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The Media, Education, and the State: Arts-Based Research and a Marxist Analysis
of the Syrian Refugee Crisis

A Dissertation by

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Chapman University

Orange, CA

College of Educational Studies

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

August 2019

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August 2019

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The Media, Education, and the State: Arts-Based Research and a Marxist Analysis
of the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The Media, Education, and the State: Arts-Based Research and a Marxist Analysis of the Syrian Refugee Crisis

by Meng Zhao

By 2019, the Syrian civil war has lasted for nearly eight years and it has created the largest humanitarian crisis since WWII (Achlume, 2015). Using the siege of Aleppo in 2016 as a case study, the author applied a Marxist-humanist theoretical framework and incorporated arts-based research methodology to examine how the US news media supports capitalist social relations. The research question for this study was: how do the US media depictions of the siege of Aleppo, Syria in 2016 reflect capitalist social relations? There were three sub-questions that followed: (1) Which elements of the siege of Aleppo in 2016 get the most attention in the specific outlets examined? In what ways do these depictions support the US government and/or corporate interests? (2) What are some of the ways in which Syrian refugees are depicted in the various outlets examined? How and in what ways is the US humanitarian policy reflected? How are Syrian's racialized through these depictions? and (3) How are corporate and government interests tied to these media outlets? This study used narrative inquiry, visual analysis, and critical discourse analysis as research methods to discover five major themes found in US news media's reporting on the siege of Aleppo in 2016. The author then examined these five main themes through a Marxist-humanist lens to discover how the US news media, the supposed "gatekeeper" for the public, establishes, maintains, and reinforces an ideology that supported hegemony for the dominant class.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The flux of Syrian refugees is a major humanitarian crisis the world is facing right now. While some of the public welcomed and even dedicated their efforts to help the Syrian refugees, some groups demonstrated anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments. Across the US, anti-Muslim marches appeared; in Europe, the public witnessed bursts of anti-Muslim immigrant and refugee demonstrations (Lee & Jarvie, 2017; Kern, 2012). The negative opinions and resistant attitudes toward Syrian refugees, like that against any other group who merely seeks safety for their families and a chance to live with dignity, is a testament to our human decay. How we, as human beings, can turn away the neediest people, including children is, for me, beyond comprehension.

A pivotal factor in the perception, and correlative treatment, of refugees is the media; it is the information gatekeeper for the public (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011). Regarding the current Syrian crisis, the news media becomes the first connection between the majority of the public and the actual events happening in Syria. Since most Americans cannot travel to Syria right now and observe the events in person, they may actively seek information from news media, if they are curious on the topic of Syria. However, the audience can also be passive because the media seeks to bombard the public with information. For instance, media is well used as a persuasive tool for advertising, which encourages consumers to desire more material things and therefore spend more (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999). Used politically, the media actively attempts to draw the public to their point of view (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McMahon

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& Chow-White, 2011). Even in a society where people have the freedom to choose which news media source to use, such as in the US, one still cannot escape the influence of media, as it either bluntly or indirectly persuades public opinion, meanwhile sustaining and reinforcing a capitalist ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Mullen, 2010).

From a Marxist view, mass media in capitalist societies is most often an agent for influencing public opinion and thereby serves in a watchdog capacity for the rich and powerful capitalists (Mullen, 2010); thus, mass media has the ability to both guide public interests and affect the political economy in the US. Which aspects of the Syrian crisis the news media focus on, as well as how and why they do so, is crucial to study how the public understands the Syrian crisis and its people. Looking through the lens of Marxist-humanist and critical pedagogy, I conducted arts-based research using the siege of Aleppo in 2016, one of the most recent events in Syria that involved US intervention, as a case study to examine the relationship between US mainstream news media and capitalist social relations.

This study was conducted and written during 2018-2019; during the two plus years between the end of the siege to the time of this writing, the US has had a new administration, new involvement in Syria, and new policy for the Syrian people. After the siege of Aleppo in 2016, the US intervention in Syria continues. The most recent US attack in Syria was in April 2018, where US, British, and French forces conducted missile attacks on Damascus, Syria's capital city (A timeline of US Involvement, 2019). At present, the Trump administration has significantly cut the number of refugees allowed in the US, resulting in the US admitting the lowest number of refugees since 1980 when the refugee program was first created (Gal & Mark, 2019). Additionally, anti-

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refugee, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim sentiments are growing in our country, creating new challenges for Syrian refugees and those who wish to be their allies (Achlume, 2015; Disney, 2017; Fandl, 2017). In January 2017, President Trump implemented a discriminatory Muslim ban that forbade people from seven predominately Muslim countries, including Syria, from coming into the US, and additionally, he placed a hold on all Syrian refugees' entry to the US (Understanding Trump's Muslim bans, 2019). Since the creation of the Muslim ban, Trump has altered it into three versions in the public eye, in an attempt to "legitimize" this discriminatory act to those who are against his decision. Although some states rejected Trump's order, this executive decision reflects the racist and prejudice attitude Muslim people face in our current society.

In a way, this study looks back in time to understand the role and influence of the media. Nonetheless, no matter how the US has changed over time, because the media is a tool of the ruling class (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), it is then always controlled by those who dominate our society. Hence, the main principles from this study would still apply to our understanding of the media today.

A Chance Encounter

In the summer of 2013, I did a solo-backpacking trip in Europe. One day, as I was sitting on a train heading to the most northern tip of Sweden, I met a young woman who sat across from me, also traveling alone. At first, I thought she was on vacation just like me, but I soon noticed that she looked sad and distraught. I began a conversation with her and learned that her name was Maria, and to my surprise, she told me she was a refugee, was on her own because she had no one left. A humanitarian organization was sending Maria to a very small town in northern Sweden so she could resettle there, first to

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learn basic Swedish, then they would assign Maria a low-level job, which only required a minimal level of the Swedish language, maybe as a grocery clerk or an office cleaner. Maria had just landed in Sweden after a very long journey from Syria, and this was the last part of her trip before she could call a new place home. After hearing this, I felt extremely embarrassed and even ashamed—I assumed this young lady sitting across from me was traveling alone by choice, going to explore a place with little population due to curiosity. I presupposed she was like me, and failed to realize that there are people in the world that have no choice but to travel alone to faraway places in order to survive. I wanted to ask Maria more questions, such as what was the war like, what happened to her family, and how did she end up to relocate in Sweden; I knew nothing about the Syrian civil war back then and I was eager to learn more. However, I was also aware of her exhaustion from the long travel and her vulnerable emotional state at that moment, so I let her rest and thought to myself that I would do research on the Syrian civil war once I had access to the Internet again, so I could educate myself on Syria from the news media. Before meeting Maria, I knew there were refugees in the world. When I was 15 and first arrived in the US, I entered US Customs at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago and saw a gate labeled "Refugees and Asylums." Under that sign, I saw some women and children sitting and waiting, and I still vividly remember the look of uncertainty and worry on their faces. It made sense to me back then that refugees would go to a country like the US that is made up of people with diverse backgrounds and different cultures. In addition, I thought all refugees go to large cities, such as Chicago, and that they would be with their families. Nonetheless, after meeting Maria, I became conscious of the harsh reality for war refugees—they are scared, alone, worried, and they have few, if any,

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choices. After Maria told me she knew nothing about the place where she was going, I asked her what was she going to do about her uncertainty. She looked at me and said, “When things like this happens, what else can you do? You just push forward.”

About one hour later, I said goodbye to Maria as she got out at a station that seemed to me like the middle of nowhere. The station looked deserted with some concrete square buildings behind them, I could only see dense trees. There, Maria was supposed to wait for someone to pick her up and take her to what would be her new home, where she would start her new life. The last image I saw of Maria was of her standing with her only belonging, one nylon bag, looking aimlessly around the station as the train pulled away. I wondered just how many other war refugees are like Maria, settling into a strange land in order to survive.

The civil war in Syria, which began in 2011, created an ongoing trend of forced migration and a large refugee crisis in the world; today, more than half of the world’s refugee population comes from Syria (Figures at a glance, 2017). Currently, many Syrian civilians are seeking resettlement in other countries due to this large humanitarian disaster (Fantz, Anderson, & Elwazer, 2015). There are over 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees at the time of this writing, and the number of refugee applications is increasing (Syria regional refugee response, 2018). Among those forced to migrate, 75 percent were women and children (Figures at a glance, 2017). It has been more than seven years since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, and the amount of Syrian refugees resulting from this adversity marks the largest humanitarian crisis since WWII (Achlume, 2015). Almost eight years later, the Syrian crisis still remains active in news media. As the Syrian civil war progressed, some countries saw it as an opportunity to

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establish their power in the region by getting involved in the war, which turned Syria into ground for various proxy wars, making the Syrian civil war an international affair that has serious implications for those seeking to migrate on a refugee status.

That summer, after my chance encounter with Maria, I wondered why I had not heard about the refugee crisis that turned Maria homeless. Many people probably asked themselves the same question after seeing the photograph of the little Syrian boy found dead on a Turkish beach in 2015. How is it that the Syrian crisis started in 2011 but so many people were not aware of it until much later? Why did the media focus so little on this crisis when it first started? How are the different aspects of the Syrian war, such as the refugee crisis, reported by our news media and why? After developing greater criticality through my doctoral education, I have come to realize that these questions deserve a deep analysis. Many years later, I still think of Maria and wonder how she is doing in her new community. We have not kept in touch because she did not have an email or physical address when we met. However, that chance encounter with Maria remained on my mind and sparked my research interest.

Statement of the Problem

This concern over Maria and other Syrian refugees is part of a larger way of thinking about the world, questioning the various injustices that are all around us such as war, famine, violence, and inequality. For many years throughout my life, I learned not to question these issues very much. I accepted what was told to me by authoritative and official sources, and I mostly learned the world through the media, school, family and other institutions. When it came to particular crises or wars, I relied almost entirely on what I read or heard in mainstream news. I believed the information I gained from the

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news to be true and had little understanding of the forces that influence the type of stories we receive in the media. As I began to study systematically critical theories and reading very diverse stories about the origins and influences of the Syrian war, as well as finding the various perspectives that were presented to US viewers/audiences, I began to realize the significant complexity that exists in media representations.

This dissertation is a study of this complexity as it relates to the siege of Aleppo in 2016 and to understand the ways in which Syria and the Syrian people are represented in diverse media outlets and for what purposes these representations can differ. With plenty of news media choices, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) suggested that audiences in general are goal oriented, and they actively select the media that best match their needs. For instance, if someone chooses to use one news media over another, this person is likely to find the chosen news media appealing to his or her beliefs. At the same time, the news media produces information to the public that would further reinforce their audiences' beliefs. Like an ongoing spiral, the media reflects public opinion, and public opinion influences the media.

Consequently, a primary role of media is to act as a gatekeeper for public information, because of its ability to influence public opinion and affect policy (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011). The news media directs the audiences' attention to selected topics, thus telling the audience what to think and maybe even how to think (McCombs & Shaw, 1977). With all the events happening on a daily basis throughout the world, the news media has the power to educate the audience as to which issues are important and relevant to them and therefore deserve policy change, at the same time which issues are less important or not worth the audiences' attention, resulting in these

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issues being mentioned only slightly or even omitted. Although media users could seek niche news media sources or solely get news from social media, the major news companies remain in the role of gatekeeper and therefore influence the other news sources on what topics should be discussed (McCombs & Shaw, 1977). For example, if an event is called “breaking news” on *CNN*, it is very likely to appear on *Fox News* as an important event, as well. Furthermore, one would probably find the same event featured in major news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, as well as mentioned in other information platforms such as *Twitter* and *Reddit*. Thus, a small amount of powerful news media corporations determine what agendas to push and what is important for the public to know (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011). Marx (1992) pointed out that the ruling class’s ideas are indeed “ruling” the ideas of the public. Media becomes a vehicle for the powerful dominant group in spreading their ideology to those dominated. On the other hand, the dominant group considers how to relay their ideas through media, because the public can influence policy change that either benefits or disadvantages their power. Take voting as an example, US citizens have opportunities to vote for issues they care about in elections, and to support politicians whose ideas match their beliefs in particular issues, such as immigration policy. With an important topic, it is the means by which the ruling class uses media to inform the public that can ultimately persuade the public to vote for policy change; hence, the media can be used as an effective propaganda tool (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). For example, very recently we saw the Supreme Court uphold the President’s ban of five predominantly Muslim countries, which includes a halt on Muslim Syrian refugees trying to resettle in the US (Higgins, 2018). The President has garnered support for this by creating fear of the “Other” through his many statements

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shown in the media, for instance, describing all Syrian refugees as “young, strong men” (Rhodan, 2015). Thus, the media can be partly to blame for some of these policies because they decide what they give time and space to in their reports.

However, the issue is much more complex than this because the news media, even if it is called “free media” in democratic societies, is also a corporate entity that is controlled by the politically and economically powerful (Mullen, 2010), and also one whose role is presumably to check and balance the government by providing information to the public (Starke, Naab, & Scherer, 2016). Nonetheless, there is no chance for media transparency since the news media is dependent on other social relations, such as the source of funding (Cotterrell, 1999). For instance, the media could expose corruption to the public, but the public could also face the possibility that those in power would block such messages because of their corruptive actions (Solis & Antenangeli, 2017; Starke, Naab, & Scherer, 2016), thus no transparency, and the media is not “free.” Since the news media outlets today are mostly for profit, they have to juggle between being just and being able to sustain themselves (Williams, 2017). This combination of responsibility and obligation of the media make it a multifaceted entity that requires deep examination. Freedom of the press is only true as long as the message is passable to the corporation that owns the media. To be more precise, news media sources have a social responsibility to keep the public informed with factual data, but they do not have sole freedom in what and how to report, because they must follow certain guidelines set by their respective corporations. This is why we see the news stories on Syria and its refugees differ in their delivery, depiction, and commentary—because they stem from different corporate agendas.

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In this dissertation, my goal is to use the siege of Aleppo in 2016 as a case study to examine how capitalist ideology penetrates the public through US mainstream news media. To be precise, I want to find out how the siege of Aleppo, a key event for the Syrian war, was reported from US-based mainstream news sources, and compare it with how it was portrayed in an alternative media source that has different political affiliations. Furthermore, I wish to examine whether these differences in reporting comply with corporate interests of particular news agencies, and if and how the media can push back against capitalist demands.

Media and Racism

Media outlets make the choice of which selected information reaches the public, then direct the public to focus on those particular issues, and as a result the public think, debate, and question the existing policies that apply to the chosen issues in the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1977). The carefully selected information is carried out by well-designed discourse in the media. Critical scholars suggested that media language could inadvertently widen the gaps between power inequalities, as well as generate a new racism (Downing & Husband, 2005; van Dijk, 2009). This new racism no longer just focuses on the differences of physical appearance but also on cultural differences (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011). For example, instead of having prejudice toward people of a different skin color, the new racism reflects the prejudice toward people from different cultures, religions, and beliefs. In the case of Muslim Syrian refugees, we see certain media platforms attack them because of their religious belief.

The media's choice of language serves to normalize unjust and prejudiced issues in the society (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011), thus individuals can use the media to

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either spread or protest racism in our society. Media messages are intentionally created for pushing certain agendas; therefore, what words the media uses to describe a group of people heavily influence the audience's perception of them (McCombs & Shaw, 1977). When used for the purpose of building public support, such as calling firefighters in post-911 disaster "heroes," the media urges the public to support and respect rescuers. On the other hand, when used for the purpose of creating "othering" sentiment, such as describing all Syrian refugees as young men who are physically strong and are waiting to infiltrate the US under a refugee disguise, can create fear and an othering attitude toward the Syrian refugees among the public (Rhodan, 2015). Such language not only showed racism toward the Syrian refugees, but also completely ignored the women and children refugees who make up the majority of the Syrian refugee population. However, although the media creates social consciousness, we cannot label one's consciousness as "false" versus "true," or "good" versus "bad," because the media only *suggests* what to think and how to think, but it is ultimately the audience's own perspectives that guide their understanding. Thus, it is the *potential* impact of the media that warrants our close examination.

Moreover, one's social consciousness depends on one's various attributes, such as his or her belief and sense of belonging, and what seems *wrong* to us could indeed seem *right* to others. Peter O'Connor (2013) discussed how, although a terrorist act is considered evil for the majority of people, in the terrorists' eyes, their action is reasonable and justified. O'Connor (2013) encouraged us to build consciousness that is empathetic, because it is important to understand the role of empathy in conflict with terrorism; thus the attribute of empathy prevents people from simplifying terrorism, but serves to truly

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understand it in order to prevent it from happening in the future. Zhirkov, Verkuyten, and Weesie (2014) predicted that support for terrorism would decrease if the relationship between the West and the Muslim world improves, because support for terrorist acts often stems from the two worlds not sharing the same values. Therefore, having an empathetic consciousness which allows us to understand the other side's intention is valuable. Even when the media suggests to us what and how to think, having empathy for the "other"—which is created by the media—could help us in building a critical consciousness.

The complex nature of a free press in the US is important to my study because it makes a significant difference in the fate of many Syrian refugees. Media encourages dialogues within the public, and in turn, dialogues can lead to policy change. It is important for my study to look at how the media shapes dialogues regarding the siege of Aleppo, Syria and the Syrian refugees. Additionally, the public's attitude toward Syria and its people would affect policies that relate to Syrian refugees. The presence of a racist attitude in the media influences public opinion and serves as an excuse for unjust behaviors towards some populations. Racism is touted among many on the left as a strong reason for anti-immigrant, anti-refugees, and specifically anti-Muslim sentiments. The way some media frame immigrants and refugees as people who would require government assistance and financial aids pushes the audience to shift blame onto these newcomers when there is an economic plummet (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017); moreover, Esses, Medianu, and Lawson (2013) explained that the non-white, non-Christian refugees, such as the majority of the Syrian refugee population, face the possibility of being dehumanized by the media, and are often illustrated as a potential threat to US

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society and our homeland security. This potential threat, however, can also be economical, as Lawlor and Tolley (2017) suggested; the refugees are depicted in some media as a needy group that would request much of society resources, and for this reason, it is beneficial to the public to eliminate refugees in order to preserve tax payers' money. Furthermore, anti-Muslim messages are made easier for the public to accept due to the fact that the mainstream media overly associate Muslims with terrorism (Dixon & Williams, 2015). This is especially prominent during the era of "War on Terror" (Al-Zo'by, 2015), and media continue to be such vessel that would eventually influence the public's perception and attitude on Syrian refugees.

