other side of refugee systemic luck—the good kind—began to gain momentum. The conservative political advisor, consultant, and Senator Henry Jackson's staffer, Richard Perle, noted in an interview that Jackson, as a co-sponsor of the refugee-friendly

Jackson-Vanik Amendment, viewed the right to leave and to find a new home as a singularly important and powerful human right: "if people could vote with their feet, governments would have to acknowledge that and governments would have to make for their citizens a life that would keep them there" (PBS 2002).

This public narrative of political—and, crucially, moral—rights of refugees was echoed in 1989, when the U.S. Congress passed the Lautenberg Amendment, classifying Soviet Jews and certain other religious communities as persecuted groups, qualifying them for refugee status, and thereby opening the doors over the next decade or so to increasing number of Russian–Jewish refugees, bringing as many as 25,000 individuals a year to New York alone—with some measure of public approval (Rosenberg 2015). When in the 1970s and 1980s the news broadcasts in the West began to be filled with stories about Soviet "refuseniks," the very public messages about the oppression of religious beliefs, as well as of the threat to Western-oriented intelligentsia, predominated as a narrative of the West's moral responsibility to offer safe harbor (Beckerman 2010). Indeed,

> "[s]ince the mid-1970s, a number of programs were adopted by Congress to encourage the smooth adjustment of refugees from . . . the former Soviet Union. The most important of these was the Refugee Act of 1980 [reauthorized in 1991]. This legislation was intended to provide transitional assistance to refugees in the United States, and assist them with, among other things, job training and placement, as well as English language training and cash assistance." (Bruno 2011)

Thus, American policymakers found it politically advantageous to challenge the Soviet Union both culturally and geopolitically by targeting their most public political critiques and

actions at what they viewed as the soft, vulnerable underbelly of the Soviet machine—its human rights record, and in particular, its longstanding record of anti-Semitism and the persecution of both religious and intellectual communities. In this way, by encouraging Soviet refugees, they were able to accomplish two simultaneous goals: to (less publicly) maneuver their central Cold War foe politically and economically, while (quite publicly) doing so under the umbrella of human rights pressure, mobilizing national (and world-wide) sympathies for the beleaguered Soviet Jewry, which could now be rescued by the United States and its allies. This acceptance of refugees from the Eastern Bloc would not only demonstrate the failure of communism, but it would do so by painting those seeking to leave it as heroic, and those taking them in as morally righteous (Beckerman 2010).

And it worked. Families such as my own were assisted not only by the federal legislation, but by those who heard and responded to the call for refugee assistance: local groups of assimilated refugees and American citizens organized to help new arrivals, assisting them with finding homes, helping them with the language and cultural norms, and so on. Newspaper columns, editorials, entire books were written about the process of welcoming those fleeing totalitarian oppression in the East. And the American public, always historically suspicious of newcomers, generally made an exception for those who were storied as communism-defying, freedom-seeking, educated—and white—families, seeking only to plant new roots in the quest for the American Dream. No longer crypto-spies, German agents, or "ugly" foreigners, these refugees were publicly, repeatedly storied as objects of sympathy, empathy, and support—of enormous systemic luck. Although not having much personal control over their circumstances, these refugees happened to find themselves in a historical moment when their needs matched those of powerful systems that were themselves neither natural nor accidental. Approvingly

narrated by Western socio–political forces, these particular refugees were favored as useful agents of the West's growing dominance over the East. And it is out of this luck—this tremendous, unearned luck of being a convenient "humanitarian" pawn—that my family, and so many others, found a way to a home out of the homelessness and darkness of political flight. But these favorable narrative winds can also be capricious.

IV.   NEW REFUGEES, NEW STORIES

This pro-refugee narrative is largely absent for the current generation of Syrian refugees. Since the 2011 civil war began, an estimated 11 million desperate Syrians have fled their homes, and about 13.5 million are in need of assistance (Syrian Refugees 2016). As more Syrians are forced to flee war, terror, hunger, and other disasters, wrought in no small part by the lethal combination of religious extremism and wars of economic and geopolitical advantage, the Global North has taken a dramatically different attitude toward their needs. Austria passed tougher asylum laws, allowing itself to declare a state of emergency if refugee numbers "threaten public order" or overwhelm public institutions. The Austrian media reported that the government was planning to build a fence at its border with Italy for protection in the event of rising migrant numbers (BBC 2016). And though the former Prime Minister of Great Britain, David Cameron, argued for a "moral responsibility" to welcome Syrian refugees, he quickly announced that the U.K could accept only 20,000 over a five-year period (Wintour 2015). Cameron's flagging support of the refugees was, however, not sufficiently meager for the anti-immigration U.K. Independence Party, whose leader, Nigel Farage, unleashed a lengthy public campaign of openly racist speeches, written commentary, and ads designed to frighten the British public and turn them against the "hordes" of Muslims about to land on their shores.

