

## 'Tinder Humanitarians'

The Moral Panic Around Representations of Old Relationships in New Media

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# “TINDER HUMANITARIANS”: THE MORAL PANIC AROUND REPRESENTATIONS OF OLD RELATIONSHIPS IN NEW MEDIA

Lisa Ann Richey

*According to the company website, Tinder is a mobile phone application for “friends, dates, relationships, and everything in between”. Cody Clarke, a writer and filmmaker, documents screenshots of photographs from the closed network of Tinder to publicly “out” users of the site who post photographs showing themselves in some “do-gooding” relationship that appears to take place in the South. Through the posting of a new photograph every day, the “Humanitarians of Tinder” Tumblr blog and Facebook page have generated a public discussion on the politics of representing suffering strangers in attempts to enhance the appeal of western image producers. This article will investigate the phenomenon of the Humanitarians of Tinder in order to understand its representations of North–South relations from the photographs themselves and from the debates held around them in new media and old. Critical development studies, media studies and sociology will provide an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to understand the moral panic that these Tinder humanitarians have created through posting private photographs of humanitarian performances to increase their personal desirability.*

**KEYWORDS** humanitarianism; new media; north-south relations; Tinder; Facebook; moral panic

## Introduction

According to the company website, Tinder is a mobile phone application for “friends, dates, relationships, and everything in between”.<sup>1</sup> While some consider the quick turn-around time of swiping through photographs of potential hook-ups to represent a particularly vulgar side of transactional interaction for sex, there is also a performance of humanitarianism that deserves scrutiny for the representations it presents and the engagement of the public in North–South relations. Popular media such as *The Atlantic* and *The Huffington Post* have derided these “humanitarians of Tinder”, as discovered through a blog on the popular social media site Tumblr and its linked Facebook page. Cody Clarke, a writer and filmmaker, documents screenshots of photographs from the closed network of Tinder to publicly “out” users of the site who post photographs showing themselves in some “do-gooding” relationship (Littler 2008) that appears to take place in the South. Through the posting of a new photograph every day, the page has generated what might be considered a “moral panic” over the use of distant Others posed with “white saviours” in selling the western self on a dating app. It has also sparked a public discussion on the politics of representing suffering strangers in service of Chouliaraki’s (2010) (post?)-humanitarian self. This article will analyse the images and texts as forms of political communication that perform interesting negotiations around identity in relation to proximate and distant Others.

Goldberg writes in the *Huffington Post* that “While it’s true that the volunteers on Tinder could be a little more humble about their advocacy work and may be painting themselves in a martyr light, we can’t completely fault them for showing off their selfless side.”<sup>2</sup> Yet this “selfless” demonstration through the Tinder profile has provoked significant controversy and back-talk. On a popular blog for travellers, Emily Westmoreland writes “An Open Letter to the Humanitarians of Tinder” which notes, among other critiques:

Cultural imperialism isn’t sexy. Relationships should be reciprocal: you shouldn’t be the only one left feeling good. I can’t help but wonder whether your presence had a lasting positive effect on the community you visited, and if not, why would I ever think you’d have a lasting positive effect on me? Voluntourism is selfish and short-sighted.<sup>3</sup>

Megan Garber, a staff writer for *The Atlantic* covering culture, wrote her own critical and artistically snarky poem “To the Humanitarians of Tinder: An Open Ode from Walt Whitman to the Dating Apps Do-Gooders” in which she interposes selections from Whitman’s “Song of Myself (1892 version)” with 10 of the photographs taken from Humanitarians of Tinder in which the faces of the central white subjects are blurred. The introduction to this work states:

Do not mock the humanitarians of Tinder. Do not resent them, or be horrified by them, or assume that the images they have posted to a proximity-based hookup app are specimens of white privilege or liberal guilt or thoughtless violation of the categorical imperative. Instead, celebrate the humanitarians of Tinder! Revel in the complexity they are attempting to bring to a smartphone-enabled dating culture whose sexual-economic logic is otherwise stark! Admire the layers of humanity these people are trying to bring to Tinder’s two-dimensional approach to romance!<sup>4</sup>

An early critique of the Humanitarians of Tinder appeared in *Nerve*, where the title—“Meet the Humanitarians of Tinder, Saving the world, One Dating Profile at a Time”—is a spoiler for the article that follows:<sup>5</sup> “Everyone wants to present themselves well on their dating profiles. It’s possible to go too far, though, and make a forced attempt to brand oneself as a younger, hotter Mother Theresa.” It begins with a lovely, thin young woman posing with her arms around two brown Asian girls, preceded by the introduction: “Starring that girl from college who spend a month in Ghana”. No mention is made of the disconnection between the photograph on one continent and the referent of the critical introduction to another. For critics of Tinder Humanitarianism, as for the photographs they are critiquing, a smooth global notion of do-gooding acts as an adhesive that pulls together even the most disparate things like a hook-up app and humanitarianism. This article will investigate the phenomenon of the Humanitarians of Tinder in order to understand its representations of North–South relations from the photographs themselves and from the debates held around them in new media and old. Critical development studies, media studies and sociology will provide a theoretical framework to understand the moral panic that these Tinder humanitarians have created through posting private photographs of humanitarian performances to increase their personal desirability.

