FORCED DISPLACEMENT, FORCED PERSPECTIVE: THE RHETORICS OF REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This dissertation interrogates the intersection of digital media, displacement, and human rights within the contemporary geopolitical landscape, with a specific focus on the MENA region. From a perspective firmly rooted rhetoric, it dissects the complex relationship between technology and displaced populations, emphasizing the role of transmedia storytelling in shaping refugee experiences and narratives and the potential for transmedia storytelling to facilitate greater insights into needs and gaps for displaced people. Central to the analysis is the paradox of digital tools both as emancipatory devices and tools of surveillance and control, which are further elucidated through case studies.

Engaging with thinkers like Stein, Arendt, Agamben, and Burke, this research delves into the rhetorical dimensions of statelessness, marginalization, and human rights, situating these concepts within the digital realm. This work shifts from the conceptual to the empirical, highlighting the firsthand experiences of refugees in camps and in transit, their digital footprints, and their negotiation of identity in virtual spaces. Attention is also given to the role of global and local agencies in mediating these experiences, including international bodies, non-profits, and Refugee-led Organizations (RLOs).

The research critically examines the broader implications of digital engagement in conflict zones, drawing from the Syrian conflict as a pertinent example. The weaponization of refugees in political discourses, both online and offline, is unpacked, and the potential of transmedia storytelling as a counter-narrative is explored. The significance of digital literacy and the need for a holistic understanding of refugee

experiences in both physical and digital domains are emphasized. This dissertation calls for a reconceptualization of humanitarian aid in the digital age, advocating for more inclusive, participatory, and digitally aware interventions that prioritize the voices and rights of the displaced. By highlighting the intricate web of politics, media, and migration, this dissertation contributes to a nuanced understanding of displacement in the digital era, bridging the gap between theory, policy, and lived experiences through refugee-led transmedia.

Dedication

For Kelly and Mickey

Acknowledgements

The impetus for this long journey through academic pursuit began with a firm but encouraging word from Mrs. Stacey Reeves, to whom I and every GWOT veteran she has ever met owe a debt we can never repay. Mr. Charlie Hall also has a share in that support and encouragement throughout the years. These two are the pillars to the roof under which my family has thrived for over a decade.

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Chapter 1: An introduction to the rhetorics of forced migration in war

Refugee status can be difficult to acquire and similarly difficult to remove, and while the legal definition has a clear and linear progression since the first UN convention on it, it can be difficult for migrants to prove their eligibility, notably for those who have fled and continue to flee from armed conflict in Syria. Yet, it is more often the case that an individual may meet the eligibility criteria and quickly establish refugee status, but his/her immediate family – spouse, child[ren], mother, or father – are ineligible or cannot accompany them to their destination. This creates an impossible dilemma for the traveler and wedges them firmly within the impasse disjointed systems have created. One of the questions this research seeks to answer is: how does the migrant-refugee binary affect these travelers from Syria? I mean this in an immediate, practical way as much as the philosophical sense. How do migrants conceptualize "home," and how does that change – or remain – through the experience of forced migration? These questions of home and semantic categorization are closely connected, and I posit that forced migrants have much to teach the world about them, lessons and insights which well-intended but over-composed media attempts often miss.

Lexicon and categories in refugee studies

There are a few generally accepted, widely used categories of forced migrants: internally displaced persons, asylum-seekers, and refugees, and that is the usual order of escalation in status. The term refugee as a condition or status of a migration came to its

first structured use in the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention on Refugees in the wake of mass forced displacement and migration from World War II. This convention defined refugees as people who "owing to a well-founded fear of persecution, on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a social group" find themselves outside their country of origin and are unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country (UNHCR 2010; Loescher 2021, 5). One of the many problems in the propagation of these definitions – especially when they function in the rhetorical exchanges within refugee studies – is that it confuses the state with a community. However, before discussing the nature and differences between community and state as it relates to refugees, it is necessary to explore the terms asylum-seeker, migrant, and refugee, as well the history of their usage and treatment as a group.

An asylum-seeker is someone who has fled in similar fashion for similar reasons as a refugee and who pursues protection and protective status(es) in a country other than their country of origin. One of the primary and most pressing benefits migrants seek refugee status is the hope of non-refoulement. Now customary in international law, "non-refoulement is the right to not be involuntarily returned to a country where there exists a risk of persecution" (Loescher 2021, 5–6). Therefore, asylum-seekers often must petition and persuade representatives of multiple organizations and institutional structures to consider their story in exchange for favorable status and protection from an entity like the United Nations Higher Commission on Refugees (UNHCR).

Across human history, refugees have impacted and featured in every aspect of life. Since ancient Greece, historians and poets alike have recorded the forced displacement of human beings, and their characterization and treatment have varied widely. In the long and complex history of human interaction, people – individuals, families, ethnic groups, religious groups, and every category – have fled persecution and violent conflict. In the modern era, rapid industrialization has contributed more effective and brutal means by which we kill and maim each other, and "although war had always generated large number of refugees, only in the 20th century did international conflict affect entire civilian populations" (Loescher 2021, 43). The mechanisms and gaps which create conditions and precipitate forced displacement took form in the era of global conflict. The germination and impact of two world wars coupled with the disintegration of several European and Middle Eastern empires led to immense loss of life and unprecedented refugee movement. Refugee resettlement became a new "problem" for fledgling governments to solve – framed as such at the time – and the task of persuasion fell squarely on those who sought hope and promise in a new place, a new home. Humanitarian service as a formal structure and industry, not yet the mix of government and private it is now, still grasped at what effective planning and operations might be, still reactive and strained. A few examples of sites for immense populations of displaced people included Romania, Soviet Armenia, Syria, Greece, and Turkey, not only due to world war but also more localized conflict as well.

The narrative habits and practices of each migrant shift and vary, but they frequently seek to address the same questions – where their home is, who their family is, where they need to go, and why they need to leave. Regardless of their ordinary occupation, they also get progressively more efficient at telling their story, and they hone the selectiveness of their chosen audience to which they tailor their message and medium. They rely mostly on the rhetorical canons of invention and memory, but eventually, they acquire a unique arrangement, as well, arrangement as argument. “Stories,” Kenneth Burke reminds us, “are equipment for living” (Burke, Rivers, and Weber 2010). The requirements of this storytelling process are rarely trauma-informed, and often, migrants must relive the raw immediacy of comingled fond and painful memories. Afghan American pediatrician and novelist, Nadia Hashimi, reflects, “Refugees didn’t just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand memories until they’d put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake to a better day” (Hashimi 2015, 159). The task of compartmentalizing traumatic experiences while still actively calling upon other memories is a monumental task, particularly when one’s activities of daily living are full of danger and discomfort.

The ancient Greek poet Simonides developed the "method of loci," more commonly referred to as the "memory palace" technique. This method is a mnemonic device that uses visualization and spatio-temporal memory to facilitate an individual’s information recall. In *The Problem of Empathy*, Edith Stein explains, “All our own

present experiences are primordial. What could be more primordial than experience itself?" In Simonides prototypical conception of memory, he requires an object onto which he may orient his ideation and convey it, recall it and re-encounter it at will. Stein writes, "But not all experiences are primordially given nor primordial in their content. Memory, expectation, and fantasy do not have their object bodily present before them. They only represent it, and this character of representation is an emanant, essential moment of these acts, not a sign from their objects" (7). These objective correlatives for experience are the mechanisms for the rhetorical interplay between memory and invention, the same interplay on which Simonides relied to *locate* his memories.

The method of loci involves associating pieces of information with specific locations or objects in a familiar space, such as a building or a town. For example, to remember a list of groceries, you might associate each item with a room in your house, such as bananas in the living room, bread in the kitchen, and milk in the fridge. Then, when you need to recall the items on your list, you can mentally walk through your house and remember each item in its designated location. A broader audience may have encountered the locus method in non-academic business courses (like the Dale Carnegie series) to remember several new names and faces encountered in a short period of time with many distractions. The method works by taking advantage of the brain's ability to remember spatial information and by creating strong associations between the information you want to remember and specific locations or objects which correlate to

the initial memory. The trick is to emplace the name and the face to a unique physical characteristic or another odd or strange free-associated you are more likely to remember. The locus method has also appeared in popular culture such as the BBC version of Sherlock Holmes wherein Holmes, portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch, relies on his "memory palace" to quickly store and easily recall vast amounts of detailed information for his analyses.

In the mythos, Simonides steps outside of the banquet hall just before it collapses, and when he returns, he is able to identify the bodies of the guests based on where they had been sitting. From this experience, he realizes the power of spatial memory. Even the root of the method itself is steeped in violence and loss.

Before elucidating conceptions of home and ahead of detailing specific narrative habits of refugees, it is important to define and examine the term "refugee." The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that the word itself comes from the French word *refugiè* and means "a person who has been forced to leave his or her home and seek refuge elsewhere, especially in a foreign country" as a result of armed conflict. On the other hand, a migrant is often defined simply as a person who moves, temporarily or permanently, from their home place to another country. The distinction is frequently connected to the impetus for the move, the driving force behind the action.

In broad strokes, migrants move for occupational reasons, finding new work or going to school, relocating to cohabitate with family members who have moved for

economic reasons. Specifically, migrants as a term encapsulates emigrants and immigrants. These are a matter of perspective, defined relative to the point of view for which the term is operational. Of course, an emigrant is one who leaves their country for the purpose of permanent change of residence, and the term distinguishes the going-away attribute from the perspective of the emigrant's fellow citizens. It is interesting to observe migrants are not considered emigrants until they have departed their home nation. The converse of this going-away is the coming-to of migrants entering their destination country as immigrants from the perspective of natives and long-term/established residents. It seems speakers have already built alterity into this semantic process with ambiguous waypoints predicated on intent of action and linguistic relativity.

More than social implications, these terms retain usage in legal contexts as well, indicating a kind of cooperation and persuasion, which makes them rhetorical. Kenneth Burke writes in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, "Rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and continually born anew: the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Burke 1950, 43). The word emigrant induces, or appeals for, cooperation from the sending nation, and the word immigrant induces, or appeals for, cooperation from the receiving nation. In this practical example of what Thomas Nail refers to as kinopolitics, the [bio]politics of movement, the migrant becomes a political figure, functioning with less autonomy – or none at all – and with figures of authority framing the migrant's

narrative. In this context, movement is a spatio-temporal shift from a beginning place and time, a going-away point (A), to a coming-to point of arrival (B), and deliberately transitional intermediary spaces and places translate and/or convey the migrant's transverse movement from (A) to (B) (Nail 2015, 11–15).

Now, consider the symbolic act of the policy of externalization, wherein a receiving nation at least temporarily rejects this supplication for cooperation. The sending nation has completed its symbolic task, but the receiving nation has declined its symbolic task, leaving the supplicant stateless, *dis*placed, in a state of place*less-ness*. We may define home as a *placed* or emplaced dwelling where we work, rest, play, and – most importantly for many – worship or have proximity to our sacred spaces. A person's memories are so often geolocated, oriented to a particular place with the senses tying them or directing them to the place.

This displaced condition returns us to the term refugee, but a migrant may still only be a *de facto* refugee, an asylum seeker, until they have sufficiently persuaded officials and representatives of authority that they are a *de jure* refugee. The definition of a refugee is like migrant, but the external reason for movement shifts the status from migrant to refugee. This external force is most often conflict, particularly armed conflict. Though, since the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, the term "refugee" in international legal contexts has enjoyed an expanded scope and generous interpretations. This expansion is key in defining refugees who flee other forceful but sometimes less directly violent

circumstances of displacement such as economic strife, milder social unrest, or natural disasters.

It is important to construct the figure of the migrant as a base to the figure of the refugee because they share movement. However, movement as described here in an AB line which the migrant and/or refugee traverse(s) is infinitely divisible, like space, with the condition or state of movement occupying each of the infinite points along this successive line. In *The Figure of the Migrant*, Nail points out the flaws in this logic: "…movement cannot be divided without destroying it. By thinking that we can divide movement into fixed, immobile stages based on departures and arrivals, we spatialize and immobilize it" (Nail 2015, 11–12). The migrant – or anyone – would have to traverse these infinite intervals to technically and specifically arrive *anywhere*.

In the case of the migrant, the movement occurs from one socio-political point A to point B, and systems and structures such as immigration departments, schools, travel authorities, and even social non-governmental organizations privilege these social points A and B as fixed. This suggests the migrant is the one who is *ipso facto* lacking, and the system that the migrant traverses or moves accounts for the migrant as unrepresented within the same system. In this displacement between movement and representation, the migrant becomes displaced from a seemingly static social context, without socio-political membership. This is the starting line for refugee status. *Dis*placement and placeless-ness indicate the forceful externally imposed revocation of the migrant's membership, their

belonging, to a home group. From the perspective of the going-away nation, conflict may be a form of the forceful expansion of a particular socio-political group. For the coming-to nation, forceful displacement by a policy of externalization is at least a temporary denial of admission to a protected home place and at most an isolationist and nationalistic tactic to protect an advantaged group.

Syria exemplifies the complex and layered conflict of a going-away/sending nation as much as the United States exemplifies the coming-to nation. Internal displacement frequently precedes external migrant flow, and in early 2011, internal unrest in Syria between Bashar al-Assad's government and civilian protestors created fertile ground for armed conflict with what became the Free Syrian Army. Civilians fled major cities and routes in favor of less kinetic regions of the country. At this point, Syrians become internally displaced in their own country, and armed conflict ensues between violently opposed but distinctly Syrian groups. Many of the Syrians who managed to survive this phase of the conflict faced small arms firefights between government and rebels, shelling by Syrian military, close air support by Syrian military air units, growing intervention from the Islamic State/ISIS/Daesh and Iran, power grid outages, and progressively less access to emergency healthcare. Even the most thorough media and artistic coverage of the Syrian Civil War often obviates or circumnavigates this phase of displacement and initial placeless-ness for Syrian civilians.

There is a gap in discourse, research, and understanding of those who traversed the first distance, those who moved out of the frame of initial armed conflict, who outsiders deemed still "at-home" but who often felt placeless at best and homeless at worst. The barriers they faced were not yet those of UN classifications or destination country documentation requirements, but they were the initial mechanisms and points of geographical and social dislocation. External coverage by media outlets and governmental institutions framed the conflict as political-gone-awry. Internal coverage was often met with a firing squad. The world, humanity, remains with the task of forensic excavation of these narratives amid global powers' continued jostling for influence and the mad scramble – and, at times, glacial shift – for humane and humanitarian response.

There is an uncomfortable and disturbing parallel in the current Russo-Ukrainian War, beginning with the Revolution of Dignity and escalating to full-blown international refugee flow following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but at the risk of framing the problem with a cynical lens, these will not be the last. Ukrainian culture differs, of course, substantially from Syrian culture, but patterns of human experience from one may be scalable and repeatable to the other and reduce human suffering or at least increase understanding. Broader patterns in human experience demonstrate it is not a matter of *whether* internal displacement such as the Syrian populace experience will happen again but *when* it will happen.

Perception and empathy in the rhetoric of refugee studies

In research on refugees, there is discussion of [e/im]migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeker, but authors represent or refer to the armed conflict – the brutality and violence – which qualifies one status versus the other in shades of equivocation. This may just be the result of authors not having personally experienced direct violence in armed conflict as a combatant or target, and there is an understandable discomfort with this fact. However, avoiding exploration of the experience of graphic violent acts robs us – the audience, other human beings, other scholars – of the immediacy and urgency of response and aid. The understandable fear is that the depiction or relay of intense violence will traumatize the recipient (reader, viewer, listener) as it likely did the original recipient, the migrant-refugee.

Conversely, a more pressing concern by researchers and scholars is that recounting difficult migrant journeys that include instances of torture, extreme violence, and rape *re-traumatize* refugees and risks their ability to achieve post-traumatic growth in their destination. Still, the result of withholding details and earnest investigation of forced displacement in the context of extreme violence is mere compassion for those who survived it, rather than empathy. It is crucial for researchers to collaborate in a truly transdisciplinary way to facilitate these given narratives while mitigating or altogether eliminating risk and further harm to refugee participants. Dispassionately detached data do not elaborate the ambiguity of refugee experience, but harmful interview techniques in

first-person and third-person points of view from refugee experience are equally ineffective.

The 20th century German phenomenologist Edith Stein distinguishes between basic empathy (what is now direct perception) and inference by analogy or mimicry. Without intimate or close examination, we perform the latter in a kind of mental model of the refugee's experience and projecting it onto our own experience as a kind of internal mimicry or simulation by which we predict how we would feel or how the refugee felt (Borden 2003; Sharkey 2015). It is interesting to note that Stein would have also been quite familiar with the locus method. Later in life, in what could be described as a third turn in the development of her philosophy, she took on the new name Teresa Benedicta and became a Carmelite nun after staying with a close friend and reading St Teresa's *Interior Castle*. The text, central to the Carmelites as St Teresa was their founder, uses the locus method to frame a memory palace by which the sisters of her order could more easily remember teachings and important spiritual maxims.

From the Stein perspective, the refugee "gives" their experience to the observer in an intentional inter-subjective experience (Stein 1917, 11-13, 16-20, 27-28). Johan Galtung describes peace as the absence of war, but if we describe a condition what it *is not* as Galtung has here, we have only vaguely gestured at it or at least reduced the number of possible conditions it *is* (Galtung 1969; 1990). The refugee's recounted lived

experience of forced migration *is* necessarily the site and summit of empathy rather than mere compassion or sympathy in rhetorics of refugee studies.

As a mere institutional mechanism or policy of the state, the resettlement – however thoughtful and trauma-informed – cannot easily mend the separation of refugees from their home communities and of course from their families. Though each Syrian refugee is unique and individual, their individuality is, as Edith Stein maintains, inextricably tied to their communion with others. Despite the extreme isolation and exclusion they may experience at various intervals along a hazardous trek, "[t]here are no isolated individuals" (Borden 2003, 46–47). Each refugee's understanding of the self is tied to their relationships with others, especially those within their local and/or religious communities from their country of origin (Stein 2016, 16). However, one does not derive identity from the state *as community*; the state is not itself a community but a *tool* of community (Stein 2000, 129–294). Land, the physical locality wherein the person subsists, plays a deeper role in the formation of a person, and this type of land is a poor but more generalizable substitute for the concept of home. The forcible removal of a person from the land which has most prominently formed their identity and community is at the root of the traumatic displacement of people. This dislodging strips away or lays bare a person.

Attempts to capture or frame the experience of dislocation from a refugee's home place, though well intentioned, often result in an exploitative trauma tour. This is the

tension which my research seeks to alleviate by introducing a collaborative storytelling element and leaving room for forced migrants to describe their idea of home – however abstract or concrete. This makes the viewer/reader/audience less a passive participant or consumer of media and more a student of experience, a member of a sentient exchange (Sharkey 2015; Stein 2002). The goal is more transactional communication of experience, a narrowing of individual and community from mere *mass* to *association* or even *community*.

There are gradations of communal experience, and while individual refugees experience each of them in turn, the outside observer often confuses one for the other. Depictions of forced migration from Syria often show b-roll of or even first-person (translated) interviews of individual within a large crowd, especially encampments. One of the many suggestions in this depiction is the viewer should take this as the migrant's actual community, but the crowd is simply a temporary social formation wherein members imitate one another's emotions and behavioral patterns without necessarily sharing common intent. Individuals within the crowd are not immediately aware of the psychodynamic phenomenon and are subsequently vulnerable to mass suggestion (Stein 2000, 241–54). This is one of the sources of the negative stereotype associated with "crowds" or "masses" of forced migrants, and my project attempts to introduce opportunity for migrants to face both the crowd and the world beyond the crowd and self-select a social formation of their own at least closer to an *association*. One of the many

benefits of this for the migrant is the mitigation of the risk for mass suggestion or mass contagion that precedes panic, interpersonal violence, or even human trafficking (Loescher 2021, 28–30, 95; Masri and Chavez 2020, 215).

