

Syrian Refugee Women Producing Counter-stories: Countering Female Fragility

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Abstract: This paper examines the racialized, gendered, and religiously charged discourses surrounding refugee representations, with a particular focus on Syrian Muslim refugee women. It critiques dominant narratives within mainstream media and policy that homogenize refugees, portraying them as threats, burdens, or passive victims devoid of agency. Drawing from critical race theory (CRT) and transnational feminism, the analysis reveals how systemic structures of power and oppression--rooted in colonial, racial, and gendered frameworks--continue to marginalize refugee voices, particularly those of Muslim women. The study interrogates the elemental metaphors and criminalized depictions used to “other” Middle Eastern and Muslim refugees, especially Syrian males and women, reinforcing public fear and legitimizing exclusionary policies. By advocating for counter-storytelling through writing curricula, this paper positions refugee women as complex historical agents, whose stories challenge prevailing stereotypes and offer nuanced understandings of displacement and resilience. Ultimately, it calls for a shift in writing pedagogies and public discourse to include refugee women’s own narratives, resisting their persistent victimization and tokenization.

Tags: [refugee \(mis\)representation](#), [Muslim women](#), [othering](#), [media stereotypes](#), [critical race theory \(CRT\)](#), [counterstorytelling](#), [transnational feminism](#), [Syrian refugee women](#), [writing pedagogy](#), [refugee agency](#)

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Mainstream migration and refugee discourses often portray refugees in biased and reductive ways, shaped by their racial, religious, and gender identities. Scholars have examined this through the concept of “othering,” which helps explain how dominant narratives construct refugees as fundamentally different and inferior. Refugees are frequently depicted as a homogeneous group lacking the skills, agency, and complexity of settled citizens. They are often described using elemental metaphors such as “flood” or “swamping,” which frame them as overwhelming forces rather than individuals (Behrman; Pulitano). In contrast, host country citizens--the “Self”--are portrayed as “bewildered Westerners” caught off guard by unexpected demands for compassion or aid. This dichotomy positions the “Self” as entitled and morally upright, while casting refugees as undeserving and burdensome (Behrman; van Schaik). Such representations are not only inaccurate but also dangerous, as they erase refugee agency and perpetuate the false idea that paints refugees as a homogeneous group. Ultimately, “othering” reinforces harmful narratives, with far-reaching implications beyond mere representation.

Confronting additional layers of misrepresentation, refugees from Middle Eastern countries, and especially those who identify as Muslims, are always depicted according to a certain narrative that has been ratified and recirculated—representing them as criminal and more threatening (Shaheen). A particularly

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marginalized and misrepresented group, Syrian refugees¹ have often been depicted in ways that reinforce specific, often negative narratives that have been attached to the identities of Middle Easterners and Arabs (Shaheen). Research has shown that the portrayal of Syrian refugees in media is frequently skewed, emphasizing themes of threat, burden, and victimhood, which contribute to a narrow and distorted public perception (Aswad; Irom; Mustafa-Awad & Kirner-Ludwig). Syrian males are presented as violent, terrorists, and rapists—threats to national security, often linking them to terrorism and criminality. Noor Ghazal Aswad posits that “Syrian refugees were at times constructed as potential terrorists intent on carrying out indiscriminate acts of extreme violence to achieve religious, political, or ideological aims” (Aswad 365). Similarly, Jill Walker Rettberg and Radhika Gajjala argue that with the height of the Syrian refugee crisis and the flood of Syrian refugees into Europe, anti-immigrant discourses casted doubt on refugees and their integrity, spewing hateful, racist, and derogatory comments such as, “Won’t be long before the rapes start” (Rettberg & Gajjala 179). This type of representation fosters public fear and legitimizes restrictive and discriminatory policies against refugees.

Despite global and national immigration trends of Muslims and the recent waves of refugees, specifically Syrian refugees, the long history of colonialism and racial violence, and the centrality of gender and gender-based practices to the colonial project, little attention has been given to the racialization of Muslim refugee women, particularly Syrian Muslim refugee women. While these dynamics are evident in national contexts such as the United States, this discussion focuses on the broader transnational patterns through which Muslim refugee women are marginalized and misrepresented. Thus, there is a growing need to understand the complex experiences of refugee women and the structures—both local and global—that produce conflict and undermine their post-displacement lives and the efforts refugee women undertake. Katty Alhayek emphasizes that “Syrian refugees are portrayed as a homogeneous group of powerless, victimized women and oppressive men who sell their daughters as commodities for rich Arabian men” (Alhayek 698). The simplistic and damaging stereotypes frequently employed to depict Syrian refugees overlook the unique narratives and diverse circumstances among them, thereby obscuring the intricate realities of their existence and erasing the complexities of their lives.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework that examines society and culture as they relate to categorizations of race, law, and power, can be applied to address the misrepresentation of refugee Muslim women by highlighting and challenging the systemic and structural factors that contribute to their marginalization. By examining how media, politics, and social narratives depict these women, CRT can reveal the underlying biases and prejudices that shape these representations, promoting the use of counter-narratives to challenge dominant discourses. Transnational feminism complements this approach by emphasizing the need to situate these narratives within global power structures, including imperialism, capitalism, and cultural hegemony, frequently furthering the continued marginalization of refugee women. By amplifying the voices and stories of Muslim refugee women themselves, CRT and transnational feminism together provide a more nuanced