The infamous Brexit vote that followed was spurred largely by anti-immigrant and anti-refugee narratives. In fact, an overwhelming number of Britons who voted for Brexit did so in response to the anti-refugee messaging prevalent in the media, the political sphere, and elsewhere (Forster 2016). Not surprisingly, incidents of violence against immigrants and refugees have risen significantly following the Brexit vote (Forster 2016). Even in Germany, which opened its borders to more than a million refugees, mostly from Syria and Iraq, relying on its *Wilkommenskultur* (welcoming culture) for national support, the welcome has been noticeably eroding as support for extreme right-wing anti-immigration groups such as Pegida and the Eurosceptic Alternative für Deutschland party has increased, with violent nationalist-led confrontations on the rise (McCarthy 2015). In fact, 2016 saw the German parliament pass laws forcing Syrian refugees who are not "personally persecuted" to wait two years to even begin their application process to bring their families to Europe. The phrase "national suicide" has been repeated by large numbers of influential European nationalists when discussing the crisis (Brown 2015).

But perhaps nowhere has bad systemic luck been put into practice as successfully, with the official endorsement of a general election, as in the United States. From casual anti-refugee sentiment, to the gubernatorial resistance to allowing the crossing of state boundaries, to the unabashed racism and xenophobia of Donald Trump, many narratives painted this new generation of refugees as a feared and unwanted "other." And despite calls for tolerance and compassion, much louder, shriller voices told frightening tales of the "Islamization of America"; about thousands of terrorists "sneaking through" the immigration process; about the establishment of "Sharia Law" and the disappearance of jobs and opportunities for "real Americans," and so on (Steinback 2011).

For example, *American Thinker* declared that the United States was "Expediting National Suicide with 'Refugees'" (SPLC 2015). When the Obama administration announced plans to resettle an additional 10,000 Syrian refugees within the next fiscal year, the organizing Islamophobic movements reacted angrily:

> Pamela Geller, head of the anti-Muslim hate group American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI), called the announcement a Trojan horse, writing on her website, "The Islamic State threatened to send half a million Muslim migrants to Europe as a "weapon" against the West. Obama is bringing them here." (SPLC 2015)

Ann Corcoran, founder of the anti-refugee and anti-Muslim website "Refugee Resettlement Watch" has similarly called the Obama administration's policies a part of the "human rights industrial complex" and claimed that the "mostly Muslim" refugees are "many more than most Americans want to take care of" (SPLC 2015). Meanwhile, "Numbers USA," the largest grassroots anti-immigrant and anti-refugee group in the country, called for a ban on Syrian refugee relocation to the U.S., insisting that "the risk is simply too great" (SPLC 2015). Compare this to the American press in November of 1976, when *The Washington Post* focused the public's attention on Soviet human rights abuses and argued for the necessity of helping those trying to flee; the *Los Angeles Times* ran five such stories; and in 1977, the *New York Times* ran fifty-eight stories addressing the plight of Soviet dissidents (Beckerman 2010).

This national battle cry against the threat of the other was heard, granted uptake, and reproduced in the smallest of towns: In Twin Falls, Idaho, anti-refugee activists targeted refugee centers and loudly opposed the relocation of refugees, repeating what they have heard: that most refugees entering the U.S. are Islamic extremists. Even before the relocation process was to

begin, the House and Senate Judiciary Committees planned hearings on the national security "threat" Syrian refugees pose:

> [i]t took about a day and a half for Republican politicians to move from "What happened in Paris was awful!" through "Barack Obama is weak on evildoers!" to "Terrorist foreigners are coming to kill your children!" . . . 26 Republican governors . . . have said publicly that they oppose bringing Syrian refugees to their states, with most saying they'd refuse to accept them. . . . Meanwhile, every major GOP presidential candidate has come out against bringing Syrian refugees here, and Ted Cruz has introduced a bill to bar any Syrian refugees from settling in the United States. (Waldman 2015)

These narratives—these voices—had their effect. The current generations of refugees face the barriers of an historical American moment particularly drenched in xenophobic, anti-Muslim sentiment, reified into policy that paints the least powerful as the vilest, the most dangerous, the most unwanted. And even if we grant that the current generations of politicians and other leaders perpetuating these master narratives cannot help but respond to what they take to be the dominant national zeitgeist, we can still wonder at the seeming readiness with which they give into the worst impulses and sentiments of their political base. The fact that this racist narrative of the "dangerous refugee" succeeded even though not *all* prominent persons participated is, first, demonstrative of the need for a more focused, cohesive, and powerful response by those empowered to shape the national anti-racist counternarratives; second, it is demonstrative of the power of strategically wielded public narrative itself. It is an object lesson in how to do very bad things with effectively deployed words.

So, words and contexts matter—that much seems clear. But Trump's 2016 victory is odd for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the lack of his own conservative bone fides. That is, while the majority of those engaging in racist, oppressive narratives were not only historically well-positioned to do so, but were already of a certain public stature that would lend immediate credence to their political views, Trump was not necessarily included in this "vetted" circle. This raises two questions: First, to what extent is Trump's victory predicated on narrative prestidigitation? Second, what do we do about this power of public speech—especially when its content and manner hold the fates of those less powerful in the balance? The last section of this paper offers some possible answers.

V.   HOLDING AS A POLITICAL ACT

While polls have shown that many Americans echoed vague suspicions of Islam and of refugees more generally, when they heard Donald Trump as Presidential candidate loudly calling for "extreme vetting" of foreigners, they listened (Kahn 2017). And enough of them liked what they heard when Trump declared:

> I can look at their [Syrian refugee children's] faces and say, Look, you can't come here. . . . Their parents should always stay with them. But we don't know where their parents come from. We have no documentation whatsoever. . . . There's absolutely no way of saying where these people come from. (Allen and Sherlock 2016)

But consider that for most of his pre-presidential career, Trump was neither a consistent Republican, nor a "true" conservative. He supported universal health care, additional tax on the super-wealthy—he even claimed to "love" Hillary Clinton (Schwarz 2015)! His run for President

as a Republican was in many ways an odd move: questions about whether he was genuinely reflective of the increasingly-right, anti-foreigner Republic Party was a central one of the 2016 electoral season. And so Trump chose to re-create himself in an act of legerdemain that might very well be studied by political scientists for decades to come. In order to rid himself of every left-signaling shibboleth, certain drastic narrative re-alignments had to take place—certain words needed to be uttered, and certain stories spun (Tierney 2016). Knowing where "his people" were in relation to their views on refugees was key—and tapping into the suspicions, the Islamophobia, and the fear required repeated, public calls to reject, to deny, to label, to hate. More than others. Louder than others. Most importantly, more "genuinely" than others. Not only did Trump signal to his voters that he was on their side, but that he has always been there, creating what psychologists call "cognitive consistency" for his supporters (Tierney 2016). Importantly, "[w]hat Trump has discovered was that to win the GOP nomination, it's not enough to attack the Democrats. He must speak the unspeakable" (Tierney 2016). In this case, the "unspeakable" was nothing short of dehumanization of the Muslim refugee. And in order to assume this position of the master narrator of anti-refugee messages, Trump had to be a convincing mimic: Trying to reflect, and increase, the existing anti-refugee sentiment, he gave official, eventually Presidential, voice to messages of suspicion, otherness, and exclusion.[1]

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[1] Compare Trump's rhetoric with that of Cold War-era Vice President George Bush, echoing Ronald Reagan's Berlin Wall demands: "Let's see not five or six or 10 or 20 refuseniks released at a time, but thousands, tens of thousands. Mr. Gorbachev, let these people go!" (Beckerman 2010, 526).