Beyond a crowd, another social formation refugees experience is the association. When individuals regard one another as objects, there is no more than an association dictated by common goals planned and executed from a practical and contractual perspective. However, when they regard one another as *subjects*, there may be community with a shared emotionally dynamic bond, mutually recognized values, and gradations of trust (Stein 2000, 133–66, 255-294).

Background and context of the Syrian Civil War (2011 – present)

The Syrian Civil War began in 2011, as a result of widespread protests against President Bashar al-Assad's regime. The protests were part of the wider Arab Spring movement that saw uprisings and revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa. The arrest and torture of several teenagers who had painted anti-government slogans on a wall in the city of Daraa sparked the initial protests. This kinetic movement quickly spread to other parts of the country as participants demanded greater political freedom, economic reform, and an end to corruption and human rights abuses. The Syrian government responded to the protests with a harsh crackdown, using police and military forces to disperse crowds and arrest demonstrators. Of course, this only fueled the unrest,

with more Syrians, now more righteously indignant than ever, taking to the streets to demand change.

As the protests continued, armed opposition groups began to emerge, seeking to overthrow the government by force. The Syrian government responded by launching a military crackdown, with the conflict quickly escalating into a full-scale civil war. The conflict has been characterized by intense fighting between government forces and opposition groups, as well as the involvement of foreign powers and extremist groups, most notably Daesh/ISIS but also pro-Assad paramilitary factions. The war has led to widespread displacement, with millions of people forced to flee their homes, their lives, their memories, both within Syria and to neighboring countries.

The United States military has been involved in the Syrian Civil War since 2014, primarily in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist group. In 2014, the United States formed a coalition of countries to launch airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq. The United States has also provided training and support to local forces fighting against ISIS, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is primarily made up of Kurdish fighters (Enzinna 2015). In addition to the fight against ISIS, the United States has also been involved in other aspects of the Syrian conflict. For example, in 2017, the United States launched missile strikes against a Syrian government airbase in response to a chemical weapons attack that killed dozens of civilians (Davis n.d.; Gordon, Cooper, and Shear 2017).

The United States has also provided military and economic support to opposition groups fighting against the Syrian government, though this support has been limited and has not included direct military intervention. The US military's involvement in the Syrian Civil War has been primarily focused on the fight against ISIS, with limited involvement in other aspects of the conflict.

Russia, Turkey, and Iran have all been involved in the armed conflict in Syria since 2011, but their roles and interests in the conflict have varied over time. Russia has been the most significant (external) supporter of Assad's government. Since September 2015, Russia has conducted a military intervention in Syria in support of the government. This has included airstrikes against opposition groups, training and support for Syrian government forces, and the deployment of Russian military personnel to Syria. Russia's involvement has been important in turning the tide of the conflict in favor of Assad's government and limiting the scope of the opposition.

Turkey has been a key supporter of some opposition groups fighting against Assad. Turkey has provided weapons and training to opposition groups and has launched military operations inside Syria to target both ISIS and Kurdish forces. Turkey has also been a major host for Syrian refugees, with over 3.6 million Syrian refugees residing in Turkey as of 2021. However, there have been several incidents of civilian casualties from shelling questionable targets along the Turkish-Syrian border (Liveuamaps 2022). The

2023 serial earthquakes in Turkey rocked several border towns home to tens of thousands of Syrian refugees and native Turks alike.

Iran has also been a key supporter of the Syrian government, providing significant military and financial support to the government and its allied militias. Iran has deployed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel and allied militias to Syria to support the government. In an interview for this research, Kareem Shora, Executive VP of Programs and Policy at Human Rights First and former Deputy Director at the Department of Homeland Security, said:

> As far as I'm concerned […] Syria is currently under Iranian occupation, no question about it. I have family members in Damascus, and elsewhere, and friends who have shown me…I mean, there are certain parts of Damascus, now you walk, and you don't hear Arabic…near the old fort in Damascus, if you walk around, you're hearing Persian being spoken. You're seeing people in the black abayas. That's not Damascus. It used to be very progressive city (Shora 2023).[1]

Iran's involvement has been motivated by its strategic interests in the region and its close alliance with the Syrian government.

While each country's motivations and interests in the conflict differ, their involvement has contributed to the complexity and intensity of the conflict. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, international tensions – particularly between and

[1] See Appendix A for the full interview transcript.

among the US, Russia, and Turkey – have only increased. As of this writing, conflict is ongoing and includes recent clashes with Iranian drones and US unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and counter-offensives, with no clear end in sight.

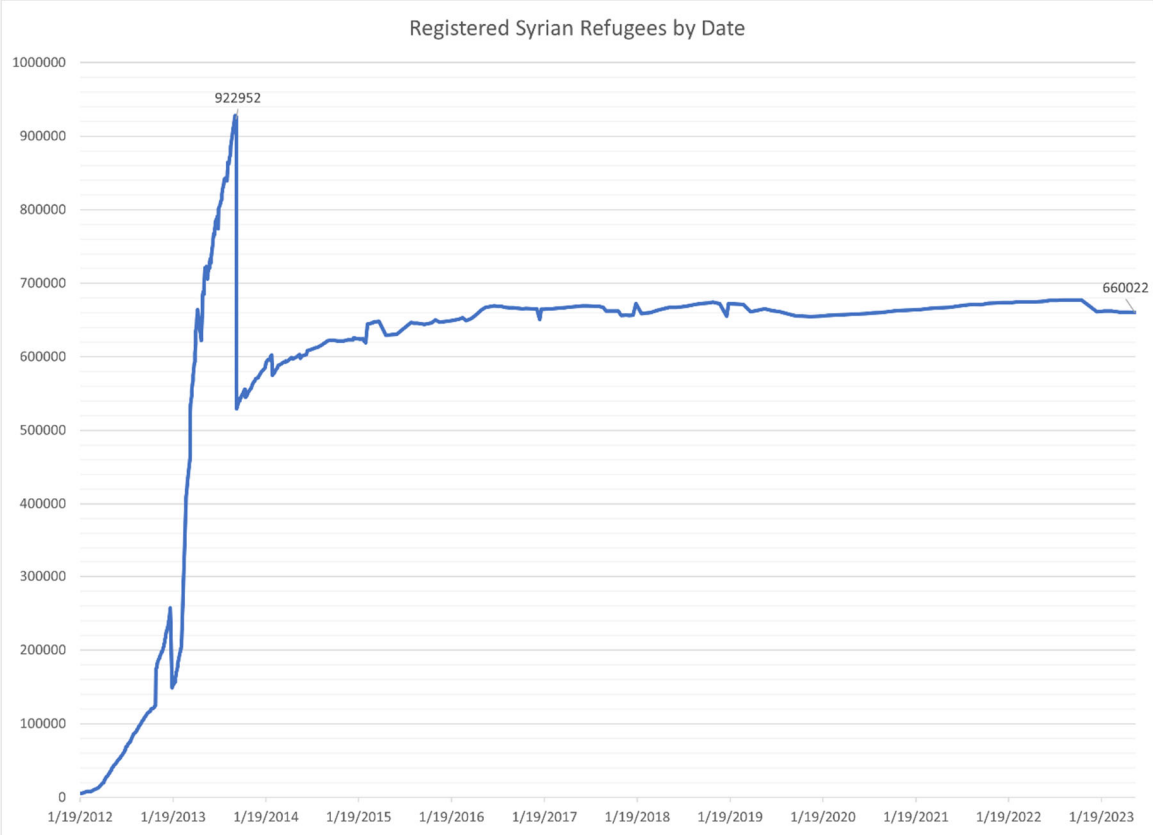

Figure 1. Registered Syrian Refugees by Date, UNHCR

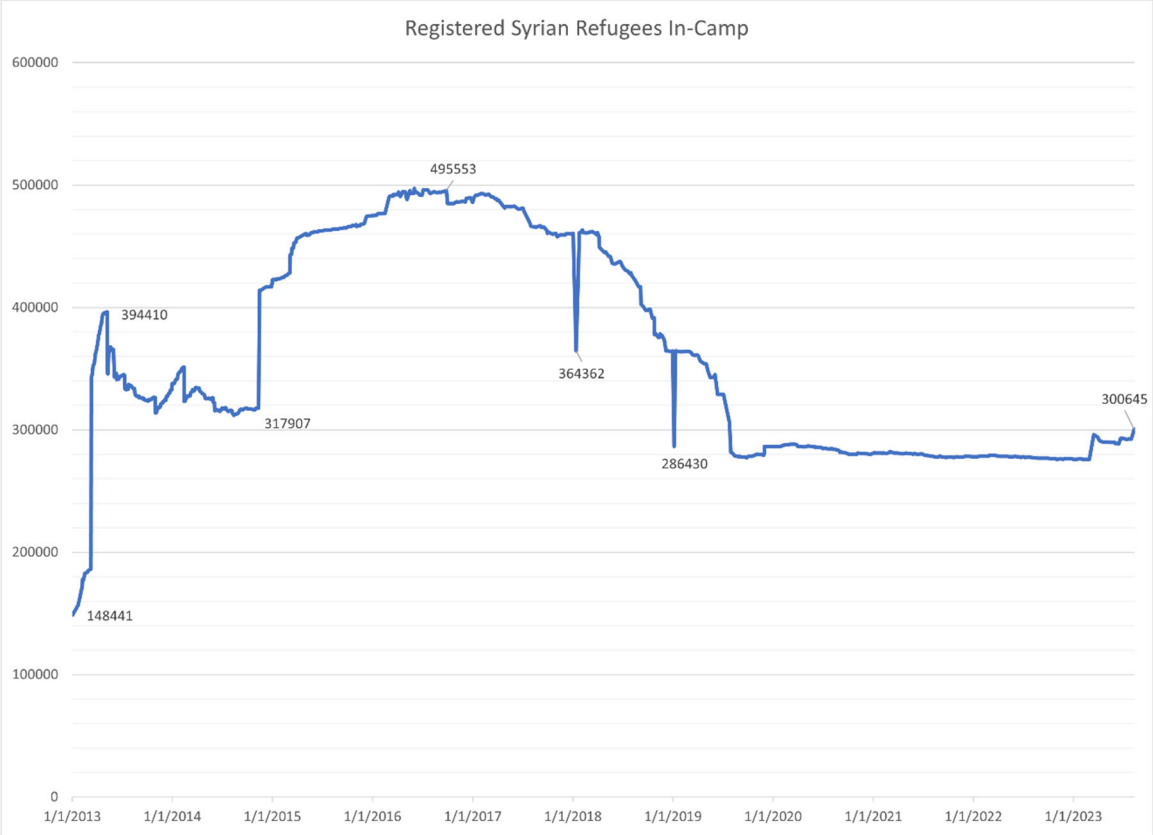

Figure 2. Registered Syrian Refugees In-Camp, UNCHR

Timeline of Casualties

The Syrian Civil War has resulted in many military and civilian casualties. However, the exact number of casualties is difficult to determine, as estimates vary widely, and reliable data is limited due to the ongoing violence. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitoring group that tracks casualties in the conflict, the number of casualties as of March 2022 is as follows:

Table 1. Yearly deaths by group, civilian and combatants

Year	Civilians	Combatants	Total
2011	3,968	3,873	7,841
2012	22,663	30,253	52,916
2013	36,383	60,626	97,009
2014	30,911	80,009	110,920
2015	23,822	61,705	85,527
2016	17,935	46,191	64,126
2017	11,387	26,815	38,202
2018	6,776	13,357	20,133
2019	3,488	7,756	11,244
2020	1,484	5,278	6,762
2021	1,560	2,324	3,884
2022	1,627	2,141	3,825

These figures are estimates and the actual numbers may be higher due to underreporting or the difficulty in collecting accurate data in an active, kinetic war zone. Behind each of these numbers is a human being and their loved ones, whose lives have been affected by the devastating consequences of war.

Camps

There are many refugee camps near Syria still hosting refugees who have fled their homes since the start of the war. The UNHCR and OCHA host a Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) and share their most up-to-date figures on many different areas, populations, and incidents/conflicts. Unless otherwise noted, I gathered data and reports from the HDX, also referred to by humanitarian workers and researchers as HumData. Some of the largest refugee camps include:

1. Zaatari Camp, Jordan: According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of February 2021, the population of Zaatari camp was 76,400.
2. Domiz Camp, Iraq: In December 2020, the UNHCR reported that Domiz camp had 40,560 Syrian refugees.
3. Azraq Camp, Jordan: According to the UNHCR, as of January 2021, the population of Azraq camp was 36,853.
4. Kilis Camp, Turkey: In 2020, the Turkish government reported to OCHA that Kilis camp had a population of around 20,000 Syrian refugees.
5. Al-Hol Camp, Syria: The population of Al-Hol camp is constantly changing due to the ongoing conflict, but as of March 2021, the UNHCR estimated that it had a population of over 60,000 refugees.
6. Darbasiyah Camp, Syria: The UNHCR reported in February 2021 that Darbasiyah camp had a population of 10,366 Syrian refugees.

Demographics

According to the UNHCR, the number of refugees who fled the Syrian Civil War in 2012 was relatively low compared to subsequent years. By the end of December 2012, the UNHCR estimated that there were approximately 234,642 Syrian formal refugees registered or awaiting registration in neighboring countries. This figure includes only the refugees who had been officially registered or were in the process of being registered with the UNHCR. By the following year, the figure had more than doubled to 579,297.

From there, it was a steady climb to the current volume of 660,022 registered refugees. Whether in-camp or out-of-camp, the majority of refugees are adults 18-59 years with slightly more females than males. The second-largest age group is children 5-11 with slightly more males than females. Data collection from 2011 onward has been fraught with restriction, inaccuracy, and unreliability. There have been many barriers to collection and conflicting counts from NGOs, government agencies, and international coalition organizations. I have relied on data from the UNHCR's operational data portal because it is the most used inter-agency data collection and reporting tool with the most regular audits and updates. It is frequently cited in government publications such as those from UK Parliament, the US government, and prominent NGOs like the International Rescue Committee, Human Rights First, and Médecins Sans Frontières.

Narratives

The task of facilitating the refugee's narration of his or her own lived experience requires the facilitator's close assessment of mis/perceptions. As the late "gentle giant" of refugee studies, Gil Loescher, points out in *Refugees*, "The lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers are often far removed from how they are represented in the media and public discourse" (Loescher 2021, 75). The more salient themes and highlights of the refugee's flight from danger prevail in journalistic descriptions and political commentary.

These third-person journalistic narratives pay due attention to the refugees' uprooting from their homes and everything they have come to know as endearingly familiar and comfortably quotidian. External forces dislodge them from their ordinary

institutions such as schools, places of worship, and means of employment and livelihood. Thereafter, a seemingly unending exile ensues, and the liminal state[lessness] of refugee life begins. However, each refugee experience is different and unique, even within populations with the same country of origin or religious group, and it is difficult to generalize from one population to the next (e.g. Syrians and Ukrainians, Afghans and Iraqis, or Syrians and Central Africans).

Aside from the initial patterns of conflict and flight, refugees still often share in the barriers and challenges they face from the global refugee system (Loescher 2021, 75). There is also the persistent issue of subpopulations of refugees who are the most vulnerable and exposed to greater risk and exploitation. Those include refugees with disabilities and other medical statuses and the unaccompanied children and teenagers.

Personal freedom, autonomy, and agency are essential to successful outcomes for refugees, but restrictive policies and lack of resources reduce the likelihood of refugees expressing themselves and achieving a positive outcome *they* choose and define for themselves. Refugees like those who fled Syria for Turkey to the north or Jordan to the south navigated a series of protracted and convoluted processes and environments only to encounter yet another web of legalistic traps – rarely in their own first language – and relegation to underfunded camps and even detention facilities. In these intermediary environments, a kind of refugee purgatory or limbo, forced migrants are at risk for or fall prey to human trafficking, human rights violations (too often similar to those they

originally fled), kidnapping, slavery, and sexual assault/violence (Loescher 2021, 76–80). Regulatory burden from international organizations, host countries, and sponsoring countries (coming-to nations) coalesce at the feet of refugees under these conditions.

In many host nations, immigration discourse and refugee/asylum-seeker issues comingle in a nebulous deliberation on the fate of others, and incoming refugees and asylum-seekers face staunch opposition from politicians and social commentators. Particularly in the UK, the US, and parts of Germany and Italy, immigrants with refugee status languish under pressure and fear of social safety net and other economic infrastructure burden (Masri and Chavez 2020, 211–14). The host nation fears are incongruous with the reality that when refugees enjoy the freedom of self-direction and independent decision-making on the trajectory of their socioeconomic life, they make important contributions to their host nations *and* their country of origin (Loescher 2021; Betts 2021; Masri and Chavez 2020; Hyndman and Giles 2017). Still, misrepresentation persists and is difficult for refugees to overcome without advocacy, awareness, and what Richard Kearney calls radical hospitality in the host nation.

For nationalist rhetoricians of most varieties, refugees serve as a cultural threat to the primacy of their specific in-group(s) and the essence of the national identity. A characteristic concern of rhetoric is the manipulation of people's beliefs for political ends (Burke 1950, 41; Cassirer 1979). Many less-radical positions still include fear about

Muslim immigrants' perceived proclivity for Islamic fundamentalism and potential for internal radicalization of natives.

It is a significant point of discussion in contemporary political discourse, especially in host nations who receive sudden sizable influxes of Muslim and/or refugees of Middle Eastern origin. Journalists, politicians, and commentators inform and entrench public opinions on refugees by dramatic semantic choices of descriptors like "floods/flooding," "streams/streaming," and "droves" in border areas and sanctuary sites. This narrative treats whole communities of refugees as a mere social *mass*. In practice, narratives like this facilitate the pretenses necessary for the sweeping rejection of applications for asylum by the European Union (Haynes 2016, 97).

To be clear, I am not advocating or stumping for one side of the political spectrum (or quadrant) over another. Political entities of all persuasions have mistreated and misrepresented migrants and refugees. Right-wing groups and individuals actively impede the civil assimilation of refugees and migrants and propagate prejudiced and xenophobic stereotypes. Left-wing groups often fall into the temptation to treat refugees as victims and victims only or – worse – cast them as heroes in an epic poem of survival and resilience, treating them as a monolithic figure of exemplary human achievement. Through my research presented here, I have an approach all sides might find valuable, helpful, and actionable.

However, anthropological and social scientific researchers have shown media frequently frame refugees and asylum-seekers as "traumatized, speechless, and bereft victims without agency, rather than as individuals with the potential to make important contributions to society and the economy" (Loescher 2021, 78–80). This more commonly liberal view of refugees – though humanistic and well-intentioned – often propagates the idea that refugees are helpless and cannot direct the terms of their existence through some fault or lack in their own faculties. This view even manifests in humanitarian organizations and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Social justice for social justice's sake (or for bringing those with power to some sort of extra-legal version of cultural justice) still often leaves refugees and other migrants at the proverbial doorstep.

Host nations relegate migrants and refugees to specific areas, even camps like Zataari in Jordan, which has become Jordan's fourth largest "city." However, Jordanians are reticent to classify Zataari as a truly Jordanian city because it is almost exclusively populated by Syrian refugees. For Zataari as well as functional ghettos in the surrounding cities and towns, this classification of space and place and the authorities who dictate its use and membership are interesting points of exploration in this research few others have examined in the Syrian Civil War.

In Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international law provides that those who flee their country of origin and seek protection in another may petition for asylum and refugee status. This seems to cover important ground, but when

migrants must take on this persuasive act midflight and against foreign institutions, the system breaks down. Applications for processes like the US Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) require applicants to substantiate their claim for protection and access to program features, and representatives review each instance on a case-by-case basis.

These admission processes are often wasteful, tedious, repetitive, and time-consuming, and backlogs beset nearly every program of that kind in the global migration network. Refugees suddenly find themselves in tense rhetorical situations, speaking to unfamiliar figures of authority in a courtroom or even panel-style setting. Individual caseworkers of varying levels and degrees of experience, qualification, and background decide whether a migrant should receive refugee status. If authorities judge that an applicant does not qualify, he or she is deported or returned to their country of origin.

The *experience* of the asylum-seeking process varies widely, and the conditions under which migrants languish are rarely pleasant. Many Syrians struggle to survive and function in inhospitable conditions in border towns, resettlement camps, and even detention facilities, in some cases. In instances of detention, asylum-seekers may have to mix with the general population of a prison, and children may not accompany their parents, family members, or other guardians. In more radical examples of this phenomenon combined with the policy of externalization, host – or, more appropriately, "destination" – nations require asylum-seekers remain in inhospitable detention facilities indefinitely and without recourse to other entities.

In the rhetoric of refugee studies, there is a gap that begs for investigation into the decision-making process not only for refugee designation – willful selection or inclusion versus exclusion – but for hospitality and hostility *at the site(s)* of the decision. There is a close relationship between hospitality and place, "a liminal phenomenon" in the experience of borders and frontiers (Kearney and Semonovich 2011, 31). When a host offers hospitality, it is usually under certain conditions whereas violence usually has fewer (and sometimes no) requirements for participation or engagement. When one stranger encounters another ethically or politically, it takes *place* at a specific site "…with an interior and an exterior, a way in and a way out" (Kearney and Semonovich 2011). There is an underexamined tension in the hospitality of listening to a stranger in an inhospitable place.

The phrase "host nation" implies the presence or expectation of a guest, which indicates hospitality or at least the intention of it, but when a host chooses detention and restriction for its guest(s), the conditions shift from hospitality to hostility, openness to occlusion. This is the opposite of self-knowing or self-knowledge and an activity that produces a disorder of civility in associations and which dismembers community. Sophocles shows us in *Oedipus Rex* that we may only come to know ourselves by way of the *xenos*. "One can recognize the Stranger at the gates because one was once a Stranger oneself" (Kearney and Semonovich 2011, 36). We should examine the encounter of refugees with their foes and hosts with close analysis, rigid exactness, and description,

but my research includes “hospitable listening” respect and inclusion of our inherent disposition and proclivity for poetic reflection as human beings. “Being with Others has an inverse; Being Without” (Haynes 2016, 163). Migrant and facilitator-as-listener should remain with each other in a benevolent openness to exchange.

Figure 3. A mural at the Zaatari Camp in Jordan and a group of Syrian children in front

Chapter 2: The rhetorical artifacts of war in Syria, 2011 – 2023

Over the last twenty years, the language of refuge and the cultural elaborations of the experience of refuge seeking have proliferated and deepened commensurate with the global spike in the displacement of people. As with any expansion of a field and the ways in which scholars of various disciplines involve themselves in a subfield like refugee literature, cinema, and transmedia, terms inevitably take shape through tension and sometimes hold conflicting meaning for those in a neighboring field. Social media also has an important role for Syrians fleeing armed conflict in their homeland. Selecting and defining terms inherently decreases the scope and method of qualitative analysis of unique case studies of refugee-led transmedia and even social media. This is all a uniquely rhetorical act. Kenneth Burke explains:

> Men seek vocabularies that are reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality (Burke 2000, 158).

Literature and film lend themselves to a unique and honed selection of the reality of forced migration, and it is no wonder that displacement of some type has featured in the plot and premise of every literary work since each liminal wandering within the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Transmedia and transmediality are terms which still function mostly in a descriptive way. They have not attained any explanatory nature, and using the term is usually just suggestive of a technical approach in storytelling. Still, the term “transmedia”

can be misleading as transmediation of a narrative is not always digital, and it is not always interactive or participatory (Jenkins 2017, 2020; Freeman and Gambarato 2019, 280–89). There are both "closed" and "open" systems of transmedia storytelling. Perhaps a more serious problem with involving transmedia in refugee narratives is the origin of transmediation as a cultural form and practice from the entertainment industry. What I propose is that a closed system – wherein the first-person composer retains control of their narrative – of transmediated refugee experience is an innovative and rewarding way for forced migrants to retain (or *re*-attain) dignity, mourn at their own pace, and maintain intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge. This is not to the exclusion of other filmmakers, writers, or other "transmediators" but an intentional inclusion of greater contours of collective narration of a cultural memory.

Writers still manage to over-compose and force refugee narratives into frames within which they do not thrive. Amid many other meanings, frames are "the ways of selectively carving up experience as essential to the conduct of war" (Butler 2016, 26–27). In the experience of forced migration, the characters write the "plot" in real time. Architects, planners, and designers have long since constructed the "set" in city limits, military checkpoints, detention facilities, processing centers, and resettlement camps. There are the frames of the photographer and videographer. There are the many frames of politicians and policymakers, ranging from helpless, voiceless victimized mass to invading horde, a "crisis" of criminality.

Tightening the lens or setting the margins on this drama is a necessary step in the storytelling process, an attempt to manage the otherwise unmitigated chaos of armed

conflict and survival, but it is not without consequence. Few have managed to orient the narrative perspective(s) in a way that allows in enough light. The location of the first-person narration has an immediate and immense impact on the outcome.

To operationalize terms, I define literature as the perceptible product of artistic exertion, and the literati likely find this definition problematic or crude due to the likely inclusion of "genre-literature" or works deemed of lesser artistic and intellectual merit, textual "spectacles" more than literary object. "Definition itself," Burke reminds us, "is a symbolic act" (Burke 2013, 44). These definitions are important openings to a different kind of observation later, observations of *ex*pression and *re*pression in refugee experiences. My definition is suitable for the examination of literatures of a particular experience that necessitates complex and extended investigation. Literature of any form on displacement brings the everyday experience of displaced persons into the concentrated sphere of close examination, which it shares with more "literary" works.

For this research, I have listened to hours of interviews. I have read many pages of transcripts and first-hand stories. I have used NodeXL and Webscraper.io to examine immense volumes of social media content. I have seen photographs and videos of the most horrific and violent effects of armed conflict in Syria that rival – and in some cases surpass – anything I saw or experienced in combat in Afghanistan or as a first responder. I have never been to Syria, and yet Syria and its people now make frequent appearances in my dreams. Syrian civilians have experienced a staggering volume of human rights violations and war crimes, and nearly all the most propagated research and documentation since 2011 – or at least those translated to English – have this

characteristic: the victimization of Syrians. This habitual frame of Anglophonic researchers persists.

Is the answer, then, a “critical distance” from the subject? The first and seemingly insurmountable task is to contextualize and humanize the myriad data from this moment in history. Yet, when we approach with an “a-critical proximity,” the tidal wave of pain and loss wash over every researcher who ventures from the outside. And now imagine the degree of loss and pain from the inside. This is not the fullness of Syrian experience, but it is an important part of it. Nothing is tidy here.

One of the more tragic aspects of this war in Syria and international play (what better word could there be for this sad game?) is that in 2011, video and visual art were the most popular media for expression in the revolution, media in which Syrians excelled and changed in fascinating ways. Murals and posters became outlets for the rhetorical exertion of the previously unheard, and film, especially in documentary form, saw an intricate and nuanced expansion in Syria (Halasa, Omareen, and Mahfoud 2014). Each instance of expression in these media does not contain the entirety of the concept or narrative to which it belongs. Like a stone skipping across the water, each encounter the world makes with the narrative adds another touch point to the path it travels. The ripples involve more lives with each contact. This is transmediality.

Transmedia: tracing the stone’s trajectory

The term "transmedia" refers to the creation of a single story or narrative across multiple media platforms, such as film, television, literature, and video games. However,

it is easily confused with multimedia, which is the manifestation of the same story in two or more media with no additional information. The concept of transmedia storytelling has been around for many years, and we can trace its history to the early days of media, but it has only taken more precise shape in the 21st century.

One of the earliest examples of transmedia storytelling is Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*. The novel is transmedial in nature, an epistolary sequence of stories within stories, discontinuous flashbacks and memories contained within a continuous narrative. Over the years, the story has been adapted into numerous films, plays, and other forms of media, each adaptation adding new layers to the original narrative. Traditional print form followed in a linear and progressive fashion. Film provided more directive tone, atmosphere, and visualization of action sequences, some of which do not appear as precisely in Shelley's original. Re-telling and re-imagining by authors and directors enrich the wider narrative.

In the 20th century, the development of new media technologies, such as television and film, led to greater opportunities for new forms of transmedia storytelling. The Star Wars franchise began as a film in 1977 but has since expanded into novels, comic books, video games, and other forms of media. Each instance of the saga in various media provides new information or new insight into established information, deepening and/or broadening it. By the late 90s, marketing for these enterprises also took on characteristics of transmedia with films like The Blair Witch Project. "Drops" and "leaks" with documentary-style first-person footage created the illusion of an actual witch narrative, complete with victims, survivors, and lore.

In 2003, media scholar Henry Jenkins first coined the term "transmedia" in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. Jenkins argues that transmedia storytelling is becoming increasingly important in the digital age, as audiences begin to demand more immersive and interconnected narratives that spanned multiple platforms. It brings the audience from a passive recipient of story to an active participant in the storytelling and narrative propagation processes, widening the networks within which the narrative operates. The stone goes deeper with each touch on the water until it finally sinks in, rests in the bottom.

Since then, the practice of transmedia storytelling has continued to evolve and expand, with new technologies such as social media and virtual reality offering new opportunities for [co-]creators to engage audiences with complex and interactive narratives. Today, transmedia storytelling is a key part of the entertainment industry, with many major franchises using multiple media platforms to tell their stories and engage with fans.

But what could be “entertaining” about the torture, rape, and murder of civilians in a war zone, a war zone that used to be “home”? What does transmedia marketing have to do with displacing astronomical numbers of human beings from their homes? How does this not fetishize and re-victimize an oppressed people?

In some ways, it does, or can. The problem is not that the theory of transmedia or its historical application cheapens or trivializes the experience of Syrian refugees. The problem is how we have chosen to use it and the subsequent uncomfortable juxtaposition. The short answer is money. There is immense financial reward in operationalizing

transmedia theory, as demonstrated above with wildly successful media empires, not unlike what happened to psychology in the 60s when B.F. Skinner's behaviorism applied to advertising (Bartholomew 2013, 4; Baum 2017).

Stone skip: cinema

As a theoretical orientation, I adhere to Kamran Rastegar's usage of cinema "as a critical arena for discerning the process of competition over cultural memory." Rastegar argues "that cinema may at times reaffirm dominant readings of these memories, while at other times subjects them to critique" (Rastegar 2015, 4). I define cinema as the art and technology of creating moving images for the purpose of storytelling, entertainment, or education.

Film is a fascinating and intricate medium that combines various elements – visuals, sound, music, and dialogue – to convey its message or narrative to an audience. In the late 19th century, inventors and entrepreneurs such as Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers developed technologies for capturing and projecting moving images. Since then, cinema has evolved into a complex and diverse experience of story, encompassing a wide range of genres, styles, and techniques, the subject of both popular consumption and academic inquiry. One of the defining features of cinema is its ability to immerse the audience in a visual and auditory experience, one that is nonlinear and which can call forth emotions, thoughts, and ideas. As film scholar David Bordwell writes in

Film Art, cinema "offers us the possibility of experiencing another world, or seeing our own world in a new light, and thus enlarging our own sense of what is possible, desirable, or valuable" (Bordwell and Thompson 2013, 3). Yet, in this conception, the audience is still a passive recipient of a product.

Cinema is also a form of communication, as it allows filmmakers to express their ideas and perspectives to a wide audience. As communication scholar James W. Carey explains, "film, like all media, is a medium of communication, a language of symbolic action through which realities are constructed and shared" (Carey 2009, 17). Through the use of cinematic language, such as framing, editing, and sound design, filmmakers can convey complex ideas and emotions to the audience, which only deepen with each subsequent [re-]viewing. The audience participates more fully in this elaboration of ambiguity. Cinema is a cultural artifact that reflects and shapes the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the society in which it is produced. As film scholar Richard Maltby notes, cinema is "…a product of the society that makes it, reflecting and refracting the dominant values and ideologies of that society" (Maltby 2003, 2). Films can both reflect and challenge the dominant narratives and power structures of a society, making cinema a powerful tool for cultural critique and social change.

Cinema is a complex and multifaceted medium that combines art, technology, communication, and culture. It is a form of storytelling that allows filmmakers to express their ideas and perspectives, while also plunging the audience into a visual and auditory experience that can elicit emotions, provoke thoughts, and inspire ideas. It is crucial to

understand and analyze the language and dynamics of cinema, as well as its potential for cultural critique and as an impetus for social change.

Cinema has been a key medium in the development of transmedia storytelling, as it provides a rich and complex narrative world participants can extend and explore through other media as a form of rhetorical invention. "[Cinema] is often the source text for transmedia storytelling, providing the story world, characters, and themes that are then elaborated, explored, and extended in other media" (Jenkins 2006, 93). For example, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has expanded beyond the films to include television shows, comic books, and video games, creating a vast and interconnected narrative universe, one which actively captures and shapes public memory, crafts our current sliver of the stream of time.

Transmedia storytelling also offers new opportunities for communication and engagement with audiences. In her article "Transmedia Storytelling in Television," Kristina Busse writes: "transmedia storytelling often involves a participatory component, inviting audiences to engage with the narrative through active participation, feedback, or even creation of their own content" (Busse, Kristin 2017, 93). This approach allows for a more active and collaborative relationship between creators and audiences, as well as opportunities for audience empowerment and agency.

Cinema and transmedia also intersect in their use of genre conventions and narrative structures. In *Complex TV*, media scholar Jason Mittell tells us "…genre is a fundamental organizing principle of transmedia storytelling, as it provides a shared set of expectations and conventions that can be deployed across media to create a coherent and

engaging narrative world" (Mittell 2015, 175). This approach allows for a more fluid and flexible instance of genre and subgenre, hybridity, and experimentation.

Transmedia storytelling offers new insights and perspectives on the social and cultural contexts in which cinema is produced and consumed. Jonathan Gray explains: "transmedia storytelling can provide a means of exploring social issues and tensions that are not typically addressed within the confines of traditional media texts" (Gray 2010, 5). This approach allows for a more diverse and inclusive representation of voices and perspectives, as well as opportunities for social and cultural critique. The intersection of cinema and transmedia storytelling opens a door to innovative and collaborative ways to convey experience, to place and recall memories.

The experiences of Syrian refugees since 2011 manifest in a variety of cultural artifacts, including film and visual art. The 2017 documentary *Last Men in Aleppo* follows the experiences of a group of volunteer rescue workers, known as the White Helmets, in Aleppo, Syria. The film provides a powerful and moving portrait of the human cost of the conflict, as the volunteers risk their lives to save others amidst the chaos and destruction of the war. Syrian Museum is an ongoing art project started by artist and activist Issam Kourbaj in response to the destruction of cultural heritage sites in Syria. Kourbaj creates miniature replicas of Syrian artifacts and displays them in a makeshift museum, drawing attention to the loss and devastation the war has caused. "Sea of Stories" is an art installation, created by artist and filmmaker Zena el Khalil, and it uses sound, video, and sculpture to explore the experiences of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The installation features interviews with refugees, as well as objects and

artifacts collected from refugee camps, tangible, physical reminders that serve as objective correlatives to life in the camps.

These are just a few examples of the many cultural artifacts that have emerged in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Each of these works uses different media and techniques to tell the stories of those affected by the conflict, highlighting the power of art and media to raise awareness and cultivate empathy.

First-person narration

Across two decades, we have seen a marked proliferation of cinema from "the unifying vision of an individual artist" on the experience of displaced people, and technology and global mobility have facilitated greater access to both production processes and streaming films. Documentaries and some fictional films treat and examine experiences of refugees most often from the Middle East and southwest Asia, countries like Iraq and Syria, Iran and Afghanistan. The plight is often that of an Arab Muslim asylum-seeker or group of asylees who face treacherous journeys, discrimination, persecution and poverty, and externalization from Europe, the United States, and commonwealth nations. Others portray the burdensome predicament of Latin American refugees, moving across vast expanses of terrain by myriad modes of transportation, traversing national and cultural boundaries one after another. Each of these cinematic portrayals has the added complication of representation, of *framing* these complex experiences in a responsible, equitable way. Each of these productions preconditions the audience – passive consumers rather than active participants – by way of marketing and

promotion of the finished product. Most often, snips, clips, and frames of the product circulate in digital spaces, and still, the circulated images and clips function to break out of the frame, move beyond it. As Judith Butler observes:

> The movement of the image or the text outside of confinement is a kind of "breaking out," so that even though neither the image nor the poetry can free anyone from prison, or stop a bomb or, indeed, reverse the course of the war, they nevertheless do provide the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalized horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice and an end to violence (Butler 2016, 11).

The immersion of the viewer in a deft and thoughtful piece of artistic cinema often *undoes* the viewer and moves, *compels*, the audience to involve themselves in the experience, a shift from seat to feet, from passive observer to active participant. Artists, writers, researchers, filmmakers intercede in the otherwise "quotidian acceptance" of more mainstream media depictions and narratives, which often favor a more critical distance from the subject. Writers and filmmakers also provide the invaluable elucidation of that which is otherwise unattended and invisible to the public eye.

There are few, if any, films that violate the passive acceptance of war more than *For Sama*, a 2019 award-winning documentary produced and narrated in the first person by Waad al-Kataeb. The film provides slivers of key moments and narratives from Waad's five years in Aleppo before and during the Battle of Aleppo, where she was an economics student when the 2011 riots began against the Assad regime. Waad's husband, Hamza al-Kataeb, was one of the last living physicians in Aleppo, and as he was

committed to providing care to the local population, the family was essentially trapped in what became an active war zone.

The frames are shaky, unfocused at times, but Waad's narration provides a focal point, a point of reference amid chaos. It is not overcomposed or contrived. It is sincere, pressing, unpretentious. Most importantly, it is fully controlled by Waad and her vision, which sees beyond Aleppo's skyline, to Sama's future. Waad orients the entirety of the documentary to her daughter, at times with the insinuation Waad may not be with her when she finally sees the film. As an anchor to the abstractions and emotional torrents of the experience, Waad draws the viewer – always Sama – to objective correlates: a plant, a blanket, a meal. She transmediates their story in real-time, organically charging each object with the rhetorical energy of their lived experience (or perhaps releasing the charge), integrating an epistemological concept with a poetic concept. As Paul Ricoeur explains in *The Rule of Metaphor*, "in all metaphor one might consider not only *the* word alone or *the* name alone, whose meaning is displaced, but *the pair* of terms or relationships between which the transposition operates" (Ricoeur 2003, 23). These objective correlates, these organic metaphors, are the site of *For Sama*'s transmediality and allow opportunity for the viewer to participate in the narrative through the heuristic of emotion and thought.

Researchers in transmedia storytelling with refugees often encounter barriers for data collection – even with techniques such as participant directed photovoice, and it can be difficult to incorporate these methods with the participants' daily lives (Gladwin 2020, 6–7; Lenette 2017). However, Waad directs and captures each shot and frame of her

experience and even those around her without pausing to compose, interrogating the form and function of the object, or "workshopping" the technical approach.