1 Following the Arab Spring and the subsequent protests and civil war, Syrians fled in massive numbers, escaping the brutal war. While Syrians sought refuge in neighboring countries, many undertook the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea to migrate to Europe (UNHCR, 2023a).

understanding of their experiences, countering the often one-dimensional portrayals in mainstream media and policy discussions. This intersectional approach highlights how systemic inequalities intersect with gender, race, and geopolitical contexts, challenging the paternalistic frameworks that characterize these women solely as victims in need of rescue by Western institutions.

Departing from the prevailing understandings of Muslim refugee women as victims, problems, and objects of rescue, I (re)consider refugee women as fluid subjects and historical actors, inquiring into their social and cultural positioning counter-story to the dominant, normalized image of refugee women lacking agency. Building from the premise of CRT and transnational feminism and in contrast to the potent images circulating in the media, through which refugees are often reduced to sheer numbers, I call attention to the way refugees, and in my case Syrian refugee women, are portrayed. I argue that refugee stories need to be heard and studied in writing classrooms, but from refugee women themselves, to stop reinforcing the victimization image that is attached to their intersectional identities. It is critical to shift the perception of refugee women from victims to valuable resources for their families and communities, while also understanding the complex experiences and structures that produce conflict and hinder their efforts. While CRT scholars perceive storytelling as rhetorical means to document, centralize, and share the voices of marginalized populations, the purpose of the counter-stories of refugee women is to oppose the language of hegemony and oppression associated with their identities. Counter-storytelling, “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (Solorzano & Yosso 26), provides a platform for voices that are often excluded from mainstream narratives, highlighting perspectives and experiences that are not commonly represented.

Transcending “the argument that Syrian refugees are terrorists [which] allows for the construction of a ‘them’ versus ‘us’ narrative” (Aswad 365), I invite their stories into the writing classroom. In this essay, I explain how I apply counter-storytelling as a powerful instrument of resistance to unpack, problematize, and fight labeling practices portraying refugee women as deficient and in need of saving. I analyze the ways in which race and gender intersect to shape the experiences of Syrian refugee women facing particular forms of discrimination and marginalization and detail the ways in which intersecting forms of oppression impact their lives. In doing so, I draw from transnational feminist approaches, which critique Western feminism for universalizing women’s experiences and overlooking the specific, contextually rooted struggles of women in the Global South. Transnational feminism emphasizes the importance of context, voice, and power, helping to frame Syrian refugee women not as passive victims, but as historically and socially situated agents. I foreground my argument in counter-stories, as methodology and intervention in rhetorical and composition studies, to show how these women are active agents in (re)shaping their resettlement process, highlighting their rhetorical agency and resilience in the face of adversity. Specifically, I explain how I bring refugee women’s counter-stories into the college writing classroom and invite my students to research and examine the various (counter)stories told by refugee women to dismantle the various systems of oppression that perpetuate dominant narratives that paint them as powerless, incapable, and agentless. I posit that writing classrooms and composition and rhetorical practices are means for counter-stories to expose, analyze, and

critique the racialized reality in which those experiences are contextualized, silenced, and perpetuated, and examine the lived experiences of refugees, while making those experiences the basis for social change, starting with the writing classroom.

Layers of (Mis)representation of Middle Eastern Muslim Women

Although there is significant interest in the Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern subject, it is frequently depicted as a homogenized and racialized other (Alsultany; Narayan; Semati; Semati & Brookey). The portrayal of Middle Eastern Arab Muslim women in Western media, however, is complex and multifaceted, often marred by negative stereotypes that obscure their diverse realities; these women are often misrepresented as oppressed, subjugated, and voiceless, needing Western intervention to be “saved” (Abu-Lughod; Mohanty; Rettberg & Gajjala). This depiction enforces a sense of “otherness” and cultural superiority, overshadowing their diverse and nuanced experiences and choices. The misrepresentation of Middle Eastern Muslim women is perpetuated not only by mainstream Western media but also by Western feminism which involves several problematic dynamics that undermine the goals of inclusivity and understanding within feminist movements. Western feminism has been criticized for universalizing the experiences of women, ignoring the specificities of race, class, and geographical location. Such approaches can inadvertently reinforce colonialist attitudes by imposing Western ideals on non-Western women (Mohanty), hence perpetuating stereotypes and failing to address the specific needs and challenges faced by these women. These approaches can undermine the agency of non-Western women by suggesting that they need to be “rescued” or “empowered” according to Western standards. This perspective overlooks the existing forms of empowerment these women already possess within their own cultural and religious frameworks. Instead of validating these women in ways that align with their own goals and contexts, such approaches risk further marginalizing them by disregarding the value of their voices, lived experiences, and proposed solutions.