The Study and Research Question

As the Syrian crisis continues to unfold, the news media retains the role of gatekeeper and agenda setter for public information. Unlike in some countries where there is only one state-owned news media, audiences in the US can choose from a wide selection of news sources to find those that most suit their needs. For news like the Syrian crisis, I like to read about it from several different news sources, and I have noticed a divergence among the different sources. For example, while some news sources elaborate on one aspect of the crisis, another addresses this same aspect much more lightly. It is critical to understand what motivates these differences in representations, especially as numerous critical scholars have identified the media to be an arm of the state.

In contrast to this analysis, we have the insistence from President Trump that the news stories we receive today are "fake news," therefore the truth lies outside the media. As noted above, the media's influence on public opinion in a country that claims to have

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a democratic government is crucial, since the public votes on laws, policies, and those who get to represent the people in making decisions. However the various media, especially the mainstream media, are corporate entities and as such have particular interests in supporting policies and shaping public opinion in particular ways (Doucet, 2018), and the alternative media also have their own particular interests. However, the media's role in the US is supposed to be one of a check-and-balance system against corruption by being transparent with the news, so that people's voting can be based on that of an informed citizenry (Cotterrell, 1999). Thus, understanding the complex role of the news media in shaping public opinion about a complicated issue such as the Syrian refugee crisis involves a deep analysis of the US government and corporate involvement and interests in Syria, the criteria by which news stories are chosen and how they are depicted, and how racism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and white supremacy are embedded in the media and reflected in the stories of Syria and Syrian refugees. The following specific questions guide my study:

1. To what extent do the US news reports on the siege of Aleppo in 2016 differ between media platforms and why?
2. What aspects of the siege were emphasized the most and what aspects received little to no focus, and how do they match their corporate agendas?
3. How do all these differences and similarities answer to a capitalist social relation of the US?

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Research Question

My research question for this dissertation is: how do the US media depictions of the siege of Aleppo, Syria in 2016 reflect capitalist social relations?

The three subquestions are:

- 1) Which elements of the siege of Aleppo in 2016 get the most attention in the specific outlets examined? In what ways do these depictions support US government and/or corporate interests?
- 2) What are some of the ways in which Syrian refugees are depicted in the various outlets examined? How and in what ways is US humanitarian policy reflected? How are Syrians racialized through these depictions?
- 3) How are corporate and government interests tied to these media outlets?

The specific types of news media I analyzed are US-based, mainstream news sources, as well as one alternative US news source for the purpose of check and balance. These news media outlets all have online versions that require no subscription from their viewers/audience, therefore it is easy for the public to gain access to their contents. They are all well known to the public and are all considered authorities in covering world news. Via an online search tool, I gathered as many news articles as I could find on the topic of the siege of Aleppo in 2016, with the criteria that the articles must be written in 2016, the same year as the siege. From there, once I reached data saturation, I stopped looking for more news articles and start a coding process in order to collect data and ultimately to find out the major themes. I chose to incorporate an arts-based research methodology and be a “scholarist,” someone who is a scholar and thinks like an artist, to

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conduct, analyze, and represent my data. Additionally, I used critical discourse analysis to apply a critical lens when reading the news stories and viewing the news photographs. The methods I used are narrative inquiry and visual analysis, both supported by an arts-based methodology, to identify what key elements of the siege the US mainstream news media chose to focus on, how the news stories on the siege of Aleppo reflected the news corporations' interests, and how these do or do not reflect capitalist interests.

While I do not claim neutrality, I do attempt to give the benefit of the doubt to the US mainstream news media. I looked at the mainstream news media from different political spectrums, if I could find related articles from all political perspectives. Additionally, I used *Truthout*, a far left, anti-capitalism news source, to serve as a comparison to the mainstream ones. I presumed the left spectrum is going to be anti-capitalist and pro-Syrian refugees, but I endeavored to find out if the news matched my assumptions.

A Marxist Framework

As a critical thinker, I believe things are not always what they appear on the surface. Everything has a historical and cultural background, and I often need to know the core before I can start examining the outside. Moreover, my belief is that class and relations of domination are the roots of inequality and injustice problems we see in society, which aligns with Marx's philosophy. Due to my subjectivity, I chose to apply a Marxist framework to this case study, and to answer the research question from a Marxist-humanist critical pedagogy perspective. A Marxist framework would allow me to dig deeper into the roots of the problem, to find the real causes of inequality, to

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question the status quo, and to suggest change. Overall, this study draws heavily on the work of Marx, Freire, and Dunayevskaya.

Marx (1992) believed that oppression and exploitation are unavoidable in a capitalist society; however, freedom for all can come from those who want to change it. Throughout history, we have seen numerous social movements that hoped to rattle and reshape class relations found in capitalist societies. Nonetheless, Mendes (2011) stressed that while the news media educate the public on social movements, they do so in a way that is compatible with a capitalist ideology. Additionally, Hearn-Branaman (2009) argued that the news media always represent a pro-capitalist ideology, which benefit the state. To be precise, the news media serves as an army of the state and helps to develop capitalist ideologies among the public (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The larger the corporation, the more influential it can be in policy-making (Doucet, 2018). This makes the news media, as corporate entities, significantly invested in and capable of sustaining capitalism.

The notion of the media as neutral is a myth, but one that is necessary to support the idea that the US is the “greatest democracy.” Even so, the news media remains legitimate in a supposedly democratic society, because people believe it is neutral and once the neutrality is challenged, people will stop trusting it. Media’s existence can be a double-edged sword. On one end, one can use it to bring down capitalism by revealing a lack of neutrality due to hidden agendas in the media; and on the other end, one can use it to spread racism, lies, and conspiracies to the public.

The Italian Marxist Gramsci (2003) suggested that the dominant group in a society can only maintain their power by the less powerful group giving consent to their

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hegemonic ideology, and such consent is carefully manufactured and carried out through complex entities such as churches, schools, and the press. The dominant group uses these educational entities to reinforce its ideology, as they guide the civil society in what to think, how to behave, and what is normal. In other words, hegemony is sustained through manufacturing consent. In order to challenge the hegemony in civil society, Gramsci (2003) believed we must create counter-hegemonic ideology within the civil society, but it is a slow process. Because once the hegemonic ideology has planted deep roots in the public, and therefore becomes the “culture,” a way of life for the public, challenging the status quo is a time-consuming task.

From a Marxist perspective, culture reflects class, and it is manufactured as a justification for the hegemonic ideology (Gramsci, 2003). Moreover, it is extremely difficult to remove or even confront the hegemonic ideology, because their core values are stably grounded within the public; thus events such as strikes and uprisings do not really pose a threat to the dominant group in liberal democracies (Buttigieg, 2005). For instance, it is normal to see a group protesting a decision the US government has made in front of the White House, but it is extremely rare and nearly impossible to see the same protest against the Chinese government in Tiananmen Square. The more “free” the democracy, the more security the dominant group has. This deep-rooted influence is a result of the continuous bombarding of the public with the media’s agenda-setting messages. Hence, Gramsci (2003) called it a “war of position” to refer to the method used for ideological war fought through civil society. It is not a war involving firearms or physical confrontations between countries, but one that provides alternative sources of

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information to slowly penetrate the public with a counter-hegemonic ideology (Cox, 1983).

Overall, the media is the ideological arm that supports corporate interests to ensure the maintenance of capitalism. To use a Marxist lens to critique the news media is to rattle the seemingly normal system and to question the status quo. It is to beg the question of why certain things are taking the spotlight in the news and at the same time, why certain things are less represented or even omitted. Since the main goal of capitalism is accumulation (Dunayevskaya, 1958; Marx, 1992), then how the depiction of the Syrian crisis relates to the accumulation of capital, the maintenance of the system, and/or securing of power among the ruling class is important. For instance, if one news media dedicated more time and space to justify US involvement in the siege of Aleppo in 2016, then I would inspect to whom these messages ultimately benefit and to what ideology they attempted to support. Thus, the common phrase “follow the money” is well-fitting to my intention to examine US news media coverage on the siege of Aleppo. In the end, to solve real problems in society requires practical solutions, and a Marxist-humanist framework is a practical one that focuses on human relationships and intends to find solutions (Dunayevskaya, 1958; Dupré, 1966; Eagleton, 2011). My study looks at the major tenets of Marxist theory and uses them as a lens to view news media representations of Syria and its people.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the fields of education and communication studies. It examines how the mainstream US news media use a major world event in the 21st century (i.e., the Syrian crisis) to push their political, social, and economic agendas.

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Although previous studies discuss the role of mass media and how it affects public opinion, there is a lack of discussion of the US mainstream news media in relation to the current Syrian crisis. In addition, this study uses a Marxist-humanist critical pedagogy theory to challenge the deep-rooted political and social inequality that exist in US corporations, which directly determine how and what the news media present to the public regarding the current Syrian crisis.

From an education perspective, because the media has the ability to educate, inform, and persuade the audience—both directly and indirectly—this case study would contribute to the education field. Education can be the context within which people learn to examine the media critically and understand its role in the state. Showing students that corporate media transparency is a myth, this study therefore encourages them to always approach the news with a critical lens. Additionally, while the US mainstream media is corporation-controlled, other sources of media can be sponsored in other ways such as interest groups and lobbyists, and thus, students should be conscious of the ultimate beneficiaries behind the media sources they use. Moreover, there is also the role of the public intellectual to check the state, and with the Internet, their messages can be spread to the public, which can challenge the corporate media. During the beginning of Arab Spring, many Syrian demonstrators utilized mobile phones to document the uprisings and uploaded video footage on social media platforms (Rohde et al., 2016), thus allowing other social media users to witness the Syrian crisis through avenues other than corporate-owned news. Although later pro-Assad groups posted their own video footages to challenge the demonstrators, both sides' documentations on social media provided the public an alternative way to view the conflict from both perspectives. As a result, by

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showing students to be critical of the corporate media means giving more power to other media sources, including social media and alternative news sources.

Ethics

As a critical thinker and a Marxist researcher, I acknowledge that I do not possess a neutral researcher perspective. My critical consciousness, as Freire (2000a) called it, “conscientization,” enables me to always reflect on the inequalities in society caused by social and political injustices. I do not believe any opinion can be completely neutral, because a neutral opinion is equivalent to being content and comfortable in the status quo, and being comfortable in the status quo has never been a part of who I am. Growing up, I was always the child who annoyed my teachers with many “whys,” therefore I was never a favored student by any of my traditional Chinese educators. My teachers often viewed this behavior as rebellious or disobedient, and as a result, my parents received many reports on my “bad” behavior in classes. Some teachers even suggested to my parents that I was a bad influence on the “good” students—the ones who always just listened and accepted any information given to them, without raising any doubts or voicing any concerns. Consequently, I received punishments for not being “like everyone else.” My upbringing in China in the 80s taught me to always obey those who were older or held more powerful positions. To show obedience is the equivalent of showing respect; therefore, it was better to be a “yes” person than a “why” person. In addition, my Confucius-influenced culture placed a high value on silence, as seen in a famous Chinese proverb, “silence is gold,” which describes that it is better to be quiet during a disagreement than speaking up or to raising questions, especially dealing with

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authorities. In other words, my cultural background and education did not equip me to challenge the status quo.

It was not until I moved to the US at age 15 that I felt more free to speak my mind and to be able to openly and comfortably question the status quo. Often, people back home refer to this critical consciousness in me as I have been “Westernized” or “Americanized,” that I have somehow forgotten my Chinese roots. However, I view the ability to think critically as a part of being fully free, and as Freire (2000a) stated, to be fully human. To be able to think critically, to me, is not a cultural thing per se, but some people are denied this ability because the possible social discouragement and even political prosecutions they might face. I am aware that many people around the world do not have the privilege to make their conscientization known. Thus, for people like me who have the capability, I believe it is our responsibility to make our critical conscious known.

It was after taking some critical courses in my doctoral program that I have come to recognize the Marxist in me, that part of me that seeks to challenge existing conditions of exploitation and oppression and desires a true justice for all. In my opinion, the capitalist system structures the totality of the world, including the way we behave, the things we value, and our beliefs. Capitalism is a system that exploits the masses in service to the few capitalists who own the means of production. In today’s global capitalism, these capitalists work together as corporate entities that seek to maintain their wealth through the necessary accumulation of capital, which requires the exploitation of the many. The media plays a big part in this by helping to justify the actions that support corporate interests. However, this does not mean that there is no room for change.

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Indeed, Marx has been recognized as the person with the greatest faith in our humanity. He believed that we are capable of challenging this system and bringing about a new social order that is truly human. Presumably this means that as human agents, we can challenge the media, and that journalists also have agency to be subversive. To be an ethical researcher in this study, I have been clear with my subjectivity and have carefully documented all my analysis to show evidence of my claims.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Karl Marx is one of the most influential philosophers in human history. Some people refer to Marx's influence in the world as being as large as Darwin's and Freud's; in comparison, Marx's ideas have more *political* impact than any other philosopher (Seed, 2010). Marx is best known for his critique of capitalism, which has heavily influenced generations of people. His pioneering thinking has led to several political revolutions around the world; unfortunately, these societies that claim to be founded upon Marx's thinking (Seed, 2010) have veered significantly from the humanism of his philosophy.

According to Eagleton (2011), there was a decline of interest in Marxism by 1986, when the Berlin Wall fell. Many people took this event as a symbol that Marxist philosophy had failed; however, there has been a boom of Marxist studies in recent years (Wolff, 2002). It is suggested that the economic crisis of recent years has led to an increase of Marxist studies—his economic theories are in revival in the West, and people are once again paying attention to Marx's critique of capitalism (Open University, 2012). Those who are interested in political economy and social economic reforms are finding Marx's theory particularly useful. Even though Marx's writing was based primarily on his observation of a 19th century society, because he focused more on a humanistic perspective, it is still relevant and applicable to today's readers (Dupré, 1966). Dunayevskaya (1958) stressed that Marx focused on human relationships and aimed to bring freedom to all. Marx knew it would take more than political and religious reforms to accomplish the goal of liberation for all. Although some have argued that Marx

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believed that liberation must begin with the workers first (Dupré, 1966), others have pointed out that Marx supported nationalist efforts and abolition in the US even when these were not specifically class struggles (Anderson, 2017). Thus, in the context of Syria and the refugee crisis as one embodying the polemics of global capitalism, imperialism, and racism, Marx's philosophy of revolution can be especially useful. As a polemicist, Marx practiced argumentation and controversy, and used his thinking not just to point out the problem, but to find solutions that could solve them; in other words, Marx's theory and philosophy is a practical one (Dunayevskaya, 1958; Dupre, 1966; Eagleton, 2011).

Major Tenets of Marxist Theory

Marx's philosophy includes a thorough analysis and critique of capitalism. Marx acknowledged the benefits that the capitalist system brought to society, namely the mobilization of productive forces capable of producing sufficient foods and goods for all of humanity. However, this same strength has allowed it to develop into a system with the capacity for tremendous devastation.

Capitalism can be defined as a system that produces value (i.e., monetized labor, profit) and does so through the exploitation of labor. With the goal of liberation and bringing forth a new humanism, Marx dedicated his work to understanding and critiquing the production of value in a capitalist society (Dunayevskaya, 1958). Marx developed a tremendous body of work that explained the economic exploitation and social destruction that capitalism creates. Much of this work culminates in his most famous work published in 1867, *Das Kapital*. In order to draw upon Marxist theory as a lens from which to understand the current Syrian refugee crisis, I first discuss some of the major tenets of

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Marx's critique of capitalism: (1) alienated labor, (2) division of class, (3) exploitation of the workers, (4) capital accumulation as the goal, and (5) dialectical reasoning.

Alienated Labor

Marx considered labor a distinctively human activity and discussed it extensively in his writings (Fischer, 1996; Wolff, 2002). In fact, Marx placed much emphasis on the importance of labor to the mode of production, more so than the product itself (Dunayevskaya, 1958). Marx argued that the production of commodities allowed for the production of surplus value. Surplus value is created by extolling the greatest amount of labor from the workers within a portion of the working day. The remainder of the working day produces unpaid labor, which produces surplus value or profits, which are turned into capital when they are reinserted into a new cycle of production. This exploitation is a necessary feature of capitalist production and it is also a feature that deforms our humanity by turning us into alienated beings—deformed from our true human potential. Marx (1964) explained alienated labor in his work *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor? First, in the fact that labor is external to the worker, that is, that it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel well but unhappy, does not freely develop his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker, therefore, feels himself only outside his work, and feels beside himself in his work. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His work therefore is not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a

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need, but only a means for satisfying needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that labor is shunned like the plague as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion. (p. 136)

It is evident that alienated labor dehumanizes the workers, as it robs happiness and true self-worth from the workers. Nonetheless, this alienated labor, as Marx pointed out, is the ultimate source of all value and surplus value in capitalist society, the single source of the most misery in the world (Dunayevskaya, 1992; Wolff, 2002). Overall, under capitalism, the workers are alienated from their work, themselves, each other, and nature (Dupré, 1966).

The workers are alienated from their work. Humans are creative in nature and should find joy in their work; however, Marx argued that in the process of production, the workers are alienated from their own work because they are viewed no differently than machines (Dunayevskaya, 1958). Under mass production and competition, human beings can not put care and love into their labor; instead, they must work with the cheapest materials, produce in mass, and are estranged from the final product, its use, and the people the use them. As a result, the workers do not find joy or pride in their work; they do not feel complete because they are separated from their own labor. Instead, the workers are only associated with the materials, tools, and end result of their work (Dupré, 1966). This is just as true for the producers of media content as it is for the factory worker, an attitude which serves to compromise conscience from content. Such alienation derives from the division of labor. During the process of production, the division of labor is an economic technology that increases workers' productivity; nonetheless, the negative aspect is that the workers end up doing the same repetitive,

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mundane, and boring tasks. In other words, a worker is no longer fully responsible for creating a complete product, but rather he or she now is only responsible for a part or a section of that product. The human need and desire to create and to be creative cannot be fulfilled while workers complete the same tasks over and over again on a daily basis (Fischer, 1996). Hence, this division of labor alienates the workers from their own work.

The concept of division of labor exists in any and every class society (Dunayevskaya, 1958). Marx called a worker a whole man if he is allowed to combine both mental and physical labor during his workday; however, the division of labor constrains the worker to focus on only one of these things (Dunayevskaya, 1958). As a result, the worker cannot be fully satisfied, nor work with his or her full potential (Dunayevskaya, 1992). It is not to say that there is none that enjoy both physical and mental labor during the work day, but the lucky few make up a very limited population. Since most likely the worker solely focuses on either physical or mental labor, the division of labor results in less skilled workers; in other words, the workers must de-skill themselves in order to keep their jobs (Wolff, 2002). Moreover, the division of labor separates people and invites social inequality (Fischer, 1996). Marx pointed out that division of labor and private property go hand in hand; if a worker refuses to perform his or her task, the worker is free to leave because the owner will have no trouble finding someone else to take over that task (Dupré, 1966). As a result, the workers are forced to carry out their tasks without taking time to question or oppose their superiors.