Waad al-Kataeb demonstrates impressive skill and understanding in her production of *For Sama* with a clear idea of her viewer, but there is also room in ethnography of displacement for dirty realism as we see in the controversial war documentary, *Combat Obscura*, by Miles Lagoze. As a combat cameraman and enlisted Marine Lance Corporal, Lagoze had what Anderson Cooper and his crew did not: Lagoze was absolutely and without question one of us. The premise of a combat production specialist, photographer, or videographer embedded with combat troops is that the footage and interactions with the troops will serve as war propaganda, after-action material for tacticians, and recruitment. Given the immense amount of b-roll, troops often lapse into a state of comfort or altogether ignore the phenomenon of being recorded.

Far from the clean-cut, chiseled jaw caricatures in dress blues on Marine Corps recruiting ads, the Marines in Lagoze's film were dirty, foul-mouthed, tired, and irreverent. This is precisely the state I had found myself in only a year prior to Lagoze's deployment in a completely different unit. Helmand is a place full of abundant crops and other resources cultivated by the locals, and *Combat Obscura* captured a common occurrence for war-time troops: frequent drug use, particularly cannabis. The footage is reminiscent of famous frames from the Vietnam War in which olive drab clad troops took turns smoking cannabis from a joint and shotgun. Marines hunkered down in a wadi, tired from patrolling kilometer after kilometer in sweltering heat, and take turns smoking from

assorted methods of delivery. Like Vietnam, opium is another substance of choice, which is plentiful in Afghanistan. Despite the obvious process of filming, the Marines continue.

Unlike *For Sama*, there is no target audience or viewer for *Combat Obscura*. There is narration. There is hardly an organic narrative arc or character development. The entire film is like the war Lagoze hopes to depict: random disjointed scenes of excruciating boredom interspersed with scenes of unimaginably intense violence and loss with interludes of hedonistic debauchery.

Originally intended for recruitment and propaganda, it became immediately apparent that the footage was mostly useless for that end, and Lagoze had it declassified for his personal use (Simkins 2019). The first nature of the footage collection made it naturally rhetorical, or rhetoric as mere persuasion (Haynes 2016, 4). Lagoze's intent to increase his ownership of it for the purposes of progeny and community made it much more, placed closer to the transmedial core of a truer rhetoric. They are rhetorical in "that they have a purpose," and "they use conventions of [media] "and culture to satisfy that purpose." Scholars can use Lagoze's declassified and distributed media to tell us "a great deal about the author's purpose and we could examine the text for rhetorical features that reflect the culture's beliefs and the relationships between individuals" (Marshall 1995, 5–7).

This relationship between displaced and disjointed young Marines and the experience of refugees in war zones and in flight from persecution is key in moving from association to community. It is difficult for viewers and outsiders to comprehend because precisely because of images of Marines laughing off a misplaced airstrike or a Syrian

mother crying over the mangled body of her toddler covered in debris. This brutal paradox calls out for meaning-making – specifically to those who experience it – and the forced migrant and the combatant have to either plunge into the chasm of mourning that must follow collective trauma or lash themselves to the cyclic violence that inevitably follows. The denial of closure, of a homeplace, is a traumatic suspension that allows neither mourning nor melancholia (Rastegar 2015, 96). *I argue this is one of the phenomena that so readily binds combat veterans to their former local-national comrades who become refugees.*

This bond is not a mere friendship – though it is also deeply this – but a cultural indicator of a wider community rhetorically operating within a network to improve and empower its respective members. There is evidence of this shift in authority and community and the need for empowerment in the very fact that the Marine Corps attempted to block Lagoze's release of his documentary, compiled while at Columbia University film school. A Marine spokesman said, "The actions depicted in the film of these few betrayed the trust and safety of their fellow Marines; they selfishly put their own self-interests over their unit, and by doing so put their entire team at risk" (Szoldra 2019). It is important to note the film opens with Marines waiting for an airstrike to hit a compound, but the strike hits the wrong building. That error was likely tragic to the local population, and the release of footage of such an egregious error was likely tragic to the Marine Corps. The Marines around the camera were effectively displaced, dislocated from their community, left with only each other. Lagoze's subsequent struggle with military authorities is a part of the post-war reckoning that inevitably ensues following

armed conflict. While the locals and the Marines may have found themselves at odds with one another, eventually, we are in many ways as close to the forced migrant as we are to the Marine Corps. Only we – combat veterans and displaced persons – can say to each other, "No one knows what we know until we say it together in the way only we can."

The function of representing war – especially when mediated by the state or state-sponsored actors – is the expansion and inflation of the ego of each individual member of the in-group. "Sometimes there are triumphalist images that give us the idea of the human with whom we are to identify: for instance the patriotic hero who expands our own ego boundary ecstatically into that of the nation" (Butler 2006, 145). Regardless of side, the spectacle of war is far more enthralling to a wider audience than any spectacle we produce in peace. The British cavalry in the Crimean War brought Tennyson's pen to paper:

> When can their glory fade?
> O the wild charge they made!
> All the world wonder'd.
> Honour the charge they made!"
> Honour the Light Brigade,
> Noble six hundred!

What have we done with cloaked and spectacular patriotism? It is a distinctly human tragedy more souls are stirred to war by the spectacle of violence than are stirred to peace by the gentle kindness of a social worker. The representative of peace produces

no spectacle yet becomes a phantom. We are more captivated by detonated JDAMs than by the laughter of schoolchildren. We find this too in the cultural insensitivity and raw brutality of the troops in *Comat Obscura*.

Transmedia curation and the cultural memory of displacement

One obvious contrast between *For Sama* and *Combat Obscura* is the setting; the former is in Syria, and the latter is Helmand Province, Afghanistan. I have personal and professional experience assisting in the safety, security, evacuation, and resettlement of displaced people from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. This may lead some to ask: why research Syria/ns? Why not research rhetorics of Afghan refugees? Or Iraqis? Or Ukrainians, which is an active, widely covered armed conflict with immense internal displacement and external refugee flow? Kakuma in Kenya is one of the largest refugee camps in the world, full of Sudanese and Somali from the 2nd Sudanese Civil War, with a population greater than my hometown in South Carolina. The answer rests in four "frames": the origin and complexity of the combatants involved, the proliferation and *curation* of film/literature of first-person narratives, the time between initial conflict and the current, and the cultural memory in and around the conflict.

Cinema contributes to the cultivation and entrenchment of cultural memory of traumatic social experiences, and the curation of experience for cinematic purposes is a *de*selection of the reality of others in favor of a more specific narrative. As Mieke Bal and Kamran Rastegar explain, cultural memory is a "cultural phenomenon as well as an

individual or social one" with as much bearing on the past and it does the present (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999, 7; Rastegar 2015, 4).

There was a cultural memory which preceded the initial conflict between the Assad regime and the citizenry of Syria, and concurrently, there was motive in external parties – Russia, the US, Turkey, Daesh – to seize upon a crucial moment of transition or series of transitions. The purpose was (is?) to either capitalize on the cultural memory of the Syrian people and/or practicing Muslims or to curate public memory in such a way that favor shifts to one party or another, not unlike propaganda.

The intersection of public memory and cinema finds rhetoric as its vertical plane, a filter or screen. The pre-attentive attributes of cinematic experience – the form, framing, pacing, craft, and critical elements – predisposes or persuades the viewer to identify with a specific community. For those who do not speak Arabic fluently, films about the experience of Syrian refugees deepen but also complicate the semiotic encounter with public memory through translation and subtitles. The act of "interpreting" a film has the additional layer or screen of the problems of translation and transcultural communication. One of the allusions in my use of "screen" comes from the phrase, "terministic screen," which Kenneth Burke develops in his essay "Terministic Screens" in *Language as Symbolic Action* and which David Blakesley further elucidates in "The Rhetoric of Film and Film Studies" in *The Terministic Screen*.

Shifting from associative relationship to community relationship and, therefore, empathy necessitates reliance on visual rhetorical correlates. In *For Sama*, indiscriminate bombs uprooted and destroyed Waad and Hamza's plants outside their new family home

in Aleppo. Non-Arabic speakers or speakers with limited Arabic proficiency can *see* the correlate in the plants and have an *openness* to organic metaphor in the visual manifestation of the Waad's violent displacement. The Waad family wants to stay, but ultimately, they cannot, and still, they want to return but cannot. The viewer can encounter this in the visual of Hamza's defeated but persistent watering of the replanted plants. Even with all the necessary resources, could the roots take hold again in the same soil?

The curation of these images and sequences *by those who experience them and identify them* is a more effective means of conveying experience, stimulating empathy, enabling closure and mourning, and cultivating community than the broader curation of a canon of refugee cinema. The cinematic memory should not be dictated only by those who did not live it, which is not to say that third-party or outside voices cannot play a role in the cultural memory production of a traumatic experience like war and forced displacement. There is a great opportunity for the archiving, curation, and thoughtful [re]presentation (sometimes posthumously) of transmediated narratives of refugee experience: the resumé of an Afghan interpreter translated into German and printed for distribution across a hybrid network of connections and potential employers, the airport photos of Iraqis on the edge of evacuation in Baghdad, or the documentary footage of a Syrian mother intended for her infant daughter. Each of these transmediations contain an arc of the full circle of the narrative, and it requires a community to create and maintain it, to bring life forward from it, for peace.

Stone skip: literature

Displacement is a condition which *takes place* for the refugee. The place is a transmedia artifact of the experience of forced migration, discursive and material. The lens and the pen are the utensils by which the composer coneys this reality, and the closer the composer is to a condition of empathy with the primary experiencer of displacement, the more likely the audience will be to receive the objective correlates, the concrete objects in the "set" or "setting" that the storyteller loads with formulas for memories and emotions. The most ideal scenario for this storytelling phenomenon is for the refugee to be the primary storyteller. In these dis/places, the refugee is the writer, and rhetoric is the refuge (Haynes 2016, 101). That from which the refugee takes refuge varies, but most often, it is war.

There are some baseline premises in the situation of refugees and war, and it may help to reduce them to single essential narrative lines. There are three sides of a story of war and/or displacement. There is the buttstock side, the muzzle side, and the truth above them both. War stories are simply situated as elements of wider stories of displacement, frequently [socio]political. Too often, refugee stories just become the sequel to war stories. The truth is across the continuum of them both. To give one primacy or privilege over the other is to have only an arc of the full circle of truth, and without the complete story, without the fullness of the literature, we have only externalized the echoes of our own heads.

My own experience is a fair example of a war story, with elements of displacement and unmitigated interpersonal violence. It is also important to account for

the influence of my own lived experience as a willful combatant as I attempt research into the world of forced migration and facilitate the transmedia storytelling of refugee experience. In 2001, the September 11th attacks occurred a day before my thirteenth birthday, and they had a profound impact on my adolescent mind as did the mythos of American patriotism and military superiority that immediately followed. For four years, every teenage birthday I had was just a rerun of death and displacement, and then I enlisted in the active-duty component of the US Marine Corps as an infantryman with the singular purpose of killing terrorists. In 2009, I deployed to Helmand Province in Afghanistan, and I delivered on my promise with interest.

The usual premise of combat experience in a war is that the combatant locates with reasonable accuracy the enemy's position, closes in on them, and kills them before they can inflict harm on anyone else. In this representation – reinforced by war movies and novels – the whole interaction is straightforward. The actual experience is rarely that tidy, and even journalistic and other embedded storytelling methods find it difficult to penetrate the ethnographic barricade of the observer effect.

Troops understand and remain acutely aware that we are the subjects of a narrative exercise. In Helmand, Anderson Cooper came on assignment from CNN to cover the invasion of the province, which was – at that time – the largest ground assault since the Vietnam War and the largest heloborne assault since the Battle of Fallujah. Before Cooper and his team ever landed, commanders and senior enlisted leaders made it clear to every Marine and sailor in our unit that we were not to engage with Cooper or any member of a news media organization unless explicitly directed to by a competent

military authority. Cooper had another crucial barrier: he was not "one of us." He was merely among us in an *associative* way, not as a member of our *community,* which made us suspicious of our alleged status as subjects. We were the *objects* of *something* we did not understand. Outside of rigidly directed interviews, we were to remain well outside of earshot and eyesight. By the time the combat had started, Cooper and his crew were nowhere near it anyway. The result was a high-quality production, well-crafted but stereotypical, representation of American war propaganda. None of us cared. We were comfortable enough with being the new Vietnam.

Before we pushed out into the bush, we wrote death letters for our buddies to mail to our families if we died. Much like a photovoice project, we smuggled cameras into our gear to take unauthorized pictures for posterity rather than glory, for a world we would never rotate back to, many of us with kids we never thought we would see born, wives we would never dance with again, fathers we would never hug again. We all had our Sama.

We were already displaced from our homes, transposed into someone else's, and we only wanted someone to remember us when we inevitably died. But when some of us made it back, these transmedia artifacts coalesced into an archive of trauma, regret, and sorrow. This was the real coverage.

A barrier to accessing the fullness of war stories is the mythos around them. It is ordinarily the combatants which guard them, curate them, disseminate them with varying degrees of discretion. There are more genres open to the combatant than the refugee as well. Refugees must sometimes fictionalize their experiences to protect themselves and

their families for retribution. Combatants present their narratives from a pre-attentive culture of mythos – a noiseless, tasteless, odorless vapor which permeates each story. Each story gets the glorious first-person perspective from that prime piece of real estate: behind the buttstock.

A barrier to the fullness of refugee stories is often the persistent risk of compromising their physical and/or socioeconomic safety. They may have not yet reached their destination, and to the contrary of our most common assessments, their destination may really be a return to their home. Again, the common experience between combatants and refugees is violence, which is embedded in the term refugee itself. Yet, in the refugee narrative, there is a presumed voicelessness, a muted nature not always found in combatant narratives or war stories. Before there were M-16s and AK-47s rifles, 5.56 and 7.62mm cartridges of Syria, there was the Enfield Pattern 1853 and the .577 Minie of British Raj, the roots and fruits of what became Orientalism in the Great Game and Western imperialism.

Orientalism and post-colonialism

Literary scholars widely regard Edward Said as a founding figure of what became post-colonialism or post-colonial critical theory. In *Orientalism*, Said describes the term itself and lays out the structures by which Western or "Occidental" authorities claim knowledge – and, therefore, power – over Eastern or "Oriental" people. He writes:

> To the extent that Western scholars were aware of contemporary Orientals or Oriental movements of thought and culture, these were perceived either as silent

> shadows to be animated by the Orientalist, brought into reality by them or as a kind of cultural and international proletariat useful for the Orientalist's grander interpretive activity (Said 1978, 208).

The East-West social binary construct subsequently only exists in one's relation to another, West to East, Occidental to Oriental. He argues the West views and treats the East as a monolithic Other purely for the sake of growing and solidifying its own identity as the West, especially Europe. The East becomes exotic and fetishized, "speaking" only by way of Western translation and interpretation. However, there are other forms of this phenomenon that are not neatly within the East-West dichotomy. There are regionally specific instances of this in Africa and Latin America, and in concentrated social interactions and institutionalized behavior in North America and Europe. They are too often bound and voiceless beneath and below the powerful and privileged.

In her 1988 essay, "Can the subaltern speak?", Gayatri Spivak famously examines the lack of female voice and agency in the Sati practice of widows' self-immolation via their husband's funeral pyre. She brings a Marxist and feminist perspective to the problem of Said's Orientalism, though she does not name it explicitly, and she defines the subaltern not merely as a general, oppressed group but as those who are outside hegemonic discourse (Spivak 1988; 2021). However, she has since deliberately and expressly distanced herself from what grew into the field of post-colonialism, writing at length about her disposition.

In 1999, Spivak published *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason*, and again in a 2021 essay, she refers to the book as her formal separation from the field. "But

‘separation’ is, of course, a relationship; and there are different kinds of separation. Perhaps this relationship constitutes itself by way of the fact that, in the country of my citizenship, the heritage of the postcolonial is dubious,” she reflects in the introduction (Spivak 2021). Though, she does go on to describe a “new subaltern,” which she defines via Gramsci as “social groups in the margins of history” (Spivak 2021, 23). This is a surprisingly broad definition for the beginning and departure from her insistence an oppressed person is not merely subaltern by virtue of their oppression so long as they are still within the hegemonic discourse. Still, she does explain:

> I believe that the sensibility trained in the humanities as I have been describing them, can also begin to see that the border between the new subaltern and disciplinarized humanities teachers and students is an unstable border.

Spivak’s riff on “border” deserves close attention, and she delineates the types of borders with a stable-unstable binary, a concept which reflects the experience of refugees in flight. Spivak continues, “Subaltern classes cannot use the state despite the fact that in a democracy, the people supposedly control the state” (Spivak 2021, 23). She uncovers in this single line the problem of reliance on the state to form community and all the trust, culture, values, and characteristics inherent in this site of empathy building, the first step toward transcending mere association (state) and achieving community (society).

In the disciplinary context of Spivak’s commentary, her explanation departs from, or inadvertently ignores, the immediacy of the refugee experience and preoccupies itself too much with the Marxist concerns of state control. Those concerns are not negligible nor necessarily invalid, but they exclude or divert an international *community* of

collaborators and coworkers with more humanitarian interests, the latter of which is more immediately relevant to the purpose of my research.

There has been a tendency in public discourse to render the refugee experience as an abstract monolith, a vague category of lived experience toward which commentators haphazardly gesture. This gesturing risks ignoring the unequal experiences of asylum seeking, privileging certain forms of migration, and "dehistoricizing" the figure of the migrant (Nail 2015). However, in post-colonialism, authors often carefully distinguish between "diasporic, exilic, and refugee literature" (Gallien 2018, 723). The common ground among them is displacement.

Chapter 3: Empathy, with refugee as rhetor

A rhetorical approach to empathy-focused transmedia storytelling

Empathy: Multidimensional Emergence/y

Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, has long been a topic of interest in various fields of study, including psychology, sociology, and philosophy. In recent years, it has gained significant attention due to its role in cultivating interpersonal relationships, promoting ethical and social development, and enhancing communication. For Edith Stein, empathy involves a process of intentional consciousness through which individuals not only perceive the experiences of others but also genuinely experience those experiences themselves. In this view, empathy goes beyond mere sympathy or compassion and entails a direct experiential engagement with the emotions and thoughts of others.

Stein argues that empathy is made possible through what she terms "non-primordial intuition" (Stein 1917, 3:10). This intuitive understanding arises from a fundamental interconnectedness between individuals, facilitated by shared human experiences and a common humanity. Through empathic intuition, individuals bridge the gap between their own subjective consciousness and the experiences of others, thereby accessing the inner world of the Other. Stein's account of co-givenness illuminates a phase of the empathic encounter she refers to as "emergence" (Stein 1917, 3:10; Shum 2012, 180). During emergence, one acquires an outer grasp of the Other's experience in a mode of intuition that Stein calls "the non-primordial parallel to perception" (Stein 1917,

3:10; Shum 2013, 122; 2012, 180). Though, for Stein, empathy is not only a form of non-primordial intuition but also one of understanding, and in Stein's conception of it, the empathic understanding transcends any less personal objectifying awareness of the Other's experience. It moves through and beyond a mere awareness of the kind of experience the Other has. Rather, Stein argues that it is part of the essential structure of acts of authentic empathy that they involve acquiring some apprehension of the nature of the Other's lived experience precisely as a lived experience. As Stein understands it, a full realization of authentic empathy entails some knowledge of what it is to be the Other having the experience at hand.

Stein highlights the role of embodiment in empathy. She posits that the body plays a crucial role in empathy, serving as a vehicle for the transmission and reception of emotional states. By embodying the experiences of others, individuals not only understand but feel what others experience. This embodied aspect of empathy forms the basis for establishing authentic human connections and deepening interpersonal understanding.