Transnational feminism critiques Western feminism for overlooking the diverse experiences of women across global contexts (Abu-Lughod; Mohanty). By examining the intersecting oppressions faced by Muslim refugee women, it highlights the complexities of their identities and challenges the racialization of the “other” in both the Global North and South. This perspective underscores the importance of situating these women’s lives within the broader framework of global power dynamics, migration, and cultural politics. It advocates for a critical and intersectional approach that recognizes the agency of Muslim refugee women, challenges reductive stereotypes, and addresses the structural inequalities that shape their lives. This perspective seeks to build genuine solidarity and understanding across cultural and national boundaries while resisting the co-optation of feminist rhetoric for exclusionary purposes. Transnational feminism is antiracist as it aims to create a more just and equitable world for all women, challenging and transforming existing power structures both locally and globally.

Scholars of transnational feminism critique Western feminist approaches for their tendency to homogenize women in the Global South, often portraying them as passive victims rather than active agents,

thereby overlooking their agency. Inderpal Grewal challenges traditional Western feminist perspectives for their universalizing tendencies, which often overlook the diverse and intersectional realities of women shaped by varying cultural, social, and geopolitical contexts. They highlight the necessity of contextualizing feminist struggles within global power dynamics while emphasizing the interconnectedness of race, nation, and gender in the treatment of displaced populations. Similarly, in their essay, “Toward a Cogent Analysis of Power: Transnational Rhetorical Studies,” Rebecca Dingo, Rachel Riedner, and Jennifer Wingard argue for a more comprehensive approach to analyzing power within rhetorical studies by adopting a transnational perspective. They critique traditional rhetorical frameworks for often being confined to localized or nation-bound contexts, which overlook the global flows of power, capital, and culture that shape rhetorical practices and discourses. The authors advocate for transnational rhetorical studies to interrogate how power operates across borders, emphasizing the interconnectedness of geopolitical, economic, and cultural forces. They examine how rhetoric both reflects and sustains global inequalities while providing tools for resistance and reimagining agency, emphasizing the need to analyze rhetoric within broader global power systems, rather than isolating it within narrowly defined national or cultural frameworks.

Wendy Hesford and Eileen Schell explore the intersections of feminist rhetoric and transnational studies, emphasizing the importance of analyzing rhetorical practices within global and cross-border contexts. They argue that feminist rhetorics must account for the complexities of transnationality, including how gender, race, class, and nation intersect to shape power dynamics and communicative practices across different geopolitical spaces. They highlight how transnational feminist rhetorics can reveal the ways in which rhetorical practices both sustain and resist systems of domination, such as imperialism and patriarchy. By situating feminist rhetorics within transnational contexts, Hesford and Schell advocate for more nuanced and intersectional analyses that reflect the lived realities of women and marginalized communities worldwide. In a similar vein, Rachel Riedner critically examines how the rhetoric of globalization constructs narratives about women’s autonomy and freedom by often framing women, particularly from the Global South, as victims of cultural patriarchy and negligent nation-states in need of rescue by Western institutions. Riedner critiques how neoliberal and nationalist discourses often exploit or erase the contributions of these women, framing them as victims or symbols rather than active agents. She argues for a feminist rhetorical approach that amplifies their voices and examines the ways they navigate and resist transnational structures of oppression. Such representations are circulated through powerful platforms, reinforcing the idea that Western agents and policies are benevolent forces liberating oppressed women. These acts—though they may appear to promote civic engagement—ultimately reinforce and contribute to the systemic structures that uphold colonial power (Nish). This rhetoric presents first-world interventions as the solution to third-world problems while ignoring the structural and systemic causes of inequality, such as global capitalism and imperialism. These narratives often marginalize the agency of the women they claim to empower and serve as tools to reinforce global systems of economic and political domination.