To Marx, all labor under capitalism is forced labor, and the division of labor does not only apply to factory workers but also applies in classes and nations (Dunayevskaya, 1958). For example, within the bourgeoisie, some people create ideas and some carry the

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ideas out. Additionally, within the international community, some countries set policies that other countries are to follow. Thus, the division of labor exists between the white- and blue-collar workers, as well as between towns and countries (Seed, 2010). It exists by gender, with white-collar men doing predominantly intellectual labor and women doing caring labor. It also exists by race, with predominantly whites doing mental and people of color doing manual labor. Furthermore, the division of labor creates division of class (Callinicos, 1992), which we will address later in this chapter. The division of labor is a clear mirror reflecting human social interactions at any scale.

“Working for the weekend” and “having a case of Mondays” are unfortunate but true sentiments among many working individuals today. In a capitalist society, the workers are no different than machines (Wolff, 2002). With the increase of machine usage during production, the workers face the possibility that machines could replace their jobs, since the machines might cost less in the long run, produce faster, and take less time to supervise (Fischer, 1996). There is no doubt that the workers are in competition with the machines they use. In the end, the machines do not liberate the workers but rather alienate them (Dunayevskaya, 1958). Therefore, the workers must produce surplus value in order to prove to their bosses that they are worth more than the machines, and therefore they deserve to continue holding onto their jobs (Dunayevskaya, 1958). In the end, the workers are stuck in this alienated space because it is the survival of their livelihood. For instance, a journalist might have to produce media content that comply with the agenda of the large corporation he/she is employed.

The workers are alienated from themselves. During production, the workers are alienated from their true selves because they cannot possibly fully engage in activities

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that allow them to display their full potential (Wolff, 2002). With division of labor, workers are for creating capital only; they are not able to express their individualities, nor express their opinions (Dunayevskaya, 1958). The workers are separated from what they truly are—their humanity, because they do not and cannot have autonomy in the process of production. The workers work no differently than machines, completing one task then another throughout their workday. The owners own the means of producing the means that are required for survival. In the end, the workers have no right to the products they have produced, but rather the owners have every right to the products the workers produced (Fischer, 1996). In the end, the workers are alienated from the things they produce, from their work, and from others, because the workers cannot enjoy their own creation and must let go their individualities during the mass production; at the same time, people become strangers to each other because of the competition engendered by globalization (Dupré, 1966). Nonetheless, the workers must press on, because they must do so in order to survive in this capitalist society. This alienation from one's self cannot bring true freedom to that person. Even in a seemingly free society, this freedom has limits; factors such as economic abilities limit one's freedom in the society (Agostinone-Wilson, 2013). The workers have much lower economic ability than the capitalists; therefore, freedom cannot reach all.

Humans are alienated from nature. The human impact on earth is visible all around, even in the seemingly “natural” areas (Wolff, 2002). Corporations' mass production and constant expansions result in an increasing destruction of nature. In order to beat the competitors and to lure more consumers, corporations turn to nature to find more raw materials and resources for their mass productions. Thus, more land is used for

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digging up minerals and oil, more rural areas are developed for building houses and stores, and more nature is being exploited for finding resources that could create wealth. When people begin to look at nature as material things, they become alienated from their self-consciousness as well as the nature surrounding them (Dupré, 1966). It is evident that in the recent years, humans are ever more detached from nature; the continuous exploitation of nature is now affecting the globe, such as climate change.

Not only people are alienated from nature; they are inhumane to nature, as well (Dupré, 1966). The understanding of value has changed from earlier generations, and there is always the pressure of competition, both for the workers and the owners. It would be a utopian society, if everyone's needs are met, everyone were able to create and to be creative, and people were to produce things people actually need. Unfortunately, capitalism has changed and is still changing our value system.

The workers are alienated from each other. Marx believed that human social interactions are tainted in a capitalist society, and they have become exchange relationships, ones that are similar to monetary relations. Marx (1964) stresses this alienation from one another that

A direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labour, from his life activity and from his species-life, is that *man is alienated* from other *men*. ... man is alienated from his species-life means that each man is alienated from others, and that each of the others is likewise alienated from human life. (p. 17)

Since the workers are alienated from themselves, they in turn are alienated from others during production; one that works as a machine can only think for himself and

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thus cannot socially engage with others that also work as machines (Wolff, 2002).

Within the proletariat, in order to receive a more challenging, creative, and well-paid position, the workers must fight competitions among themselves; such competition for survival dilutes the bond of social relationships between the workers (Eagleton, 2011).

To make the matters worse, more and more jobs are being taken over by machines; this phenomenon creates more stress and causes more struggles for the workers (Open

University, 2012). In order to hold on to their way of survival, the workers must

outwork their fellow workers in the face of competition, which results in alienation from each other (Dunayevskaya, 1958). It would be optimistic to say that humans are, for the

majority, good; however, when in a capitalist society, people end up not as concerned for others, because each person is independent (Fischer, 1996). Thus, we no longer

work as a group, but as individuals seeking individual needs. This alienation creates the notion of one group is better than the other; when such notion surfaces in society, it can lead to prejudice, hatred, and relations of domination among various groups. It is clear that in our society people tend to worry about themselves first and everyone else later.

The increasing economic and social vulnerability of people may lead them to focus more on their fear of the competition that immigrants and refugees may present for jobs than

on the fact that they are just as human as they themselves are. Alienation involves

seeing ourselves as things and each other as things; therefore we fail to engage with

others from a humanistic perspective, especially if we are bombarded every day with messages that “these people are taking our jobs,” in reference to most immigrants, or

that they are a “threat to our national security and safety,” a prevalent message related to

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Muslim refugees. This lens allows us to recognize the linkages between our alienation and the rejection of Syrian refugees.

Class Division

One cannot create a change in society without examining the different classes in the society (Agostinone-Wilson, 2013). The acknowledgement of class, as Agostinone-Wilson (2013) pointed out, is what sets Marxist research apart from other researches. Hence, class division is the second major tenet of Marxist theory. For Marx, a free society is one that is classless so that everyone has true freedom (Crotty, 1998, Monzó, 2016). Class is a foundational aspect of capitalist society. According to Marx (1992), there are two major classes in a capitalist society: the bourgeois and the proletariat—in more modern terms, the capitalists and the workers. The capitalist are those who own the means of production and the workers labor in service to the capitalist class— “slaves” to a system of exploitation that they must partake of for their own survival.¹ As long as there are class divisions, there will be struggles among people (Dupré, 1966). The laboring class is often further divided through the division of labor into blue collar and white-collar workers. Other divisions based on race and class further divide the working class, making class-consciousness among workers difficult to achieve. Classes are created through the division of labor (Dunayevskaya, 1958; Wolff, 2002). These

¹ Although Marx discussed workers as slaves, he recognized that slavery as experienced by Black Americans and Indigenous peoples in the Americas was the utmost greatest form of dehumanization.

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divisions serve then to maintain the capitalist system by preventing the working class from joining forces to challenge the system the system that oppresses them.

The two classes that make up the capitalist society are opposed to each other but also depend on each other (Eagleton, 2011). The bourgeoisie owns the means (i.e., stores, materials, machines, land, money, power) to produce, which the proletariat needs in order to survive; at the same time, the bourgeoisie needs the proletariat to accumulate capital for them. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to change or alter this dialectical relationship so long as capitalism remains (Fuchs, 2010). However, it does mean that the potential for the proletariat to bring down capitalism is very real, since it is the working class who produce and without whom the entire system fails. Marx's goal was to free all humanity; in order to do so, the constant struggles between the two classes must be eliminated (James, 1986). Marx believed the most important thing was to first liberate the workers (Dunayevskaya, 1992). As the workers create capital for the owners, they do not want to be controlled by their own work; this tension, Marx argued, would eventually lead to the workers' rebellion against the owners (Dunayevskaya, 1992). Throughout history, every social change and improvement has been made by the revolt of the weaker class (Wolff 2002).

Class and race. Although class or material conditions are central to capitalism, there are other structures of oppression and exploitation that work in tandem. These include race, gender, and religion. While there is a class dimension to each of these structures, they have also come to define social relations independently of class. Thus, these structures must also be examined when attempting to understand particular phenomena within capitalist systems, including the Syrian crisis. The classical class

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reductionist assumption that bringing down capitalism would lead to the dismantling of structures of racism and sexism is no longer seen as adequate by many Marxists, especially those of the Marxist-humanist philosophy. These scholars recognize that the working class is highly divided by race, and therefore we must begin to understand racism and challenge this structure if we want to bridge the significant gulf between working class peoples of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Likewise challenging gender and religious discrimination is key to bringing down a capitalist system that is founded on relations of domination and exploitation

Not one antagonism is more important than another; therefore even though Marx discussed extensively regarding class, it is just as important as other problems we see such as racism and sexism (Monzó, 2017; Monzó & McLaren, 2014). Additionally, Callinicos (1992) emphasized that since capitalism relies on class, racism, and other antagonisms, the elimination of class and other antagonisms are needed to collapse the system and therefore bring equality for all. The connection between race and class is that racism becomes a tool that divides the working class—the working class is left fighting for limited resources and therefore unable to work together. In addition, the white working class tends to side with white capitalist goals, rather than seeing themselves linked or in any way similar to the working class of people of color (Monzó, 2017). This too divides the working class.

Furthermore, racism is already deeply embedded in US society (DiAngelo, 2011). In the US, racism is a more sensitive topic than class and sexism for the general public, and this stigma probably extends from a shameful part of US history. The term “white fragility” describes the notion that in general, whites in North America tend to feel

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uncomfortable and even defensive when discussing racism, so much so that they are intolerant of even the tiniest racial stress, thus choosing to face it with silence or vindication (DiAngelo, 2011). Having little to no dialogue on this important issue will certainly lead to no improvement on social justice.

Unfortunately, racism is as old as the US itself and it is here to stay as long as we live in a capitalist society (Monzó & McLaren, 2014). Even for the working class, it is hard to unite together and to emancipate themselves because the deeply rooted racism causes alienation even among the oppressed working class. Marx (1870) used the Irish working class in England to give an example of this alienation and relates it to the slavery history in the US:

Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class divided into two camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life ... He regards himself as a member of the ruling nation, and consequently, he becomes a tool of the English aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination *over himself*. He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the “poor whites” to the Negroes in the former slave states of the U.S.A.

Thus, from a Marxist perspective, racism is already deeply embedded in our society and it was put in place so that the oppressed would not rise to emancipate; in other words, racism gives excuses to think that those who live on the bottom of the society “belong” to a lower class, and the ones who live on the top are meant to stay in a

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higher class (Monzó & McLaren, 2014). It is a social structure that enables capitalism to survive and maintain. Due to this nature, race and class equity essentially hold the same urgency if we wanted to achieve a just and equal society.

With the rise of globalization comes the spreading of racism around the world. Racism is integral to colonization and imperialism, which are necessary to capital accumulation. Racism is no longer limited to interactions between the whites and the blacks. McMahon and Chow-White (2011) referred to this phenomenon as “new racism,” where people are no longer judged and segregated by their biological skin color, but by their culture, which includes religious beliefs. Recently, we see new racism toward the Arabs and Muslims—for example, the Buddhists’ hostility toward the Muslims along with the widespread of Islamophobia in Myanmar (Callahan, 2017); Europe, France, Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, Bulgaria, and Switzerland have implemented a burqa ban by 2017 (Pasha-Robinson, 2017); acid attacks in London toward Asian Muslims (Erickson, 2017); in Switzerland, one can find anti-immigrant posters with one that features three white sheep kicking one black sheep outside the Swiss flag, titled “create safety” (Osborne & Broomfield, 2016). With a quick Internet search, one can easily find many more similar examples of such racism around the world. Moreover, the anti-Muslim movements reported in the news have become more prominent in most recent years. Racism is deeply rooted in any and every capitalist society. It might be subtle during peaceful times and in diplomatic places, but it resurfaces whenever there is chaos. Just like class, one’s race has pre-determined one’s worth and place in our society.

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The tragedy of 9/11 in 2001 exacerbated racism toward the Muslim population, including those in the context of Syria, and other Muslim-dominated countries, and it also intensified the tension and racism toward the Muslims via a massive media and government anti-Muslim campaign, which has persisted to today. 9/11 was a horrific crime conducted on the US and its people, and the media and those with certain political intentions labeled this attack as the most heinous crime in US history, without recognition of the many atrocities that the US sponsors around the world. In many countries around the world, it is the US who is the terrorist posing as democratic. Nonetheless, due to the horrendous event of 9/11, the Muslims as a whole also suffer from its aftermath, and many Muslim-Americans faced hate crimes from their non-Muslim neighbors, even during the crucial time where people in our nation should all stand together and citizens support each other. For many Muslim-Americans, their life experience is different prior and post 9/11, where Islamophobia started brewing right after the attack. Many of them started to be concerned about their safety due to their religion and Muslim/Arab outer appearances (O'Connor, 2016). The racism and anti-Muslim sentiment, hate, and fear, worsened by 9/11, would directly influence US policy toward Syrian refugees, of which the majority are Muslims.

Exploitation of Workers

Instead of showing itself in its true form as brutal, vicious, and cruel, exploitation—as Marx (1992) pointed out—is often “veiled” by religious and political deceptions in order to appear softer than its naked form (p. 16). From the workers’ perspective, the outcome of increased capital is more exploitation (Dunayevskaya, 1958). In a capitalist society, everyone is a part of the capital and all are exploited by it; even for

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the owners, they too suffer from their own capital. How to maintain, secure, or increase capital becomes a life-long search that consumes the capitalists. In order to keep their status in society and sustain their power and wealth, the capitalists always try to find ways to secure and accumulate more capital. Since the wealthy are only a small percent of the population, they do not need to think on behalf of the rest of society, which is the majority of the population. As a result, the private owners will do anything to gain more capital, even if that means to take advantage of their fellow men (Eagleton, 2011). This leads to the third major tenet of capitalism, the exploitation of the workers.

Ways to lower production costs. The private owners look at the workers not as individuals, but as sources for labor and means for production (Seed, 2010). Aiming to accumulate more wealth, the capitalists look for ways to lower the cost of production, and they do so through the exploitation of the workers. Because accumulation is a necessary component of capitalism, surplus value (or profit) must continuously increase and this means that production must be cheapened. The capitalists use several strategies to exploit their workers for the sake of lowering the production costs.

Replace workers with machines. First, the private owners replace the workers with machines in order to lower production costs. Machines perform tasks in place of the workers, which means the workers are exchangeable in capitalist production. In a way, the machines dominate over the workers because it is easier to exchange the workers (Dunayevskaya, 1958). Consequently, the workers are less valued than the machines. The workers produce the machines that could eventually take over their jobs, and this forms an unfortunate and ironic cycle: the more machines the workers make, the fewer jobs the workers are able to keep (Wolff, 2002). In addition, as technology improves, the

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machines get more efficient, thus the required skills for the workers decrease and more workers would face the possibility of losing their jobs (Dunayevskaya, 1958).

Surplus value. Surplus value comes from exploited labor (Fuchs, 2010). As more machines join the production process, the workers now must work extra in order to convince their bosses that they are worth just as much as the machines (Dunayevskaya, 1958). At the same time, with the efficiency of the machines, the owners expect their workers to create more value than what they were paid to produce (Dunayevskaya, 1958). This is called surplus value, and it is created through exploitation of the workers. Since capital comes from exploration, then all pure profit comes from surplus value (Wolff, 2002). Due to the competition with machines, the workers are forced to create surplus value during production; otherwise, they face the reality that the machines could jeopardize their livelihood (Wolff, 2002). In addition, the capitalists expect their workers to work beyond their paid hours. The workers are paid for their capability to work, not for the actual time they worked (Dunayevskaya, 1958). For example, when an office worker goes home, he or she might still need to answer work emails or prepare for next day's tasks; even though this worker is not physically at work, he or she must contribute time and energy to work. If they do not do it, they might not get the next promotion, or even lose their current positions. In essence, the workers generate surplus value in order to survive, which only deepens their exploitation.

Bring down the workers' wages. Second, the private owners in a capitalist society lower the workers' wages in order to save production costs. The production costs include not only the material needed, but also the wages the owners have to pay their workers; lowering the wages allow the owners to pocket profit while exploiting their

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workers. However, the owners do not worry about the consequences of lowering the workers' wages, such as dissatisfaction from the workers, or the workers choose to leave their jobs, because the owners know that there is a pool of unemployed people who would be willing to take over these jobs. According to United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), the unemployment rate in 2017 fluctuates from 4.1 to 4.8 percent for people age 16 and over; in the past decade, there has not been much change in the unemployment rate in the U.S. As an advancing society, it makes little sense that more people have become jobless. To ponder this question via Marxist theory, one can find that a capitalist society needs unemployment in order to sustain itself, or the wealthy could not keep accumulating capital.

Move productions to poorer countries. Third, the profit-driven private owners choose to move productions overseas, where the cost is much lower; in turn, they can accumulate more wealth (Wolff, 2012). In poorer countries where the standard of living is lower than the West, capitalists can pay the workers much less than they would have in the Western countries (Wolff, 2012). These poorer countries do not have the same labor laws as the West; the workers in these poorer countries do not work in the same conditions as the workers in the West do. As Eagleton (2011) stated, this is an example of exploitation of the poorer countries.

The idea of exploitation during the process of production might be abstract for some, because for most people, they do not physically see such exploitation take place. However, it does go on even when most people do not see it. For example, Western companies move their factories to poorer countries in order to lower the cost of production, which results in poor conditions and low pay for the workers in these poorer

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countries. In short, the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat in the US, and the US exploits the poor countries (Eagleton, 2011). This concept also applies to intellectual labor; in the past decade, more and more intellectual labor is outsourced overseas (Wolff, 2012). With globalization, it is ever easier for the companies to shift their labor force, which results in exploitation of the workers in those poorer countries (Eagleton, 2011).