Thus, Trump turned his extreme anti-refugee rhetoric into a transgressive discursive act by construing Muslim refugees in a way that othered them as no traditional Republican candidate was able to do. Through his words—from his campaign promises to single Muslims out for "extreme vetting," to the executive order banning immigrants and refugees from majority-Muslim nations, to his repeated mantras that what is to be feared the most from desperate refugees is "radical Islamic terrorism"—what emerges is a creation of a subclass of people who are simply not deserving of basic human compassion, assistance, or refuge. And through these words, Syrian and other Muslim refugees encounter the worst of refugee systemic luck: more than finding themselves thrown into socio–political circumstances over which they have no control, and more than being storied as dangerous interlopers by those empowered to make policy, they have become victimized by a new kind of demagoguery—the rhetoric of a political outsider who desperately desired to be the ultimate insider. With not much expertise or credibility behind him, Trump relied on his anti-refugee words and posturing to not merely capture the imagination of his intended audiences, but to win them over completely as the genuine article, the only one truly concerned about American safety. And through his narratives, he determined, and continues to determine, refugee fates by publicly destroying their moral and political personhood—their identities themselves.

So what is to be done? Let's turn once again to narratives and identities. The idea that one's identity is largely shaped and defined by others is one that is familiar to narrative ethicists, bioethicists, and others (Gotlib 2015; Charon and Montello 2002; Lindemann 2001; Eakin 1999; Frank 1997). Hilde Lindemann (2001) has argued that our personal identity is largely a function of the first-personal stories we tell others about ourselves in combination with the third-personal stories others tell about us, or include us as participants in the stories of others. These stories

constitute us as moral agents who are held responsible, who can hold others responsible, and who engage in practices that allow us to become a part of a universe of mutual moral understandings with other such agents (Walker 1997). In other words, through stories, we become precisely the kinds of people that moral theorists take to be central to questions of moral judgment and accountability. And although my intention here is not to offer a defense of narrative as an approach to normativity, I do want to suggest that a narrative approach to identity makes both theoretical and practical sense if what one wishes to do is to examine morality as a real-time practice: theoretical, because of the serious explanatory gaps and epistemic weaknesses of top-down, hierarchical moral theories; practical, because if we are interested in the questions of how we understand and address the oppressions of actual refugees in real-life dilemmas, we must engage with their lived realities (Lindemann 2001). My claim, then, is grounded in the idea that we are natural storytellers, and that this storytelling is a fundamental part of how we create, (mis)understand, and destroy each other. Thus, if we are to challenge the destructive narratives of the anti-refugee movement, it will have to be with other, better narratives.

But we would first need to grant that if identities are narratively constructed, the consequences are not only interpersonal and moral, but political and public. Stories that are shared about one as a political subject are told not just by individuals or groups, but by institutions, organizations, nations. This political self is then situated not only in the universe of normative judgments, but also in the social and political sphere of policy and law. The self is thus located not only within narratives about who she is as a person, a friend, a daughter, or so many other matrices of personal identity, but also within stories of who she is as a citizen, a rights-claimant, a participant in political and socio-economic institutions.

One's political identity, one's political self, can be said to delineate which political roles one can, and cannot, occupy; to what kinds of treatments one might be subjected; whether one's narratives about what one deserves receive social uptake; whether one can choose one's communities of belonging. And these narrative practices are deeply political not only because they create identities—citizens, non-citizens, refugees, illegal aliens, the wanted, the unwanted—but because they reify them with policies that can be nothing short of weaponized instruments of identity-assassination, where the only intelligible narrative about a disfavored group is that of "other." And what is not said also matters: when Donald Trump fails to refer to refugees as fellow human beings, what remains between the lines of his narrative is heard clearly by the audience—these are not only dangerous hordes, but as persons, they do not matter.

I hope that the direction of this argument is clear: the master narratives that shaped, and are shaping, the experiences and fates of different sets of refugees call for, among other things, narratively-based responses. European Jews were denied rescue. Soviet Jewish refugees saw a door open. Syrian refugees have heard too many of them shut.