Thomas Aquinas, a renowned 13th century philosopher and Catholic theologian, offers a different perspective on empathy within the context of his virtue ethics framework. For Aquinas, empathy is closely tied to the moral development of individuals and the cultivation of virtues. He argues that empathy, as an emotional response to the suffering of the Other, serves as a catalyst for virtuous action.

For Aquinas, empathy is an essential component of the virtue of compassion, which involves actively identifying with the suffering of others and taking steps to

alleviate it. Aquinas argues that empathy cultivates compassion by prompting individuals to recognize the inherent dignity and worth of every human being. Through empathic engagement, individuals are motivated to act in ways that promote the well-being and flourishing of others, guided by the principles of justice and charity.

Aquinas emphasizes the importance of empathy in moral decision-making. By empathizing with others, individuals are better equipped to make ethical judgments, considering the impact of their actions on the lives and experiences of those affected. Empathy enhances moral discernment, enabling individuals to act in accordance with virtues such as kindness, mercy, and generosity.

Aquinas contends that empathy arises from the virtue of charity. Through charity, or more precisely, love, individuals develop a genuine concern for the well-being of others and actively seek to alleviate their suffering. For Aquinas, love is not an emotion or sentiment but the intentional act to will the good of the other (*ST* Prima Pars, Q20). In this sense, empathy becomes a moral imperative, urging individuals to act in accordance with the dictates of charity and compassion.

Aquinas emphasizes the importance of reason in guiding empathic responses. While empathy involves an emotional connection, Aquinas argues that reason should play a role in tempering and directing empathic reactions. Rational judgment is necessary to determine the appropriate course of action and to ensure that empathic responses align with moral principles. But why would we care about this Catholic theologian's ideas on virtue and morality? More importantly, what does this have to do with Syrian refugees living in the present day?

In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was the result of years of work on the part of scholars, humanitarians, and lawyers. Though he was not among the designated members of the committee which convened for the specific purpose of finalizing the Declaration, Jacques Maritain influenced its content, and he was heavily involved in advocacy (Woodcock 2006, 245). The General Assembly convened because it hoped to place at least a common document between humanity and the abyss on the edge of which all humanity had just staggered in the wake of World War II. One of the attributes that make the document so impressive is that it includes not only Aquinas' Catholic view by way of Maritain but also incorporates views from Islam and Judaism as well as religious perspectives more common in Asia and Africa (Woodcock 2006; Glendon 1998). While this may seem like a noble and encouraging undertaking, the idea that a committee this diverse could come to agreement on a set of ideas which constitute human rights without even remotely agreeing on the source of those rights is headed for a philosophical impasse and rhetorical stasis. In a follow-on symposium, Maritain writes of the Declaration's drafting process: "…someone expressed astonishment that certain champions of violently opposed ideologies had agreed on a list of [human] rights… they said, 'We agree about the rights but *on the condition that no one asks us why*'" (Maritain and Carr 1949, 1). It was Maritain who laid the foundation of the original committee and drafted the introduction to the proceedings as well as those of the follow-on symposium, and it was Eleanor Roosevelt who chaired the primary committee and guided them through the messy work of deciding what would constitute human rights (Woodcock 2006; Glendon 1998). This

formed the foundation of the laws to which human rights workers – attorneys, case managers, social workers, clinicians – appeal on behalf of displaced Syrians.

How did Maritain (and we) get there? And why Aquinas? Maritain unabashedly declared Aquinas' views as the foundation for his own in two lengthy and rigorous works: *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1958) and *Freedom in the Modern World* (1935).[2] Across these volumes, Maritain focuses on "the rights of man" and "human dignity, as it arises from natural law, rather than on the duties of man as a social animal" (Fecher 1955, 222). Throughout his work and in the introduction to the symposium proceedings, Maritain makes a distinction between personality and individuality (Maritain and Carr 1949; Fecher 1955, 200).

In its contemporary conception, empathy has often been the subject of critique in the context of politics. Giorgio Agamben offers a critical perspective on empathy within the framework of biopolitics. Agamben argues that empathy, when mobilized by political and social institutions, can be weaponized and serve as a mechanism of control and manipulation. In this view, empathy is selectively elicited to evoke emotional responses and garner public support for certain political agendas or interventions. Agamben cautions against the uncritical acceptance of empathic appeals, highlighting the need to critically evaluate the intentions and implications of empathic discourses. For Hannah Arendt, empathy can be exploited through what she terms the "politics of pity." It distinguishes between those who suffer and those who do not, a distinction between those who look on and those who are made the spectacle for on-lookers. She writes: "To avert

[2] Of course, only one of these was published prior to the Declaration.

one's eyes from the misery and unhappiness of the mass of mankind was no more possible in eighteenth-century Paris, or in nineteenth-century Century London […] than it is today in some European, most Latin American, and nearly all Asian and African countries" (Arendt 2014, 73). Agamben's concern is the exploitation of this spectacle for the purpose of social or political gain.

Agamben further examines the relationship between empathy and the construction of the Other. He argues that empathy often operates within a framework of exclusion, as it tends to be extended primarily to individuals who are perceived as being similar or belonging to the same social or cultural groups. This exclusionary aspect of empathy reinforces social divisions and hierarchies, perpetuating inequality and marginalization.

An exploration of empathy through the works of Edith Stein, Thomas Aquinas, and Giorgio Agamben provides valuable insights into its essence, role in moral development, and potential political implications. Stein's concept of empathic intuition sheds light on the experiential dimension of empathy, highlighting the importance of embodiment and shared human experiences. Aquinas' virtue ethics framework emphasizes the moral significance of empathy, linking it to compassion and virtuous action. Agamben's critique of empathy underscores the need for critical reflection on its mobilization and potential for exclusionary practices.

By synthesizing these perspectives, we – as researchers, citizens, and human beings – can develop a comprehensive understanding of empathy, considering its multidimensional nature and its complex interplay with individual, social, and political dynamics. This exploration serves as a foundation for further investigations into

empathy's application in various domains, such as interpersonal relationships, education, and social justice.

Empathy and the Politics of Othering

Stein argues that empathy is not limited to the understanding of emotions but extends to the understanding of intentional acts and meanings conveyed through communication. According to Stein, empathic understanding involves actively perceiving and interpreting the intentions of others through their words, gestures, and expressions. By engaging in empathic acts of interpretation, individuals can bridge the gap between their own consciousness and the consciousness of others, allowing for more meaningful and effective communication. Moreover, Stein highlights the significance of empathy in overcoming misunderstandings and conflicts. Through empathic communication, individuals can cultivate a sense of shared understanding, leading to increased empathy and cooperation. By acknowledging the perspectives and intentions of others, empathy becomes a powerful tool in fostering harmony and resolving disputes.

Agamben argues that political systems can manipulate inclinations to empathy to reinforce divisions and exclusions. In contemporary societies, especially digital communities, empathy is often employed selectively within an in-group, creating an "us versus them" narrative in the process of Othering (DiResta 2018; Bradshaw, DiResta, and Miller 2022; Hameleers 2023). Empathic responses tend to be more readily extended to individuals who are perceived as similar or belonging to one's own social or cultural group, while those who are different or marginalized may be excluded from empathy's

reach, less likely to stimulate the “intellectual appetite” (as Aquinas would describe the will) for one to bend to empathy. This selective empathy perpetuates social hierarchies, reinforcing prejudices and discriminatory practices. Agamben urges us to critically examine empathic discourses that emerge within political contexts, as they may serve as instruments of control and manipulation. The politics of pity can be deployed to elicit emotional responses and shape public opinion, diverting attention from systemic issues and underlying power dynamics.

A comprehensive exploration of empathy through Stein, Aquinas, and Agamben allows us to grasp the multidimensionality of this phenomenon. Stein's theory of intentional acts emphasizes the role of empathy in communication and understanding, while Aquinas' virtue ethics framework highlights empathy as a moral virtue crucial for compassionate action. Agamben's critique alerts us to the potential pitfalls of empathy when mobilized within political frameworks, exposing the politics of pity and the exclusionary dynamics it can perpetuate. By incorporating these insights into our understanding of empathy, we can approach this complex phenomenon with nuance and critical reflection. Empathy, when nurtured and practiced ethically, has the potential to foster genuine human connections, promote moral development, and inspire transformative action in both personal and societal contexts.

Rhetoric as refuge; refugee as rhetor

In the rapidly evolving landscape of human experiences, the concept of refuge has transcended its conventional boundaries to encompass the realm of rhetoric. A synthesis

of rhetoric and refuge unveils an intricate narrative where the refugee emerges not only as a subject of empathy-focused transmedia storytelling but also as a rhetor—a storyteller and narrator weaving through the tapestry of survival, resilience, and agency. In the fabric of this tapestry, rhetoric serves as both a sanctuary and a tool for empowerment.

Just as empathy unfolds as an essential foundation for transmedia storytelling, refuge too unfurls as a multifaceted concept imbued with rhetorical implications. Refuge becomes not merely a physical space but also a metaphorical terrain where rhetors construct, share, and transform narratives. As refugees navigate unfamiliar landscapes, their stories intertwine with spaces of refuge, spaces that extend beyond geographical locations and encompass socio-cultural, linguistic, and psychological dimensions. In this intricate interplay, rhetoric becomes a refuge, a means through which rhetors elaborate their quests, draw in an otherwise unmindful world, and – eventually – settle to rest.

Amid displacement and adaptation, the refugee emerges as a rhetor—a storyteller whose narrative(s) transcend(s) ordinary words and shifts into a tension between words as objects and words as signs of other words. The refugee's narrative assumes a unique dimension. Stein's empathic intuition – an idea buried in obscurity and time – comes alive as the refugee's voice echoes experiences across shared humanity, invoking a co-givenness that bridges cultural chasms. Aquinas' virtue ethics, intrinsically tied to the refugee's journey and set as the foundation for the International Bill of Human Rights, emphasizes the cultivation of virtues – compassion, resilience, and empathy – forming a lens through which the refugee's narrative takes shape.

Through the refugee's narrative, we witness narratives of survival that transcend mere accounts of physical displacement. The act of escaping war-torn homelands and navigating perilous journeys – overland, at-sea, and plane-hopping on borrowed time and dwindling money – becomes a testimony to human resilience, where adversity metamorphoses into agency. The refugee's story unfolds as a testimony to the triumph of the human spirit, where empathy – nurtured through shared experiences – transcends borders and resonates across cultures. Or it would, if the fellow humans these travelers encounter at every demarcation would see and hear them without simply processing them through lanes made of hasty schemas and cognitive distortions. And such is the plight of every well-intentioned humanitarian grinding away – with borrowed time and dwindling money – against the same systems and bureaucracies.

Refugees, once exploited as mere spectacles, can become rhetors at the helm of their own narratives – narratives like Waad Al-Kataeb's that defy the politics of pity and demand agency. Empathy, harnessed as a tool for authentic connection rather than manipulation, becomes a catalyst for transcending the barriers of Othering. The refugee's story, interwoven with empathic discourses, galvanizes action, challenging systemic injustices and transforming narratives of exclusion into narratives of unity.

Just as Edith Stein's theory of intentional acts reveals the power of empathy in communication, the transmedia narrative emerges as a channel to amplify the voices of refugees. Each platform along a transmediated story – whether textual, visual, or auditory – becomes a vessel for empathy, allowing audiences to engage, connect, and immerse themselves in the refugee's world rather than mere consumers of disjointed multimedia

attempts at “campaign.” Through interactive storytelling, the audience is not merely passive observers but active participants in the journey of understanding, forging a collective refuge of empathy.

The relationship between rhetoric, refuge, and the refugee-as-a-rhetor exemplifies the transformative potential of storytelling *and our respective place in it*. As Stein’s empathic intuition and Aquinas’ virtue ethics converge, the refugee's narrative emerges as a beacon of hope and resilience. Through the lens of Agamben's critique, the refugee’s narrative confronts the politics of pity, reshaping the discourse on displacement and identity. In the embrace of transmedia storytelling, empathy thrives as a force that transcends barriers and cultivates connections.

This exploration not only underscores the dynamic fusion of rhetoric and refuge but also accentuates the refugee as a rhetor—a bearer of narratives that traverse the realms of survival, empathy, and empowerment. Just as empathy-focused transmedia storytelling illuminates the many dimensions of empathy, this narrative encapsulates the potency of rhetoric in fostering understanding, compassion, and change. By embracing the refugee as a rhetor and refuge as rhetoric, we embark on a journey toward a world where empathy – more often than it does not – converges with resilience, forging narratives that resonate across cultures and kindling the flame of a shared humanity.

Chapter 4: Placing Syria – results and findings of a transmedia study

The state of media in Syria has been in steep decline for quite some time, but of course, it took a noticeable dive in the beginning of 2011. Private journalists must practice self-censorship in the interest of basic survival, and this has led many to alternate media platforms and prompted greater social media use for reporting and commentary. Broadly, the Syrian mass media landscape is comprised of private pro-regime, state-run, and private opposition/anti-regime operating in varying capacities. Most opposition media within Syria's geographic boundaries (which is itself a complex subject) operates outside territory controlled by the regime. Other opposition media are based in Turkey and throughout Europe. The languages include Arabic, Kurdish, English, and French (*BBC News* 2011). Strict censorship and massive infrastructure destruction and disruption have made it immensely difficult to collect reliable data on media and internet usage. Despite the ongoing difficulty of acquiring audience, access, and usage data, a combination of open-source collection/analysis and basic web-scraping techniques have proven useful in discerning at least correlations suggesting usage patterns, especially on social media platforms. However, the war in Syria and the resulting displacement of people has seen an unprecedented phenomenon that provides a unique opportunity for current and future refugees as well as researchers: the "indispensable" smartphone as persistent access to the internet, a network of contacts, and social media (Dekker et al. 2018, 2; Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Merisalo and Jauhiainen 2021).

Transmedia narratives – like the Al-Kataeb/*For Sama* case – often find their first contact with the wider world in social media networks. This necessitates analysis of

social media activity and networks so that we, as researchers, can better understand the narrative qualities and the efficacy and influence of social media in the contemporary migration process. Even before widespread social media and internet prevalence, "the effective units of migration were (and are) neither individuals nor households but sets of people linked by acquaintance, kinship, and work experience" (Dekker and Engbersen 2014, 2; Brettell and Hollifield 2023; Massey and International Union for the Scientific Study of Population 2005; Tilly 2017, 84). In my interviews with research participants, I discovered an unsurprising trend that displaced Syrians frequently relied on acquaintances, kinships, and work connections spanning the globe, maintained through social apps on smartphones. Therein, the digital storytelling of each person finds its origin. Migrants are not simply passive objects influenced by the overarching forces of migration; they are active participants – feeling, thinking, seeing, knowing subjects – who deliberately choose to move between nations. Unfortunately, external forces restrict those choices more and more across time, the longer they wait or are forced to hide.

Smartphones, social networks, and a refugee-led social media phenomenon

In my research, I interviewed a participant who I will refer to as Nadia (for her safety and privacy) about her experience of the immigration process. I had met her through a friend at a church we attend, and we first met in-person at a social gathering there. In our conversations spanning 4 sessions, she declined to be recorded in any way other than handwritten notes, and we conversed in a group setting of her friends and family members. She said:

> When you leave your home, you're not just escaping a place. The place itself is not what you dislike. You're leaving behind memories, family, and the streets you once played on. But I had hope that I could maybe find a new home, a safe place for me and my family. All this talk of the constitution [of Syria] and the [Syrian] election with [Hafez Al-Assad's] son…it was not just these politics and controversies, but other things…I just thought there were greater opportunities out there. It's hard to say why then, but now, it's different. I cannot really go back at all of course.

Nadia first moved from her home in Damascus to Lebanon in the spring of 2000, taking a break from college as she made her way to Nantes, France shortly after getting help from a friend preparing her immigration paperwork. Unfortunately, the details from this process are unclear, but it is apparent she relied heavily on this friend and several acquaintances to navigate the convoluted legal processes involving visa types, document requirements, and the everyday needs of work, food, and lodging. "Connections are more than just acquaintances. Each person I met became a lifeline, a guide in a land unfamiliar. The support I received, from a simple meal to deciphering complex paperwork, made the impossible seem possible," she said. Nadia says that without this network, she would not have survived after leaving Syria.

In France, she had two native French roommates, acquaintances she had met in one of her many community-based English classes. The group had a small but comfortable apartment close to the city, and they shared a common area with a desktop computer they had all pitched in to purchase. That little gateway to the rest of the world

provided invaluable information and research for her journey and a social media website called Myspace, where she met and grew closer to many other Syrians who shared advice and their experiences with her.

> Sharing an apartment with those two French women was an education in itself! That computer we shared? It was like a window. And Myspace reconnected me with my home and with people who knew exactly what I was going through. […][3] Do you remember trying to get the music to play and all the backgrounds and things? she said, laughing.

After September 11, 2001, it was increasingly difficult for Nadia and her extended family to immigrate to the United States. She said:

> The world seemed to shift overnight. The dream of moving to the United States, I was so close, seemed now too far away. But I held on, working hard, learning English and French of course, and building building building a life piece by piece.

She told me she worked odd jobs, usually as a receptionist, administrative assistant, or secretary, while she finished her degree in business and spent any spare time attending community-based English and French classes, which tended to be cheap or free and well-run. In one of these classes, she had grown close to a man who would eventually become her husband, and they had a daughter together.

> In all these things, in one of the classrooms, I found love. It was unexpected but welcomed. His smile got me first. Getting married there was a little difficult and nothing impressive like you see here all the time, but it was ours and all we

[3] She makes a few comments about my age and appearance here.

wanted. And when our daughter came into this world, it gave our journey a new purpose. We had to get going with more focus. The pressure.

In 2010, Nadia and her family finally made the move to the United States, settling in West Virginia for a while.

West Virginia was unlike any place I had been before. Yet, there was a familiarity to it, a kind of warmth. My husband and I, we worked hard, not just for ourselves, but for the promise of a brighter future for [our daughter]. She is everything.

Her husband worked full time at UPS and part time as a valet, and she became an accountant through a friend she had met in Lebanon.

You know, [the friend] I met in Lebanon? We might've lost touch if it wasn't for Myspace, and then Facebook came out, and we found each other on there, did the 'friend' thing, posting on each other's walls. Technology has a way of turning time zones and big distances into mere seconds and inches. Beautiful.

Nadia's experiences are interesting because her emigration journey spanned many years, and the global usage of internet and social media spiked. From the turn of the millennium, the world experienced an unprecedented boom in internet accessibility and usage. Yet, much of the world was still offline. In 2000, internet users were an exclusive group, with only 412.8 million people — or 6.8% of the global population — having access ("The Impact of Internet in OECD Countries" 2012; Roser 2018). By the end of 2021, the digital landscape had dramatically changed with the global user count escalating to an astounding 4.9 billion, accounting for over 63% of the global population.

Such rapid adoption signaled a revolution, impacting everything from the economy and social structures to politics and culture (Ritchie et al. 2023).