Globalization and centralization. The growth of technologies encourages the expansion of globalization across the world. At the same time, the increasing competitions between the corporations lead to more centralization (Fuchs, 2010). Both globalization and centralization present opportunities for businesses to flourish, but at the same time, they bring forth inequality of power, imperial warfare, and exploitation of men (Eagleton, 2011). In addition, the boom of globalization increases the capitalist crisis (Wolff, 2002). Globalization pushes for a constant exploitation of nature, which consequently results in climate change and produces an increasing amount of climate change refugees (Eagleton, 2011). Furthermore, globalization also brings an increasing competition, which leads to more centralization (Fuchs, 2010). As economy booms with the expansion of globalization, people from poorer areas move to the more rich areas to seek better employment, education, and standard living; for example, people migrate from third world countries to advanced countries, or from small towns to large cities. This phenomenon is the birth of prejudice and racism (Eagleton, 2011). This could offer an angle to understand how the Syrian refugees as Muslims are depicted negatively in US media and ideologies.

Hire labor that would cost less. Globalization also makes it easier for capitalists to seek laborers that cost them less. The capitalists hyperexploit certain demographic

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groups, such as women, minorities, and immigrants by paying them lower wages, extending work hours, and providing below standard working conditions in order to lower the production cost (Eagleton, 2011; Monzó, 2016). In the US, many illegal immigrants get paid under the table; due to their illegal status, they cannot report the unsafe and inhumane work conditions to the authorities. Furthermore, due to the hyperexploitation of Latino workers, other minorities could be more prone to exploitation since they possess little to no need for capitalist production (Monzó & McLaren, 2014). Via this lens, one can examine if and how the perspective of humanitarian needs in Syria garners less attention from corporate media and its relation to whether Syrians immigrants in the US are exploited in their workforces.

Capital Accumulation is the Goal of Capitalism

All the previous tenets all reflect one thing: capital accumulating is the goal of capitalism. The continuous growth of capital accumulation is what marks capitalism. And it is in the process of creating more and more capital that class division becomes essential, workers become alienated and workers are exploited (Dunayevskaya, 1958; Dupré, 1966; Eagleton, 2011; Wolff, 2002). The capitalist society favors the rich, and with wealth comes political power (Wolff, 2012; Seed, 2010). In other words, as the bourgeoisie look for ways to accumulate more capital, they are gaining more power in the political realm. In contrast, as the workers' exploitation deepens, they shed their power and freedom.

In addition to exploiting and alienating the workers, the capitalists accumulate wealth through centralizing capital (Dunayevskaya, 1958). To eliminate competition, the larger corporations seek to absorb the smaller businesses; in so doing, the large

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corporations get larger, richer, and more powerful, while the working class gets poorer and weaker (Wolff, 2012). To make the matter worse, in the past decades, the government lessens the burden of large corporation taxation, much more so in proportion than with individual taxes. The most recent example of this is President Trump's tax cut announced in December 2017. This imbalanced wealth distribution, as Wolff (2012) stated, is a sign that there is also a power imbalance in the society. This lens provides a guide to examine how the Syrian refugees are used as alienated labor for capitalist accumulation.

Primitive Accumulation

Primitive accumulation is the basis for imperialism and colonization. Marx (1992) stated that the most important process of accumulation comes from colonization, where one country controls another country's resources. For example, for Indigenous people, it is the land and the resources produced from the land that are the greatest motivator for imperialism and colonization, as Marx (1992) pointed out:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.

For this reason, it might be in the US's best interest to keep a country vulnerable and in need of US involvement, such as Syria. The connection with US involvement with Syria and Marxism is the continuous need for imperialism. According to Webb (2018), the US is now controlling over 30 percent of Syria, including most of its oil

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resources, natural gas resources, as well as Syria's three largest freshwater reservoirs.

Thus, by continuously staying in Syria and having control over these precious natural resources, the US has the advantage over Assad-controlled regions in Syria.

Furthermore, it is unlikely the US would leave these resources unattended or let them fall into others' hands, which further prevents the unification of Syria and its people.

Dialectical Reasoning

Marx examined the contradictions of capitalism, and this led to the fifth major tenet of capitalism—dialectical reasoning (Dupré, 1966; Dunayevskaya, 1958). As a radical philosopher, Marx aimed to solve problems at their roots. In order to make a change in the world and solve the problems within a society, dialectical thinking might just be the only research method that can achieve such a goal (Agostinone-Wilson, 2013). In a way, to think dialectically is to think reflectively (Oizerman, 2017), and a Marxist-humanist perspective places more emphasis on dialectics than that of classic Marxism.

Dunayevskaya (1958), a Marxist-humanist, referred to Marx as a dialectician, who could find solutions to contradictions by his thinking even though the contradictions linger in the real world. In addition, Monzó (2016) praised Marx's dialectical thinking, which focused on both sides of a contradiction, and his recognition of equal importance of the two sides. Marx saw those contradictions as revolutionary, something necessary in order to create something new, and to move the society forward; Marx used the term “negation of the negation” to describe this theory (Dunayevskaya, 1958).

Negation of the negation. The negation of the negation is necessary in order to move the society forward, and it is an ongoing process. As Oizerman (2017) stated, the society develops with the negation of negation in a spiral shape. For example, it is only

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with contradiction things would change; therefore, without the negation of the negation, the society would stand still and new technologies would not be invented (Dupré, 1966). Although it is constant, the society always balances itself through negation of the negation. For example, history has shown that freeing the slaves from their masters in Europe introduced feudalism into the society. As a result, new problems surfaced along with the new society; therefore, the end is also a beginning. Every time there is contradiction, there is a revolt that ultimately moves the society forward (Dunayevskaya, 1958). However, as Dunayevskaya (1958) warned, each revolt brings forth more centralization and even more exploitation of the workers. Nonetheless, each revolt has brought emancipation to men (Crotty, 1998). It is this negation of the negation that liberates humans one step at a time.

Human ideas create and shape the materials in the world, and at the same time, the materials create and shape human ideas (Fuchs, 2010). In other words, there is a dialectical relationship between the subjective and objective. The human ideology is subjective, and the material is objective; the two interact and inspire each other in a capitalist society that is governed by money, power, and class (Monzó, 2016). In order to really understand and to change the world, Marx urges people to consider how human ideology affects the material, as well as how materials form human ideology (Fuchs, 2010). In addition, nothing is binary; everything is dialectical and has two contradicting sides (Fischer, 1996).

Dialectical reasoning in a capitalist society. Under a capitalist ideology, money has power and all things can be priced (Wolff, 2002). One cannot simply ignore that capitalism has made the society as a whole more wealthy; however, it has also brought

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much inequity and injustice in the society (Monzó, 2016). In addition, wealth has its own contradiction; on one hand, wealth leads to power, and on the other hand, wealth alters interpersonal relationships (Wolff, 2002). As the capitalist society grows, the exploitation of the workers increases as well; the more exploitation of the workers, the more contradictions between the two classes exist in the capitalist society (Dunayevskaya, 1958).

This also reflects the dialectical nature of capitalist society. For example, capitalism creates jobs while it creates unemployment. As stated earlier, the capitalists are supposed to create more jobs in this free market, but unemployment is vital in their pursuit of more wealth (Dunayevskaya, 1958). Undoubtedly, capitalism helps to advance a society; however, it causes much destruction on earth while doing so (Agostinone-Wilson, 2013). There is hardly much “natural” environment humans can live in (Wolff, 2002). This dialectic is one of the distinguishable traits of Marx’s thinking, one that could truly “challenge” capitalism (Agostinone-Wilson, 2013, p. 62). Marx believed in freedom for humanity, not just in economics but also in life. To find steps that lead to this freedom, people must find ways to solve the contradictions between the two classes existing in a capitalist society. However, as long as capitalism is the system, this contradiction will always be evident in the society. To apply the concept of dialectical materialism to study capitalism is to examine the internal contradictions within the system. It is mainly how they rattle the system, possible solutions for the contradictions, and the tipping points for these contradictions that move this system to another one (Eagleton, 2011). Under capitalist production, the positive aspect is the resistance of the workers, and the negative is the hostility between the two classes. These two opposing

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sides form the entity of capitalist society. Moreover, racism and elimination coexist with capitalism—they need each other in order to grow and survive (Eagleton, 2011).

Dialectical reasoning serves as a lens to understand the relationship between the US and Syria.

Media and Ideology

There is a joke that a foreigner moved to Beijing for work and settled in an apartment. One day at 7 pm, he knocked on his neighbor's door hastily.

“Yes? What is the matter?” His Chinese neighbor asked.

“Please help,” the foreigner said. “I don't seem to understand my Chinese TV. Every channel has the same program, no matter how I click my remote!”

“What program are you referring to?”

“CCTV News.”

“Look, my friend,” the Chinese neighbor shook his head with a laugh. “At 7pm, every house in China has a broken TV!”

This joke, although intended to be funny, reflects the nature of the mainstream news programs in non-democratic countries, such as China, where the state holds ultimate control over the media and its information fluidity. However, here in the US, we can choose what religion to practice, whom to vote for as President, and which media outlet to use. This consciousness of “free to choose as one pleases” makes our society *appear* to be the ultimate free society. Nonetheless, this is a false consciousness created by the dominant class, and it is put in place to create the pretence of democracy and to justify the exploitation of other classes and races (McLaren, 1995).

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As Gramsci (1971) pointed out, the dominant group in a capitalist society achieves their dominance through war of position and war of maneuver, where the war of maneuver is accomplished by militarization and policing, and the war of position is accomplished through establishing and normalizing an ideology that best serves the dominant group. In order to win the war of position, the dominant group creates cultural hegemony by manufacturing their ideology in less obvious ways that slowly penetrate the public, making their values the “common sense” value for the society (Gramsci, 1971). Therefore, hegemony only works with the support of ideology (McLaren, 2003). To define ideology, Donald and Hall (1986) quoted that:

[Ideology is] the frameworks of thought which are used in society to explain, figure out, make sense of or give meaning to the social and political world... Without these frameworks, we could not make sense of the world at all. But with them, our perceptions are inevitably structured in a particular direction by the very concepts we are using. (pp. ix-x)

Furthermore, McLaren (2003) referred to ideology as “the production and representation of ideas, values, and beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed and lived out by both individuals and groups” (p. 205). Hence, ideology is *maintained* in a way that it appears as our way of life, something we accept as natural and in Gramsci’s (1971) words, our “common sense.” Therefore, ideology helps to mask the true intentions and interests of the dominant group, and it is made possible through the public’s consent to it, although such consent is due to the public’s ignorance of the dominant group’s special interests (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Leiter, 2015). In our society, a capitalist ideology benefits the dominant class and has soaked through the mainstream media, influencing

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people on what to think and how to think, not much different than those in “non-democratic” societies. Via media, the dominant group establishes, secures, and maintains its power; as Dewey (1939) described power as “the sum of conditions available for bringing the desirable end into existence” (p. 784), the dominant group controls the media, thus it has the means to achieve its agenda by spreading its ideology to the audience.

A false consciousness has the ability to alter people’s understanding of the society they live in, and ultimately manipulates people’s political views (Gershon, 2010). John Thompson (1987) discussed four modes in which ideology works as a negative function: (1) legitimation, (2) dissimulation, (3) fragmentation, and (4) reification. In the case of this study, we can use these four modes to look at how media operate negatively.

Legitimation occurs when the dominant group makes their ideology as the norm for the society, therefore their ideology is legitimized and supported by the people because it is seen as the common sense. For example, when the media portrays Syria, its people, and its region as aggressive and barbaric, it legitimizes the US military involvement in Syria and furthermore, any anti-refugee and anti-Muslim sentiments in our society would be made just and valid. *Dissimulation* occurs when the dominant group uses the media to conceal, hide, or deny their dominance, so that the society thinks all is equal while the dominant group achieves its agenda. For example, the news media do not necessarily *present* the audience with false information, but rather, they disguise, hide, or obscure the opinions from those oppose to the dominant group. With a banking media, the audience is prevented from having two-way communication thus are discouraged to think critically and easily take in the information media give them. *Fragmentation* occurs when the dominant group breaks the society into fragment groups and makes them oppose each

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other. By alienating oppressed groups from each other, the dominant group prevents the oppressed from working collectively; therefore, it secures and stabilizes their dominant status in the society. For instance, when the media use othering narrative in discussing Muslim Syrian refugees, it presents this group of people as not a part of our society and therefore they do not need our support and empathy. The narrative of fear media creates alienates Muslim people, probing the society to support an anti-Muslim, anti-refugee sentiment that supports the government's heavy military presence in the Middle East. *Reification* occurs when the dominant group presents something that is temporary and transitional as a permanent thing that has always existed in the society. In other words, through reification, a temporary event is made to seem like a time-tested common sense, making the society overlook any important factors that caused the event. For example, when the news media report the chaos of Syrian civil war—a state that is transitory—as something that has always existed in Syria and the Middle East region, the audience is blind-sighted on how the US military involvement contributed to the present state in Syria and its region. Additionally, such reification racializes the Muslim community by presenting the Muslims world as barbaric and dangerous. Therefore, although there are outliers in the media industry, such as alternative media, that could provide us with different perspectives, the mainstream media functions negatively to maintain hegemony in our society via these modes.

Academia has long trusted peer-reviewed journals as a source of authentic and trustworthy information. Spiegel and Rubenstein (2017) confirmed academia's ultimate responsibility to inform the public on controversial issues with an unbiased perspective. On the other hand, although most Americans use news media to stay informed with

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current events, they fail to acknowledge that the news media is for profit; therefore, the news stories are controlled by money, but the audiences take them as unprejudiced truth (Williams, 2017). This presents a challenge in reporting news stories in an unbiased fashion, because the news media are controlled by capitalists whose goal is capital accumulation. As Fuchs (2009) stated:

Media capitalists invest money in the production of media content and its transmission, which is achieved by employing labour that produces the media as a commodity that is circulated and either sold by selling media to consumers or by selling the media audience to advertisers. (p. 383)

For instance, some media sources ask their users to sign up for subscriptions in order to gain access to their contents. In order to sign up, the users must enter their names and email addresses, which the media capitalists could use to sell to third parties. Even with the news media sources that do not ask users to subscribe, it is not hard to find advertisements within the content of the news. As a result, the news media cannot serve as a “watchdog” for the audiences, because it is dominated by the rich and powerful (Ekman, 2012). Hence, Marx and Engels (1958ff) have suggested people seek alternative media sources, ones that have no relation to capitalist pressures and therefore can truly be a “public watchdog, the tireless denouncer of those in power” (MEW 6, p. 231).

Chomsky (2002) reminded us that the media’s purpose in society is revealed through “the way they [the media] select topics, distribute concerns, frame issues, filter information, focus their analysis, through emphasis, tone, and a whole range of other techniques like that.” By the time a news story reaches us, it has passed certain prerequisites, such as alignment with the news corporation’s agenda, and has gone

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through a selective process, though this is usually not announced to the public.

Furthermore, Ekman (2012) warned that almost all news media, be it traditional or social media, come to audiences with a commercial purpose. For example, it is rare to see a news media with zero advertisement; this is more evident in social media platforms. The overwhelming amount of advertisements in social media platforms, such as *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and *Instagram*, is a reflection of surplus value needed for capital accumulation (Ekman, 2012), because the advertisements in social media are making profits for the capitalists by exploiting the work of the social media content creators. For example, if one publishes a video on *YouTube* on how to change oil in a vehicle, this person is posting a free tutorial for the *YouTube* users; however, the social media platform could place an advertisement that the viewers must watch first before watching the video they intended to watch. The dependant relationship between financial powerhouses and news media cannot be taken lightly.

The CNN Effect

Lutz (2012) found that back in 1983, there were 50 companies that own the majority of mainstream media in the US, but by 2011, it shrank to only six companies (i.e., GE, News-Corp, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, and CBS) controlling the most of the media in the US. It indicated that within 28 years, the “choice” for US audiences decreased from 50 perspectives and opinions to only six. A smaller percentage of people currently control the information audiences receive and smaller media companies eventually lost their voices and authenticities due to company mergers. Media corporations got bigger and richer, which means if we use mainstream media, the information we receive is most likely coming from these big five corporations.

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This is not just television media alone; the same thing is happening with print media and social media, as well. For instance, in 2010, two main newspapers in the state of Hawai'i, *Honolulu Advertiser* and *the Star Bulletin*, merged to one after *Star Bulletin* bought out its competitor, which cost hundreds of people their jobs. After the merger, people in Hawai'i only had one source of information, and hence became a "one paper city" (Juscen, 2010). In the world of social media, one example is that of *Facebook* which has been acquiring companies worldwide, with the most famous billion dollar acquisition of *Instagram* in 2012, and 19 billion dollars buying *WhatsApp*, a popular social messaging application. Both of these acquisitions enabled *Facebook* to collect more users' personal data, which is valuable to its financial growth (Page, 2018).

Such media monopoly is an example of Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. The greatest accumulation, according to Marx, occurs not through individual workers, but the consolidation and centralization of capital. Hence, when the big media corporations acquire smaller ones that were once their competitors, not only do they eliminate the competition from the market; they also do so toward gaining the maximum capital. Moreover, the monopolized US media support an imperialist ideology. Instead of controlling resources in other countries through violent acts, US dominance is achieved through ideology. The influential US media normalizes the American culture, and spreads its capitalist ideology to the world. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Gramsci discussed that ideology as created through civil society, used by the dominant group to impose their agenda to the dominated. However, the dominated group is either oblivious of this disguise through the media, or they are aware of this imposed ideology but believe they can benefit from obliging to the dominant group (Fuchs, 2009). Thus, it

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is important to use critical pedagogy to examine the news media so people can see the real nature of the dominant group.

To put things in perspective, the dominant class dominates the media we use in the US, and through languages and concepts, the dominant class passes its ideology through media that could appear to be the reality to the audience, all in the pursuit of maintaining capitalist status (Fuchs, 2009). Today, audiences have many options for media usage, such as alternative media (e.g., *Truthout*, *Democracy Now!*), which Marx referred to as non-monetary and resisting capitalism (Fuchs, 2009). Nonetheless, the mainstream media, owned by large corporations, still control and determine the majority of the information fluidity in our society, this phenomenon is called the “CNN Effect” (Doucet, 2018).

The CNN Effect describes that whatever and whichever topic the big media corporations decide to put out for the public, it would become the “hot topic” for society, regardless of what media outlet one uses (Doucet, 2018). For instance, a front-page news story on a major news website would most likely appear as important news on an alternative news website. Additionally, the top stories reported on a major television network would most likely appear on smaller news websites as breaking stories. The images, sounds, and narratives in the news can easily persuade emotions. Simultaneously, policy-makers make decisions based on public emotions that are aroused from the media; thus the media strive to make a strong emotional appeal to the public (De Franco, 2012). With the CNN Effect, the big media corporations are able to spread their ideologies and effect audiences’ emotions in almost every corner of the globe. The CNN Effect also

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suggests that the US media play a major role in the world, as it pushes Western values to the rest of the world through media (Fuchs, 2009).