## Theoretical Framework

While an online study of images from a location-based hook-up app may appear an unlikely site for improving our understandings of humanitarianism, I argue that these

representations need serious scrutiny as a manifestation of political values, as a performance of North–South relations and as potential sites of assemblages of solidarity (see Ong and Collier 2005). Mason’s (2016) study of Tinder draws on Berlant’s (1997) justification for studying “waste communication” in the public sphere, where citizenship is constructed through the “silliest, most banal, ... erratic logic” (Berlant 1997, 12 as quoted in Mason 2016, 3). Through a close examination of the social media engagement with “humanitarians of Tinder” and an exploratory online ethnography, this article will critically consider the claim of the smartphone dating app that “Tinder empowers users around the world to create new connections that otherwise might never have been possible.” This is a complex case analysing both the use of humanitarian photographs on the dating app Tinder and the critical assemblage of these photographs on Tumblr and Facebook.

To begin to understand the debates sparked by Tinder Humanitarians’ representations of old relationships in new media, I begin with thinking around “moral panic”. The concept of “moral panic” dates back to sociology of the mid-1960s when the symbolic interactionists developed theories of labelling (Becker 1963; Wilkins 1964). However, it was the development of the concept in relation to the amplification of deviance by the moral panic of the state through the media that brought the term “moral panic” into popular usage, and clarified the critical role of the media in the constitution of the panic and its reactions. Back in the mid-1990s, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) argued for a revision of the theory of moral panic and the social relations that construct it to recognise both the expansion of media and of public involvement in debate. Their revision of moral panic that emphasises both the role of the media, in this case, Tumblr and Facebook, and the increasing participation of the public, ranging from “comments” on Facebook to popular articles, is particularly useful. Yet the moral issues raised by this complex case of the Humanitarians of Tinder extend beyond the scope of creating “folk demons” of the Tinder users who share photographs in humanitarian poses. The images themselves raise questions around the politics of representation—who has the right to represent the Other and on what grounds and with what consent? They also provoke thinking around the intertextual references in the photographs themselves—why do these seem so familiar? Finally, the circulation of the images of the Humanitarians of Tinder between the semi-private platform of the dating app and the public platform with commenting of Facebook requires a consideration of the morality of public shaming as a political act.

Chouliaraki (2013) emphasises that humanitarian communication in the new media favours partial, personal readings as opposed to more objective, shared interpretations of humanitarian problems, and thus, is less effective at integrating audiences and providing a shared foundation for collective action. Therefore, critical scholarship must question the “optimists” who lead us to believe that globalisation and mediatization are permeating all corners of the globe and “networking” everyone, while leaving isolation, misunderstanding and callousness as part of a “pre-humanitarian” past (for a useful overview, see Robertson 2015). Simultaneously, argues Chouliaraki, the grand narratives of solidarity have been replaced by individualist projects. This is linked to changes in technology and new media forms where audiences in the North have become both producers and consumers of a public communication that obfuscates the distant Others.

In previous work, I have examined the ways in which humanitarian causes have been sold to northern consumer publics (Richey and Ponte 2011) and I draw on these understandings for the analysis of how we might think about the Humanitarians of Tinder. I focus on what Smith and Yanacopulos (2004) describe as the “public faces of development”

or what Scott (2014) groups as “media representations of development”—the various ways in which meanings and representations of the Global South are conveyed to northern publics. In this article, I will argue that the reception of the photographs in various media, both online and in traditional media, can be considered a new form of “moral panic”. In examining the social relations around the Humanitarians of Tinder and their media representations of the ensuing debate, I return to their revision of the classic theories of “moral panic”, but read this within the context of “post-humanitarianism” and the increasingly celebritised relationships of humanitarianism.

## Methodology

As a relatively new phenomenon, the dating app Tinder has not been a concern taken up by much serious research. However, there are two exceptions that are worth mentioning; the first is a journal article that uses a “theoretical analysis of Humanitarians of Tinder” as a platform for inquiry using racial erotics (“how racial power operates through sex”) (Mason 2016, 2). The article is based on theories of race and bodily exploitation; notably it studies the idea of Tinder Humanitarians, but not the actual images themselves or the content surrounding the posting of these images. The other academic analysis that is useful for this study is a master’s thesis in which Braziel (2015) actually conducted an ethnographic study with Tinder users and analysed the results. This thesis has been invaluable in understanding more about how people actually use Tinder, but does not include the Tinder Humanitarians in any way.

Initially, I too had planned to undertake an ethnographic study, because I believed that it could have been useful for understanding the reasons why Tinder users posted photographs of themselves as “humanitarians”. However, I did not actually undertake my own ethnographic study with Tinder users, because I am still thinking about how to ethically create a profile that would allow me to directly access and chat with users on the site. There are considerable ethical dilemmas involved in studying this phenomenon up close, such as whether young people in a relaxed environment of seeking hook-ups would be disrupted by a connection with a professor of international development studies seeking data. There are practical obstacles as well, because the average age of the Tinder Humanitarians in my sample was 26 years and thus my profile would be unlikely to be sorted by the Tinder algorithm into the same batch as my target respondents due to our differences in age. Therefore, for ethical as well as practical reasons, I have chosen to analyse only data that are already available in the public realm. Additionally, there is no risk that the research itself will expose previously private data to public critique.