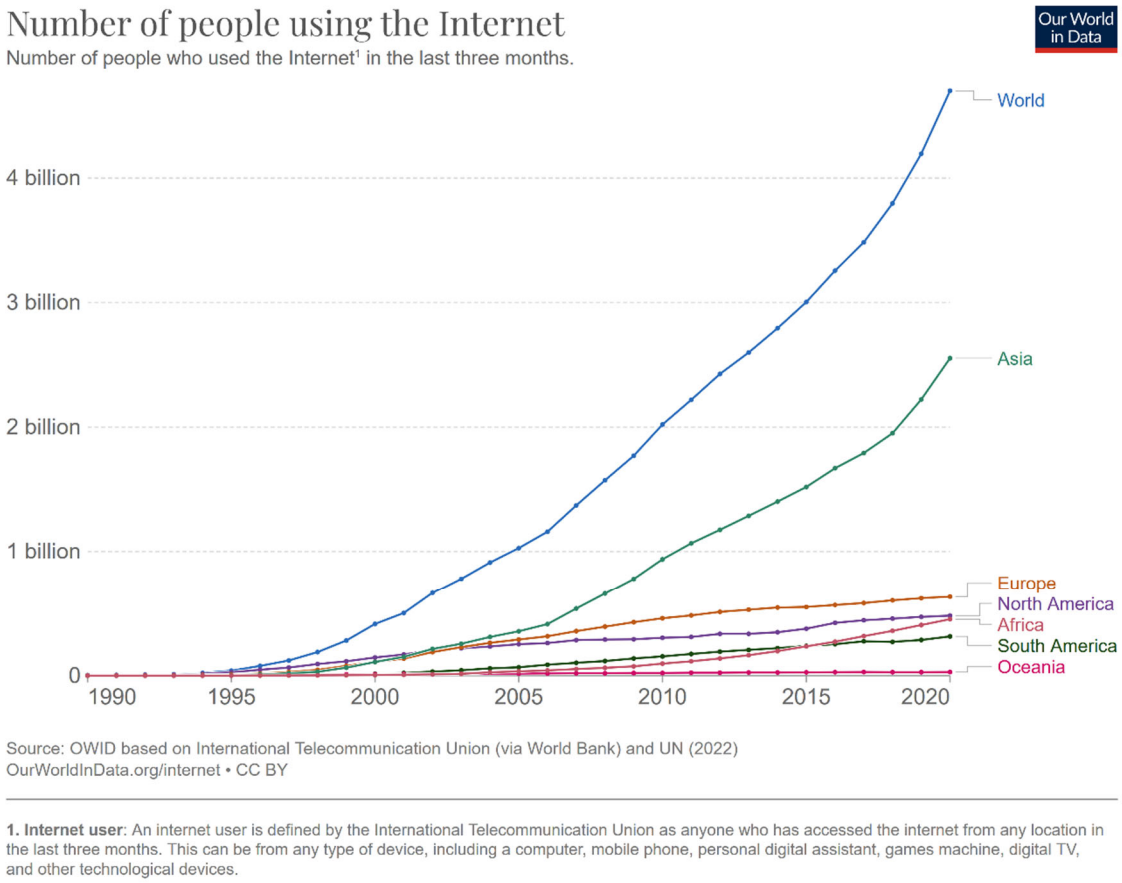

Figure 4. Number of people using the internet. (Ritchie et al. 2023)

In the early days of internet usage, many individuals connected through dial-up, which was notably slow and often unreliable. However, the early 2000s saw a transition from these cumbersome dial-up connections to broadband. Broadband not only provided faster speeds but also allowed users to use the phone line simultaneously, making it exponentially more convenient. The advent of broadband was not unique in its stunning speed (at the time); it fundamentally changed the way human beings used the internet.

Streaming services, online gaming, video conferencing, and other data-intensive activities became feasible. Countries that heavily invested in their broadband infrastructure, like South Korea, experienced direct economic benefits and became leaders in digital innovation ("The Impact of Internet in OECD Countries" 2012). While broadband was indeed a significant leap, the real disruptor came in the form of smartphones and mobile internet. Apple's iPhone launch in 2007 and the subsequent release of Android phones transformed cell phones from mere communication devices to powerful handheld computers with internet capabilities (Cisco 2023; "World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database" 2023).

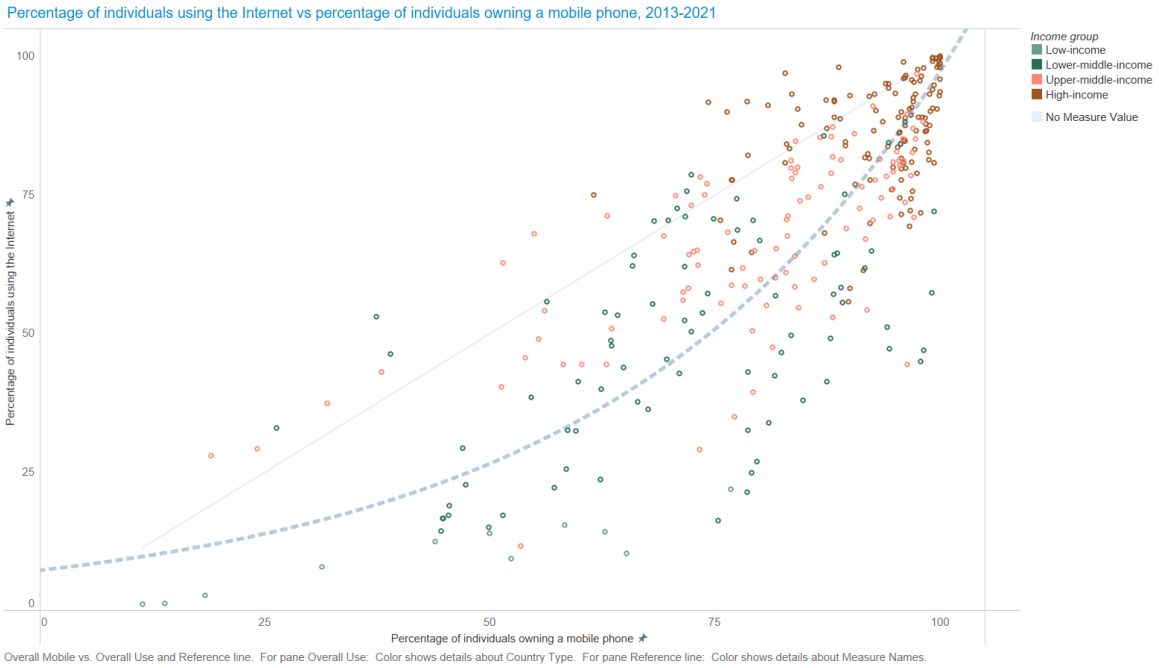

Figure 5. Global percentage of individuals using the internet vs percentage of individuals owning a mobile phone, 2013-2021, stratified by income group.

With the proliferation of smartphones, millions of people got their first taste of the internet. In developing countries, where building traditional internet infrastructure was challenging, mobile internet became the primary means of online access. In much of my own travel throughout the MENA region in the 2000s, I noticed internet cafes persisted and enjoyed high traffic. By 2021, many regions, especially in Asia and Africa, saw mobile internet users surpassing traditional desktop users.

As the demand for internet access grew, there was a consequent push to make it affordable. The 2010s witnessed a dramatic drop in the cost of internet data, especially in densely populated urban areas. Competitive markets and technological innovations were key drivers behind reduced costs. Companies like Google and Facebook even launched projects aiming to provide internet access to remote and under-served regions using innovative technologies like high-altitude balloons and drones. Simultaneously, the cost of devices, both computers and smartphones, decreased and further accelerated global internet penetration. Local manufacturers in countries like India and China started producing budget-friendly smartphones, ensuring that even the economically weaker sections of society could afford a device ("World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database" 2023; "World Bank Open Data" 2023). The domino effect of these technological advancements and increased internet accessibility was vast and varied. Economies transformed with the rise of e-commerce, digital advertising, and the gig economy. Socially, people became more connected than ever before, with social media platforms providing a global stage for everyone. Yet, the proliferation of internet usage was not without its challenges. With increased connectivity came issues like data privacy

concerns, the rise of fake news, and the challenge of digital addiction. Nations had to grapple with the balance between internet freedom and regulation, still an ongoing debate ("The Impact of Internet in OECD Countries" 2012; Silver and Johnson 2018).

The rise of social media platforms at the turn of the 21st century marked a shift in the way individuals communicate, share, and consume information. What started as simple Web 1.0 platforms for social interaction have now evolved into complex ecosystems influencing global events, commerce, politics, and individual behaviors. MySpace launched in 2003 and was one of the pioneering platforms that provided a template for modern social network sites. As Nadia fondly remembered in our conversations, users could customize their profiles, share music, post blogs, and connect with friends – even identifying their "top [#] friends" at the landing page. By 2005, it was the most visited website in the US, even surpassing digital tech giant Google. However, MySpace's reign was short-lived, and by 2008, Facebook - with its simplified design, enhanced privacy settings, and scalability – dethroned MySpace, which soon saw a decline in its user base (Boyd and Ellison 2007, 212–22). Since its inception in 2004 – and certainly since Nadia and her friends became users – Facebook changed the face of social media. Originally a Harvard-only platform, its reach quickly expanded to other universities, then high schools, and finally, to the public. Personally, I became a Facebook user in 2008 because a fellow Marine on deployment to the Middle East showed me the UI/UX and said it allowed easier communication with friends and family than individualized emails or "snail mail" postcards. Facebook's acquisition strategies, including the notable purchases of Instagram in 2012 and WhatsApp in 2014, further

solidified its position. By the end of the 2010s, it was not just a social network but an enormous digital ecosystem, influencing everything from global politics to local businesses (Frier 2020, 301).

Launched in 2006, Twitter (now “X”) introduced a novel microblogging system where users could post messages called tweets of 140 characters or less. Twitter became a platform for real-time updates, making it especially relevant for news dissemination, celebrity interactions, and even political discourses. Its influence was so potent that it played crucial roles in various socio-political events, from the Arab Spring to US presidential elections (Frier 2020; Tufekci 2017). As internet speeds increased and smartphones became ubiquitous, the nature of content shared on social media began to shift towards the visual. Instagram, introduced in 2010, capitalized on this by offering a platform exclusively for photo and video sharing, and Facebook (now Meta) acquired the Instagram platform shortly after its sharpest spike in monthly active users. Snapchat, launched a year later, introduced the concept of ephemeral messaging with its disappearing 'snaps'. Towards the late 2010s, TikTok emerged, leveraging short-form videos and sophisticated algorithmic recommendations, captivating the global Gen Z audience (Marwick 2015). Despite TikTok’s widespread and sudden popularity, it is interesting to note that only Turkey – which has the largest population of Syrian refugees outside Syria – is in the top ten of TikTok users (Statista 2023).

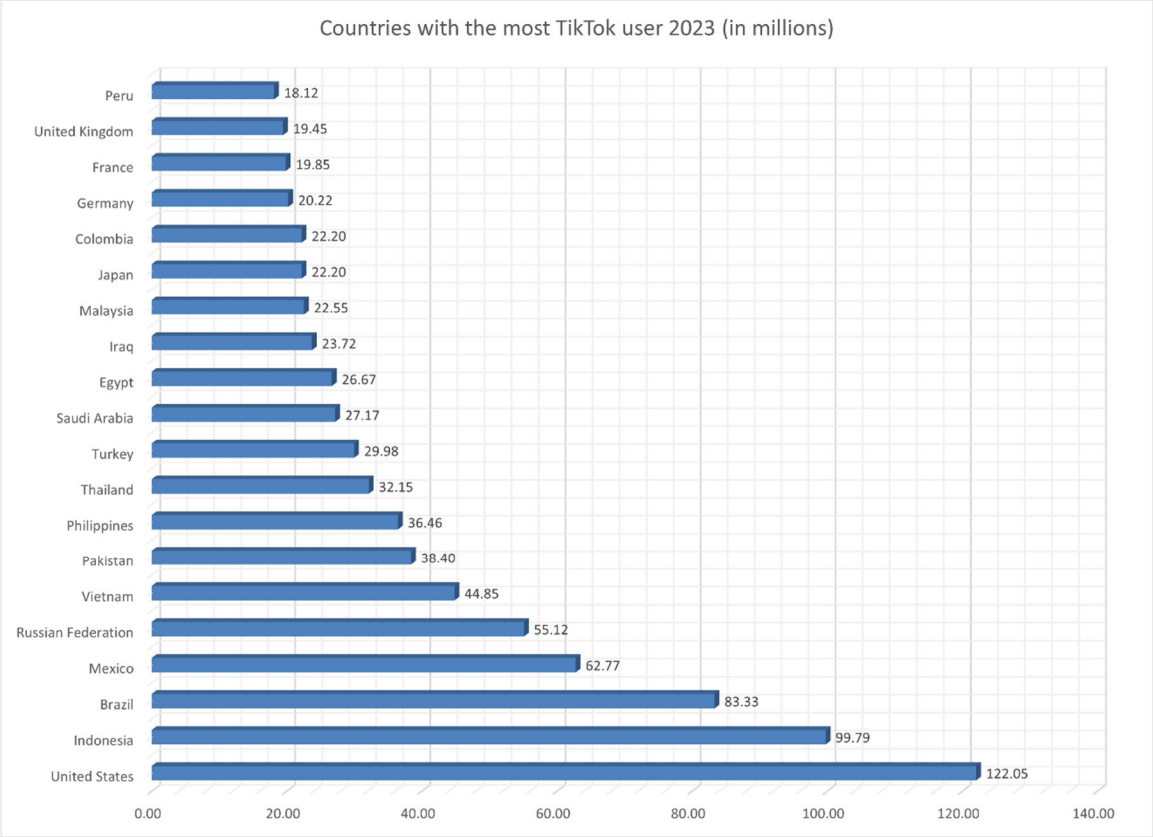

Figure 6. (Statista 2023)

The meteoric rise of social media brought with it several challenges. Issues of privacy, data breaches, mis/disinformation, and the psychosocial effects of persistent connectivity began to emerge. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, for instance, highlighted the potential misuse of user data for political gains. While platforms like Facebook and Twitter have somewhat democratized information dissemination, they've also become conduits for mis/disinformation and social echo chambers. They also harvest immense amounts of data – all in the name of enhancing user experience – while more frequently serving state or commercial interests (Vaidhyanathan 2022). Though, earlier this year, Twitter (now "X") has heavily restricted its API access, rendering it nearly

impossible to use for structured data collection and analysis. Of course, that does not mean that X does not retain the ability to mine and harvest user data.

These extensive internet histories and complex social media trends led me to ask how Syrian refugees might use the internet, broadly, and social media, specifically. Their means of accessing the web and social media was also an interesting investigation. By comparison, in my interactions with Afghans leaving Afghanistan, especially after the 2021 fall of Kabul and withdrawal of US forces, the Afghans I knew seemed to treat mobile phones as an afterthought. Changing devices as needed did not seem to bother them, and none of them had a laptop or desktop computer. On the other hand, Syrians have used many different technologies and devices as essential and primary means to aid their migration from conflict areas in Syria. Recent research on Syrian asylum seekers' decision-making processes indicates a heavy reliance on the internet, social media information sharing, and GPS/data-enabled mobile devices. Prior to migration, Syrians used their PCs for research and planning. During migration, smartphones take the primary place and enable migrants with annotated maps, GPS, instant messaging, and Voice-over-IP (VoIP) applications (Dekker et al. 2018, 6; Richter, Kunst, and Emmer 2016, 2; Zijlstra and Liempt 2017, 175–78). They primarily access their extended, pre-established network of other migrants and supporters to follow well-trod paths of their predecessors.

In one study, a 35-year-old male respondent called Mahdi, said:

> We wanted to walk by ourselves instead of paying a smuggler. We used GPS to find the route. We started in Greece with a group of 75 persons. Five of them used

> GPS. We also contacted the first group [the group that left before them, HV] to find the way to Macedonia. So, I did not need a lot of information, except for the route and the others took care of that. I did not use internet myself. I only used my smartphone to take pictures (Dekker et al. 2018, 6).

It is interesting to note that, despite NGOs establishing dedicated sites and apps for refugees in-flight, research suggests refugees do not use them or at least do not mention having used them. Also, I cannot stress the point enough: refugees are not a single blob of humans – a flat homogenous group – and research on refugee (even by specific country of origin) communication habits is extremely limited. Usage patterns and habits are closely connected and influenced by unique regional origins, cultural indicators, and demographic profile (Dekker et al. 2018, 5; Richter, Kunst, and Emmer 2016, 2; Emmer, Kunst, and Richter 2020, 1).

Through the same community I encountered Nadia, I met another Syrian who I will call Nour to protect her identity and privacy. She also asked not to be recorded on audio or video. Nour and her family's journey to the United States began in 2009, seeking a life filled with opportunities and a respite from the challenges they faced back home in Syria. Like many immigrants, they embraced their new environment with enthusiasm. A significant milestone in their American journey was the birth of their daughter on US soil. I met her on a few occasions, and she told me she hoped to get into the medical field and was learning American Sign Language in the hope that she could use her multilingual abilities to improve her patients' care.

Nour also began teaching Arabic in her local community. This endeavor not only allowed her to share a piece of her Syrian identity but also paved the way for cultural exchange. In return, she participated in sessions where she was learning English, a testament to her commitment to fully immerse herself in her adopted state's culture and community. Her dedication to helping others mirrored her own aspirations. Nour actively assisted other immigrants in preparing for the U.S. citizenship test, understanding the value and significance of this rite of passage. I sat in on many of these sessions with Nadia and Nour, and as an American born in the US, I found the test somewhat rigorous. For many, including Nour, the test was not just a requirement but a symbolic step towards fully realizing their dreams in a new homeland.

Her overarching goal, clear amidst all her endeavors, is to help other Syrian immigrants become US citizens. This aspiration indicates not just a legal status but a deeper sense of community and a desire to contribute to the nation that welcomed her and her family. I should note here that Nour – like Nadia and her family – belong to a unique group of Christians with a tightknit community and international social support network. In the group sessions with Nadia and Nour, the experience was an interesting mix of digital and analog. The citizenship test came as a printed packet with handwritten annotations throughout. Many of us took notes on our Arabic/English language exchange sessions using pen and paper, but when I brought an iPad and Apple Pencil, it seemed to be too much of a distraction to the others who frequently stopped taking their own notes to watch me write mine. However, all communications for the classes came through WhatsApp, and there were Facebook groups and pages dedicated to our communities. On

one occasion, Nour did tell me she felt somewhat uncomfortable with WhatsApp and printing the packets for class. On a few instances, her daughter identified herself to me as sending messages for class through WhatsApp on Nour's behalf. Nour's journey, with all its challenges, learning, and mutual cultural exchange, embodies the spirit of countless immigrants striving to find their [new] place in the world. The group's digital communication habits and transmediated learning methods are not unlike social media usage in Arab countries (Figure 7.)