Marx and the Media

Media helps with accumulation in a capitalist society and money sets the range of how media spreads its ideology. In today's world, the media consistently spreads ideas to the public, thus creating the ideology of how society functions and thinks. It is through ideology that people make sense of society and normalize social relations. Marx believed that the capitalist ideology serves the wealthy and delivers messages on the capitalists' behalf. As Marx (1970) stated, "ideological forms in which men become conscious of...conflict and fight it out" (p. 21). Therefore, Marx viewed ideology as equivalent to everyday consciousness and this is important for capitalists to sustain a capitalist society. The capitalists use media to accumulate capital; in other words, they depend on media capital for capital accumulation (Fuchs, 2010). As addressed earlier, capitalists use machines to create surplus value, and media is just another machine used for this purpose (Dunayevskaya, 1958, Wolff, 2002, Fuchs, 2010). Even with the supposedly neutral-voiced news media, it acts heavily as a platform to sustain capital accumulation (Ekman, 2012).

The rise of globalization brought forth an increasing amount of new technologies; at the same time, the evolution of media reflects the changes of society (Fuchs, 2010). Thus, society and media are in a dialectical relationship; one cannot survive without the other. For example, through media, a product can be introduced to people all around the globe without any constraint of time and space. Media pushes capitalism ideology and makes audiences think that capitalism is the only suitable system for the society, and as

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the capitalists seek to accumulate more capital, they use more communication technology (Fuchs, 2010). Advertisement is created with the purpose of accumulating more profit, even if the product portrayed is not one hundred percent accurate. The same applies to sending out political agendas. Donald and Hall (1986) pointed out that in order to push their agenda, capitalists use media as a tool to misinterpret reality; in turn, the reality audiences experience is distorted by this ideology, and this ideology continues to build false consciousness among the public.

Be the agenda economical or political, media plays an important role in spreading capitalist ideology. As media often purposefully misinterprets reality, it spreads ideas that are designed to benefit capitalists (Fuchs, 2010). For example, corporate media often solely focus on race and rarely acknowledge the relationship between race to class, because discussions on race are more safe and more appealing to corporate interests (Monzó & McLaren, 2014). As mentioned earlier, everything is a commodity in a capitalist society (Monzó & McLaren, 2014; Wolff, 2002). This includes each and every media user as well. Thus, in today's society, no one can escape the fate of being used by some form of media. This would provide a lens to understand how the US corporate media depict the Syrian crisis to the public and why.

Critical Pedagogy

This study also draws from critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy reflects the thinking of Marx and squarely grounds the field of education. Whereas Marxism is used across fields and mainly discussed in sociology and political science, critical pedagogy influences the field of education, and there is a clear connection between the two. Freire, like Marx, was a humanist, and he focused on praxis to make Marx's abstract ideas more

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easily understandable for the public through operationalizing Marx's theories in practice (Monzó, in press). bell hooks (1994) described critical pedagogy as a theoretical lens that focuses on action, equity, and social justice. It takes cultural and social contexts into consideration and at the same time, it scrutinizes and challenges the cultures and social structures (Crotty, 1998). Hence Giroux (2011) praised critical pedagogy for its ability to provide critical insights on the most urgent problems we face in society today.

Paulo Freire is a leading philosopher and advocate for critical pedagogy, and his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000a) has influenced many in the field of education and beyond. Freire (2000a) often used "conscientization," "unfinishedness," "dialogue," and "praxis" in explaining the characteristics of critical pedagogy. Conscientization is having a sense of critical consciousness, which is imperative for recognizing the societal problems at their historical roots. This critical consciousness is the first step in liberation and must be paired with action in order to carry out that consciousness for change. In addition, critical pedagogy scholars are always aware of the unfinishedness in society, the constant work needing to be done by those who have a critical consciousness. Hence, to liberate all is an ongoing process because as people's knowledge increases, new questions and problems will also arise, and together they form an uprising endless spiral. It is through this spiral our society moves forward. Dialogues serve as the moving force for this spiral, as it is only through dialogues can there be understanding and actions that lead to a stage of liberation.

Revolutionary critical pedagogy emphasizes the Marxist roots of Freire's work and presents educators with the challenge to interrogate how ideologies and material realities come together to impact the Syrian crisis as well as the media's response to it.

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Critical media analysis is imperative for critical pedagogy scholars, because although the media is meant to serve as the public's watchdog, profit-seeking large corporations monopolize the media in order to use it to maximize their advantages (McLaren, 1995). As a liberation pedagogy, its aim in the context of Syria is to engage a revolutionary praxis that brings us to act and reflect in support of the Syrian people. The media, with its role as a check and balance to power and wealth, is an important tool for this challenge. Yet we must also recognize that the media was created by the ruling class, and large media companies are maintained by corporations that have particular interests tied to capital and state interests.

I incorporate critical pedagogy into my study because its philosophy can focus on media studies, and that critical pedagogy is a way to challenge common sense. Freire (2000a) criticized what he called a banking concept of education, where the education is an one-way street, and the educators simply feed information to the students without giving them any freedom or space to develop critical consciousness. As a result, the educators load information into their students—much like depositing funds into a bank—and the students only need to regurgitate the information back when they need it. This banking concept prevents the students from thinking critically about the information they receive; thus, they blindly accept, memorize, and repeat the information without picking out any biases or posing any questions. Critical pedagogy is applicable in media studies because it can be used in a way to understand the diminished level of criticality that the media, particularly the news media, allow the audience. When a capitalist-owned “banking” media feeds the audience/viewers information agreeable to its ideology, without offering any space for developing critical consciousness, it aids in developing

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capitalist values within the society. In the context of the US involvement in Syria, a banking-natured mainstream news media prompts the audience/viewers to support the war and government intervention in Syrian and its region. To critically analyze the news media is to challenge its banking concept of reporting, and critical pedagogy guides my critical analysis not only of the society and capitalism, but also how the mainstream news media in the US teach the public to be complacent, to accept the status quo, and to ultimately develop a collective “American unconscious.”

Challenges of Marxist Theory

Marx’s philosophy was born in the 19th century, and his theory is still appropriate for today. However, like any other theory, Marxist theory faces its challenges in present day. Eagleton (2011) listed ten common critiques of Marxist theory in today’s world, and some of these critiques may be raised among readers of this dissertation. First, some argue that Marxist theory applies only to the West in an industrial era; in today’s world, with the rise of globalization, Marxist theory may seem less applicable. Yet, just because people do not see the condition of the industrial workers, it does not mean they do not exist. True, horrific labor conditions such as the child labor described in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* might not happen anymore in post-industrial societies, but they still exist in many third-world and developing countries. As mentioned earlier, the West exploits poorer countries for labor sources. For example, Guilbert (2017) pointed out that the Syrian refugees in Europe are more likely to be exploited by Western companies and used for cheap labor. Additionally, in 2016, Syrian refugee children were found working under poor conditions in clothing factories in Turkey, producing clothing for Western

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labels (Guilbert, 2017). The vulnerable Syrian refugees are further made into a more vulnerable labor force, which from a Marxist lens, allows for greater exploitation.

The second common challenge is that some people often associate Marxism with war, tyranny and dictatorship, based on the so-called working communisms that turned into the opposite of Marx's vision of communism. Dunayevskaya (1946) has pointed out quite convincingly that these societies have all been state capitalist, failing to develop the most important aspects of Marx's vision and retaining the basis of capitalism, including accumulation and alienated labor. People make the assumption that Marxist theory proposes a limited market, which would limit freedom. Eagleton (2011) pointed out that people often forget that capitalism has a history of violence and exploitation, such as slavery, colonization, and genocide. In addition, Ekman (2012) indicated that the primitive accumulation nature of capitalism led to events such as slavery and colonization, all built on blood and suffering. Violence is a permanent feature in the process of capital accumulation.

Thirdly, some look at Marxism as a theory that describes a utopian fantasy; in other words, they say Marx believed all humans could live in pure harmony with no conflict or selfish intentions, which is not possible due to human nature (Eagleton, 2011). However, Marx's dialectical reasoning acknowledges that there is no "ending" nor "absolute" in the world; with every solution, new challenges and problems emerge. It is a never-ending battle we must go through in order to improve society.

Fourthly, some have a limited view of Marxist theory and argue that it is all about economics, and that it relates everything in the society to either money or class. This is a very simplistic reading of the vast body of work and ideas that Marx developed

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and engaged. Still, for today's relevance, we cannot discuss a society without examining the economics and class struggles behind it. Even within a seemingly egalitarian society, economic and class differences still exist and warrant an examination. Often, these differences are the sources for conflicts in the society. Marx was a polemical philosopher; therefore, he chose to focus on the roots of the problems.

Standing at 60 Lutetia Gardens in Highgate Cemetery, London, one would find Karl Marx's tomb a rather popular destination. The tombstone says to the living, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to change it." As a political refugee himself, Marx was forced to flee to England in 1849 and spent the rest of his life in exile (Seed, 2010). With his practical and radical thinking, Marx was politically active throughout his life and aimed to solve the problems he observed in 19th century England (Crotty, 1998). Marx's work is not yet done; some problems he observed centuries ago still exist in today's 21st century. As the biggest humanitarian crisis in the 21st century, the ongoing Syria refugee issue is a complex topic that requires much attention. A Marxist-humanist lens offers an understanding of the current Syrian refugee crisis that could further suggest solutions.

The Current Syrian Crisis

The Syrian crisis is a complex one that will not cease in a short number of years. Today, Syria is still experiencing its civil war, causing an increasing number of Syrian civilians to become refugees (Figures at a glance, 2017). Abboud (2015) gives four main reasons for the Syrian crisis' longevity. First, with each formation of groups and/or organizations that oppose the Assad regime, they tend to fail in the short term due to disorganization and decentralization. In other words, there are many leaders for this

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revolt, which make it difficult to follow one command (Anden-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). Second, no matter what the opposition groups have attempted, the Assad regime proved its resilience and was either able to control or stop their efforts with heavy militia repression. Third, although the crisis is in Syria, it has greatly affected its neighboring countries such as Iran, Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt. International participations all came with each country's own political and economic agendas. Other Western participants include Russia, the US, and France. Fourth, there have been negotiations between countries regarding the cessation of the Syrian crisis, such as the Geneva process and the Moscow talks. However, due to each country's pursuit of different policies, no mutual agreement has been made to this day. The economic and political elements behind each party's motivations have made Syria a ground for their proxy wars.

The Syrian Crisis in the Media

For most Americans, the news media is the most accessible way to gain insight on the Syrian conflict, because the news media is a readily available source by which the audience can easily keep up with current events (Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015). Especially for news magazine audiences, they are considered captive readers that trust and rely on news magazines for acquiring information on their topics of interests (Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015). This is particularly important for news magazines that report hard news around the globe, such as the current Syrian conflict. The current conflict in Syria cannot be defined in simplistic terms; however, Allday (2016) criticized both academia and news media for their tendencies to offer easy and simple explanations of the conflict. It is already difficult for people outside Syria to get updates on the current conflict, made more difficult with the Syrian government's successful efforts to ban all

foreign journalism from reporting since the first day of the conflict (Anden-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015; Seo & Ebrahim, 2016).

The current Syrian crisis is more intense than what the average American sees from news media (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016). In order to appeal to a broader audience, news media tend to use simple language, thus making it easy for the majority to understand (Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015; Seo & Ebrahim, 2016). The over-simplification of the Syrian crisis only makes it harder for audiences to fully grasp the conflict, and the researchers urged the US media to explain the reality in Syria the way it truly is—gruesome and complex—instead of using languages that are comfortable for their audiences (Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015; Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016).

Visual Imagery in News Media

When news magazines report on foreign conflicts, they often use two frames: military conflict and human interest. This is especially evident with the Syrian crisis (Seo & Ebrahim, 2016). Within the US, liberal news magazines are more likely to show their readers violent photographs that document the ongoing brutality happening in Syria; in comparison, conservative news magazines have a mild approach to portraying military brutality and human suffering (Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015). In other words, compared to their conservative counterparts, liberal news magazines are more eager to show the chaos in Syria, and to display the desperation of the Syrian refugees. It is possible that news magazines use horrific visual imageries as justifications for supporting the opposition groups in Syria, as well as lobbying for Western intervention in Syria (Blumenthal, 2016; Seo & Ebrahim, 2016). From a broad perspective, the rich and

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powerful have always used media to justify any controversial issues that fit their agenda (Ekman, 2012).

Both academic journals and mainstream news media stress that socioeconomic factors in Syria have played an important role in the current Syrian conflict. In other words, the Syrian crisis is not a crisis that originated from various religious, cultural, and personal differences; but rather, it is a crisis about power and money, which reflects the weakness of capitalism (Horton, 2017). This study examines if the US news media reflect this ideology when reporting news on the current Syrian crisis.

In the case of the Syrian crisis, the media could greatly affect audiences' empathy toward the crisis. In 2017, the photo of Omran Daqneesh, a five-year-old Syrian boy sitting alone in an ambulance, covered in dust and blood, disturbed the public and went around the world like wildfire. This powerful image of Omran, provided by anti-Assad activist, bluntly showed the depressing effect of the siege of Aleppo by Assad, indicating the cruelty of Assad and Russian forces toward the Syrian civilians (Specia & Samaan, 2017). One might question whether this image became so prominent in the US news because it negatively portrayed Russia. Even though the Cold War is over, there is increasing evidence that the sentiment of Russia as the greatest threat remains in the media. The media has created similar effects in the public by using 9/11 images to perpetuate the Muslim as a terrorist image and to create support for the invasion of Iraq. Nevertheless, for the audience who were apathetic to the issue, this photo might be "the last straw"—it created such a strong emotional disturbance that people could finally feel empathy toward the fall of Aleppo. On the other hand, for those who already supported the US intervention, the image of Omran was the "icing on the cake," which further

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reinforced the ideology that was already planted in their heads. The picture of Omran raised the question whether this image became so prominent in the US news because it negatively portrayed Russia, because it maintains the sentiment that Russia is the greatest threat left over from the Cold War. Later on, the audience in other parts of the world got a completely different perspective of Omran as they watched a healthy and happy Omran, along with this family, appearing in a Russian news outlet, with Omran's father stating that his son's photo was taken without permission. Even though "seeing is believing," the contradicting images of Omran made people question the truth. In spite of this, the important question we should ask is, are the images of Syrian children, such as the image of Omran, being exploited by the big media corporations? Furthermore, are Syrian children being exploited for political reasons? Since the role of media is to help the dominant class control those who are dominated and maintain capitalism (Fuchs, 2009; McLaren, 1995), then the answer is possibly "yes."

The war in Syria has lasted for almost nine years with no ending in sight. The purpose to study the US news media's coverage on Syria is to offer an understanding on why this civil war has lasted as long as it has been, and it requires a complex understanding of Syrian society and the relationship between media and ideology. We must respond effectively to this crisis, and that is the role of the news—to help people to understand and act.

Brief History of the Syrian Conflict

The Syrian conflict would not make sense unless one first understood the historical context in Syria; additionally, in order to grasp the complexity of the Syrian

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conflict, one needs to study the sectarian variables in a historical context (Azmeah, 2016). Syria is identified as one of the oldest civilizations in the world. The Islam religion spread in Syria in 637 A.D. and remains the main religion in Syria today. After World War I, France occupied Syria, which led to several uprisings and revolts from the Syrian people. After negotiating with France, Syria regained its independence in 1936 but agreed to allow France to hold economic and military power. In 1946, after World War II, Syria finally became an independent country. However, this independence did not bring peace to the nation, and revolts, riots, and military coups kept repeating in Syria. Currently, Syria is considered a “unitary republic with a semi-presidential style of government...the controlling parties practice a highly authoritarian regime with most of the political power in the hands of the al-Assad family” (Pariona, 2019). Thus, Syria does not have full democracy and is rather a state capitalist country.

In its colonial history under Britain and France, Syria became a nation with many identities, which has caused Syria to lack one unifying identity (Azmeah, 2016). The tension between two major groups, the Sunnis and the Alawites Muslims, has been present since Syria’s independence in 1946. Hafez al-Assad, a former minister of defense in Syria, came to power in 1970 and governed Syria until 2000. After the government of President Assad gained control in Syria, the conflict between these two main groups remained in the society, and this conflict precisely stems from economic and sociocultural differences. For example, the economic elite in Syria contains a large number of Sunnis, but they support the Alawites Assad regime during the conflict, for their economic benefits (Azmeah, 2016). During his reign, Syria was involved in wars with Israel and Lebanon. One infamous event that happened in Syria was the uprising in

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Hama in 1982, where approximately 20,000 Syrian civilians were killed by Assad's military.

After Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000, his second son, Bashar al-Assad, became the President and remains in power today. After suspecting Syria was involved with Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri's assassination in 2005, as well as attempting to buy weapons of mass destruction, the US accused the Syrian government of supporting terrorist groups and once again placed sanctions against Syria. In 2011, the Arab Spring happened in Syria and led to a series of events that eventually caused a full-blown civil war that is known for its humanitarian crisis.

Key Events that Led to the Current Conflict

The uprising of Hama in 1982 was a pivotal event in Syrian history that is key to understanding the tension between the Assad regime and the Syrian civilians (Degerald, 2016; Sadik, 2014). In 1982, Hafez al-Assad (i.e., the current Syrian President's father) responded to the Sunni rebellion in Hama by massacring approximately 20,000 Syrian civilians. According to Rodrigues (2011) in *The Guardian*, what happened in Hama was "the single bloodiest assault by an Arab ruler against his own people in modern times."

Like a volcano ready to erupt, the Syrian people were ready for a revolt.

The birth of Arab Spring in Tunisia on December 18, 2010 ignited the fire for what would transpire on January 26, 2011 in Syria (Abboud, 2015). On March 18, 2011, a peaceful protest in the city of Deraa ended with four civilians shot to death by Assad's security forces, which created a ripple effect of many disastrous conflicts between the regime and the Syrian civilians (Syria: The Story, 2016). Since then, several factors have led Syria to present the world with the largest humanitarian crisis in the twenty-first

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century. Some factors include but are not limited to: (a) the rise and fall of various Syrian opposition groups, (b) the birth of ISIS, (c) Western intervention, (d) use of chemical weapons, and (e) foreign proxy wars.

The Kurds

It is important to mention the Kurds when discussing the current Syrian crisis, because many events have happened since the Arab Spring involved this particular group. The Kurds have been marginalized and oppressed in history. Although they do not have a state, the Kurds have various religious affiliations but are mostly made of Sunni Muslims. The Kurds are a unique ethnic presence in the Middle East; about 25 to 35 million of them reside near the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Armenia (Who Are the Kurds, 2017). By 2017, the Kurds made up about 7 to 10 percent of the population in Syria, 15 to 20 percent of the population in Turkey, and 15 to 20 percent of the population in Iraq.