I suggest that the beginning of a narrative response starts with the idea of holding. What I mean by "holding" here is largely borrowed from Lindemann's 2014 book, *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities,* where she defends a view of the moral universe that is not only shared and relational, but where we are fundamentally dependent on the stories, attitudes, and actions of others for our flourishing (or its lack), for our ideas about who we are, and, importantly for our socio–moral position in that very universe. In fact, she notes that "[t]o have lived . . . as a person is to have taken my proper place in the social world that lets us make selves of each other" (Lindemann 2014, 159). Lindemann's central insight is that human beings cannot help but create and undo each other as persons, and that this process begins before birth

and does not end with death. It is this process that she calls "holding"—the moral practices of narrative recognition of, and response to, who someone is (Lindemann 2014). As holders and the held, we are constituted through webs of stories about what matters to us, about what our central characteristics are (or should be), about our relationships, commitments, experiences, and so on. It is the narrative tissue of these stories that shapes our personal identities not just as particular people, but as *kinds of persons*— "lesser" persons, or non-persons (Lindemann 2014).

I noted earlier that Trump's extreme anti-refugee rhetoric is a kind of *holding.* By this, I mean to suggest that Lindemann's concept of holding can be empowering and liberating, but also oppressive and dangerous as a *political* linguistic practice. Indeed, as Lynne Tirrell eloquently argues, this practice can be one of

> derogation . . . made up of many kinds of language games, which comprise many kinds of speech acts. These derogatory acts, games, and practices are repressive prima facie but even more, they produce a positive set of licenses and permissions which foster behaviors that both construct the positive identities of all parties to the games, and permit destructive actions which undermine the very logic of the game and practice. (Tirrell 2012, 216–217)

Through these stories—and by "stories" here, I am emphasizing expressly public narratives and speech acts directed at large audiences, designed to influence opinion and subsequent policies—vivid and outcome-determinative pictures are painted of who is wanted, who is unwanted, who is to be welcomed, and who is to be rejected and denied refuge. An aspect of Lindemann's earlier work (Lindemann 2001) is especially useful here. Her emphasis on the power, and the effects, of master narratives clarifies what holding can do: It not only matters *that* one is held, but it matters how, by whom, and under what circumstances. Practices of holding by

individuals with relatively little sociopolitical power and influence might not be as identity-constituting, or as outcome-determinative for the held—some kinds of holding are simply not equal to others. But the narratives of those who engage with others on a massive scale can matter greatly simply by holding a group as inferior, dangerous, or alien.

A detailed and fully realized analysis of holding as a political counternarrative is beyond the scope of this paper—but I do want to conclude by moving in that direction. If we allow that public narratives about others can hold them in ways that increase their vulnerabilities, then how we hold them certainly ought not be a function of political expediency, party politics, or refugee moral luck. What this might mean in practice is a question complicated by the imbalances of power between the subject and the object, between the holder and the held. But what seems to be a not impossible set of initial moves includes first, paying and bringing attention to the kinds of speech and actions that are indicative of bad holding; second, understanding the significance of the historical and political contexts in which damaging narratives tend to occur, for it is far too tempting to view one's sociopolitical predicament as special, or as ahistorical; and third, de-weaponizing certain at-risk identities by responding to oppressive, and often existentially-threatening, public speech with public counternarratives of holding well, of holding in ways that contribute to personhood rather than destroy it.

This might include an increased amount of vigilance and responsiveness on all of our parts—to construct and to publicize counterstories about Syrian and other threatened refugees, and to push back on the pervasive narratives of terrorism, danger, and otherness. To call out those political and social leaders whose words can hold the most vulnerable so badly—or not at all—and to challenge their narratives on the grounds of the deep injustices born of bad moral luck. And even if we are somewhat successful, these leaders might be reminded that the refugees

they see as threats are fleeing horrors much like generations of refugees before them, and that the question of whether we open our doors ought not be a function of our own expediency or electoral politics.

Lindemann argues that narratives hold us by expressing and signaling who we take others, and ourselves, to be (Lindemann 2014). I have suggested that not only can this signaling be extended into the political realm, but it can, and should, be applied to groups—especially to those who are oppressed, threatened, or otherwise exposed to exploitation, isolation, and othering. To put it simply, we have to learn to do less damage with words, to recognize bad holding, and to take a stand when others do damage—especially the kind of damage that is only possible with public language wielded by powerful people. We have to do so urgently, given the role that moral luck can play in the lives of the vulnerable. Arendt tells us that "[w]e humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human (Arendt 1968, 24–25). And so it is imperative that we deepen and broaden our practices of humanization—of our politics, our words, ourselves. The other way lies the unthinkable.

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