A Visual Argument: Embedded Omeka Support for Art History

The Problem:

The ability to use digital resources and research methodologies is in high demand in the academy and beyond. But traditional humanities seminars – and the traditional seminar paper – are generally oriented toward Scholarly Communications 1.0 methods and products, and some disciplines like art history are a bit behind the curve in embracing digital humanities compared to literature and history. So how can librarians help professors provide students with demonstrable skills and durable research products that take advantage of new tools and methods, but still ensure students demonstrate mastery of domain specific knowledge?

The Opportunity:

In Fall semester 2014, Professor Jennifer Way in the University of North Texas department of Art History and Art Education invited UNT Libraries Public Services to collaborate on a classroom experiment to encourage her students to develop digital exhibits as an alternative to the traditional seminar paper. Digital Humanities Coordinator Spencer Keralis and Art Reference Librarian Rebecca Barham were embedded with Dr. Way's graduate art history seminar AEAH 5813: Visual Culture of Refugees and Migrants. The students used Omeka as the platform for their exhibits, and Rebecca and Spencer delivered a series of mini-lectures for the students to introduce the platform, and to encourage the students to think about metadata, copyright, and fair use.

Omeka:

Omeka is an online exhibit platform developed by the Roy Rozenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. For this experiment, the students got individual free accounts on Omeka.net, which provides the basic exhibit platform, with select add-on widgets. (Alternatively, students could use a low-cost hosting service like Reclaim, which includes 1-click installation of the full-featured Omeka for less than the cost of a textbook.) The platform is easy to use; students who have experience using WordPress, or even social media platforms like Tumblr, have all the technical skills necessary to use Omeka.

Metadata:

Omeka supports a Dublin-Core based metadata schema. Students were encouraged to think about developing controlled vocabularies for their exhibits as they were curating the images. We explained metadata as analogous to tags on blogs, or hashtags in social media – textual clues to help identify and discover items in a Web 2.0 environment.

Copyright and Fair Use:

We introduced the students to key concepts in copyright, including Creative Commons Licensing and the principles of Fair Use. Art history students were familiar with Artstor and were interested in exploring art covered by the Images for Academic Publishing (IAP) program, which allows for scholarly use of images free of charge. We encouraged the students to ask permission if using the work of a living artist in their exhibits, and provided them with the Fair Use Checklist for considering how to use publicly available images, or images for which it was unclear if they were in public domain.

Factors in determining Fair Use

1. the purpose and character of the use (commercial, non-profit, or educational)
2. the nature of the copyrighted work
3. the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole
4. the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work

Challenges:

Spencer and Rebecca divided up student support, with Spencer fielding technical and strategic questions about Omeka, and Rebecca handling reference questions. Most of the technical questions were about layout and formatting of the exhibition (Omeka.net supports limited design capability, and student ambitions quickly outpaced the tool). The reference questions for the most part were conventional art reference questions; however, students working on hyper-contemporary topics like current refugee's self-representations in social media faced challenges locating appropriate secondary resources to support their research. Further, sources on highly politicized topics were sometimes biased or propaganda.

Outcomes:

Professor Jennifer Way offered this reflection on the pilot project:

"I wanted students to develop research projects that inquired about these questions critically. Moreover, having the students each research and create an exhibition through Omeka was a great way for them to become involved with the very material that makes up visual representations – works of art, photographs, and other visual media that are published and distributed in mass print and electronic media. Omeka-based exhibitions provided a welcome alternative to writing papers, too. Importantly, creating these online exhibitions challenged students to pursue image-centered research, something that proved new to many of them. At the same time, students learned to develop narratives that situated their images in relevant historical, social and cultural contexts."