The Kurds and their autonomy. Despite their large presence in these countries, the Kurds face suppression from their respective governments, but the Kurds have also been fighting for autonomy in these states (Who Are the Kurds, 2017). For example, the Kurds in Turkey started a rebel group called Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) which has been fighting for their autonomy in Turkey since the 1980s. Additionally, the US and EU also view the PKK as a terrorist group. With the recent success of the Kurdish fighters of the Popular Protection Units (YPG) fighting against the Islamic State (IS or ISIS), the Turkish government is still hostile with the YPG because it associates the YPG fighters with the rebels in PKK (Syria: The Story, 2016). Inside Syria, the Syrian Kurds built Rojava, a self-governed region for the Syrian Kurds.

Rojava. Since the beginning of its civil war, Syria is hardly the image of peace and safety. However, the start of the Syrian civil war brought Syrian Kurds a real chance of establishing autonomy, and Rojava is the product of their fight for freedom. Located in the midst of the desert, Rojava is a self-governed nation of Syrian Kurds and is a haven for those who are seeking safety (Sheppard, 2016). More specifically, Rojava is well known for their group of female fighters. The Kurdish female fighters are leaders in Rojava, and they are a strong representation of this self-proclaimed nation's goal for freedom and equality (Enzinna, 2015). However, the governments of Iran, Turkey, and Iraq are wary of Rojava, afraid that Rojava's declaration of independence would arouse the Kurds in their own countries to riot (Sheppard, 2016). For the Turkish government, Rojava resembles the PKK, which has caused the death of 40,000 civilians in its fight against the Turkish government since 1978. The US is an ally of Turkey, and it declared the PKK as a terrorist group in 1997. Nonetheless, the US remains supportive of Rojava by the time of this writing, perhaps Rojava presents itself as a land that possesses certain Western values, such as the freedom to believe in atheism and feminism; therefore, many Westerners see Rojava as a positive outcome, that of a utopia, of the Syrian civil war (Enzinna, 2015).

The Kurds fighting IS. Today, the Kurds are known in the US news as fighters against the Islamic State. Although the Turkish government is hostile toward the YPG, it did earn the support from the US (Syria's Beleaguered Christians, 2016). Along with Arab militias, the Syrian Kurds formed the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and fought ISIS on the front line (Who Are the Kurds, 2017; Masters, 2017). However,

the alliance between YPG and SDF has threatened Turkey greatly, and it will not cease bombardments on the Syrian Kurds (Syria: The Story, 2016).

The Syrian Refugee Crisis

Those suffering the most from the current Syrian crisis are the Syrian civilians, and the number registering for refugee status has correspondingly increased since the beginning of the conflict (Syria regional refugee response, 2018). The majority of Syrian refugees reside in five neighboring countries to Syria: Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt (Achlume, 2015; Figures at a glance, 2017). These five countries did not play a main role in the Syrian conflict, and they were not solely responsible for the current state of Syria (Achlume, 2015). Currently, about 86 percent of the world's refugee population resettle in less economical advanced countries, which means only about 14 percent resides in the wealthier regions such as Western European countries and North American countries, even if these wealthier countries are accountable for causing the refugee problem (Achlume, 2015; Fandl, 2017). Although the United Nations established a principle of "Responsibility to Protect" since 2005 (Resonsibility to protect, n.d.), there is still no real solution for all the Syrian refugees from international communities.

The majority of Syrian refugees are women and children, and they remain the most vulnerable within the refugee population that require more assistance (Doocy & Lyles, 2017; Figures at a glance, 2017). In addition, Syrian women refugees possess the most vulnerability because their voices are hardly represented through mainstream and global media coverage (Alhayek, 2014); thus the public has little awareness of the specific concerns and needs of the refugee women. For instance, Amnesty International reported several violent stories of Syrian women refugees suffering from physical abuse

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and sexual exploitation (Female refugees face physical assault, 2016). Even though these are serious issues that deserve the world's attention, they received little coverage from mainstream media, thus the majority of the public are unaware of such dark realities for refugee women, unless they purposefully seek out this information.

This Syrian refugee crisis is not the burden of Syria's alone, but rather a crisis for all nations (Horton, 2017). In 2018, there were more than 5.4 million Syrian refugees resettling in refugee camps or host countries with this number still growing (Syria regional refugee response, 2018). Currently, the largest number of refugees comes from Syria, which results in the biggest human migration since the Rwandan genocide in 1994 (Spiegel & Rubenstein, 2017). The five neighboring countries to Syria (i.e., Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan) have taken in the most of Syrian refugees; however, these five countries were not the ones that were the most responsible for creating the crisis (Achume, 2015). By the end of 2017, these countries have spent much of their resources to host Syrian refugees, and some talks have shifted to gaining more support from the West.

Context of the US in Syria

At present, there is a large void on the topic of Syria-US relationships in academic journals, which may stem from the lack of prior relations between the two countries (Denselow, 2016). The existing research mainly comes from the US, and the majority of it is done by the State Department; much less research comes from Syria (Denselow, 2016). In contrast, the US news magazines have an increasing interest in the topic of the Syria-US relationship. At first glance, the US appears to be less involved in Syria as it did in the past with other Middle Eastern countries such as Afghanistan; perhaps this is

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the attempt to avoid Syria becoming the second Iraq, and the US did not want to participate in another controversy within the international community (Bentley, 2014; Sanger, Schmitt, & Hubbard, 2017).

The Arab Spring happened during the Obama administration, and President Obama's seeming lack of interest in the Syrian crisis caused many to doubt if the US would ever take any serious action against the Assad regime (Hamid, 2015). The Obama administration was at first hesitant to get involved in the Syrian conflict because it was difficult to predict the outcome; in other words, the US was not sure about which victor would be more politically beneficial for the US (Sanger et al., 2017). In addition, intense intervention in Syria would jeopardize the negotiation between US and Iran regarding the Iranian nuclear program (Hamid, 2015). Furthermore, the US's apparent "disinterest" protects the political and economical relationships between the US and its Sunni allies in the Gulf (Milne, 2015).

The Assumption of US Non-action in Syria

This "non-action" from the US has created dialogues within the public, both academic and news arenas alike. There are some that push for more US involvement in the Syrian conflict; on the other hand, some have argued that the US has already involved itself in the Syrian crisis in forms other than heavy military participation (Allday, 2016). Compared to academic journals, news magazines tend to be more critical when discussing US involvement in Syria. The purpose of this paper is not to identify the legitimacy of the news magazines' stories, but to show how the news magazines structure their narratives regarding the current Syrian conflict.

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The assumption that the US has not yet been involved in the Syrian conflict is a common misunderstanding within the public; given the animosity between the two governments in history, the US has already gone to war with Syria (Allday, 2016). For a crisis this severe, we ought to examine both sides of the US intervention in Syria. On one hand, US intervention seems to help the defenseless Syrian civilians; on the other hand, US intervention seems to have hidden agendas that would deepen Syrian civilians' sufferings. For example, the BBC story on Syria's beleaguered Christians (2015) documented how the US and Saudi Arabia provided machinery to ISIS through first delivering weapons to Eastern European countries, that were then transferred via Turkey. This action violates international agreements but would help to overthrow Assad, which corresponds to the US agenda (O'Connor, 2017b).

Nonetheless, in the US, there is little scrutiny from the public regarding US intervention, and the debate on this topic is very limited. Allday (2016) provided several explanations for this trend. First, many people are afraid to speak their doubts or even engage in an open debate on Syria, because of past serious personal attacks coming from those who are pro-Western intervention in Syria. If people are only exposed to one side of the issue, then it is easy to form misunderstanding, even within universities and human rights groups. Secondly, the main narrative from the media and academia share the pro-West narrative; therefore, many intellectuals are now advocating for Western intervention in Syria. Thirdly, an abundance of purported "experts" on Syria and its region emerged in both media and academia realms; some of them have connections in the military and/or Washington, so people are willing to treat them as authorities and listen to their advice.

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After President Bush declared Syria as one of the “rogue states” after 9/11, the US aimed to restructure Syria and alter the Assad government (Roychowdhury, 2017; Zagorin, 2006). The US and other Western countries are supportive to the opposition that is revolting for regime change in Syria (Kent, 2015; Milne, 2015), because Assad’s foreign policy is not favorable to the West’s interests (Anden-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). Although the US did not directly support the opposition groups with military personnel, it provided monetary support and arms machinery to Syrian rebel groups, such as The Free Syrian Army, in order to overthrow Assad and achieve its own political agenda (Timeline, 2014). Such a strategy was used more than 30 years ago for driving the Communist Soviet Union army out of Afghanistan (Kent, 2015; Milne, 2015). Furthermore, Sanger et al. (2017) recognized that the Kennedy administration used the same approach to topple the Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Inherently, the US and other Western countries are only intervening in Syria in order to maintain control (Milne, 2015).

Oil in Syria

Oil is a material capital. Ekman (2012) suggested that Iraq was an example of how military was used for exploitation in order to accumulate oil for material capital gain. Similar military occupations have been used to exploit other land and natural materials. In Syria, much conflict revolves oil, as well. Currently, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces maintain control over the majority of oil fields in Syria (O’Connor, 2017a). The biggest oil facility in Syria is the al-Omar oil field. At its peak, the oil field made approximately 50 million dollars monthly from its oil production (Masters, 2017).

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However, this oil field was taken over by ISIS in 2014 and not long after, oil production was reduced to merely 4 million dollars monthly.

In 2017, US-backed Kurdish and Arab forces successfully regained control over the al-Omar oil field, which means these forces now have access and control over an area that is crucial to the economy in Syria (Barnard, 2017; Masters, 2017). The pro-Assad parties, which are backed by Russia and Iran, lost the chance to have any power in this financially critical area. Even without ISIS, there is still tension between the coalitions over the al-Omar oil field. It is important to note that without the US military support from the air, the oil field is likely to be controlled by Russian-Iranian coalitions, thus the evidently proxy war between these countries will go on (Barnard, 2017). In the midst of the conflict, more Syrian civilians are left in the dust and have become homeless (Masters, 2017).

US Intervention in Syria

In August 2013, a chemical attack happened in Damascus suburbs which killed hundreds of people; although the Syrian President Assad denied involvement in this event, the West believed otherwise (Syria: The Story, 2016). The US announced its intention to intervene in Syria, if Assad did not agree to cease all Syrian chemical weapons arsenals. After repeatedly blaming the rebel groups for the chemical attack, Assad later agreed to such terms. However, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) repeatedly found chemical gas such as chlorine used on civilians during the Syrian conflict (Timeline, 2014; Syria's beleaguered Christians 2016). In 2017, the Trump administration put a stop to providing arms and other supports to Syrian opposition, a decision that seems to please the Russian government as

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it has been on the same side with the Assad regime (Sanger et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the imperial Western interventions in the Middle East do not help to eliminate Syrian civilians' sufferings, but rather they have caused more violence and division within the country (Milne, 2015). No matter how many players are involved in Syria, one common understanding is that there must be help for the Syrian refugees, because they are the casualties from both sides.

As of this writing, the most recent US involvement in Syria was the air strike near the city of Al Bukamal in April 2018. The US has always stated its involvement in the Syrian conflict for humanitarian reasons; however, it has not yet provided enough homes for those who became homeless due to its humanitarian action (Fandl, 2017). In fact, the US has admitted 18,000 Syrian refugees by 2015, much less in comparison than other countries that are taking in Syrian refugees (Achlume, 2015). The number of Syrian refugees admitted into the US does not even make up one percent of the world's Syrian refugee population, and this number does not support its humanitarian statement (Fandl, 2017). This is not just a mismatch for the US statement; overall, the countries that are engaged in proxy wars in Syria (e.g., Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, France, UK, and the US) admitted much fewer Syrian refugees than Syria's neighboring countries (Achlume, 2015).

Humanitarian Aids

As the Syrian crisis continues, more and more Syrian civilians become refugees; there is an increasing need to support these war casualties as well as helping the civilians within Syria (Syria regional refugee response, 2018). There is a growing number of international governmental organizations and NGOs that aim to serve the Syrian

refugees, and many of them are Western organizations. However, some are doubtful with the true objectives behind these humanitarian organizations. Degerald (2016) pointed out that among those Western governments who are involved in Syria, Russia is “skeptical of any Western claims to humanitarian goals behind regime change; they see them as a ruse for expansionism” (p. 166). By 2016, some well-known organizations are: Hand in Hand for Syria, Karam Foundation, The Syria Campaign, Women Now for Development (previously Soriyat for Development), Syria Relief, and The White Helmets (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016). It is worthy to note that out of these six organizations, five are located in the West, such as in the US, U.K., and France. To be precise, this paper will only examine two controversial organizations and their narratives.

The Syria Campaign. The Syria Campaign, which is a PR firm that is funded by the Syrian opposition, started protests in various city squares in the US on September 30, 2016. Few Americans are aware that this PR firm has close relations with the US government (Blumenthal, 2016). Although the Syria Campaign alleges itself as a neutral third party, its relation to Syria is not unbiased. The Syria Campaign has been lobbying for a no-fly zone in Syria, which would bring about 70,000 US military personnel into Syria; in the past, it is evident that once a no-fly zone is set in place, there will be a regime change shortly after in the country (Bartlett, 2015; Blumenthal, 2016). Using Iraq and Libya as examples, some securitized the Syria Campaign’s narratives on the West’s intentions in Syria (Bartlett, 2015). There are also doubts on whether the Syria Campaign truly represents the Syrian people’s voice (Blumenthal, 2016). Either way, a regime change in Syria would surely lead to more chaos and casualties.

White Helmets. Founded in 2013, the White Helmets has rescued more than 62,000 people in Syria; it is a humanitarian organization that has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Award. The White Helmets consist of all Syrian members; however, it is assisted by the US, Britain, and the Netherlands (Lucas, 2016). The Netflix documentary, *The White Helmets* has won the Oscar for Best Documentary Short in 2017; its victory in the entertainment industry hoped to show that the world is on the Syrian civilians' side as they fight against Assad's regime (Larkin & Lewis, 2017). It is proven that when mixed with entertainment, political messages are more appealing and influential to audiences (Entous, Nakashima, & Jaffe, 2017). *The White Helmets* casted some of Hollywood's biggest stars and some criticized it for using media's influence to push the US agenda, which is rooting for US military intervention in Syria, as well as pushing the Russian military out of Syria (Blumenthal, 2016). In addition, some believe the White Helmets is a group serving as "a conspiracy of American 'imperialism'" (Lucas, 2016).

It is a common belief that a non-profit organization solely focuses on good deeds and does not carry political affiliations; however, upon closer examination, one can always find voices that question the real objective. On the other hand, no one can deny the lives these organizations saved or the goodness they have done. In any case, no matter how beautifully their mission statements are constructed, and no matter what is their true intent, these organizations struggle to be sufficient substitutes for the Syrian people to have autonomy.

Proxy War

The present US media frequently discuss the intricate relationship between the US and Russia, for example, on whether the Russian government has influenced the result of the 2016 Presidential election. The political tension between the two countries since the Cold War is still boiling today, and now it continues in Syria. In September 2015, Russia and Iran stood by Assad and offered military support. As the coalition put in the effort to fight off ISIS, it also had to worry about another force that was closing in: the US (O'Connor, 2017a). The US-backed Kurdish forces fought against ISIS, as well; however, a proxy war between Russia-Iran and US started to boil. Currently, Syria is hosting a string of proxy wars for several international communities, including the US (AbuKhalil, 2018; Kent, 2015; Ulutas, 2016). Some proxy wars include Sunnis versus Shia Muslims, Qatar versus Saudi Arabia, and the US versus Russia (AbuKhalil, 2018; Kent, 2015). Other participants consist of Jordan, France, Turkey, and the UK; all these countries entered Syria with their individual agendas, and their proxy wars have further torn Syria and burdened its people (Syria: The Story, 2016; Ulutas, 2016).

Looking at the various proxy wars, the Syrian crisis reflects the weakness of capitalism in today's world, where money and power are the main considerations for those participating in the conflict (Horton, 2017). The West has played a big part in shaping the Arab and Muslim worlds today, and it is now shaping Syria (Abboud, 2015; AbuKhalil, 2018; Syria: The Story, 2016; Horton, 2017; Kent, 2015; Ulutas, 2016). In theory, if a country's involvement in a war caused civilians to flee their homes, this country should host these refugees. However, the US is not taking a noticeable amount of Syrian refugees that are the result of US intervention; in other words, the US resettled

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much fewer Syrian refugees than other host countries (Fandl, 2017). The explanation for US humanitarian intervention not matched with the statistics of Syrian refugees in the US requires understanding of US policy and attitude on Syrian refugees.

US Policies toward Syrian Refugees

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau earned much applause when he announced Canada's generous policy of accepting Syrian refugees, which is much more welcoming and humanitarian compared to US policy on the same matter (Howard LaFranchi Staff, 2016). One can credit the Canadian culture and its long history of accepting refugees; however, the US has a long history of accepting refugees, as well (Fandl, 2017). It is a common belief that helping out those in need is something that is considered "American" (Hamid, 2016). The US created the Refugee Act in 1980 and has been providing resettlement support to refugees coming into the US since; however, there is hesitation in taking in Syrian refugees (Achlume, 2015; Fandl, 2017). Perhaps the requirements of refugees relocating in the US is more politically related and less humanitarian related. Since the US refugee policy started in 1948, the US has been willingly admitting refugees who tried to escape from Communist governments (Fandl, 2017; McBride, 1999). It is clear that the US policy toward refugees has been closely related to its politics: compared to the number of refugees from Communist countries, the US let in far fewer refugees with other backgrounds (McBride, 1999). By the beginning of 2017, approximately 18,000 Syrian refugees are living in the US (Zong & Batalova, 2017). That is only 0.35 percent of the Syrian refugee population. In the US, the public heavily influences the government's policy toward refugees (McBride, 1999). Compared to other refugees in the US, Syrian refugees could face a

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different attitude, and some US communities resist Syrian refugees coming into their neighborhoods (Fandl, 2017). The the media shapes the public's perception play a key factor; however, granting refugees entry to the US is still a federal decision (Fandl, 2017). By the beginning of 2017, Wyoming, Alabama, and Mississippi have not had a refugee program; on the other hand, California has taken in more Syrian refugees than other states, which is almost 31 percent of all Syrian refugee population in the US (Fandl, 2017; Zong & Batalova, 2017).