I have collected three types of original data for this article. First, I downloaded and systematically analysed all of the photographs from the Humanitarians of Tinder Tumblr beginning with the date I started this research (posted 10 May 2016) and going back systematically until I reached a total of 100 photographs (posted 20 January 2016). Because the initiative remains ongoing at the time of publication, it would never be possible to consider the entire universe of cases for analysis; thus, I selected 100 photographs retroactively to ensure that I would have a representative selection of sufficient quantity to understand overall trends in the postings, and not to choose photographs simply because they were more interesting for my analysis. Having now done the analysis on the photographs, it is clear that the number of photographs is sufficient for reaching the point of data saturation for qualitative analysis (Seale 1999).

Second, I also conducted as much as possible (given that I remained within the realm of publically accessible material and did not “friend” unknown people to retrieve information) an online ethnography of a selection of approximately 10 per cent of these photographs. I read all of their comments and any information publicly available from the Facebook profiles of the commentators on the Humanitarians of Tinder photographs in order to try to understand whether some of the contextual issues that are assumed about these users are, in fact, verifiable. The photographs selected for this online ethnography were chosen to inform my understanding of the different kinds of comments that were written on the Facebook page.

Third, I also conducted a question-and-answer interview online with Cody Clarke, the individual responsible for the Humanitarians of Tinder Facebook page, providing background material for this article. Additionally, I looked at many more of the Humanitarians of Tinder photographs on Facebook, read extensively the Tinder website and blog, and followed up on relevant initiatives that could inform our understanding of the Humanitarians of Tinder. This empirical material has been analysed in consultation with secondary sources from both popular media and academia written about the Tinder Humanitarians.

### **Tinder Humanitarianism: What Is the Problem?**

In vernacular usage, the term “humanitarian” is used as an adjective to modify a noun in ways that indicate any gesture engaging in transnational “do-gooding” (Littler 2008).<sup>6</sup> In its commonly used noun form, a “humanitarian” is “a person who seeks to promote human welfare”. Yet the welfare of humans is meant as an extroverted activity, not linked to the immediate needs of or care for the human “self”. “Humanitarians” are assumed to exhibit a fundamental “selflessness” in their work in service of simple, needy Others (Malkki 2015). The adjective “humanitarian” is assumed to work in opposition to other potential modifiers that function at different levels from the structural to the individual—like “military”, “narcissistic” or “political”. It has become a catch-all term for an imaginary of selfless engagement with suffering, distant Others whose “bare life” (Agamben 1998) exists outside any identifiable political, historical or social context (see Calhoun as quoted in Barnett and Weiss 2008, and other contributions therein).

In such an idealised world of humanitarian selflessness, it is easy to understand the moral panic that has arisen from the exposure of the “humanitarians of Tinder” who use anonymous photographs of people in the Global South to frame themselves as desirable and attractive. These “Tindertarians” are the manifestation of all that is wrong in North–South relations. They are self-serving instead of selfless; they are displaying their “exotic” companions instead of helping them; and they are enjoying poverty instead of weeping with its victims. In this role, they are set apart from the normal workings of humanitarian organisations in practice or from theoretical presumptions of “human welfare” in theory. The single piece of thus far published academic work on this topic argues that “while not explicit in a majority of popular humanitarian campaigns and images, the Humanitarians of Tinder explicitly place desire, the erotic, and their ‘sadistic/voyeuristic’ gaze in the hand of users swiping through to find ‘hot’ people for hook-ups” (Mason 2016, 8).

Humanitarianism itself is a contested concept that cannot be assumed “innocent” in analysing the photographs and the phenomenon of “Tinder humanitarianism”. International relations scholars use “humanitarianism” with a specific historical reference to the 1864

Geneva Convention's recognition in international law of humanitarian principles to govern the moral practice of war. Yet the term has spread to involve a more generalised gesturing to "do-gooding" extending beyond war, and in some instances to both war's aftermath and its prevention. The expansion of humanitarian space from the governance of war to more nebulous interventions on behalf of an assumed shared humanity dates back specifically to the 1970s crisis in Biafra and links clearly to media representations of humanitarianism and human suffering (see Vestergaard ([forthcoming](#)) for an in-depth review).

There is a significant gap between the portrayal of the causes of humanitarian disasters as "emergencies" and considerations of their historical and political roots, and these differences shape both conflict itself and institutional resilience, as argued by Roberto Belloni (2007). What we have seen since Biafra is that global humanitarianism, and the solidarity that is supposed to underpin its foundations, have been reliant on images—photographic representations that bridge the gap between the western self and the (typically African) Other. Robert van Krieken (2016) analyses how the logic of humanitarianism or, using Hannah Arendt's (1963) turn of phrase, "the passion for compassion" has always been an essential and contested element of the colonial project. In consideration of the roots of humanitarianism in the colonial project and the reliance on representations to provide moral justification for solidarity and action, we turn to consider the Humanitarians of Tinder.