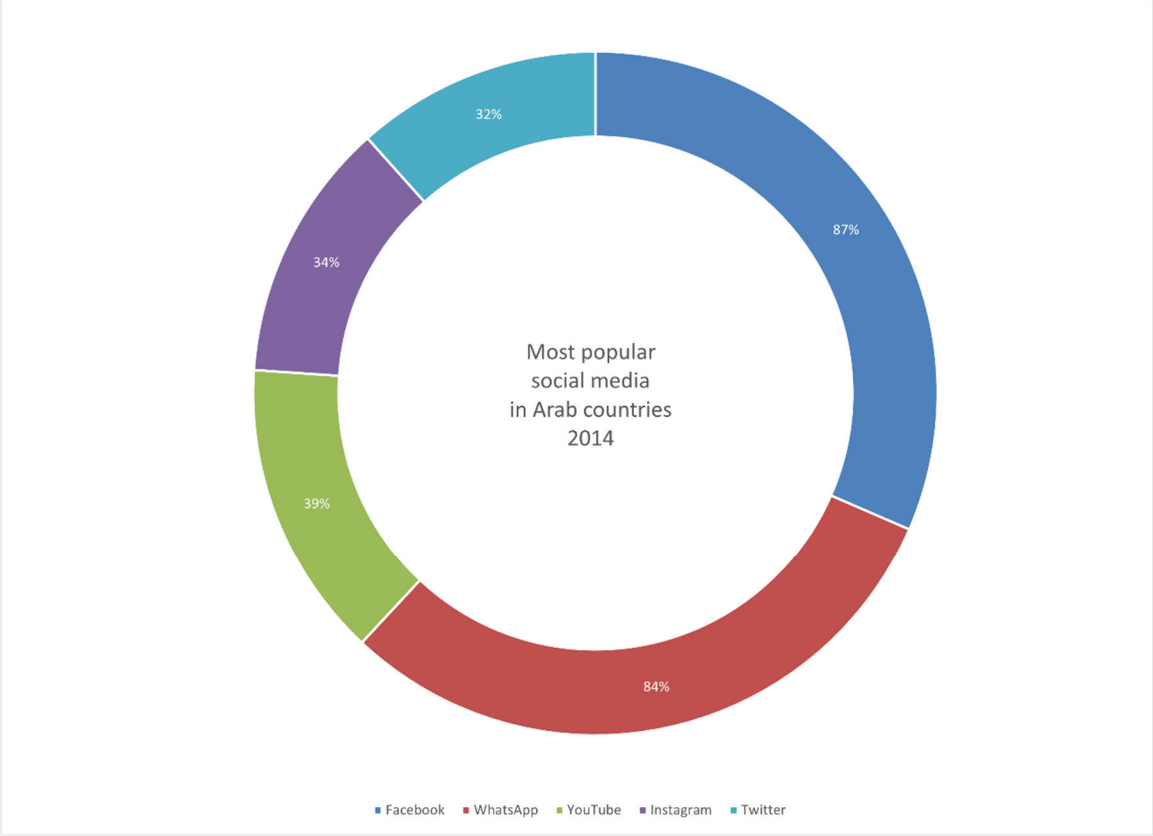

Figure 7. Most popular social media in Arab countries (MENA), 2014 (Statista 2015)

I drew from Statista datasets to figure out at least broadly what social media traffic looked like around 2014 when refugee camps were mostly established and asylum-seeker volume leaving Syria plateaued. Facebook took the number one spot as the most popular social media platform, which also lines up with global social media trends in the same time period (Fig. 7). WhatsApp took a close second place, and that supports what we have seen in the case studies with Nour, Nadia, and other case studies. YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter lagged far behind the first two and took up 39%, 34%, and 32% of monthly active users, respectively.

Once I figured out that many of those egressing had mobile devices or access to mobile devices, I learned that they relied on apps like WhatsApp and Google Maps and primarily used Android devices. Those types of devices often use Google's search engine as the default search method. So, I took to Google Trends datasets to figure out what sites were most popular at the end of the first full year of the conflict in Syria. Google allows researchers to reasonably tune Trends queries, and I was able to correlate it with findings from a separate Comscoredatamine.com dataset in Statista. In Trends data for Syria on October of 2012, the top two web search queries on Google were "Facebook" in English and "فيس," which is Facebook in Arabic. In the Statista dataset, the top five most popular websites in the entire MENA region for October 2012 were – from most popular to least – Google, Facebook, Microsoft sites, Yahoo!, and Wikipedia (Fig. 8).

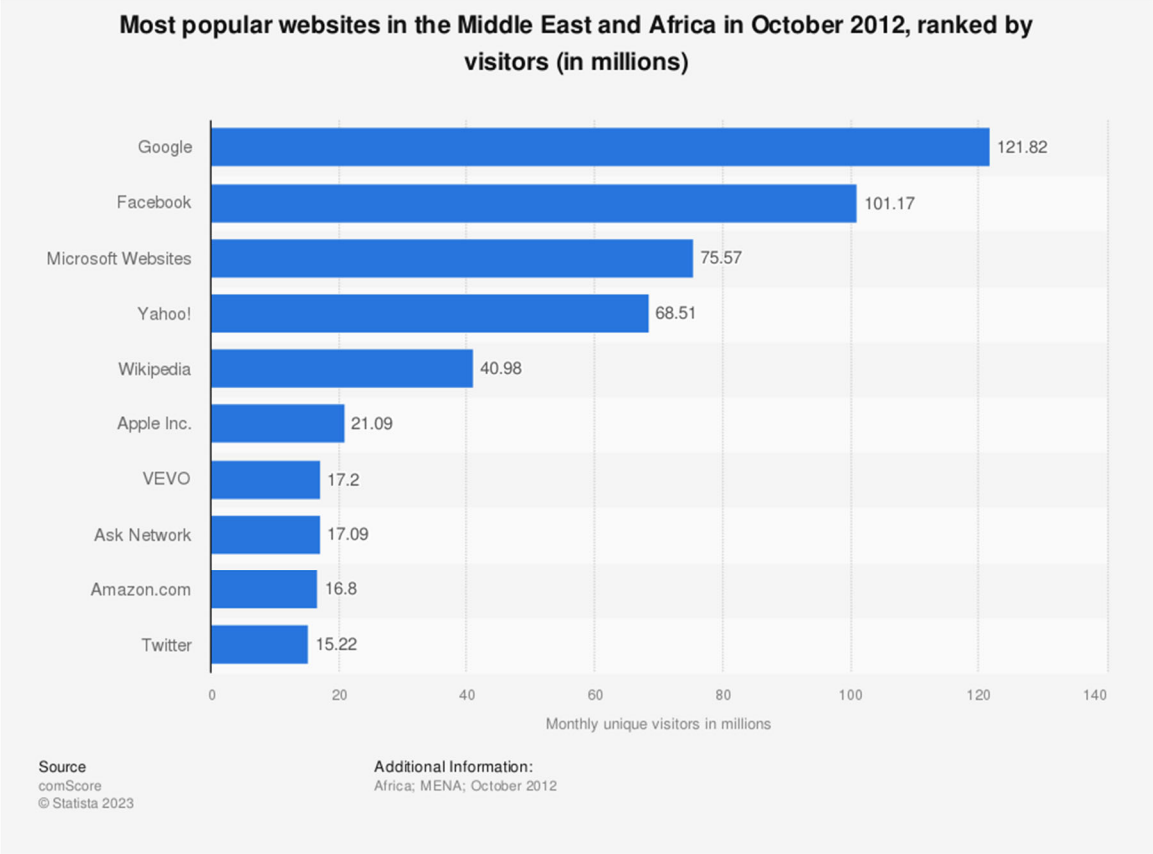

Figure 8. MENA, most popular websites, October 2012 (in millions). (comScore 2013)

[digital] cartography and refugees pre, mid, and post-conflict

The digital age has revolutionized cartography, offering detailed satellite imagery and real-time mapping capabilities to the masses. For Syrian refugees, digital cartography has taken on a pivotal role at every stage of their journey. Prior to the onset of violence, Syria, like many nations, had begun embracing digital maps. They were not just tools for navigation; they served as a repository of cultural heritage, highlighting historical landmarks, and serving as platforms for social connectivity. Digital platforms such as

Google Earth allowed Syrians, especially the younger generation, to explore their homeland in unprecedented detail, fostering a sense of connectedness and pride.

As conflict intensified, the very same maps became crucial for survival. The war transformed urban landscapes, turning previously benign regions into areas of conflict. Digital maps were updated in near-real-time, guiding refugees on safer routes, marking zones of active conflict, and indicating makeshift medical camps or relief centers. In some instances of evacuation, these updates come from supporters within the evacuees' extended network, guiding them from the other side of the world, across oceans and mountains and several time zones. OpenStreetMaps (OSM) and other community-driven platforms saw a surge of local contributions, transforming them into living documents of a nation, a people, in flux.

In the aftermath of conflict, cartography takes on a role of reconstruction and memory. Satellite imagery serves as a stark visual record, enabling refugees to confront the physical changes to their homeland. These maps also aid in planning their return, indicating areas that might be habitable and those that remain danger zones due to unexploded ordnances, armed troop movement, or structural instability.

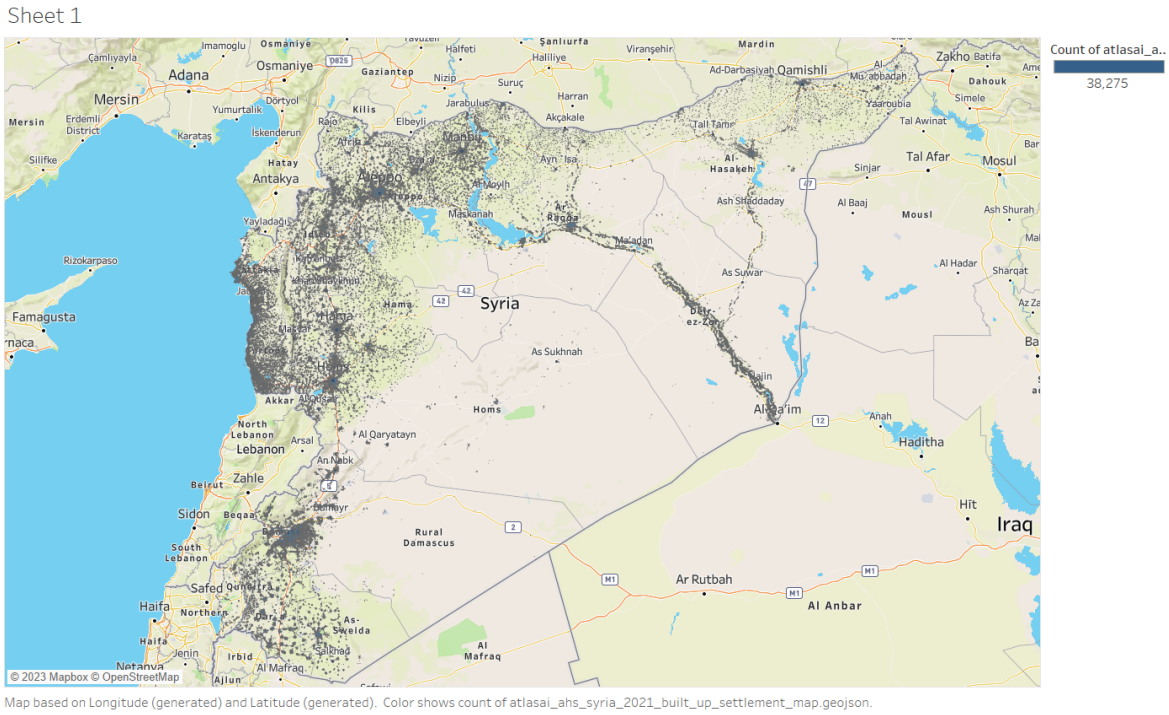

Figure 9. Map of settlements in Syria[4]

The immediacy of danger in conflict zones necessitates real-time or at least near-real-time updates using open source, publicly available, or commercially available data. For Syrian refugees, especially during the exodus, the experience did not just feature the precarious navigation of routes out of Syria, but it included the discernment of routes that were least perilous. In many cases, conventional GPS capabilities were integrated with chat applications like WhatsApp, where refugees exchanged real-time geographic information about threats like checkpoints, militia movements, and areas recently bombed. Even in my conversations with Giulia Longo or Nour, we conversed using

[4] This map is the result of AI-generated analysis from synthetic aperature radar (SAR) data I acquired through Atlas AI. I generated this version by ingesting the geoJSON into Tableau and oriented it onto a MapBox basemap.

WhatsApp. These instantaneous exchanges, often accompanied by geo-tagged images or coordinates, served as lifelines for those on the move. When the sequence of earthquakes devastated parts of Turkey, Giulia sent me images and video through WhatsApp with location information. Digital platforms like "Syria Tracker," which crowdsourced and visualized user-generated reports of violence, became pivotal. These tools provided an overlay of conflict intensity on conventional maps, guiding decisions about when to move and which paths to avoid. In navigating their escape, Syrian refugees were not merely selecting routes based on safety; they were making choices imbued with meaning and memory, whether an oral history or something they had seen on a news broadcast or heard on the radio. This is a type of rhetorical invention, the ways in which those in flight reconstructed and narrated their journeys, both to themselves and to others, especially those who would follow them as in the Al-Kataeb family and their friends in *For Sama*.

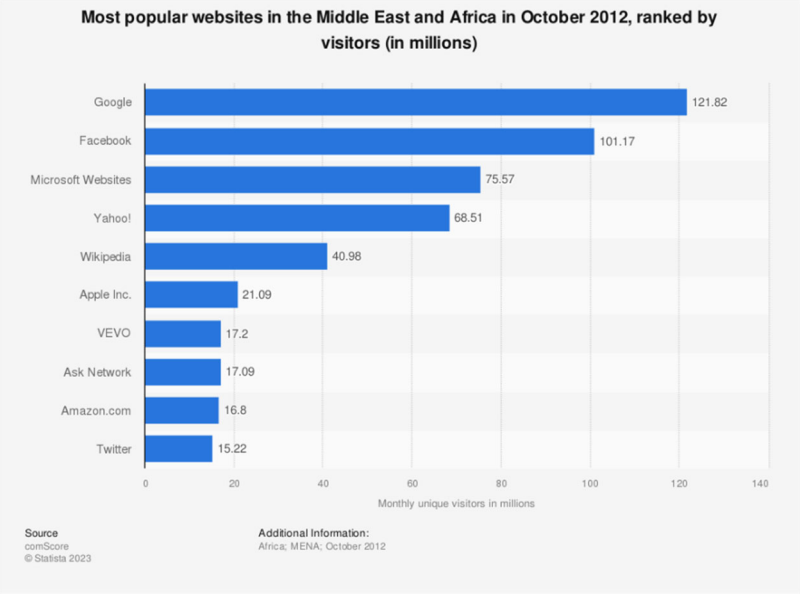

Figure 10. (Statista 2015)

Google, which we have seen is one of the longstanding most popular sites in the MENA region, is yet another site of rhetorical invention I have discovered (Fig. 10). After discussing digital habits with Nadia, Nour, and a few others and seeing the Al-Kataeb family's decision-making process in *For Sama*, I decided to look at Google Trends data from 2011-2012 and again from the release of *For Sama*. What does one query while fleeing one's home, or when deciding whether one should? That is much more difficult to answer and even more difficult to collect reliable data on, but we can examine popular and rising Google queries from 2011 to 2012.

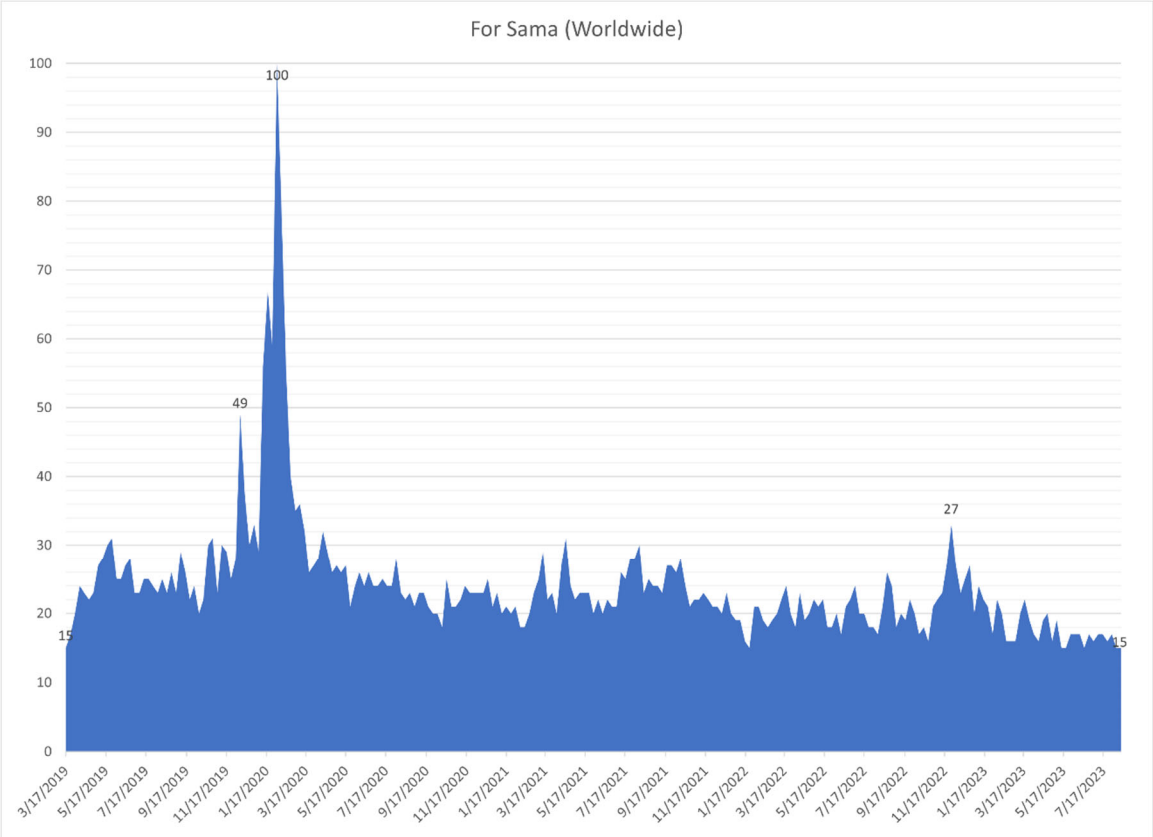

Figure 11. Google Trends *For Sama* search performance on YouTube, by week 3/17/2019-7/17/2023

The Google Trends data of worldwide YouTube searches for the documentary For Sama shows that the number of searches for the documentary peaked in March 2019, when it was released, and then gradually declined over time. However, there was a slight increase in searches for the documentary in January 2020, shortly after it was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. This also coincided with a spike in significant combat activity in Syria as well as the documentary breaking BAFTA's record for most nominations in the documentary category.

Google normalizes Trends data to account for differences in search volume over time and between different regions. This means the data are scaled so that the values for different time periods and regions are comparable. Google Trends does this by dividing the number of searches for a given term by the total number of searches for all terms. This normalization process is necessary because the number of searches for a given term might vary greatly over time and across different regions. For example, the number of searches for the term "Christmas" is likely to be much higher in December than in other months of the year. Additionally, the number of searches for a given term is likely to be higher in countries where the language spoken is the same language as the search term itself. By normalizing the data, Google Trends provides a more accurate picture of the popularity of a given term over time and between different regions.

Since we have seen the popularity of Google as a site and a service, it is fair to say Google Trends data can be a valuable tool for researchers, marketers, or anyone else who wants to understand how people use the internet. However, it is important to be aware of the limitations of the data. For example, Google Trends data only reflects the

search behavior of people who used Google Search for their queries. The data are only collected for a limited number of terms and regions. The structures of various networks and the mechanisms by which organizations like Google collect data have also inclined some users to prefer more privacy-oriented search engines like DuckDuckGo. As the architecture of the internet continues to evolve, users' rhetorical choices – the ways they choose to engage with it – evolve too, making it progressively more difficult to quantify and qualify activity and intent, choices which shape the architecture of the environment in which they are made.

In-camp: architecture of displacement

The Zaatari refugee camp, located near Mafraq in Jordan, is one of the largest refugee camps in the world, set up in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. It emerged in 2012 as a temporary settlement but has since evolved into a semi-permanent city, housing tens of thousands of Syrians. The Zaatari camp's initial formation followed the typical model of emergency humanitarian response, characterized by uniformity and grid layout, a direct application of modernist planning (Holston 1989, 51). However, as time progressed, the camp began to transform. Refugees, taking agency of their space, reshaped the environment to suit their sociocultural and economic needs, leading to a more organic form but one still at conflict with its "container," paths or lines of being reminiscent of what Deleuze and Guattari termed as "rhizomes" rather than points or positions found in structures (Deleuze and Guattari 1989, 19:8). The grid-style blocks are

no longer cells or points but connected lines, transformed into traces of existence by each member, a synecdoche signaling persistent and determined life.