According to Spiegel and Rubenstein (2017), the US is the number one choice for seeking asylum for most Syrian women and children refugees. In 2015, the American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act (SAFE ACT) placed heavier background checks on refugees who are Iraqis and Syrians (Fandl, 2017); nonetheless, in the same year, President Obama vowed to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees by the end of fiscal 2016 (Foley, 2016). However, the Trump administration tightened the refugee application process and the refugee ban in early 2017 put a stop to many Syrian refugees' resettlement applications (Feldman, 2017).

US Attitudes toward Syrian Refugees

It would be understandable to think that the majority of Americans are good-natured and are willing to help those in need. However, welcoming Syrian refugees into the US has not been an easy task. During the Obama administration, the idea of relocating Syrian refugees into US communities faced much criticism and rejection from a large group of Republican governors and several anti-immigration groups (Howard LaFranchi Staff, 2016). Such rejection was voiced from many ordinary Americans, as well (Disney, 2017; Howard LaFranchi Staff, 2016). Currently, fewer than half of the

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registered voters in the US expressed that they want the government to open its door to Syrian refugees, which means that most registered voters in the US do not welcome Syrian refugees to relocate in their communities (Greve, 2017). Furthermore, Disney (2017) found that although people of all faiths or no faith all believed in humanitarian actions for those who are less fortunate, the othering attitude toward Muslim Syrians is more likely to happen within a Christian community versus other communities in the US. Disney (2017) further suggested that there is a subtle discrimination, particularly from the conservative Christian communities in the US against immigrants and refugees, especially if the refugees are Muslims. However, it is important to point out that there are many Christian organizations in the US dedicate themselves to serve immigrants and refugees (Disney, 2017).

Economy Affects Attitudes toward Syrian Refugees

The othering attitude exists in all Western societies that host Syrian refugees. Granted, some Western European countries are more proactive in taking in Syrian refugees, but stereotypes, prejudices, and racism toward the Syrian refugees still can exist in these communities. By 2017, the number of Syrian asylum seekers in Europe reached 198,000, which makes them the largest group of refugees seeking asylum in Europe (Asylum statistics, 2018). Germany now hosts 31% of Syrian refugees, which makes it the leading European country providing asylum, followed by Italy with 20% of Syrian refugees, and France with 14% (Asylum statistics, 2018).

In Germany, for example, the large amount of newly arrived Syrian refugees are often trained with basic German language and then placed in low-skilled and low-wage job positions, despite many of them having a high level of education and having held

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high-paying jobs back in Syria (Geis, 2016). Undoubtedly, the language barrier poses a big problem for those Syrian refugees who seek higher paying jobs in Germany.

Furthermore, the German government must make sure its own citizens have a chance to work first; with the saturation always existing in the low-skilled job market, it is a challenge to find best-matched jobs for the tens of thousand Syrian refugees (Geis, 2016).

Here in the US, many Syrian refugees not only face the challenge of learning English in order to find stable jobs, but also physical and cultural challenges. Some Syrian refugees have become disabled from the war, which prevents them from doing certain types of work. Moreover, many Syrian men hold the cultural belief that their wives ought to stay home and care for the children, therefore there is even more monetary stress on these refugee households (Frej & Abdelaziz, 2017). Just like the Syrian refugees in Germany, even if some were trained in higher education and had high-level jobs back in Syria, the Syrian refugees in the US must first learn basic English, and then have the chance to find work at low-paying jobs. As a result, as Frej and Abdelaziz (2017) pointed out, while there are many Syrian refugee men aim to improve their English, continue their education, and find stable jobs; there are also some that choose to solely depend on welfare, because welfare provides the refugee families more financial support than the available low paying jobs that provide no benefits.

Stereotypes, prejudices, and new racism toward Syrian refugees. The unstable economy in the West creates competition in the job market. Stereotypes and prejudices toward refugees started to brew as the Syrian refugees have made their way to asylum in the Western countries. Many Westerners are afraid that the incoming Syrian refugees will steal their jobs if they are relocated into their communities (Lawlor &

Tolley, 2017; Seeking asylum, 2016). To be precise, the economic stress makes people weary about anyone who might be a competitor in the job market. At the same time, companies are less optimistic about hiring Syrian refugees because employing people with refugee status does not guarantee business gain but rather an act, or a proof of social responsibility of the company (Seeking asylum, 2016). For all of these reasons, the alienation between Syrian refugees and citizens grows bigger.

In North America, citizens often prefer immigrants to refugees. This preference is due to people's view of immigrants as potential workers that could improve the economy; on the other hand, people view the refugees as those who require social services and take resources (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017). Hence, there is prejudiced thinking that Syrian refugees are rather "takers" than "contributors" to the host communities. Nonetheless, the Syrian refugees face the possibility of being used as low-waged and overworked workers that are exploited by their employers, placed in positions to create surplus value. For example, it was discovered that Syrian refugee children in Lebanon are working long hours instead of going to school, and they were forced to work in terrible conditions, up to 10 hours a day (Halldorsson, 2017). Moreover, Syrian refugees, children included, were found working in sweatshop conditions in Turkish garment factories (Kingsley, 2016). In short, in European and US communities, economic considerations affect people's view on Syrian refugees; politically, cultural and religious differences also create separation between the Syrian refugees and the citizens.

Othering. No matter where they are resettled, if displaced in unwelcoming communities, the Syrian refugees have to overcome the othering attitude of their neighbors, which is often discouraging. This subtle discrimination is another form of

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racism that is spreading in the US today (Disney, 2017). Furthermore, as a “new racism” continues to brew in society, since Syrian refugees have a different culture than the majority of Americans, they might be the victims of this new racism and would constantly being othered (McMahon and Chow-White, 2011).

Doocy and Lyles (2017) found that the displaced refugee families are more vulnerable than the non-displaced refugee families. To be precise, refugee families newly resettled in host countries face more obstacles than those still living in refugee camps, because the displaced ones must combat physical and emotional issues alone in a foreign land. For female-headed Syrian refugee households, they require even more assistance and often face more vulnerability in society (Doocy & Lyles, 2017). For those Syrian refugees who are already resettled in the US, many have trouble connecting with their new communities; they need more than just basic household items but also other forms of help, such as building personal relationships with their American neighbors (Bouhmam, Boothe, & George, 2017). Their separation could be the result of the narrative of fear planted by politicians and media.

Media Depiction of Syria and Syrian Refugees

The accuracy of media representation is an ethical dilemma. The media uses the narrative of fear as an effective tool for gaining readership and viewership (Disney, 2017; Hamid, 2016). The media often depicts negative stereotypes of the Arab and Muslim world, and this is due to the power imbalance between the West and the East (Jaber, 2016). For instance, the US media has long illustrated the Arab and Muslim cultures as associated with “terrorism” and “violence.” In the US, there has been a negative narrative toward male Middle-Easterners ever since 9/11—the Middle-Eastern male is

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often portrayed as someone who poses a potential threat to safety (Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016). Additionally, the West has historically represented Middle-Eastern men as inferior to white men, and portrait them as having a tendency to sexually threaten women, especially white women (Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016).

Narrative of Fear

In politics, the narrative of fear is a powerful persuasive tool, and this is particularly evident in the 2016 Presidential election (Bentley, 2014; Disney, 2017; Fandl, 2017; Kellman, 2015). The Paris attack by the Islamic State in 2015 gave the US presidential candidates another chance to use the narrative of fear when discussing the topic of admitting Muslim Syrian refugees into the US; in other words, during the political campaigns, the idea of Islamicphobia was repeatedly planted in the audience (Kellman, 2015).

The Paris attack heightened people's awareness for terrorist activities in the nation, and politicians used it as a justification for their refugee and immigration policy (Fandl, 2017). Many of the candidates, predominantly the Republican candidates, tried to validate their intention to limit or stop Syrian refugees from coming into the US. Although the Republican candidates preferred to use national security as a reason to eliminate the Syrian refugees from coming into the US, the Democrat candidates also want to put restrictions on the Syrian refugee admission (Kellman, 2015). Ultimately, both political parties have resistance for relocating Syrian refugees in the US.

In 2015, during an interview with Yahoo News and speaking with Sean Hannity from Fox News, then presidential candidate Trump described the Syrian refugees as "young," "strong," "men" (Rhodan, 2015). Trump described the incoming Syrian

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refugees as the “Trojan horse,” where the ISIS-affiliated terrorists are infiltrating the US, dressing like refugees escaping war and turmoil (Higgins, 2016; Rhodan, 2015). Even though a large part of Syrian refugees are women and children (Foley, 2016), such narratives planted fear into viewers’ minds, which would further affect their attitude toward the Syrian crisis and the Syrian refugees (Higgins, 2016).

Some politicians expressed the desire to welcome Syrian refugees, but only the ones that meet certain religious criteria. For example, former Florida Governor and presidential candidate Jeb Bush (2015) stated on *Meet the Press* that the US should focus on helping the Christian Syrians. Moreover, when the Obama administration admitted 10,801 Syrian refugees in 2016, *Fox News* called such event a “gross injustice” because only a small percentage (i.e., .5 percent) of these refugees are Christians (Shaw, 2016). This belief that Christian Syrian refugees are the first priority might be caused by various US news magazines’ reporting on Islamic State’s brutal prosecutions targeted to Christian Syrians during the conflict (Syria’s Beleaguered Christians, 2015; Eibner, 2017; Maza, 2018). In essence, the religious factor emerges as the most important factor for debating on the issue of Syrian refugees.

Even as the narrative of fear plays a role, the process of admitting and resettling a refugee into the US is a rigorous one; the US Homeland Security is involved in screening each Syrian refugee before they can relocate in the US (Fandl, 2017). Each refugee must go through several levels of screening process and each person is carefully reviewed and cleared for security (Refugees, 2017). Once resettled in the US, the government grants the refugee families loans to build a new life, and they will have to pay the loan back to the government within a set time frame (Refugees, 2017). Simply put, there is a heavy

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background check done behind each Syrian refugee in the US, and every refugee family has the potential to join job forces, pay taxes, and improve the US economy (Fandl, 2017).

Chapter 3

Methodology: Critical Arts-Based Research

When I tell people about my research, I often get asked why I would be interested in this topic. During the first year of my doctoral program, we heard a saying that doctoral students end up studying themselves in their dissertations; in other words, doctoral students most likely conduct research that is closely related to their own personal experience or to solve a problem in their own life. I understand their curiosity when people ask me why I chose a topic that seems unrelated to my life. I am a Chinese woman, I grew up in China, I am not religious, I have not yet even traveled to Syria, I am not a refugee, and fortunately I have never lived during a civil war. Besides the story of my chance encounter with the Syrian woman refugee Maria, some note that my interest in how the US news portray the siege of Aleppo does not match my background. However, this topic is important to me, and it is a study relatable to me in many ways.

This study is an extension of my desire to learn more about the Syrian refugees in the US. I am not a refugee, but I left home to be an exchange student in the US at age 15 and am now a member of the immigrant population in the US. At first, I stayed to just finish my studies, but later on, I realized that I am now so used to the Americanized way of living that returning to China would be a difficult transition for me. For the past 20 years, I have been here in this country alone, away from my family and friends back home. Of course, I have made many friends and have started my own family during these years in the US, but the reality of being so far away from my own family always leaves a void in my heart. I might not understand what it is like to be a refugee, but I can empathize with their isolation in a new country, not knowing the language at first, having

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no family support, and the overall fear of the unknown, because I have also encountered these challenges myself as an immigrant.

Comparable with the refugee identity crisis, I also face identity issues with the notion that I am an outsider. I am now a US citizen, who can speak fluent English and have acclimated to the US culture, but the unsure feeling of how I fit in this society while balancing my native Chinese culture and my adapted US culture surfaces from time to time. It is even more difficult if one is isolated from those who share the same cultural background, because there is no one to share this experience with. Additionally, the Syrian refugees are likely to face challenges resulting from religious differences with those in their new community. I have experienced this myself when I first came to the US and stayed with a very religious Christian family. My family is atheist and I had no experience with Christianity before my arrival; therefore, the countless mandatory church events, Sunday school, devotions, and Bible studies were overwhelming. The constant reminder that my belief in life does not fit with the majority population around me made me more confused about my identity. With the media's influence on Islamophobia, I can only imagine the challenge Syrian refugees face when they resettle here, especially if they get resettled in a community that is not familiar with or accepting of the Muslim faith.

Last but not least, I witness how the US mainstream news media push their agenda to prompt the audience to think in a certain way toward another country, and I notice it especially with the news on China. From time to time, I get asked if China is certain way and some of the questions were just mind-boggling. I realized that for those who have never been to China, the news is an official source for them to learn about the

country, the culture, and its people. Just recently, *The New York Times* published an article and a documentary video on the health care system in China (Kessel, n.d.). In a nutshell, the news outlet displayed a strong disappointment in the Chinese healthcare system and reported that the expensive and inefficient healthcare in China is leaving its cancer patients poor and hopeless, therefore violent acts from patients to doctors and nurses in Chinese hospitals are a common scene.

Soon after this article and the video were published, an American named Nathan Rich, who works as a CG manager and has lived in China for many years, published a *YouTube* video (Rich, 2019) debunking *The New York Times* article and video, stating it purposely showed false representations of the healthcare system in China in order to spread anti-China ideology. Additionally, Rich stated his positive healthcare experience as an expat living in China. Rich considered *The New York Times* shameful for trying to paint a dark picture of the healthcare system in another country in order to achieve an agenda, and it is most evident in the interviews' translation, which was heavily flawed intentionally to misinform the audience. For example, during one interview, an elderly cancer patient told the interviewer in Mandarin Chinese that she has spent a lot of time, energy, and money to cure her diseases, but the cancer was not going away, so she told her son she wanted to give up but her son asked her to continue with the treatment. The way *The New York Times* translated it was saying that this elderly lady "wasted" her time and money, because her treatment was delayed by the hospital—therefore her cancer is now worse, which made her want to give up in life. Another example was that during an interview with a doctor, the doctor was explaining a certain type of cancer is currently untreatable in the world, therefore he can only do so much for his patients. With *The*

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New York Times translation, the doctor was saying that he was giving his patients certain treatments—treatments that do not cure the type of cancer—because “that is how we treat this disease here.”

I viewed the article and the video myself and surely, I recognized these translating errors and was very frustrated to see *The New York Times*—a news outlet I often read—exploiting these cancer patients for its anti-China agenda. These are just two examples, such mistranslated phrases laced throughout the video, along with strategically placed sad music fragments, which were painful for me to watch. As a native Mandarin Chinese speaker, I know fully that these peoples’ statements were either purposefully or carelessly misinterpreted, sometimes even cut short or only translated partly, to “reveal” an inferior healthcare system. At the same time, I know that for those who do not understand Mandarin Chinese, they have to trust the translations and the commentary provided by *The New York Times*, a magazine that is a popular news choice for many Americans.

Whether it was a result of malicious intent or unprofessional carelessness, the misinterpretation painted a very negative picture of the Chinese healthcare system, one that the doctors cannot be trusted and the patients are left with no choice but to pay ample amounts of money but receive no positive results. This article in *The New York Times* made me question the accuracy of the interviews’ translation in the articles I gathered for my study. I further beg the question, just how often do the mainstream news media purposely misinform its audiences in pursuit of their agenda? One interesting thing to consider, shortly after Rich published his video on *YouTube*, is that it generated a large amount of buzz from *YouTube* users and resonated for many native Chinese and Western expats living or have lived in China; however, the social media platform altered both the

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number of the views and the number of Rich's subscribers to make them appear much less. Essentially, *YouTube* changed factual numbers in order to make this video look less popular. To me, this is a breach of the freedom of speech, even though the platform did not take down Rich's video, its attempt to make it look less popular is challenging a constitution that many Americans believe in. This made me wonder, whenever there is an opinion challenging the large news corporations' agenda, who is out there to protect that voice, and can we really have democracy if the large corporations can effortlessly silence or suppress those against them?

When my husband and I started dating, he visited China during one summer, and later confided that the China he saw was nothing like what he had imagined. For instance, he thought the moment he entered China, there would be military personnel holding machine guns everywhere, because the media painted a certain picture of Communist countries for him. He was surprised at how many things he saw that were not what he expected. Granted, my husband only traveled to Beijing and Shanghai, two major cities, and there are parts of China where people live in poverty and suffer from terrible living conditions, but it was interesting to see the media has the ability to generalize a country to its viewers by depicting only parts of that country of their choice. A personal example of this was when I was traveling to Russia in the summer of 2015. As I waited in a long line at the TSA in LAX, a friendly TSA agent was making small talk with several of us. He asked each one of us where we were headed, and the answers varied. A family was going to Italy, a couple was going to Mexico for their wedding, and a lady was going home to Fiji. When it was my turn, I said, "Russia."

"Russia!?" he looked very surprised, "Are you going for work, or?"

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“No, just for leisure.” I secretly hoped he did not think I was a spy, and I later realized this consciousness came from my own media consumption.

He shook his head a bit and said, “You are brave! I would never go to Russia or China alone.” Then he walked away before I had a chance to ask him why.

Even without hearing this TSA agent’s explanation, I have a pretty good idea of why he would make such a statement. It was obvious that he has not traveled to Russia and/or China, but something was warning him of the danger of going to these places—something so authentic and trustworthy that he does not need to personally experience in order to make a decision for himself. During that time, the US news was saturated with the Russia’s occupation of Crimea and some of my family and friends expressed their concern for my safety. I, too, was a bit worried about my travel choice due to the news media. That summer, I had a great time visiting several parts of Russia and I must admit that I was pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed this country. This phenomenon happens to some of my friends, too, when they traveled to China, Cuba, Colombia, or Russia. I know the media is such a powerful force in leading people’s beliefs and attitudes toward things that are not familiar, and it is the eyes from which many see the world. I question just how accurate the information is that I read and saw on the case of Syria, and I am sure certain things are exaggerated or omitted to make it more fitting to the big news corporations’ purpose.

This study is important to me because of the above personal connections. I wish to advocate for critical media literacy education in schools and the public, perhaps even at a young age, since children are exposed to media at a younger age due to the increasing influence of technology. I believe it is our role as people who work in academia to serve

as public intellectuals, to challenge the status quo, and to raise the question “why” when the big media corporations select certain news to educate the public on the world.