### *Tinder*

Launched in 2012, Tinder is the world's leading social app for meeting new people. With its global reach, people in all 196 countries around the world are swiping right to connect with others, making it a top 10 lifestyle app in more than 70 countries. In 2015, the company introduced Tinder Plus, giving users access to premium features, Rewind and Passport. Each day, 26 million matches are made on Tinder with more than 10 billion matches made to date.<sup>7</sup>

Tinder was the second most downloaded app in 50 countries around the world in 2015, but notably is not yet widespread in Africa where the market (limited to Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa) is dominated by its competitor Badoo.<sup>8</sup> The US-based dating app launched its first overseas office in India, and it was the nation's most popular dating app in 2015, now attracting 14 million swipes per day in India.<sup>9</sup>

While Tinder is first and foremost a dating app, it has also been used for a number of explicitly political engagements and campaigns. In 2014, Tinder in Australia partnered with Amnesty International to celebrate International Women's Day. The Amnesty International "Take Over" of Tinder involved sharing profile photographs with Amnesty's colours and logo, stating: "Not all women have the choices you do."<sup>10</sup> On 8 March 2014, Tinder agreed to show these profile pictures regularly. When users swiped on them, they were directed, according to a description of the campaign, to a "fully-responsive HTML5 microsite detailing the rights abuses many women face, and the work Amnesty does to stand up for them".<sup>11</sup> Mason describes the campaign as "using neoliberalised feminist choice rhetoric" of "'Nope' or 'Like' as the epitome of gender equality, and a yardstick with which to measure other nation's inequitable standards on love, marriage, and choice for women" (2016, 3). The unusual partnership between Amnesty and Tinder was undertaken in spite of the potential friction between the goals of user in a dating app and an international humanitarian organisation. Yet the data mined, including emails, and "thousands more" click-throughs



to Amnesty's website suggest that it was a partnership with benefits for Amnesty. In an article from *The Guardian* on the Voluntary Sector Network, a representative from Amnesty stated: "We were mindful that we were talking to individuals in leisure mode and we were also wary that Amnesty's messaging could come across as 'too serious' in such a relaxed medium."<sup>12</sup> The award-winning campaign clearly offered benefits to Tinder as well, both in producing a respectable corporate morality of supporting women's rights, and in getting Tinder significant publicity. On an award website, it states:

the campaign was a world first, and a clever way to bring up such an important issue at the right time and on an extremely popular social app. Its successful delivery reached both national and international headlines, as well as several industry blogs.<sup>13</sup>

Tinder users must download the free app for their smartphone that links Tinder automatically to their Facebook account and make a profile with six photographs and, if desirable, a few lines of text. Users are allowed to indicate their gender (from male or female), the distance range they would like to search for connections, the age range they prefer (between 18 and 55+) and whether they would like to be shown profiles of females, males or both. The app automatically links to photographs from Facebook, so you can choose amongst them for the six photographs that will decide if you are "hot". The first, and often only, item a potential connection will see is your profile page that includes a photograph and an optional 500 characters of text. If you click on the profile photograph of another Tinder user, you are then able to see their other five photographs, the text they use to describe themselves and whether you have any of the same Facebook friends or interests in common. There is a red X on the left and a green heart on the right for the choice of whether you would like to connect or not. If you choose the heart and the other user chooses the heart, then you are a match and are put through to the possibility of chatting. A message appears on your screen: "Congratulations! You have a new match." This means that another user has also swiped right, or liked your profile. The screen on the app then asks whether you want to "chat now" or "keep playing". If you want to pass on the profile photograph you are shown, you "swipe left"; but if you want the potential to connect, you "swipe right". If you make a mistake or want to change your mind, you can return to a previous user only if you purchase a Tinder Plus account for a charge of \$10 per month.

Tinder brands itself as being a safe environment for meeting new people, particularly for women, and gives explicit advice on its website for how to connect in public, keep your data safe from scammers and protect your sexual health.<sup>14</sup> However, the ethnographic account provided by Braziel suggests that Tinder can also be used for harassment. She writes of her own Tinder experience:

Occasionally when chatting with other users I notice the button to "unmatch" or "report" another user. Although I do not think much of the feature at first, I suddenly understand its use when one of my matches becomes angry that I did not text him back after he gave me his number. "Is that too large of a task for your tiny brain? You stupid cunt." Clicking on the "report" button before "unmatching" myself with him—meaning that we cannot contact each other again—gives me a small sense of relief, although he reappears under a new photo many months later. It is some time before I use the app comfortably again. (Braziel 2015, 9)

The concerns with sharing information on Tinder are significant, and the amount of data collected by Tinder for the use of its advertisers is wide ranging.<sup>15</sup> However, it is notable

that Tinder does not give the rights to the use of profile photographs to the owners of the Humanitarians of Tinder blog. These photographs are screenshots, taken by other Tinder users, who then submit them for posting as “humanitarians”. On some of the Humanitarians of Tinder photographs, the names and faces of the Tinder users have been blurred, on some all faces are blurred and on one the penises of young men painted for their circumcision ceremony were blacked out. I asked the Facebook page respondent Cody Clarke whether he blurs out the faces in response to requests from the subjects of the photographs, and if these requests were common. He responded:

Yeah, sometimes people request that their faces are blurred, so I oblige. Even though I’m probably well within my rights to post the photos, I try to keep the peace so that I don’t run the risk of the page ever being shut down. The requests are pretty rare. Maybe one or two every couple months.<sup>16</sup>

In my sample of 100 photographs, only four had the faces blurred by request. This raises the question of how likely is it that any individual Tinder user would become aware of being selected and posted as a Tinder Humanitarian.