In “Gender Violence as Global Phenomenon: Refugees, Genital Surgeries, and the Neocolonial Projects of the United States,” Sara McKinnon critically examines how gender-based violence is framed as

a global issue, exposing the neocolonial lens through which Western powers, particularly the United States, memorialize cultural dominance. She argues that narratives surrounding gender violence—such as the experiences of refugees—are often employed to justify interventionist policies and reinforce Western superiority. These narratives construct women from the Global South as passive victims in need of rescue, obscuring the structural violence rooted in imperialism and global inequality. Furthermore, McKinnon critiques US asylum law for its Western-centric perspectives, which marginalize and misrepresent the lived experiences of non-Western women. She contends that these biases perpetuate colonial power dynamics by ignoring the systemic factors, including US foreign policy, that contribute to persecution and displacement (McKinnon *Gendered Asylum: Race and Violence in US Law and Politics*).

Furthermore, there is a tendency in Western feminism to portray Middle Eastern Muslim women predominantly as victims of patriarchy and religious oppression. This narrative can strip these women of their agency and reduce their identities to one-dimensional stereotypes (Haq). Adopting a paternalistic, “rescue” mentality, believing that Middle Eastern Muslim women need to be saved from their own cultures, is patronizing and dismissive of the ways in which these women are already advocating for their rights and making changes within their own societies (Korteweg & Yurdakul). Additionally, viewing veiling as a symbol of oppression, Western feminism often ignores and overlooks the complex and varied reasons why women choose to wear it, including personal, religious, and cultural motivations, which can lead to misunderstandings and alienation (Zine). For many women, veiling is an expression of their identity, a way to assert their individuality, or a means of finding comfort and confidence in their daily lives. For numerous Muslim women, veiling is an act of faith and devotion, a way to adhere to religious principles and connect more deeply with their spirituality. Ignoring this aspect reduces a profound spiritual practice to a mere political statement, stripping it of its religious significance and potentially alienating those for whom it holds great meaning. This view not only undermines the diverse realities of Muslim women but also silences their voices and experiences and hinders efforts to build solidarity across cultural and religious divides.

Due to the lack of adequate representation of Middle Eastern Muslim women, Western feminism often imposes its own values and norms, disregarding their unique cultural and religious contexts. This approach is a form of cultural imperialism, where Western standards are viewed as the benchmark for women’s liberation, ignoring the specific socio-political contexts in which Middle Eastern women live (Abu-Lughod). Western feminist perspectives often homogenize Middle Eastern Muslim women, failing to acknowledge the vast diversity within this group. This tendency can erase important distinctions in their experiences, identities, and backgrounds, shaped by differences in nationality, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Specifically, such reductionist views overlook the complexities and variations that exist across Middle Eastern societies

Portraying Syrian refugee women as passive victims denies their agency, reinforces a patronizing attitude, and reduces their experiences and contributions to simplistic, dehumanizing tropes. The repetition of these narratives in mainstream media serves to entrench stereotypes and biases, making it difficult for Syrian refugees to be seen as individuals with diverse backgrounds and aspirations. It also impacts their ability

to integrate into host societies, as public opinion shaped by these narratives can influence policy decisions and social attitudes towards them. These portrayals are not accidental but are often shaped by the interests of powerful groups that control the media and the narrative. By framing the narrative to emphasize threat and burden, these groups justify exclusionary practices, maintain social and political hierarchies, and sustain policies that marginalize and disadvantage refugees. This framing cements refugees' position as outsiders, reinforces their societal misrepresentation, and leads to tangible impacts—shaping public perceptions, influencing policy decisions, fueling Islamophobia, justifying discriminatory practices, and hindering efforts toward mutual understanding and respect (Semati). Ultimately, many refugees come to realize that the safe haven they imagined is nothing more than a facade and a sham.

CRT: Combating Misrepresentation

To combat misrepresentations, it is crucial to promote diverse and accurate portrayals of Middle Eastern Muslim women by amplifying their voices, sharing their stories, and challenging stereotypes. This effort should expand CRT on the educational implications of refugees' legally sanctioned, economically constrained, and racialized experiences. The fundamental principle of CRT is to highlight the narratives of oppressed peoples, examine how racism permeates instructional, curricular, and assessment practices, and critique inadequate practices in schools. CRT emphasizes counter-storytelling to illuminate the experiences of refugees and conceptualizes them as individuals who are racialized, othered, and legally classified, experiencing systemic oppression both in their countries of origin and even in resettlement. Utilizing CRT, I demonstrate the emancipatory role of counter-stories in (re)telling racialized narratives, specifically the story of Syrian refugee women. As tools of accountability, counter-stories can reveal and challenge the oppressive forces and hidden structures that shape racialized social norms and behaviors.

