

Salam Neighbor: Syrian Refugees Through the Camera Lens

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Recommended Citation

Asaad, Lava. "*Salam Neighbor: Syrian Refugees Through the Camera Lens.*" *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21.5 (2019): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3263>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
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Volume 21 Issue 5 (September 2019) Article 3

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss5/3>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.5 (2019)**

Special Issue **Struggling, Endurance, Understanding**. Ed. Simon Estok, Douglas Berman, and Frank Stevenson

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss6/>>

Abstract: This paper examines the documentary *Salam Neighbor* (2015), which celebrates the will of Syrian refugee women who are displaced in Jordan. The collective experience of the refugees portrayed in the documentary solicits a reaction from the Western viewer. To counteract the images of refugees in the media, documentaries can be a good alternative for mass media, which has been perpetuating a binary of the West and the Rest. The argument tackles the issue of this new representation of refugees in documentaries within a postcolonial paradigm of how we represent or speak to/with the Other in our technological age, as well as the possibilities of misrepresenting or silencing the Other through the camera lens.

Lava ASAAD

Salam Neighbor: Syrian Refugees Through the Camera Lens

The recent refugee crisis has left thousands of bodies lingering on foreign borders waiting to be acknowledged and admitted. International media flooded with images of displaced Syrian refugees trudging through hinterlands, inside camps, gazing hopelessly into what is behind the fenced area, or dead on some Mediterranean shores. In a highly technological age, it is difficult to miss these images and as they become more prevalent it is inevitable that much of the viewing public will experience compassion-fatigue. The Syrian crisis has entered its sixth year now, and these images of refugees persist. Complicating matters, those who have managed to reach a new homeland have been painted as a threatening mass of invaders by some media and nationalist groups. In a revival of Orientalism, their "Otherness" has been used to create fears that any misstep on the part of refugee legitimates in the minds of those already alarmed by the arrival of so many foreign bodies. This unexpected, unwanted encounter between the hegemonic west and dispossessed refugees infringing upon Europe's porous borders has reawakened the colonial dichotomy of the powerful, white metropole and the menacing, swarming Other. To humanize the refugees' plight, many within the western media have produced documentaries about the refugees, on their migration routes, on their lives in camps, or on their new lives in an often unwelcoming Europe. These films include such provocative titles as *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe, Through Abdullah's Eyes, Children of Syria, People of Nowhere, Escape and Home, Life on Hold: The Struggle of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, Hamsa, and After Spring*, which makes direct reference to the Arab Spring. These documentaries focus on Syrians abroad in order to witness their predicament and elicit an empathetic reaction from the viewer. These documentaries hope to start a dialogue in contrast to the growing antagonistic rhetoric of rightwing politicians in both Europe and the United States, the unwilling host countries that build walls and fences instead of welcoming those escaping violence. This paper takes as its focus the 2015 documentary feature *Salam Neighbor*, which celebrates the will of Syrian women who are displaced in Jordan but who are leading their household, reversing the trope of women being helpless victims of war and displacement. However, in its joyous conclusion, the documentary leaves much unsaid. Aside from the broad concepts of borders, migration, diaspora and gendered displacement, this study also incorporates Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Judith Butler's "grievable bodies" and Laura Mulvey's fetishism in the media in order to trace how certain narratives are constructed, maintained, and publicized as warning signs that feed the global North's states of insecurity.

The UNHCR has estimated that there are around 4 million Syrian refugees, 50.3% of which are women (Kiely). Accordingly, international concerns have been awakened to the physical abuse, harassment, and possible sex trafficking that women refugees suffer. Complicating this further is the fact that Syrian refugee women often travel alone for several reasons, including the death or imprisonment of a husband or guardian. If their husband is living it then creates the hope that the family will be able to reunite as part of the European family reunion act. If not alone, women often travel with their children or the children of relatives. Conventional wisdom would suggest that women with accompanying children would have a better chance of gaining entry into European countries. However, in *Tracking Europe*, Ginette Verstraete explains how women refugees actually encounter great difficulty being granted asylum because "their cases are seen to belong to the private sphere" whereas asylum for men "is a right given in response to persecution within the—implicitly male—public sphere of war and politics" (96). Despite what politicians like Donald Trump believe, that most Syrian refugees are "young, strong men," the war in Syria has impelled women to take matters into their own hands to save themselves and often their children by escaping war zones.