### **The Tinder Images—In Circulation**

For purposes of our analysis, it is important to clarify that the images of Tinder Humanitarians we see are already in public circulation on the social media platforms of Tumblr and Facebook. Thus, we are gazing at images that were produced in unknown contexts, shared on a semi-public dating app (Tinder), reproduced without permission by anonymous Tinder users and shared with Humanitarians of Tinder, curated by the blog writer Cody Clarke, and finally shared on social media for access by anyone with an internet connection. This raises ethical questions about the sharing of information from the (semi-)private space of the dating app to the public Facebook page. The issues of exposing personal information that was never meant to reach the public realm have not been seriously considered in the writings thus far on the Tinder Humanitarians. Clarke explained:

I started it just as a place to post all the ones I was noticing on Tinder. I started out just posting them on my personal Facebook page for friends to see, and they were so popular that I figured I might as well do a Tumblr. I’d never used Tumblr much so I had no idea how fast things can circulate there, and only a couple days after I started it, it started taking off really fast.<sup>17</sup>

On 25 February 2014, the first photograph was posted on the Humanitarians of Tinder blog showing 26-year-old Lauren from the back. Lauren’s photograph was also reproduced in many of the popular articles in the media about the Tumblr page. In the first photograph, a young, white woman, hair practically pulled into a bun, dominated by a heavy backpack, is crouching down to extend a hand to a Black toddler dressed in a plain white t-shirt. You cannot see the face of Lauren, but see only a small child sitting on a broken sidewalk. The child wears a ragged, old t-shirt stained with red clay dust. Seated and gazing intensely at Lauren, the image conveys a need or at least a request from the child, and an action in the reaching of the hand in response from Lauren. It is a photograph in which the small Black, assumedly African, child’s need is central. It is one of six photographs used by Lauren as a presentation of herself to potential Tinder dates or friends.

From my manual counting on the Facebook page, 308 photographs were posted in 2014 and 305 photographs in 2015. When I asked the Facebook page owner (Cody Clarke) how many photographs had been received in total, he replied “probably around 1500, and I receive 5+ submissions a day from all over the world”.<sup>18</sup> According to a post on the Facebook page from 16 August 2016, it seems that submission numbers are ever-increasing. The post states:

Sorry I have been MIA! I have over 1000 submissions I still haven't posted, and it's very overwhelming. I receive a ton of submissions ever day and I needed a break. Even though this page is popular, I've never made a single dime off of it, and it's time consuming to maintain amidst everything else I do. Anyway, I'm back now.<sup>19</sup>

From this post we see that while the interest in Tinder Humanitarians appears to be growing, it is interesting that its curator emphasises that this is “voluntary” work for which he receives no pay. I will return to this point again later in the discussion.

“For most critics, Tindertarians are a new breed of inappropriate millennial selfie-takers” (Mason 2016, 4). Yet none of the critical work on popular or academic media has so far addressed the content of the photographs. There is a general assumption that we all know what these photographs are (rich white people trying to get dates by exploiting helpless Others), and we know before looking at them what forms these images will take. The images themselves come from screenshots of private Tinder users who then share them with the manager of the blog, who will choose which ones to post of those he receives.

My systematic sampling of 100 Tinder Humanitarian photographs came from the site's Tumblr blog where only the photographs themselves are visible. From a descriptive analysis, we can understand that most of these do-gooders are young, with an average age of 26 years; the oldest profiles were two men aged 45 years, and the youngest was a male aged 17 years. The vast majority of the sample had profiles in English (sometimes we can understand whether they were American, British or Australian based on the mobile phone service providers that appear in the screenshot, but this was not always possible). After English speakers the next most common language was Dutch (still with only 11 out of 100 profiles), German and French speakers both had four profiles, while Spanish and Italian speakers had only one profile each.

The overall genre of the photographs in my own categorisation was predominantly “tourist” (54 out of 100 profiles), many featuring the Tinder user in tank top and shorts with sunglasses and carrying a backpack and sometimes a camera. The second most common genre was “saviour” (34 out of 100), in which the profile picture showed the Tinder user amidst visible signs of poverty such as standing in front of villagers' earthen homes, cradling dirty children in torn clothing or in the process of doing some “helping” activity like carrying a bucket on their head in a village. The other genres coded were “Rambo”, in which men posed in military uniforms, and “professional”, which included a doctor posing with a patient in a clinic context, a school teacher and a woman appearing to be an aid worker digging together with an Asian boy.