The importance of storytelling to CRT is well-documented. Scholars such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Aja Martinez, and Bronwyn Williams have employed narratives to challenge preconceived notions about race and enhance our understanding of contemporary race relations. They argue that counter-stories allow marginalized groups to affirm their experiences beyond the dominant White supremacist narrative, thereby fortifying their communities. More importantly, these narratives challenge hegemonic discourse by rejecting color-blindness and exposing racism as a central factor in American societal inequities. In fact, “stories can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo” (Delgado 5). However, CRT scholarship has largely overlooked storytelling as an empowering tool for refugees, especially in undergraduate courses (Pulitano). Refugee stories challenge dehumanizing metaphors like “floods,” “waves,” and “victims,” often used in popular discourse. They offer a stark contrast, inviting readers into complex realities, humanize suffering often overlooked in statistics, and inspire empathy and action against the dominant culture of fear and intolerance, which has led to a resurgence of nativist sentiments and xenophobic acts. Additionally, these stories showcase refugees' resilience and agency, highlighting how their movements and transactions in a new land involve not only new communities but also the exchange of goods, services, capital, and ideas across borders.

Welcoming Refugee Women's Counter-stories into the Writing Classroom

Scholars like Mais Al-Khateeb have advanced feminist methodologies to better understand and address the complexities of our changing world, including the migration of people to the United States. Including the voices and experiences of refugee women in educational curricula fosters student awareness of the diverse and complex realities refugees face. Counter-storytelling as a methodology highlights the experiences of refugee women—telling the stories that are often left untold—and serves as a tool for analyzing and challenging the majoritarian or single story that stereotypes refugee women, focusing on their deficits rather than their decision-making, strengths, and agency. Integrating the voices of marginalized groups into broader conversations about race, gender, and justice fosters a more inclusive and accurate understanding of their experiences. Incorporating refugee women's stories into CRT, in particular, can broaden the focus beyond Black-White racial dynamics to include other marginalized groups, such as refugees.

With synergy between my research and teaching, enhancing and informing each other, I have crafted curricula on CRT and counter-story. As I joined the George Washington University, I decided to theme my first-year writing class on refugees. I focus on refugee women as the primary case study. With my students, we engage with the lived experiences of refugee women to evaluate their construction of agency—how they are agents in finding ways not only to survive but also to thrive and gain economic mobility. Engaging in various texts, including academic arguments, personal narratives, TEDx Talks, documentaries, guest speaker lectures, and personal interviews, we explore how refugees are complex individuals experiencing immense challenges but also exerting great resilience. Students learn to ask critical questions about issues related to refugees, conduct research, explore possible arguments, consider counter-arguments, form their own claims, and reflect on their position as it takes shape. In the major research assignment, titled, “Interview and Position Essay,” and in conjunction with secondary research, students interview refugee women and inquire about their lived experiences navigating the system in the United States, more specifically the Washington D.C. region, while constructing a home away from home. The goal in this essay is to build on the writing and research (including the interview) to offer the argument they find most persuasive within the issue they are examining. They learn how to take a position within the debate, address competing positions and alternatives, and effectively and efficiently organize their ideas.

While students are allowed to choose the refugee women population they want to research, work with, and interview, I structure the curriculum on the Syrian refugee crisis, due to my expertise on the topic. In the first few weeks of classes, and as I am teaching summary and rhetorical analysis, I explain the context that led to the Arab Spring and the subsequent civil war in Syria and the largest exodus of the 21st century, with nearly two-thirds of displaced Syrians being women and children. As we approach the Interview and Position essay, I spend time preparing students for primary and secondary research and specifically the interview process. First, I conference with them to go over their topic choices and the research question they hope to untangle throughout the semester. Also, I go over the interview process and encourage them to allow the interview to happen organically—going off script and asking follow-up questions. We discuss the type of

questions to ask and ways to get the interviewee to engage in open dialogue, which functions as an outlet to give voice to refugee women and a space to explain their choices and express their feelings while the interviewers (students) are engaged in rhetorical listening, which Krista Ratcliffe defines as a “stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (Ratcliffe 17). While listening, students visualize and picture the interviewee’s experiences and empathize. Rhetorical listening encourages understanding and allows for cross-cultural communication and open, honest dialogue. It is an approach to communication that emphasizes understanding and considering the perspectives and experiences of others, especially those who may be marginalized or different from oneself. It requires not only listening to what is being said but also actively engaging with the cultural and social contexts that shape the speaker’s message, promoting deeper empathy and understanding in the conversation.