Many of the students ended up doing more writing for their interpretive text than they would have for a typical seminar paper! Among the topics featured in students' exhibits were Peter Hiatt's exploration of images of refugees collected in "Hashtag Refugee," and Jessica Burnham's "Once a Lost Boy, Always a Lost Boy?" which collects book covers depicting Sudan's refugee children. Hiatt used metadata from social media to curate his collection, which included selfies and other self-representations of refugees posted on Vine, Instagram, and other social media platforms. His exhibit represents the ideal outcome of the project: demonstrating both domain specific knowledge mastery and C.V. ready skills in digital exhibit curation.
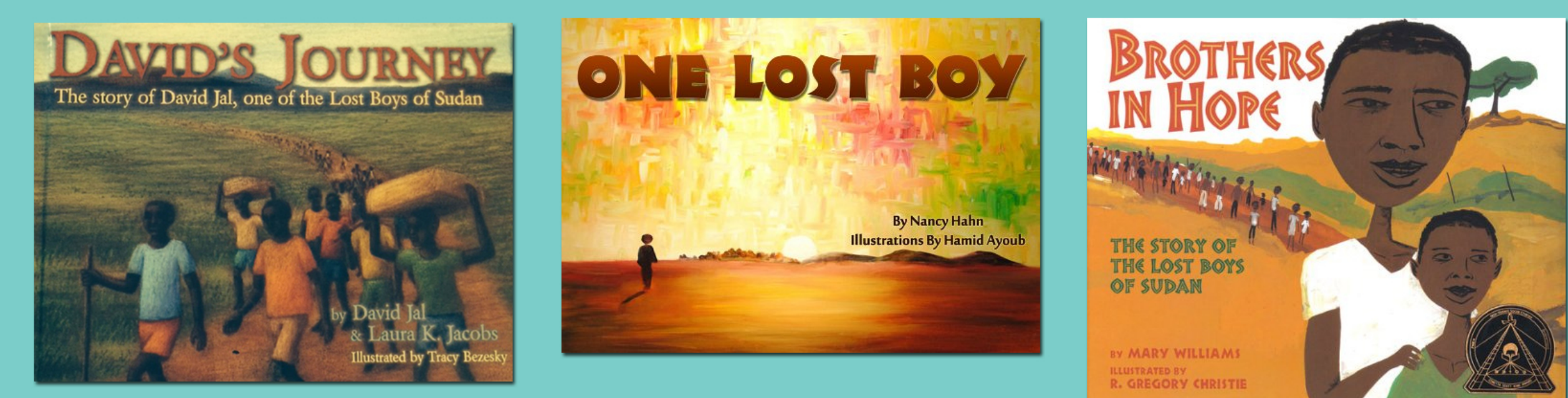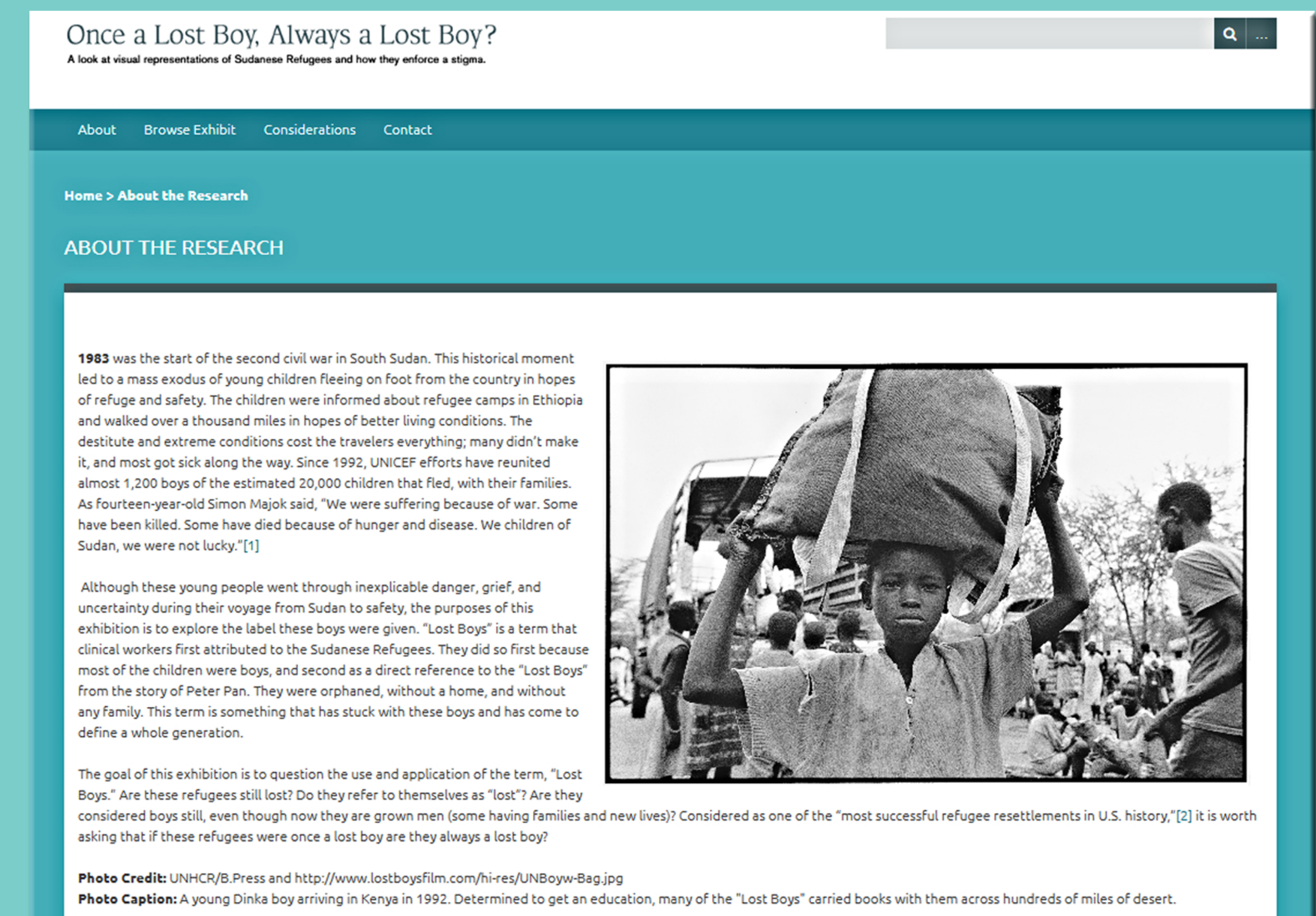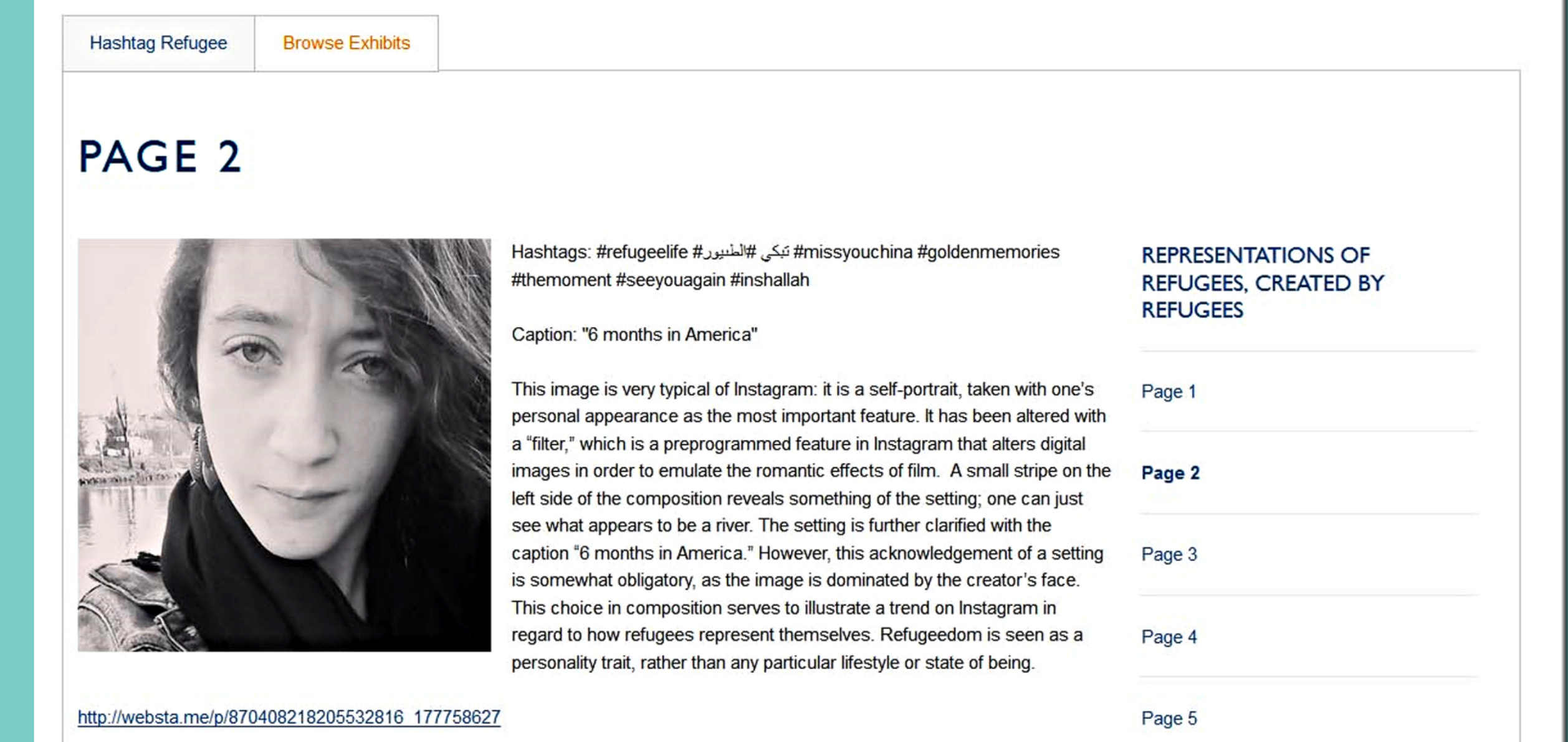
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