While visually claiming to identify race or ethnicity is both empirically unreliable and conceptually problematic, it appears that nearly all of the Tinder Humanitarians in this sample were white, with only three perhaps Asian humanitarians and one Black humanitarian. The Black profile was clearly within the “tourist” genre, a young man in sweatshirt and sunglasses holding a shield with “jambo” (a popular greeting for tourists in pidgin Swahili) written on it, posing with two “natives” in traditional dance costumes. When the image was reposted on Facebook, one commentator wrote: “Naw, this one doesn't fit the usual patronising, condescending HoT. Dominic's ok.” To this, another replied “DONT LET HIS COLOUR

FOOL YOU lol.”<sup>20</sup> The racism inherent in Tinder humanitarian images is important (and well critiqued in Mason 2016), but we cannot make any empirically grounded claims on the performances of Black humanitarians on the basis of a single case. However, the comments added to the Facebook photograph suggest that the racism of humanitarianism does not go unnoticed, and demonstrate some of the moral uses of this digital platform.

*Networked Political Communication? When “HOT Images” Are Posted on Facebook*

In consideration of the links between morality and values in political communication, Blumler and Coleman suggest that an important distinguishing feature about communication on social media sites is that it “enables groups and individuals to present themselves to sizeable global audiences without needing to pass through the gatekeeping filter of the professional media” (2015, 123). Yet according to survey data from Allmer (2014), only 2.5 per cent of the student respondents listed “communication in political and interest groups” as one of the beneficial aspects of engaging in social media. Here it may be that whether communication is identified as “political” is more a question of interpretation than one of ontology. When the Humanitarians of Tinder images are posted on the Facebook site, they are subjected to “commenting” in addition to “liking” (now expanded to include “love”, “haha”, “sad” or “angry”). I suggest that the practice of adding a comment to the photographs constitutes a form of political communication, defined by the outcomes of the discourse, not the intentions of the user. This political communication that takes place as images travel between networks of Tinder, Tumblr and Facebook becomes one that is radically democratic (anyone with access to a Facebook account can comment), although limited by the usual “community standards” of Facebook.<sup>21</sup> Thus, while the images themselves are curated, the comments, we can hypothesise, would be less so.

The public performances of the Tinder Humanitarians result from an interplay between production and reception of the images. Thus, our analysis switches between a focus on the production of the photographs (how the Tinder users portray themselves) to a focus on the reception of the picture (how others have commented on the Facebook page next to each picture). On the Facebook version, each photograph posted can be commented on in the public domain by any other Facebook user. Almost all photographs have comments, and an unsystematic examination of them suggests that most commenters are English speaking, from North America and of a similar age range to the Tinder Humanitarians themselves (as estimated by the sample of 100 photographs).

Exploring these comments on the photographs can provide an indication of the engagement that they provoke. For example, Sérgio has an exceptional photograph in that it shows a Black child in intimate space together with the white Tinder user. This space is a car, and it is rare that a Tinder humanitarian photograph shows the Other in the “civilised”, “modern” space of the subject. It is far more typical to see the Tinder user together with the Others in a context that is dirty, barren, squalid and, most often, outdoors. The comments on Sergio’s photograph are not unusual in that they range from stating the core of the problem (“he’s a humanitarian dude, that’s what they do, take little black kids for rides in their cars, then use the photo to get dates”) to random, silly comments (“Kim Kardashian needs a shave”), and some are just to connect other Facebook friends to the website.

First, many times the commentators take a close-up screen shot of the Others who are in the background of the photograph—the African child in the crowd whose face shows his disinterest in the spectacle around him, or the individual on the receiving side of the hug for the photograph who appears to dislike the squeeze—and they post the cropped-out image into the comments section on the photograph of the Tinder Humanitarian. Often these are posted in the comments section without any textual comment. While these may be just ways of poking fun at the Tinder humanitarians, they are also performing a layperson's critique of the visual image of humanitarianism. They are literally taking the background, the Other, and making them the foreground, the subject of consideration. In a stark visual move, unencumbered by the excesses of postcolonial theory, the Facebook commentators on Humanitarians of Tinder are turning the gaze away from the humanitarian self of the self-promotion of Tinder and towards their often seemingly unwitting accomplice.

The other play that is seen often in the comments section of the photographs on Facebook is when a Tinder user posts a photograph in which they are amongst a crowd of African schoolchildren or a group of Maasai, for example, and someone in the comments will write "how do you know which one is Aj?".<sup>22</sup> While this may seem like the silliest of low humour, and it is repeated on numerous different group photographs, it performs an interesting trick in forcing the view to consider why it is that the comment seems so absurd. In this absurdity, it gestures to the harsh geopolitical realities of North–South relations which make it obvious that the white person in the photograph is the subject, while the racialised Others are simply background. Mason's (2016) informed critique of the use of Black bodies in the performance of white pleasure in Humanitarians of Tinder is far more nuanced and grounded in critical race theory, but the punch of this critique is also manifested in the comments asking us to consider why we should just "know" the racialised subject of the photograph.