I played a pivotal role in mediating relationships, offering guidance on respectful communication, and ensuring that both students and refugees were comfortable throughout the process. To initiate contact with refugee women, I facilitated connections by collaborating with local organizations and community centers that maintain established and trusted relationships with refugee communities. Partnerships with local non-profit organizations, such as those focused on refugee resettlement and empowerment, served as key pathways for students to engage with participants. I leveraged my own networks and acted as a bridge to connect students with refugee women. This direct facilitation ensured that students could build relationships with participants in a respectful and ethical manner. To address linguistic and cultural differences, I occasionally served as both a translator and a cultural informant during the interviews with Arab speaking refugee women. My presence not only facilitated effective communication but also provided critical cultural context, ensuring that the participants felt understood and respected. These efforts helped to mitigate potential misunderstandings and fostered a more authentic and meaningful exchange.

The course design also incorporated preparatory activities to build cultural competency and promote ethical research practices. Students underwent preparatory training on qualitative research interview methods, informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and active listening. Emphasis was placed on creating a safe and respectful environment for storytelling. Students engaged with documentaries, case studies, and academic readings on Syrian refugees across various contexts and countries. These activities helped them develop a nuanced understanding of the socio-political and cultural dynamics shaping the lives of Syrian refugees. By the time students reached the interview stage, they were equipped to approach the conversations with sensitivity and respect. Reflective discussions and debrief sessions after the interviews provided an opportunity for students to critically evaluate their approaches, address challenges they encountered, and learn from the experience. These steps ensured that students not only engaged ethically and effectively with Syrian refugee women but also deepened their understanding of the complexities and transformative potential of cross-cultural research.

To better prepare for the interview, we conduct a mock interview in class where a group of students interviews me, given my identity as a Syrian immigrant woman who has worked closely with refugee wom-

en. During this mock interview, one student verbally asks me questions—crafted ahead of time—while another takes notes, reflecting the roles I envisioned when designing the assignment. The rest of the class observes and listens. Students’ questions vary widely, often focusing on how I became invested in academic and volunteer work with Syrian refugees and how my Syrian heritage and academic background influence my research and relationships with refugee communities. Follow-up questions frequently arise during the process, allowing for a more organic and dynamic exchange.

To further prepare for their personal interviews with refugee women, we collaboratively create a pool of questions students can use. Each student is asked to post 5-6 potential questions on the course’s discussion board, encouraging thoughtful and varied contributions. I guide students to craft open-ended questions that go beyond simple yes-or-no answers to foster richer, more meaningful dialogue. For example, students have developed questions such as: “What challenges did you face when resettling in a new country, and how did you overcome them?”; “Can you share a story about how your family has adapted to life in the diaspora?”; “How do you navigate preserving your cultural identity while integrating into a new community?”; “What role does storytelling or memory play in your life and that of your family?”; and “Have you encountered racism or discrimination during your resettlement journey, and how has that shaped your experience?”. I also emphasize two key points as students prepare for their interviews: first, they should let the conversation flow naturally, understanding that topics may arise in an unexpected order or that the respondent may choose not to answer certain questions; second, I encourage students to take detailed notes and, if the interviewee consents, to record the conversation. These practices help ensure accuracy and allow students to focus more fully on the exchange. By crafting thoughtful questions and approaching interviews with flexibility and sensitivity, students not only gain valuable insight into refugee women’s coping mechanisms and familial roles but also explore deeper issues, such as racism and systemic challenges. This approach integrates counter-story methodology, offering students the opportunity to critically engage with the lived experiences of refugee women while addressing the intersectional challenges they face, including racial and cultural marginalization.

After completing the research process and workshopping their position essays, students reflect on the experience and the knowledge they have gained. Their reflections reveal recurring themes, such as the defiance exhibited by refugee women against dominant narratives. These disparaging narratives often portray refugee women as lacking agency, entirely dependent on male partners, and incapable of leading their families to financial stability. Students also challenge the oversimplified master narrative that depicts all refugees as desperate to leave their countries for the United States, perceived as the ultimate destination of the “American dream.” Through these reflections, students deepen their understanding of refugee women’s diverse experiences and the complexities of their stories.

Female Financial Prosperity Against Projected Fragility

The interviews revealed to students how refugees often construct their own identities or resist those imposed on them. The political climate has essentially put an entire group of people—refugees—under a microscope to scrutinize. Students learned that refugee women, without formal education even in their first language, have been able to have their own businesses and support their families from their domestic spaces. Many women have become breadwinners and sustainers of their families either because their male partners or supporters passed away or because the system in the United States does not recognize their human capital, the skills and knowledge they must possess to be economically and financially productive. Many of their male partners are unable to work, or even if they work, the jobs available for them can hardly provide for them or even enable them to have a decent income or life. Ultimately, refugee women have stepped in and utilized and leveraged their domestic skills, such as cooking and sewing, to create successful home-based businesses. For example, some women have started catering services, preparing traditional dishes for local communities and events, while others have launched sewing businesses, making and selling clothing and accessories, or offering alterations.