Whether woman or man, upon leaving Syria the refugee will often necessarily fall into the hands of smugglers who are similar to tourist guides in their methods of advertising a chance at mobility and access in what is a purely capitalistic industry (Verstraete 112). The images that appear in the media are of displaced people who have given their last penny to smugglers to guide them through forests or set them on boats. The illegality of their movement has gone in tandem with increasing border restrictions, marking them as a threat to the European nation-state. In a world that has been increasingly dominated by a "virtual-visual" understanding of migration, images of dangerous refugees bringing their (mostly Islamic) ideologies into certain borders have set off the bomb of worry and national alert.

The infiltration of refugees into Europe disrupts an imagined homogenization of what Europe should look like, bringing to mind Arjun Appadurai's work *Modernity at Large*, which sheds light on the uncertain relationship between the local and the global where the latter produces imagined conceptions of people's

movements. Appadurai introduces the concept of "Ethnoscape" in his essay "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" (1990), defining it as "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree" (297).

The influx of refugees into Europe, however, has led to the creation of stricter border control laws reinforcing the limitation of movement based on national and religious affiliations. In a world where nations and states are inseparable, the displaced refugees are trying to abandon nation-state affiliations and instead live through imagining other possibilities of existence elsewhere (Appadurai 39). What is happening, however, is that European countries are also forming imagined ideas and fears of these displaced bodies that they fear will dominate or deplete, through their countless numbers, the economy of the host countries.

Since this flow of refugees into Europe has intensified extreme border control measures, the refugee's body, being, and identity call for heightened sense of national belonging against the globalization of people's movement, as earlier stated in the free movement in Appadurai's sense of Ethnoscape. Kristeva's theory of the abject can be employed to understand the reaction of the host countries and their continuous exclusion of refugees as representatives of terror regression. In a broader sense of the abject, Kristeva defines it in *Powers of Horror* as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Thus, refugees are to be demonized, excluded, and fought against. Border restrictions and the increase of anti-refugee rhetoric are a rejection of the abject in that it is "a precondition of narcissism" (13) where the self becomes more enclosed within itself, marking transparent borders and lines between what is myself and what is Other. The death of refugees, with photos of corpses on shores becoming normalized, instigates pity, but also fear and alarm that these beings are entering the self-space, i.e., the pure white space of Europe or specific European nation-state boundaries. Therefore, as a reaction the EU restricts politics of entrance allowing smugglers to take advantage of refugees, especially women who are sometimes coerced into sex for assistance on the journey or trafficked. Unsurprisingly, the EU has condemned these repugnant brokers who bring sex trafficking into Europe instead of redressing the real cause which forces women into such desperation. This vicious cycle of abuse and exclusion has contributed greatly to the deterioration of the status of Syrian refugees into sub-humans who deserve at best a tent on the roadside and at worst death.

Following and documenting these refugees through the camera lens calls to mind Laura Mulvey's seminal article on the male gaze in cinema. To extend Mulvey's theory of the gaze, a similar gaze can be incorporated into examining refugees, who are situated under border control's panoptic surveillance, through different media coverage, and through documentaries such as *Salam Neighbor*. Mulvey's "male gaze" can be stretched to become an "international gaze" projected on refugees. Rhetoric demonizing the refugees, for example, illustrates how the collective gaze upon refugees has failed to produce an empathetic understanding of the calamity. Without denying the sympathetic and genuine interest in the crisis, there is also a fetishized side of the refugee image, especially on women and children. Sex trafficking, forced marriages, prostitution, and cheap exploitative female labor are the harmful results of the displaced refugee image who is ready to do anything to get outside of the fence. The "international gaze" subscribes to binary view of gender, with women and children seen as in need of rescue, single women at perpetual risk of being taken advantage of, and all men representing possible danger.

As established earlier, narcissism only enhances the difference between the self and the other in distress. Scopophilia, Mulvey writes, following Freud's opinion, is a pre-requisite for augmenting the self and its worth (806). The abject body is thus both despised and desired. Mulvey's statement that "True perversion is barely concealed under a shallow mask of ideological correctness—the man is on the right side of the law, the woman on the wrong," somewhat explains the booming fear of the Other who brings terrorizing ideologies into safe and liberal spaces. Not unlike the cinema narrative that creates a contrast between male and female bodies, narratives about refugees construct a refugee identity that erases individuality and produces instead a mass spectacle of who the refugee is, what they should look like, and how they should be treated.