## Discussion

The comments around the photographs, reposted on the Facebook site, include critiques of structural racism and flippant sexism of the "you're so hot" variety, and everything in between. There is sufficient acknowledgement of the moral panic invoked by the use of Others for enhancing the appeal of the humanitarian self on a dating app profile. A young Black woman named Stephanie Betti epitomises this sentiment with a comment on the photograph of Danielle crouched down next to a poor African girl: "Why do people think having a little brown child on their profile pic on a dating app makes them more fuckable? So damn disturbing."<sup>23</sup>

Mason's critique (2016, 7) links the aspirational fantasy of whiteness (exhibited in the photographs of "benevolent and classed volunteers giving away their leisure time and vacation money to 'help' those in need") to its explicit eroticism of Blackness (those bodies who are on the "wrong side" of the colour line). She draws on critical theories of race, and combines them with Kapoor's (2013) psychoanalytical critique of celebrity humanitarianism. Mason frames the Tinder photograph as a quintessential encounter between strangers: "it's the stranger that makes the white stranger familiar" (2016, 7). The "strange" is produced through getting close to the "one we do not know" and, as Ahmed writes, "one is made a stranger when strangeness is produced through the displacement of social relations through the transformation of objects into figures" (2000, 5 as quoted in Mason 2016, 9). In Tinder Humanitarianism, erotic racisms are certainly an important

part of the interpretive story, but just as the racist tropes on which these images play are universalised, self-referential and ignoring the particularities of detail that could be used to challenge this very displacement of social relations, Mason's analysis of the phenomenon of Tinder Humanitarianism also remains at the level of ideology. Photographs of Tinder Humanitarians reproduce racist, sexist and classist notions of North–South relations; this is true, but as the previous section has demonstrated, the comments suggest that the racism does not go unnoticed and the Humanitarians of Tinder are called into account.

On This Is Africa (a leading forum for African opinion, arts and music), Kagure Mugo wrote a scathing essay that links Tinder Humanitarians to the history of “saving Africa” by westerners:

Since back in the days, there's been no shortage of Westerners flooding our shores with grand designs to “tame the dark continent” full of “negro children.” But now we have the next generation do-gooders, pretty young things that have come to save the continent during their gap year and then never want to leave. One phrase that I have heard in passing describing this new generation is “Humanitarians of Tinder.” They form an integral part of the White Saviour Industrial Complex. This generation of “Down with Darfur,” #Kony2012 and Band Aid crooners insist on closing their eyes to the ills within their own countries, seeking instead to come and carry on the work of those who came before them—namely saving Africa.<sup>24</sup>

Yet we should ask ourselves whether the photographs posted on the “Humanitarians of Tinder” blogsite could really surprise anyone. After the widespread dissemination of the video *Kony2012*, and the debates on multiple fora about the Invisible Children and its photogenic founder Jason Russell, the term “white saviour industrial complex” was coined by Teju Cole.<sup>25</sup> In his seven-part response to this video, using Twitter, Cole mapped out the terrain of the post-colonial angst that undergirds North–South relations, of which humanitarianism is a part. Fundamentally, these tweets link sentimentality with the continual refusal to acknowledge structural inequalities that make humanitarianism possible. This sentimentality is produced by the images of the “white saviour”, who is then linked to militarism, corporatisation and celebrification of contemporary society. Cole tweets: “The white saviour supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening” (8 March 2012). The “white saviour industrial complex” is at the root of most of the criticism received by the Humanitarians of Tinder, from the popular media (i.e. *The Atlantic*, *The Huffington Post*, Yahoo News, *The Washington Post*) and also from feminist critics in the blog Jezebel and academia (Mason 2016). Yet these critics are missing a critical point, the white saviours in Tinder are not linked to a do-gooding corporation, be it a humanitarian NGO or a CSR-inclined company. They are not claiming to “save the world” with a voluntourism programme (Hannam and Mostafanezhad 2014), or to provide lifesaving drugs to women and child who need them through a purchase-linked donation of a RED product (Richey and Ponte 2011), to donate a pair of shoes to a shoeless child for each pair they sell you (Ponte and Richey 2014) or to validate the work of the United Nations in the Thai–Burma border zone (Mostafanezhad 2015). They are in fact selling only themselves.

Perhaps the problem with Tinder humanitarianism is therefore that it draws on all of the visual motifs of fundraising by international humanitarian organisations, and nearly duplicates pose by pose many of the images we have of celebrity humanitarians (Richey 2016), but it actually has no link whatsoever with institutionalised humanitarianism. There are no

organisations to be called into accountability for the representations of Others, no annual reports where the “bad” side of the representation can be weighed against how much funding it might have contributed to raising for genuine humanitarian interventions.

While the Humanitarians of Tinder do not literally post a new photograph every single day, they do keep coming, long after the initial moral panic in the popular media has died down. As of 16 May 2016, they had posted 719 photographs. I asked Cody Clarke how long he plans to continue running the website and he replied:

I’ll continue for as long as I get new and interesting submissions. A lot of times I’ll get submissions that are fine (and I keep every one I get) but are poses that have been seen a hundred times before. I try to only post ones that I get excited about, ones that are different but the same, if that makes any sense.<sup>26</sup>

The photographs are “different” in the sense that they were intended to be shared on a location-based hook-up app to make their subjects more appealing to other Tinder users, and instead they are on public social media websites where anyone can interrogate them. They are exciting, as “good white people” (Brown 1995) try to distinguish themselves in secret or in the comments section from their more overly exploitative counterparts who are using humanitarianism with Black Others to increase their hook-ups. But the photographs in the Humanitarians of Tinder are also “the same”; the poses, visual performances of witnessing or simply being in the same spaces with Others are the same. Each photograph is fundamentally the same as the other on these terms. We have no way to know whether either the young woman posing with a small African child in front of what could be a health clinic (or a house, or an orphanage) or the man standing next to the African man with a bandaged leg in a hospital bed is a tourist or a doctor. What we do know is that they posted a photograph of themselves in an apparently African setting as one of six photographs representing who they are for potentially interested dates.