The systemic barriers in the United States, such as the non-recognition of foreign credentials and skills, often leave refugee men and women underemployed or unemployed. Despite having valuable skills and knowledge, these individuals struggle to find jobs that match their qualifications. For refugee women, this challenge is compounded by cultural and linguistic barriers, yet they have shown remarkable adaptability and ingenuity by turning to entrepreneurial ventures within their domestic spheres. Also, the shift in traditional family roles, with women becoming the main economic providers, has significant implications for family dynamics and gender roles. This role reversal challenges conventional gender norms and highlights the adaptability and strength of refugee women. Students learned that these women's contributions are not only economic in nature but also serve to empower them within their households and communities, fostering a sense of agency and self-worth. By running their own businesses and generating income, refugee women achieve a level of financial independence that allows them to make important decisions about their lives and families. This economic contribution shifts the power dynamics within the household, granting them greater control over financial resources and expenditures. Students came to realize how through financial autonomy, refugee women are often more involved in making decisions that affect the family, from daily budgeting to long-term planning. This increased participation strengthens their voice and influence within the family unit.

Countering the Imagined American Dream

At the beginning of the semester, many of my students had limited understanding of what it means to be a refugee and the various reasons refugees come to the United States. They believed that everyone is desperate to be in the United States, seeking economic prosperity and chasing the American dream, when in fact, many, such as Syrians, wish Syria was safe to go back to. Many wished they had never left their homes or endured the loss or the brutal violence they had witnessed. My students watched the documentary, “This

Is Home: A Refugee Story” which provides an intimate look into the lives of four Syrian refugee families who have been resettled in Baltimore, Maryland. The film captures their experiences over an eight-month period, highlighting the challenges and triumphs they encounter as they adjust to life in the United States. The documentary delves deeply into the personal stories of the individuals, revealing how Syrian men and women regret the decision to come to the United States. One of the caseworkers interviewed in the documentary noted about Syrian refugees’ experiences and reactions: “I am originally from Baghdad, Iraq, and I came as a refugee and I understand that when you’re coming from a war zone and you feel like you reached your haven and you’re gonna be safe, and suddenly, this place is not haven anymore” (*This Is Home: A Refugee Story* 00:49:58-00:50:13). Finding employment has been difficult for Syrian men, especially since their qualifications are not recognized and many face language barriers. Besides, experiencing discrimination or hostility from locals has made them feel unwelcome and unsafe. Some indicated that they wish to go back to Syria once it is safe for them to make that transition. The difference in family and community dynamics makes it harder for them to flourish in a new and different environment. The so-called “American Dream” has become a nightmare for many of the Syrian refugees as they must navigate and maneuver multiple layers and types of struggles ranging from economic independence--which they enjoyed when they were in Syria--to xenophobic policies that limit and hinder their prosperous resettlement. Others indicated that if not for the safety of their children, they would not have left their home country, Syria. The myth of the “American Dream” reflects and reinforces Western biases and misconceptions about refugees, contributing to Islamophobia and xenophobia, while perpetuating a narrative that dehumanizes Syrian refugees and justifies discriminatory attitudes and policies against them. In the documentary, an ESL teacher working with Syrian refugee students reflected on their struggles: “I think the hardest thing is realizing that we’re bringing people from another country and we’re telling them that we are helping them, like, I’m gonna move to America and I’m gonna live the American dream, and yet you get here, and the American dream is nothing like what TV or movies tell you. And we want to be the greatest country in the world, but we don’t treat people like we are the greatest country in the world” (00:50:57-00:51:20). This testimony highlights the gap between the promise of the American Dream and the lived realities of many refugees, urging a reflection on the nation’s values and actions. It calls for a reassessment of how the country lives up to its ideals and treats those who come seeking a better life. It captures a sense of disillusionment experienced by refugees who find that the reality of life in America does not match their expectations. This disparity calls for a critical reassessment of how the United States upholds its ideals and treats those who arrive seeking safety, opportunity, and a chance at a better life. The disillusionment experienced by refugees stems from the stark contrast between the idealized promise of the American Dream—characterized by prosperity, freedom, and equality—and the harsh realities they often encounter upon arrival. These realities include systemic barriers such as limited access to resources, economic hardship, discrimination, and social alienation.

Building on this reflection, it is essential to dispel the misconception that the American Dream is the primary incentive for Syrian refugees’ immigration to the United States. While the allure of economic prosperity and upward social mobility has historically been a significant factor in attracting immigrants, it is far from the only reason people choose to relocate. For many refugees, their decision to flee is rooted in survival

rather than aspiration, underscoring the urgent need to reframe narratives about their journeys and motivations. Many immigrants have been driven by a complex mix of factors, including political persecution, war, and violence in their home countries, the pursuit of educational opportunities, the desire for family reunification, and the need to escape environmental disasters. Reducing the motivation for Syrian refugees to the singular notion of the American Dream ignores the diverse and multifaceted realities of those who come to the United States.