Following Kristeva's process of constructing an abject body, which is also situated under a subjugating gaze, the abject bodies become deplorable if they do not fit certain narratives of privileged identities. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler writes about who deserves to live and whose death is worth grieving in a neoliberal, biopolitical context: "specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense" (1). The refugee body is then framed outside the parameters of power structures, a mode of existence that impairs generating genuine interest in people as real individuals. The ontological being

of refugees is put under examination in camps whether for fear of increase or for containment in lieu of actual solutions for the crisis. Butler defines war victims, or any identity formation, through certain frames. These socially constructed frames are solid but vulnerable. Circulation of multiple frames, in this case, has the ability to alter certain narratives:

The movement of the image of 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. (11)

Narratives of refugees in documentaries, thus, have a dialectic perspective; they can either stimulate fear and fetishization of the displaced, or a more veracious message to break oppressive and victimizing narratives of the refugee's condition. Nevertheless, the camera has become an apparatus for the same governments and sociopolitical structures that produce these refugees. Butler also ascertains that exposing war victims is not a radical enterprise since those victims are under "forcible exposure" (29). Similarly, Butler outlines a dialectic state of violence and protection where the endangered population asks for protection from the nation-state, which itself is the perpetuator of violence. The frames of war, however, are multiple, as Butler explains, but they intersect on issues of race, gender, religion, and sexual freedom (26). This point certainly reminds us of the current European attitudes against refugees coming from the Middle East with their "conservative" and Islamic traditions. For example, Angela Merkel's insistence on accepting more refugees into Germany prompted Right-Wing leaders to react instantaneously: "It was a mistake that will occupy us for a long time yet. I see no possibility of putting the stopper back into the bottle," affirmed Horst Seehofer, the leader of the Christian Social Union (Wagstyl). The refugees' bodies are no longer their own since their existence is always and already framed into a certain narrative. These reactions are just examples of the general rhetoric shaped around the refugees. Therefore, the dialectic thinking of the Left and the Right has endorsed legalized violence at European borders in the name of fending off unwanted Muslim immigrants whose deaths have at some point been presented in the media as necessary for those whose existence is worth saving (Butler 27-31).

Salam Neighbor

As the Syrian refugees disperse across the globe, so do their images. Appadurai's argument of image circulation offers an ambivalent view, enticing tension and distance of relationships between the empowered and the powerless. It is useful to mention that the Arab Spring in general, and the Syrian revolution in particular, have both made use of technology in spreading images of injustice through the medium of videos and pictures taken with participants' mobile phones. The abject body had the choice and the power to speak through these images, through the viewer's angle, and sometimes the voices of resistance were recorded as well. Undoubtedly, these images and videos have circulated around the globe, as did supporting and opposing sentiments around this issue. The impossibility of accessing Syria for international journalists had made it difficult to make documentaries of the violence and inhuman crises inside its borders. The documentaries listed earlier are primarily about displaced Syrians in camps in some neighboring or European countries. As a result, once the refugee traversed the borderline, the necessity of documenting the government's oppression fades from the refugee's mind. The primary focus shifts to finding shelter and secure means of living. The circulation of images, in this case, hinges on the western eye to gaze upon the refugees, to follow them closely, hoping in return to report the inhuman situation of refugee camps.

The most realistic critique of the genre of the documentary about displaced subjects is found in Edward Said's *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1999). He questions the medium of representation and how sometimes certain narratives are imposed on displaced and stateless people. In examining exile and how it is produced in the media or literary narratives, he writes:

Exile is a series of portraits without names, without contexts. Images that are largely unexplained, nameless, mute. I look at them without precise anecdotal knowledge, but their realistic exactness nevertheless makes a deeper impression than mere information. I cannot reach the actual people who were photographed, except through a European photographer who saw them for me. And I imagine that he, in turn, spoke to them through an interpreter. The one thing I know for sure, however, is that they treated him politely but as someone who came from, or perhaps acted at the direction of, those who put them where they so miserably are. There was the embarrassment of people uncertain why they were being looked at and recorded. Powerless to stop it. (12-14)

What is critiqued by Said is the effectiveness of countless images of the dispossessed and whether or not they have actual usefulness to alleviate the suffering of the photographed people. Power structures are not absent in the encounter between the video maker and the observed subject. Although documentaries aim to give the people in question a medium to express their grief, there is, undoubtedly, a process of structuring a narrative of helplessness and victimization.

One might wonder here about the actual status of refugees in documentaries: are they not helpless? Helplessness is not the only defining characteristic of refugeehood, a point which has made them abject in the media's eye. For example, Said emphasizes the need for a new way to represent displaced Palestinians in particular and the dispossessed in general:

I believe that essentially unconventional, hybrid, and fragmented forms of expression should be used to represent us. What I have quite consciously designed, then, is an alternative mode of expression to the one usually encountered in the media, in works of social science, in popular fiction. It is a personal rendering of the Palestinians as a dispersed national community – acting, acted upon, proud, tender, miserable, funny, indomitable, ironic, paranoid, defensive, assertive, attractive, compelling. (6)

Said asserts how to be human is to be all of the adjectives listed above. Victimization and helplessness cannot be the only descriptors used for refugees.