Why the “moral panic” over Tinder Humanitarians? Classical theories of “moral panic” can provide part of the answer. The practices of perpetually stirring up moral panic have been influential on business:

The promotional logic is twofold: first, the cultural good will receive a lot of free, negative, publicity because its associations with moral panic have made it newsworthy; second, rather than alienating everyone, it will be attractive to a contingent of consumers who see themselves as alternative, avant-garde, radical, rebellious or simply young. (McRobbie and Thornton 1995, 572)

The profitability of the outrage over the Tinder Humanitarians may therefore explain why when the popular media was awash in moral panic over these photographs of global do-gooding for self-promotion, Tinder itself never spoke out to protest the unintended use of its photographs. If there had been any real damage to the company’s reputation through the articles on the Humanitarians of Tinder in places like *The Atlantic* or *The Huffington Post*, we would have expected a public response from the company. However, the profitability for the curator of the site is unclear. The originator of the Humanitarians of Tinder websites himself does not receive, according to his own testimony, any sort of sponsorship or payment for this work:

I wish I received any sort of payment or sponsorship! I haven’t made a dime, a penny, nothing. Which is a shame kind of, because it’s actually a lot more work running this thing than people realize. I respond to every message I get, and I get messages all day



long, and I sift through photos for the best ones, etc. It's not a huge part of my day, but it does take up time, and that time adds up. I may start a Patreon soon where people can donate \$1 a month or something to me, just to compensate me for the work I've put in and continue to put in. Hope that helped!<sup>27</sup>

It appears that only Tinder itself is making money out of the exploitation of its users as Humanitarians of Tinder.

## Conclusions

Humanitarians of Tinder is a phenomenon that opens up multiple interpretations of intentions and outcomes. I asked Cody Clarke what he thought he had achieved through the Tumblr blog and he replied:

I think most of all I've just cataloged a phenomenon that I'm sure people figured was out there but nobody (including myself) realized how widespread it is. I figured I'd top out at about 50 or 100. But it seems like there's an endless supply of pictures of these. And now when people see this sort of thing, they think 'Humanitarians of Tinder', it's just sort of stuck.<sup>28</sup>

In consideration of the objective of this special issue—to investigate how solidarity among citizens can be built through representations and practices of new media—Tinder Humanitarianism provides a more complicated answer than the popular discourse of “moral panic” would suggest. First, it is questionable whether Tinder users who post photographs of their engagement in seemingly “humanitarian” practices are voluntarily participating in a community of potential humanitarian solidarity. Without the ethnographic understandings of the context of the pictures and the choice to post them on Tinder, and potentially their outcome—did this photograph actually make the Tinder user more likely to “hook up” with a desirable swipe mate?—all we know for sure is what we see in the photographs themselves, their curation into the Humanitarians of Tinder blog and Facebook site, and their contextualisation in secondary media. The form of display and circulation of the Tinder photographs when they move from a semi-private dating app to that of a publically accessible Tumblr blog and Facebook page produces a structural partiality. There is little way of linking up the representations with their actual actors or practices. We are seeing less than the original Tinder user who submitted the photographs to be “outed” on the Humanitarians of Tinder websites, because they could at least see the other five photographs of the same subject. This format itself limits possibilities of solidarity in the ways described by Chouliaraki (2013) where humanitarian communication in the new media favours partial, personal readings as opposed to more objective, shared interpretations of humanitarian problems, and thus is less effective at integrating audiences and providing a shared foundation for collective action.

From the representations of the Tinder Humanitarians and their contextual intertext studied here, we see movement towards an understanding of what solidarity in North–South relations might, at a minimum, entail. This movement is characterised by the debates around the photographs that include direct censure of the exploitation of Black bodies for the pleasurable enhancement of white ones. They also include open discussions of race and racism, of the boundary between humanitarian action and militarism, and, to a lesser extent, of the reactions as captured in the photograph of the humanitarian subjects in the background of the Tinder user.

If we critically consider the claim of the smartphone dating app that “Tinder empowers users around the world to create new connections that otherwise might never have



been possible”, the Humanitarians of Tinder show no real shift in the visual possibility of moving beyond the historically problematic aspects of humanitarianism. However, it should be noted that the Facebook page includes in the “about” box “typically replies within a few hours, Message now”, where any Facebook user can send a message to the page (we can assume that it is always answered by Cody Clarke). Additionally, numerous comments and “likes” are posted by Facebook users on most of the posted photographs as discussed. Therefore, when taking together the dating app, the Tumblr and Facebook websites and the interactive space provided in the comments, we can conclude that the moral panic over Tinder Humanitarians is misplaced, because these photogenic do-gooders trying to get a date are not the deviant “folk demons” of a subgroup of society, but are instead the manifestation of dominant trends in the North that link global do-gooding with the morality of the self.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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