The narrow focus on the victimization of refugees and their desperation to come to America is often used to promote American exceptionalism as it plays well into the American nationalistic agenda in which outsiders are desperate to sacrifice their lives to make it to this sacred land and have a chance to achieve the idealized American dream. The refugee stereotypes played up by the media and state paint refugees as victims desperately trying to settle into the United States while ignoring America's historical colonial injustices in the region. These racist stereotypes serve to accentuate and highlight America's own moral and cultural superiority while simultaneously *othering* those who are painted as different, such as Arabs and Muslims. Many students seriously get to reevaluate what they have been taught about American ideals of freedom, democracy, liberty, and human rights, and how America operates under these higher moral grounds and effectively allow the United States to act as a moral arbitrator of the world.

Counterstories Making a Place in Academia: Disrupting Mainstream Narratives

Disparaging narratives about Syrians in general, and Syrian women specifically, can be actively shifted not just through the act of telling other stories but also by amplifying the voices of Syrian women migrants and immigrants. Through interviews, readings, and documentaries, my students were immersed in the lived experiences of refugee women, gaining a nuanced understanding of their struggles, resilience, and the practices that have shaped their identities and choices. These interactions fostered open dialogue and organic conversations, revealing intimate details that allowed students to imagine themselves in the place of the other. This process encouraged students to engage deeply with rhetorical listening, storytelling, and counter-stories, transforming these tools into means of empathy and critical reflection. By confronting their assumptions, students gained a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers faced by refugee women and the extraordinary resilience they demonstrate, equipping them to advocate for and support marginalized communities in their future endeavors.

Critical Race Theory and Transnational Feminist Theory offer complementary and intersecting frameworks for first-year writing classrooms, providing powerful tools to analyze refugee women's counter-stories and the ways intersecting forms of oppression shape their experiences and impact their lives. CRT's focus on counter-storytelling and systemic inequities intersects with transnational feminism's emphasis on respecting cultural differences and fostering solidarities across borders. Teaching first-year writing and CRT while incorporating refugee women's narratives and counter-stories can be profoundly impactful. Incorporating case studies of refugee women who have successfully started their own businesses can inspire stu-

dents and provide concrete illustrations of the challenges and successes faced by these women. Additionally, assigning projects that require students to research and present on the entrepreneurial endeavors of refugee women—while developing business plans, marketing strategies, or community support initiatives that highlight their ingenuity—can be extremely productive and eye-opening. Also, facilitating discussions on how systemic barriers and structural inequalities manifest in the lives of refugees, including the devaluation of foreign credentials and skills and the barriers to economic and social integration, encourages students to critically examine how policies and societal attitudes can be reformed to better support refugees, recognizing them not as liabilities but as an asset and valuable contributors. Transnational feminism complements this by urging students to respect and value the diverse cultural and religious contexts that shape refugee women's choices, even when these differ from Western feminist ideals. This multifaceted framework challenges students to critically reflect on their own biases and assumptions, fostering a deeper understanding of global power dynamics.

This comprehensive approach equipped students to engage meaningfully and respectfully, providing a replicable model for similar projects in other courses. By integrating these perspectives and activities into the curriculum, students can appreciate the profound impact of refugee women's entrepreneurial endeavors. They will see that these contributions are not just about economic survival but also about fostering dignity, agency, and empowerment within and beyond the household. Incorporating these theories into first-year writing curricula provides students with a robust framework to understand and analyze complex social issues and systemic forces shaping refugee women's lives, while appreciating their agency and contributions. This approach enhances critical thinking and writing skills while fostering a deeper awareness of social justice and the importance of amplifying marginalized voices. By engaging with these intersections, students develop a greater appreciation for the multifaceted experiences of refugee women and the systemic forces shaping their lives, ultimately cultivating a more informed and compassionate worldview, and moving beyond a *single story* approach: Appreciating and respecting refugee women's choices even when they do not align with their Western views of liberation and empowerment. Moreover, transnational feminism emphasizes building solidarities and coalitions across borders, advocating for a politics of solidarity that acknowledges and respects differences while striving toward shared goals. This approach encourages Western feminists to engage in genuine partnerships with feminists from diverse backgrounds, learning from their experiences and supporting their struggles without imposing their own agendas. By following these strategies, educators can better equip students to appreciate the intricate intersections of gender, culture, and religion in transnational contexts, promoting a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of various feminist movements.

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