How are Syrian refugees actually portrayed in documentaries? The award-winning documentary *Salam Neighbor* centers on the journey of Chris Temple and Zach Ingrasci, two American journalists who gained permission from the UNHRC for the first time to make a film in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. This camp holds the second largest population of Syrian refugees of any similar camp. In an attempt to experience the daily life of the refugees, Chris and Zach set up a tent next to the thousand refugee tents and try to experience the refugee's misfortune vicariously. The goal of this documentary is to show the human face of the refugees in the camp, people who were mostly middle-class back in Syria with stable careers and convenient lifestyles. In a way, the documentary hopes to set up a perspective of the refugee crisis that is endearing, resilient, and hopeful. However, Temple's and Ingrasci's vicarious perspective was hard to achieve since the UNHRC denied them the opportunity to sleep in the camp due to potential danger. Without addressing the abject existence of the refugees, the general look of the documentary remains optimistic. The deteriorating conditions of the refugees are ameliorated, polishing up the unwanted sufferings to have a more pleasing aspect for the future of the crisis.

The documentary starts off with a Syrian man defining what it means to be a refugee: "In that instant when you cross the imaginary line, you become a refugee and your life is in the hands of others." In another instance, Temple asks Ghassem, another camp resident, "As an Arab, what does the word refugee mean to you?" Ghassem replies, "Someone who is forced to leave his country and his home. He has no money. All he has are the clothes on his back and his family." The message of the documentary is to redefine what a refugee means since now, Temple says, "the biggest myths about refugees is that they are assumed to be burdens."

The abject destiny that the refugees are aware of becomes part and parcel of how they frame their own identity. The instant they become refugees, the distance between them and the people in the host country widens. The refugees in the documentary are aware of the state of dependency they have been driven into. The producers then focus on the stereotypical narratives woven around the danger of refugees as they are trespassing illegally into other countries, carrying with them the ideologies of the Middle East that are so feared by so many. Entering the UN camp was not easy for the documentary crew. It took the producers a year of negotiations before they were given access. The camp zone has become a third-space, which Homi Bhabha defines in *The Location of Culture* as a place of hybridity, in-betweenness, belonging neither to the colonizer nor colonized set of identity patterns. Nevertheless, the limitation of Bhabha's theory is that it fails to incorporate the identities of refugees, who were impelled to leave their place of origin to escape war atrocities. Their state of being in camps, therefore, is an example of rejection and elimination where the place in which they dwell has become a place of non-being, a place outside home and in-between borders (Bhabha 56).

As it is expected from a documentary on refugees, the people interviewed are experiencing emotions of fear, alienation, and trauma. Grieving mothers expressed their inability to leave their tents when they arrived at the camp, especially when thoughts of suicide were very enticing. The sub-human conditions they were forced into have turned them into objects in the eyes of western viewers. Even more harrowing, the refugees internalize this perceived state of inferiority; as one of them states, "The difficulty of life has made us forget about our feelings." Butler's concept of a body is that it is not "a

mere surface upon which social meanings are inscribed, but that which suffers, enjoys, and responds to the exteriority of the world, an exteriority that defines its disposition, its passivity and activity" (33-34). It is then apt to say that the refugee body has been overloaded with social labels to a point it has been rendered passive and only in inactivity and unreceptiveness do they find an opportunity for survival. Dividing people, as Butler expresses, into grievable and ungrivable lives is evident in the documentary where both Temple and Ingrasci were not allowed to stay with the refugees at night for fear of theft or assault. It is clear from this division that the thousands of refugees are on one side, and the documentary crew are on another.

The documentary, however, offers an uplifting look at the refugee camps. Although it is illegal for the refugees to work outside Za'atari, they manage to make ends meet through small businesses. Specifically, the documentary focuses on how women's roles have shifted from a traditional caretaker inside the house into women who can also contribute financially to the household. Economic needs necessitate these women to break out of the confining roles of being a wife and a mother into someone who relies on her creativity to survive inside the camp. Um Ali is one such example. She collects plastic bags from the camp and turns them into decorative art. In a non-profit exhibition for the camp, she sold a vase to a foreign woman for \$70, an amount of money which can ease the needs of her family for a month. The role of women, which entailed them remaining inside the house, has been expanded now to engulf the whole camp requiring both men and women to work together while trapped inside. Although the idea of working women in Syria is not unheard of, the public spaces women are encroaching upon in the host countries can be hostile, unwelcoming, and sometime debasing.