Figure 12. Ali Kiwan, a Syrian artist in Zaatari, depicted in front of his work on a Texas barrier ("The Syrian Refugee Art Initiative" 2017).

The camp is divided into districts, each with its own set of services like schools, supermarkets, and health facilities. Though, the strict grid layout often failed to resonate with the refugees' previous urban experiences, leading many to adapt and modify their spaces. This active spatial negotiation and adaptation, which I find reflected in Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of "produced space," underscores the refugees' resilience and agency, their insistence on using the town as "a machine appropriated to…the use of a social group" (Lefebvre 1991, 345). Housing units, initially tents, were later upgraded

to prefabricated shelters, known as caravans. The way these shelters have been personalized, extended, and modified showcases a bottom-up approach to urbanism, informed by the concept of informal urbanism (Roy 2005, 147). Communal spaces between caravans have been transformed into gardens, sitting areas, or even shops, reflecting the refugees' endeavor to recreate a semblance of home and community, their desire to produce and create.

Figure 13. Child artist in Zaatari, 2017 ("The Syrian Refugee Art Initiative" 2017)

Artistic expressions have played a significant role in the lives of Zaatari's inhabitants. Initiatives like "Art for Refugees" have engaged residents, especially children, in mural painting, bringing color and hope to the otherwise monochromatic

camp environment. Art projects, such as the "Za'atari Project" facilitated by artists like Max Frieder, have enabled refugees to paint their caravans and other surfaces and structures with stories from their past and aspirations for the future ("The Syrian Refugee Art Initiative" 2017). These art initiatives not only act as cathartic, therapeutic outlets but also as powerful statements of individual and community identity, resistance, and hope in a transient setting.

The Za'atari camp and others like it, while initially created as an exception — a transitory solution to a pressing humanitarian crisis — over time seems to solidify into a normalized structure. Agamben speaks of spaces where sovereign power can suspend the rule of law, placing individuals within those spaces in an indeterminate state, neither inside nor outside the conventional legal order (2000, 51). Zaatari, in its existence and expansion, echoes this sentiment. While it may be a refuge from the tumult of war and conflict, it simultaneously places its inhabitants in an ambiguous space: not quite citizens with full rights and privileges, but also not entirely devoid of agency and identity. The real refuge is the rhetoric its residents wield across the surfaces and planes of the expansive state.

The camp's very nature — its impermanence and its evolving identity — are a manifestation of this placeless-ness, this state of exception. "The camp is the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* ever to appear on Earth was realized: this is ultimately all that counts for the victims as well as for posterity" (Agamben 2000, 48). And yet, the resident refugees of the Syrian camps are not simply victims. The resilient spirits of the camps' inhabitants defy this imposed exceptionality and victimhood.

Through rhetorical acts of art, architecture, and community-building, the refugees of Zaatari actively negotiate and resist this state of exception, highlighting both the frailty and resilience of human existence in liminal spaces. *They re-face the space.* They serve as a potent reminder that even within contexts designed as temporary and exceptional, the human spirit finds ways to reclaim agency, identity, and normality. The equipment for that reclamation is rhetoric.

Chapter 5: Implications and new efforts

"The generic condition of abject forced mobility could happen to any of us, at any time. And in fact, the dissolution of ground metaphysics with which I have been concerned effectively throws us all into the sea, or on the move, in one fell swoop. *We are all boat people*" (Haynes 2016, 88).

Current and future population displacement

The situation in Afghanistan took a downturn in 2021, impacting the most defenseless segments of the population. Currently, conflict has internally displaced about 3.25 million people. While over a million IDPs have found their way back to their origins, 1.6 million have sought refuge in neighboring nations. UNHCR has initiated responses to this crisis, as delineated in their regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) and Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). Afghanistan's neighbors, Iran and Pakistan, collectively shelter around 2.1 million registered Afghan refugees, along with other Afghans of varying statuses. Most of these registered refugees began their exodus from Afghanistan over decades, some dating back to 1979. Although there was a significant return of 5.3 million refugees to Afghanistan in stages post-2002, these numbers have dwindled recently, with barely 6,500 deciding to return in 2022. From August 2021 onwards, UNHCR has advised against returning to Afghanistan, a stance they reaffirmed in February 2023, urging a cessation of forced repatriations of Afghan citizens.

The seed of this research began with the fall of Kabul in 2021. As a Marine Corps combat veteran of the war in Afghanistan and remaining close to that community, I found myself in the midst of an evacuation effort. Two of my friends and fellow veterans co-founded a non-profit called Allied Extract, which was – in the beginning at least – just a handful of us with day jobs and families trying to help our friends on the other side of the world. Eventually, the organization formalized into a 501(c)3, and rather than a few vets with laptops and credit cards, our group included female Afghan activists, former interpreters who actively moved civilians through treacherous Taliban-controlled territory, and kindhearted non-veteran civilian volunteers and collaborators. Allied Extract has since aided in over 3,600 evacuations from Afghanistan and 338 from Ukraine. In addition to evacuation support, Allied Extract has also provided over 76 tons of supplies, equipment, and other aid materials for displaced people and humanitarian workers in conflict zones. While the UNHCR and large NGOs like the Red Cross and Red Crescent provide valuable and stable support to refugee situations, it is nimble and proactive organizations like Allied Extract that provide the blueprint for effective networked support to displaced people in current and future conflicts like the ongoing fight in Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine has caused the largest and fastest-growing refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. As of August 4, 2023, over 10 million people have fled Ukraine, and more than 6.6 million have been internally displaced. This is in addition to the over 2 million people who had already experienced internal displacement in Ukraine before the war. The majority of refugees from Ukraine have fled to neighboring

countries, including Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Moldova. However, refugees have also sought shelter in other European countries, as well as in the United States, Canada, and other parts of the world. The UNHCR Data Portal provides estimates that over 4 million people have returned to Ukraine since the start of the war. However, many of these returns are temporary, as people are often forced to return to areas that are still unsafe or lack basic services.

The humanitarian situation for refugees from Ukraine remains dire. Many refugees are living in overcrowded and makeshift shelters, and they continue struggling to access food, water, and healthcare. Refugees are also facing many challenges in integrating into their new host communities, including language barriers, lack of access to employment and education, and discrimination. It is a common objection in research on refugees that researchers often tend to treat refugees and other displaced people – even from the same conflict – as an amalgamized monolith. This is a valid concern and one on which we should continuously reflect, but as we see in the comparison across Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan, while the individual human beings are unique and varied, the challenges they face from mostly centralized systems of bureaucracy are not unique at all and often dismally predictable. Employment opportunities, education, humane housing, and every other rung of Maslow's hierarchy of needs require attention and consideration. I suggest the identification of those needs and gaps – their extent and severity – arise most readily not just from surveys or intake forms or endless questionnaires but from opportunities for displaced people to narrate their own stories with tools, methods, and platforms that fit best.

The war in Ukraine is showing no signs of ending, and the humanitarian crisis is expected to continue for months or even years to come. If the war continues, the UNHCR estimates that up to 8.8 million people could flee Ukraine, and the UN is concerned about the ability of neighboring countries to continue to absorb refugees and other IDPs from the conflict area. The war is also having a devastating impact on the economies of neighboring countries, which could make it more difficult for them to support refugees in the long term. The Ukraine situation is unique in that it essentially streams in near-real-time to the entire world through social media, not just combat footage but also media (first-person and mainstream) refugee flows into Poland and the at once familiar and foreign hasty refugee shelters.

Policy, advocacy, and service

Modern refugee housing solutions often follow a one-size-fits-all approach, prioritizing immediate shelter over long-term sustainability or cultural consideration. However, the reality of displacement often necessitates long-term stay in refugee camps, turning temporary shelters into prolonged homes (Turner 2016). The Za'atari camp is an example of the evolution from emergency tents to more durable housing. While such transitions are welcome, there is a need to rethink refugee housing. The IKEA Foundation's collaboration with the UNHCR led to the development of the "Better Shelter," a modular, durable structure that can be set up in a few hours and lasts for years. Such innovations address not just durability but also provide refugees with a sense of dignity. Considerations must be made for the socio-cultural needs of the displaced. For

example, certain communities prioritize communal spaces, while others require partitions for privacy. Solutions that allow for resident-directed flexibility and personalization may provide a sense of agency and empowerment to displaced people, transforming the idea of shelter from mere survival to sustainable living (Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter 2005).

Displaced individuals – after facing violence (potential and actual), loss, and extreme disruptions in their lives – have likely experienced trauma. The nature of this trauma is multifaceted, rooted not only in the reasons for their displacement but also in the challenges they face within refugee settings (Watters 2001). A trauma-informed approach recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and integrates this knowledge into all aspects of service delivery (Hopper, Bassuk, and Olivet 2010). This means understanding trauma's manifestations and being responsive to its effects. For instance, basic services like food distribution or medical check-ups, if not approached with sensitivity, could re-traumatize individuals. Several humanitarian organizations have started to integrate mental health support as part of their immediate response. The organization *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders), for example, often provides psychological first aid for refugees alongside medical care (Doctors Without Borders 2017). These integrated efforts recognize the interplay between physical and mental health, especially in traumatic contexts.

The world of transmedia storytelling, especially within conflict zones, brings to the forefront a myriad of ethical considerations that researchers, journalists, and humanitarian workers must grapple with. Delving into the lived experiences of those in crisis requires a nuanced approach that goes beyond just sharing a story; it demands a

commitment to prioritizing the safety, dignity, and agency of the subjects involved. One of the primary concerns in this realm is the potential for unintentional harm. Sharing personal narratives of refugees across multiple platforms can expose them to unforeseen risks, both physical and psychological. There have been instances where well-intentioned projects led to negative repercussions for those featured, ranging from stigmatization within their communities to becoming targets of political entities or hostile groups. On January 29, 2013, Hamza Al-Kateab describes the aftermath of anti-regime protestors' attempt to demonstrate in both physical and digital spaces, "Today Aleppo woke up to a massacre. And that's putting it mildly" (*For Sama*; qtd in Wallis 2020). He was at the scene as workers pulled several bodies from the river and arranged them on the floor. This highlights the need for storytellers and researchers alike to always weigh the broader implications of their work.

The act of third persons sharing these stories can sometimes inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or singular narratives about refugees, forcing the subject's narrative into a frame for which it was not intended. Transmedia projects – with their expansive scope ranging from artistic endeavor to clinical intervention – run the risk of simplifying or sensationalizing complex experiences for the sake of engagement or even narrative coherence across platforms. "We don't want your tears; we want action," Waad Al-Kateab explains (Wallis 2020). It is imperative that those crafting or just facilitating these narratives remain deeply self-aware, questioning their own biases, and ensuring that they are not inadvertently commodifying pain or reducing individuals to mere tropes.

Consent is another significant ethical pillar in this context. Given the vulnerabilities inherent in being a refugee or displaced person, obtaining informed and ongoing consent is crucial. Subjects must understand not just the immediate use of their story, but how it might be shared, reshaped, or expanded across various platforms and over time. I argue they should even direct and decide when, where, and how it is disseminated. This is particularly pertinent in this digital age in which content is incredibly difficult to retract or control.

There is also the issue of representation. With the power dynamics at play - often between Western storytellers and non-Western subjects – there is a risk of voices being overshadowed or misrepresented. Ethical transmedia storytelling should not be about speaking for refugees, but rather creating a platform where they can speak for themselves and facilitating the integration of current technology into their storytelling processes. This means not just sharing their stories, but actively involving them in the narrative process, ensuring their agency remains intact. In short, we – researchers and creatives – must begin with listening.

While transmedia storytelling offers a powerful tool for humanizing and amplifying the voices of refugees from conflict zones and cultivating empathy, it comes with a significant responsibility on all sides. Ethical considerations must be at the heart of any such endeavor, ensuring that the dignity, safety, and agency of those being represented are always at the forefront and empathy is guarded as the focus at every step.

Researchers as responders: ethical and responsible research practices

In the course of this research, I had to face certain ethical considerations. The first, in recruiting – or attempting to recruit – participants who were classified as refugees by the UNHCR, I had to address whether I would interview people who had been tortured and/or experience similar forms of physical violence. Ultimately, a series of earthquakes, military incursions into Syria, and rumors of surveillance by ISIS decided for me that I would not conduct in-person interviews with residents of camps or anyone in Turkey or Jordan. However, it is there and immediately prior to this point of friction in the decision-making process for researchers where we should approach with great caution and attention. The potential for a non-mental health professional to re-traumatize or trigger a participant – even with all necessary oversight and due diligence from a rigorous IRB review process – is significant. To a great extent, researchers who are among the first to venture into resettlement camps or war zones or any other nascently volatile environment are a kind of first responder. IRB is an essential and non-negotiable part of the process in assuring physical and psychological safety for both the subjects and researchers. However, new and emergent situations often lack sufficient information to support well-informed decision-making, and human beings may often experience a significant delay in the manifestation of mental health complications, manifestations that may arise in the middle of an interview or survey response. Approaching research projects – especially ones that use transmedia storytelling methodologies – with the researcher as a form of first responder and the subject as rhetor may help mitigate some of the risks.

In recent years, the world has witnessed the disheartening plight of countless displaced people escaping conflict, persecution, and extreme poverty, primarily from the MENA region. Of course, this generated an immense need for humanitarian and disaster relief response from the international community, usually in the form of "boots-on-the-ground" aid workers. The challenging journey these refugees undertake is not merely about crossing borders into unfamiliar lands; it's a quest for security, hope, and a promising future, and the first face they often meet is that of an aid worker. However, as Giulia Longo, a humanitarian worker with Caritas International, explained in our interview, the displacement of these people often carries with it an undercurrent of multifaceted socio-political messages, shaped both by the countries they have fled and by those receiving them.

Longo's account underscores a fundamental but overlooked aspect of the refugee situation: their weaponization by countries as instruments of political maneuvering. Their migration is, at times, painted with narratives of potential violence, trauma, and fear, overshadowing their hopes, dreams, and the vibrant ideas they bring along. By focusing solely on the intense experiences they endure, the international community risks marginalizing their desires, aspirations, and capacity for positive contribution and seeing them exclusively as victims in crisis, forcing a perspective not reflective of the subjects' reality. "They are not just bringing messages of violence, trauma and fear... But they also have a lot of ideas for their future... if you give them their voice back, the country's their words change, radically change"(Longo 2023). While humanitarian workers on not refugees themselves in the conventional legal sense, they are closest to where the work is

done, and they are best placed to facilitate some of the storytelling process. Through this research and in my volunteer work with Allied Extract evacuating people from Afghanistan and Ukraine, I have heard the recurrent theme of a desire to return home. When refugees express an overwhelming desire to return home, it emphasizes the fundamental human yearning for familiarity, security, and community. There is often a shift in that desire – from returning home to building an image of what home is or could be in the future. This work is not just about escaping a turbulent past, though it begins there; it is about nurturing hope for a better tomorrow, both individual and collective.

Yet, as global tensions shift – like the focus on the Russia-Ukraine conflict – other humanitarian crises, including the Syrian refugee situation, risk fading into the background. The danger is not just in the silence but in the cumulative impact of suppressed voices and unaddressed grievances, a wounding of memory. According to Longo, if the West does not proactively create a safe space for these displaced individuals to envision and actualize a meaningful future, the repercussions might be felt far beyond the immediate regions of conflict. For a genuinely interconnected world, the quest for a safer, more prosperous future should be a shared endeavor. The fate of one part inevitably influences the destiny of the whole (Longo 2023).

Refugee-led social media support

The digital age has brought forth unique tools that refugees and their collaborators actively leverage to connect, share stories, and find resources. Social media, in particular, has emerged as a potent platform for refugees, reshaping the way they navigate their

experiences and how the world perceives them (Gillespie et al. 2016). The use of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp has allowed refugees to document their journeys, share testimonials, and humanize the overarching narrative of displacement. They can counter mainstream media's often skewed representations with first-person accounts, giving a face to statistics and policy discussions. Refugee Phones, an initiative in Sweden, ensured that Syrian refugees had access to smartphones, allowing them to stay connected with their families and share their stories with the world (Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek 2017).

Beyond advocacy, social media has become instrumental in fostering community among refugees and promoting trans-media storytelling like the Al-Kataeb's and *For Sama*. Digital platforms act as forums where refugees can share resources, such as housing options, job opportunities, and legal advice. They also offer psychological support, allowing members to share their experiences and find and maintain a social support network (Leurs and Smets 2018). However, there is also an underlying risk in the digital realm. Surveillance, misinformation, and digital vulnerability are issues and points of friction that refugees face, often exacerbated by their uncertain legal statuses (Poole and Latonero 2018). Digital literacy programs, therefore, become vital, ensuring that refugees can safely and effectively navigate online spaces. With the prominent role social media plays in the refugee experience, policymakers must take this digital dimension into account. It is no longer enough to consider only the physical needs of refugees; their digital realities are equally significant. Programs that recognize the importance of

connectivity, offer digital literacy training, and ensure online safety can better support refugees in their integration processes.

Redefining Aid: The Role and Influence of Refugee-led Organizations (RLOs)

In the wake of widespread record-breaking displacement across Mali, Niger, Sudan, and Ukraine, the narrative of humanitarian response is rapidly shifting, and the 2016 UN World Humanitarian Summit accentuated this shift with its endorsement of the localization of aid agenda. The emphasis was clear - recognize and empower local actors, including refugee leaders. This pivot was further solidified with the introduction of the "Grand Bargain," and the subsequent 2018 Global Compact on Refugees with the spotlight on enhancing refugee self-reliance and ensuring their participation in decision-making ("Grand Bargain" 2022).

Yet, as the global community begins to adopt this transformative vision of refugee support, there remains a deficit in understanding the lived realities of Refugee-led Organizations (RLOs) in the MENA region, particularly their experiences, challenges, and strategies. Despite restrictive regulations and diverse policy environments, RLOs have managed to carve out a significant presence. However, their establishment and subsequent strategies are largely influenced by:

- Ambiguities in host country policies concerning refugee status
- Policies related to organization registration
- Refugees' awareness and capacity to navigate these policies
- Access to social and financial capital

- Support from international organizations

RLOs can be categorized into multiple layers based on their outreach, legal status, and extent of community mobilization. These range from transnational organizations with expansive networks to localized initiatives driven by individual philanthropy. Despite their varying sizes and structures, each of these entities aims to address gaps left by conventional humanitarian actors.

The efficacy of an RLO is intrinsically tied to the refugee leaders at its helm. Their legal status, connections, and insights dictate how these organizations function, evolve, and make an impact. Our extensive research unveiled a salient fact: while the more prominent RLOs have significant reach and influence, the smaller, often unregistered RLOs leave an indelible mark on the communities they serve, offering essential support structures. Transnational RLOs, given their extensive networks and visibility, have showcased a remarkable capacity for impactful interventions. In contrast, non-registered entities, driven by community ties, have had localized but profound impacts.

As global discourse around humanitarian aid evolves, there is an urgent need to view RLOs not as beneficiaries but as equal stakeholders. To truly localize aid and empower communities, both donors and humanitarian organizations must reconsider their interactions with RLOs. From offering flexible funding avenues to ensuring inclusive decision-making processes, RLOs must be recognized as essential contributors with unique insights and capabilities. In academia, participatory research should be the norm

rather than the exception. By involving refugees in the research process, from inception to execution, we stand to gain richer, more nuanced insights.

Appendices

Appendix A. Links to interview audio

The following links include the audio of interviews with experts as well as Otter.ai's AI-generated transcripts, outlines, and summaries.

Giulia Longo

https://otter.ai/u/pd-_mJ60SnPkp91ZNltVaVpFl-Y?utm_source=copy_url

Kareem Shora

https://otter.ai/u/NS6YbueNCeb0dyznHG0p48Sc6Kw?utm_source=copy_url

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