The documentary also brings to light issues of how refugees do not want to just be assisted by organization, and that they want to partake in the process of aiding their families. The image of a destitute refugee becomes false when they want to be in control of making choices about their lives. Crossing a border then should not condition a major shift of human roles and what individuals are capable of. They insist on being living bodies, with a lost past, a destroyed present, but an open future. For this matter, the documentary comments on how Syrian refugees manage the space in the camp, their third-space, not just to be content with a row of tents but to turn it into a miniature society with a market and decent housing. The UN guide comments that "we were building a camp; they were building a city."

Another uplifting example of women transgressing traditional roles is Ghousson, who did not end up in Za'atari but lives outside the camp. She is the head of a household of three young children while her husband remains in Syria. Hoping to give a proper life and education to her children, she had to be the financial provider for her family. Unable to leave the house of three children, Ghousson had to come up with ideas that could support her financially without leaving the house. She now makes pieces to support women's hijabs on their heads, selling 200 of them every month. Ghousson also confesses that she would never relocate to Za'atari, and this is an implication in itself of the layers of negative associations with being not just a refugee, but a refugee in a camp.

The tone of the documentary, which is clearly meant to be inspirational for western viewers, fails to acknowledge serious problems like child labor and sex trafficking. The two motivating female examples in the documentary, women who are the head of their household and who are becoming more independent, pull attention from the simultaneous weak position they occupy that makes them a perfect target for human traffickers. The Jordanian government has shown insufficient effort in establishing laws against such trafficking of women and children. Reports have indicated that Syrian refugee women are forced into marriage to Jordanian men or men from the Gulf ("Trafficking" 358). Maher Abu Tair, a Jordanian columnist, expresses the same alarm regarding the condition of Syrian women in Jordanian camps: "All we hear these days is talk about a Syrian wife who can be bought with 100 dinars. One could go to any of the areas of Al Mafraq, Amman, Ramtha, Irbid or Karak to pick for himself a Levantine houriya [a beautiful virgin]" (Hassan). The abject conditions of these women are inseparable from their economic and political status that has turned them into ungrivable bodies. Falling into the trap of trafficking will only spiral them down the hill, considering the standards of their conservative societies. These bodies, similar to those dying on shores, are lost and become disposable the minute they lose control over their destiny and foreign hands seize the power to shape their lot in life.

Kristeva's, Mulvey's, and Butler's theories come together in the effort to understand the refugee's existence. Visualizing their plight in the media, in this case in documentaries, intensifies their vulnerability in hope of awakening feelings from the viewer for the "grievable" body. However, we should temper our expectations regarding what can be amended in this way. The more we see images of refugees flocking across borders, the more their crisis is normalized. The way the refugee is presented in the media, as a passive and destitute being traversing borders, increases their silenced body. The fetishism of their weakness cannot be solved by merely subjugating them to the camera, but by allowing

them space to tell their own stories. In an article by Slavoj Žižek, he undercuts the "good" efforts of the Left to humanize the refugee. He asserts how it is executed poorly: "It is deeply symptomatic of our hypocrisy how rarely the European Left insists that the way to defuse the racist fear of refugees is to include refugees in the public debate. Our TV stations and other public media should have been full of refugees describing their plea, talking about their expectations, etc. One should give them the space to speak in public, not just speak on their behalf." ("The Need")

The refugee's representation does not exceed the corporal depiction of their humanity. If we ask, "can the refugees speak?" in a Spivakian way, then the answer would be they cannot as long as the media is preserving the right to maintain the hierarchical power structure of those who can speak and those who cannot.

To conclude on the inefficiency and the limitation of *Salam Neighbor*, the producers are distraught over the refugees' quandary in the camp, and they amplify empathy for the countless lives that will probably remain in the camp for years to come. The genre of documentary sets out a balance between representing the Other and interviewing them. However, it ends once again on a string of hollow moralizing. It is worth mentioning here that the documentary explains what *Salam* means in Arabic: both Hello and Peace. However, Salam can also be said to mean goodbye, implying that the camera will leave the camp behind, unchanged, offering no solution to its dire conditions. "Salam" in the title can also imply that the refugees, upon their arrival to the host country, are saying: "Salam Neighbor," in an effort to be regarded as one of them. What we have been witnessing, from the documentary and from the refugees' situation is a rejection of their Salam and their plea to assimilate and receive humanitarian help. Despite what Temple says at the end of the documentary, that "the best cure for that guilt and for that frustration has been action... to do something to help our friends in this camp in sharing their message with the world" and finalizing with "We are all connected. We are not that different," the film is nothing more than a sentimental portrayal of the crisis where the low value of refugees makes all the difference between the watcher and the being watched, the abject seen through the camera's eye.

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