Research Questions and Study Approach

This dissertation study examines how the news media reported the siege of Aleppo 2016, with a focus on the Syrian refugee coverage. Additionally, I examine how the news media depicts Syria, its region, and its people. As a study framed through a Marxist revolutionary critical pedagogy, this study presumes that capitalist social relations and the structures this system creates are highly implicated in the ways in which the media depicts the Siege of Aleppo and the existing and/or potential Syrian refugees. The three subquestions that help to operationalize this study are:

- 1) Which elements of the siege of Aleppo in 2016 get the most attention in the specific outlets examined? In what ways do these depictions support U.S. government and/or corporate interests?
- 2) What are some of the ways in which Syrian refugees are depicted in the various outlets examined? How and in what ways is U.S. humanitarian policy reflected? How are Syrians racialized through these depictions?
- 3) How are corporate and government interests tied to these media outlets?

As discussed in the previous chapter, I use a Marxist revolutionary critical pedagogy to analyze the role of the media in educating the public on the event of the siege of Aleppo, Syria in 2016. I also incorporate arts-based research (ABR) to highlight how the arts, including narratives, photographs, and the media as a whole, have a significant influence on the development of ideologies and public opinions in the US. Below I explain what

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ABR is, its philosophical foundations, and why and how ABR supports and enhances the theoretical lens of a Marxist-humanist, revolutionary critical pedagogy, which itself requires particular methodological considerations. Following that, I describe the specifics of how I conducted this study, including the process through which the developed, my subjectivity and how it influenced by desire to do this work, the specific methods I used to collect data and answer my questions, and the various challenges I faced.

Epistemology and Philosophy of ABR

ABR, as its name indicates, is a research methodology that uses the arts as the main tool for research, such as in data collection, data analysis, and data representation. As a qualitative research methodology, it offers a different way of conducting empirical research; compared to the more traditional, presumed “objective” research methods, ABR recognizes the researcher’s presence and subjectivity in every aspect of the research process (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015). It provides an innovative way for researchers to collect, analyze, and represent data, allowing us to construct fresh, interesting, and unorthodox perspectives of “truth.” Arts-based research recognizes that truth is not the universal Truth that applies to all humanity; rather, ABR recognizes that people’s conceptions of truth are based upon the understandings that resonate most for them given their experiences, cultures, and histories (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Although postmodern research has utilized ABR to construct multiple, relative truths (Hill, McLaren, Cole, & Rikowski, 2002), I use ABR from a Marxist-humanist and critical pedagogy perspective, wherein truth is dialectically approached. This means that truth exists but is always partial, depending on particular vantage points. This challenges a

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postmodern perspective of truth that is relative wherein we cannot actually call out the world's injustices because they may only be perceived as such by some (McLaren, 2015). Instead, a Marxist-humanist critical pedagogy recognizes that some aspects of the world are more accessible to particular peoples, allowing them a greater vantage point (Monzó, in press). This is why Paulo Freire argued that it is the "historical task" of the oppressed to liberate themselves and their oppressors because only they had insights and impetus to change the world (Freire, 2000a).

ABR began gaining its popularity in the sixties, due to the rise of various social justice movements, such as the feminist movement, racial justice movement, and peace movements (Leavy, 2015). This methodology is continually evolving and gaining recognition among researchers who enjoy the human experience and connection. Although it is somewhat newer in the world of academic research, the ability of using the arts to discover meanings has not been a new idea (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). Thus, it is time-tested knowledge that the arts have the power to discover the intricate meanings that might not be so obvious to the naked eye in human behavior; they help to assign meaning to everyday human experience. Additionally, Dewey wrote extensively on the direct relationship between art and experience, which was introduced to the public in his book, *Art as Experience*, in 1934. For Dewey (2005), art is an experience that adds value to life, and everyone is an artist. Since people's life experiences constantly expand and change, their art is constantly changing as well. Art not only adds value to one's own lived experience, but it also provides perspectives on others' lived experience. Dewey (2005) emphasized this by stating that art allows people to step away from their normal routines and experience the world. This is why I chose to

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use ABR to support my Marxist-humanistic critical pedagogy research. The ABR methodology and the Marx theoretical framework are both human-centered and recognize a diversity of perspectives. Their common goal of understanding life experience pushes for empathy, which is vital for making changes in the society.

ABR Purposes and Strengths

Arts-based research (ABR) uses the arts as the main agent to discover meaning and document lived experiences. It focuses on people's "lived" experience, not just the end results, because ABR recognizes significance for each small detail that builds the overall human experience (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015). In other words, ABR is a methodology that pays equal attention to the process of making a lived experience, as much as it does to the outcome of such experience. In addition, because ABR focuses on the *process* of a lived experience, it considers past experiences, which led to the present one; therefore, ABR captures the details in those experiences that might otherwise be overlooked. As the old saying, "smelling the roses along the way," ABR researchers have the opportunity to savor each detail as they move along their research process, and in empirical research, the researchers embark on a full research journey and derive meanings from their own participation (Leavy, 2015). If the research requires the researcher to work with participants, ABR allows the researcher and the participants to work collaboratively, where the participants have the chance to engage in every step of the research, and they come to a conclusion together (Leavy, 2015). The participants create art, such as poetry, collage, play, and dance, to vividly reflect their lived experience. The researcher in turn interprets the art and asks feedback from the participants, which prompt the participants to make changes or add on to their art for

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better public understanding. Such a process can repeat many times until the perfect solution is created. Through creating and examining arts together, the researcher and the participants give meaning to this shared experience. Hence, ABR can appeal to a broader audience, because it focuses on the human condition and values the common experience (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015). Dewey (2005) emphasized this idea by stating that "works of art placed in a directly human context in popular esteem, they would have a much wider appeal than they can have when pigeon-hole theories of art win general acceptance" (p. 10). For instance, an art gallery that displays artworks that capture racial inequality would stir up emotions among the viewers, push them to reflect on similar issues they are aware of, and to encourage a narrative that could lead to action toward making a change toward a more justice society. To spread a message this way can be more effective than urging the public to look up academic journals on the same issue; in other words, the arts make the message come alive. Thus, ABR answers researchers' need for making their findings more accessible to the public. Moreover, in cases where the arts do not offer findings or solutions, they do, nonetheless, present the public with a different perspective or an alternative route leading to understanding the problem (Leavy, 2015), thus opening the door for a different way of searching for solutions.

Dewey (2005) reminded us that art is a part of life. Everyone encounters art, whether they are aware of it or not. Art is an essential part of human life experience. In addition, art transcends language barriers. For example, while some forms of art require a shared language in order to extract meaning, such as protest songs, folklores, poems, and fictions, there are some forms of art that draw on a universal language. As a result,

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the arts encourage dialogues and build deeper personal connections between the public and the researchers.

For this reason, ABR is an excellent methodology to use for those who desire to make a difference in the world and to promote social change. In general, social justice issues are hard to portray, and it is difficult to communicate the urgency and importance to readers. Through art, society's most important and persistent problems, such as classism, racism, sexism, and the rights of LGBTQIA can become known and interrogated by the public. Art helps the public to understand an issue's complexity, but also to remember its urgency and importance. Thus, ABR developed as a result of researchers needing a different methodology to deal with social justice issues (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Leavy, 2015). The marginalized communities in our society need a creative way to connect with the public, and ABR is able to raise public awareness for social justice topics in a more personal, direct, and memorable way. This is evident in the important social justice work that is grounded in the arts. Revolutionary art, protest songs, and theater of the oppressed have been critically important features of major social movements throughout history. This is why under repressive regimes, the critical work of artists, including writers, is often banned and some even get locked away in political prisons. One example of this was the 81 days of solitary confinement in a political prison for the famous Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, in 2011 (Hanging Man, 2013). His brilliant art pieces showed activism for human rights and criticism for the Chinese government, which led to his abduction in Beijing International Airport and later being locked in solitary detention. After his release, Ai Weiwei created art installations in several locations in Europe showcasing his dark time

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in this secret political prison, hoping to open people's eyes on the life of a political prisoner, in China and elsewhere (Poggioli, 2013). Interestingly, Ai's father, Ai Qing, a famous poet who was also a political prisoner in 1932 in Shanghai for opposing the Guomindang government, used poetry while he was in prison to express his emotions and document his experience (Artspace Editors, 2018). Later, Ai Qing's poetry was published. Both of these examples show that the arts, a strong weapon for promoting social justice, can really shake up the core of those who want to suppress freedom.

Since art can be defined in various ways, ABR researchers have many creative outlets. For example, paintings, drawings, collage, crafts, drama, music, crotchet, photography, and storytelling all provide the ABR researcher different options in search of meaning, and these numerous possibilities in the realm of art are only limited by the materials accessible at that time (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Leavy, 2015). This characteristic makes ABR easily accessible to the public, since the road to understanding is neither linear nor singular, but rather a process that poses many possibilities to achieve understanding (Barone & Eisner, 2011). It is important to note that art helps in recognizing problems in society, but does not always solve them; rather, art provides additional forms of interpretation for difficult ideas to be conveyed in critical contexts where communication is difficult but absolutely necessary, such as social justice issues (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Leavy, 2015).

These various elements of ABR are captured by Leavy (2015), who concluded them as the 11 strengths of ABR: (1) New insights and learning. ABR provides a new perspective of looking and understanding complex issues, thus, it enables the

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viewers/readers from various backgrounds to come to a mutual understanding. (2)

Describe, explore, discover, problem-solve. ABR centers on real-world problems and is problem-centered, as its goal is to identify the problems in the society and then promote action that could give real-time solutions. (3) Forge micro-macro connections. ABR can take one small thing and use it to illuminate something on a much larger scale, for example, presenting one person's lived experience can provide insights on many others' similar experiences in the society. (4) Holistic. ABR creates synergy and encourages shared experiences. (5) Evocative and provocative. Through the arts, ABR has the power to move and affect the public emotionally, which promotes the public to act upon its inner feelings and take action. (6) Critical consciousness, raising awareness, and empathy. Due to the nature of ABR, it is able to make the hidden problems in society come alive in front of the viewers'/readers' eyes. The public gets a chance to be confronted with the critical issues they otherwise might not be aware of; hence, it is very useful to use ABR to study social justice issues. (7) Unsettle stereotypes, challenge dominant ideologies, and include marginalized voices and perspectives. ABR offers space for the suppressed voice, and it can vividly get the otherwise difficult to express messages across to the dominant audience. It is a platform for critical thinking, breaking biases, and starting radical movements toward social change. (8) Participatory. There is no hierarchy between the ABR researcher and the participant(s); they work together during the entire process. The ABR researchers are culturally responsive to the participants, as both parties exchange ideas back and forth like a swing, which eventually comes to a stop once they reach a mutual understanding. (9) Promotes dialogue. ABR encourages dialogues between the researchers, the participants, and the audiences, and

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initiates critical narratives with the public. (10) Multiple meanings. ABR offers many layers of meaning for the audiences to explore, instead of presenting a one-and-only answer. As mentioned previously, ABR does not believe there is only one straight path to understanding, but rather it believes in reaching an understanding in various nuances. (11) Public scholarship, usefulness, and social justice. ABR tackles real-life problems and presents solutions that can make a change in the world by making the research easily accessible for the public.

In order to conduct successful ABR studies that achieve these positive outcomes, ABR researchers must have five skills (Leavy, 2015): (1) Flexibility, openness, and intuition. Having an open mind and is flexible in his or her thinking is important for the ABR researcher, just as the arts are multifaceted, the ABR researcher is open to a multitude of perspectives, worldviews, and opinions. Additionally, the ABR researcher is intuitive, trusts his or her “gut feeling,” which is a result of lived past experiences combined, throughout the process. (2) Thinking conceptually, symbolically, metaphorically, and thematically. The ABR researcher examines all possible layers of meaning by trying on different thinking hats. In the end, he or she discovers a rich and well-rounded understanding for the lived experience. In turn, the ABR researcher would be able to guide the viewers/readers to this understanding through these various ways. (3) Ethical practice and values system. The ABR researcher is a culturally responsive person that considers all aspects of ethics throughout the entire research process. Because the ABR researcher is an open-minded scholarist (i.e., a scholar and an artist), he or she respects the opinions and practices of others, and this is imperative in order to make the study more accessible to a diverse public. (4) Thinking like an artist. The ABR

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researcher is someone in academia, but he or she is also an artist. The researcher examines the world with artistic eyes, combines artfulness with usefulness in the research that is both beneficial for the more traditional academia and esthetically pleasing for the public. (5) Thinking like a public intellectual. The ABR researcher wants to make a change in the society, not just have a finishing product sitting on a shelf. His or her work is aimed at helping the public and to solve existing problems.

Five Tensions of ABR

Although arts-based research (ABR) is gaining popularity, it does not lack criticism from some of the more traditional scholars. Eisner identified five tensions of ABR (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008, p. 19-25) that an ABR researcher should keep in mind when conducting an ABR. The first tension is that the ABR researcher should always have clear purpose, asking self how abstract or concrete do I want to get with the art? Is it open to interpretation? How clear the message is within the art depends on the researcher's purpose for the study. Dewey (1934) stated that there is intentionality from the artists. The second tension deals with the universal versus the particular. When an ABR researcher grasps one particular meaning, he or she would in turn understand the general inductively. Since the ABR researcher would be able to get deep, personal, and intricate meaning from the participant, knowing one person's story really well would illuminate something that is universal. For example, it would be impossible to interview all the millennial mothers in California regarding their experience of motherhood; however, an ABR researcher would tell the individual stories from a few millennial mothers that live in California vividly in order to understand their lived experiences from their standpoints. If done well, their stories might illuminate far more

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than their singular experiences. Thus, ABR has the ability to speak to the human condition. The third tension is between choosing the desire for aesthetic or desire for the truth. In other words, truth and beauty, which one should the ABR focus on the most? The fact is, truth is beauty and beauty is truth.

As a researcher that uses the arts to find and represent the truth, we cannot ignore the truth to emphasis beauty, and we cannot hide the beauty from expressing the truth. We must be artful and truthful at the same time. Artistry and scholarship need to integrate both, as Dewey (1934) pointed out the similarities and differences between artificial, artful, and artistic. The fourth tension addresses the fact that an ABR is always an ongoing quest. Answers would likely spark new questions, new questions result in new answers, and the cycle goes on. An ABR study has the ability to promote future studies that could continue to make the world a better place. The ABR process involves much self-check—namely, to constantly asking oneself if the process is going the way it was intended. For instance, during the process, the ABR researcher would ask him/herself repeatedly, am I answering my questions? What new questions are emerging? What can I do about these new questions? The public needs answers, and a successful ABR researcher provides just that, plus useful insights that challenge the public's thinking to make a change. Lastly, the fifth tension talks about objectivity versus constructivism. A researcher needs to decide the purpose of a prospect study, whether it is to find out a "Truth" or "truth." A "Truth" is a hard fact, something that is objective and generalized, such as the sun is a star and "oui" in French means "yes." Therefore, ABR might not be the best fit for studies that aim to find the objective hard "Truths"; however, if the primary goal of a study were to find the constructive "truth"

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and to understand the human condition, then ABR is certainly an appropriate fit that offers advantages. The constructive “truth,” although it is subjective, is a truth nonetheless, and it belongs in scientific research. We cannot disqualify someone’s lived experience simply because it is not objective. Only the person who has gone through that particular experience can provide meaning and understanding for such experience, and we need to respect and honor that. Moreover, because ABR is able to use one person’s experience to illuminate the reality of a larger population, the constructive truth warrants the viewers/readers to treat it as a true fact. Looking at history, many social movements were started because of one person’s experience. Take Rosa Park for example. It was her story of refusing to give up a seat for a white man on a bus in 1955 that resonated with many others, and her experience led to a famous civil rights movement in the US history. Park’s constructive truth of protesting for racial equality did not match the dominant ideology back then, but none can argue against the power behind her single action of refusal.

The human condition is multifaceted and differs from one to another; thus, ABR is an attempt to make sense of the complex makeup of the human condition by capturing vivid details of a particular human experience, and let that particular experience illuminate a meaning (i.e., a “truth”) for a much larger group. An ABR researcher is more of a “scholartist”—someone who wears the hats of both a scholar and an artist, he or she is a researcher that uses art and thinks like an artist in pursuit of learning the human condition. To think like an artist means slowing down and paying attention to detail, as no single detail in a piece of art should be ignored, because even the smallest detail adds to the meaning. A scholartist observes closely and carefully to discover the

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shades of meanings and shapes of stories in order to find all the possible ways to express these experiences as the need to build a more fair and humane future for all the people.

In academia, ABR does not replace the traditional scientific research methodologies, but rather is a new way of looking at things. Whether or not a researcher uses ABR depends on the researcher's intention. ABR, however, does stress the importance of subjectivity—we cannot study the participants if we cannot understand them. Many of these tensions were derived from the traditional “scientific” mindset. Scientific results are presumed objective; therefore, they are often considered the “hard truth.” Whereas evaluating art is a subjective matter, some scholars argue that the result developed through ABR—although it applies to the participants—does not represent a “universal Truth.” In addition, since there is no standard rubric to examine, evaluate, and analyze the quality of an art piece, some people might argue that ABR results could seem like mere “opinion.” There are standards of quality within ABR; one can indeed determine the quality of an ABR base on its ability to evoke emotion, gain empathy, and/or bring awareness of political issues to its readers (Leavy, 2015). A successful ABR brings resonance and impact to human experiences, and makes them relatable to the audience.

The ambiguous nature of visual art allows each person to interpret the art based upon what they bring to it and how referential it is. Although this invites dialogue and openness with the audience, some could find this ambiguity uncomfortable. In our society, a person's opinion or experience does not weigh equally to numbers and facts; in a culture that is individualistic and masculine like ours, many researchers unfortunately

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ignore the human and social experiences as rich resources for understanding the human condition.

ABR, however, is exactly what our society needs in order to fill that gap. Leavy (2015) pointed out that the traditional scientific methods do not and cannot find answers for everything, and many scholars have begun to look for other ways to make research creative and enthralling again. No doubt the scientific research methods work perfectly for some questions, but more and more researchers are beginning to look for other ways to gain answers. ABR offers a new perspective for people to see the world, and provides a creative outlet for those who choose to try and deeply understand human experiences. ABR places much needed importance on an individual's personal stories, feelings, and all experiences. By using creativity, ABR validates those personal experiences and recognizes their significance in human and social symptoms. In a way, ABR connects across time, place and culture, which is what we need in academia today. There is an increase in personal connection among people due to the growth of social media, and using art to conduct research would appeal to many people, as well for generations to come.

The Arts Are Multifaceted

The arts include a broad spectrum of forms; it is hard to specify what is considered "an art" because in almost all cases, the artistic value within an object or an action is determined by the viewer's lived experience or perspective. For example, I once had a discussion with a friend on an art display named "Untitled" that we saw in a local art museum. It was a paper cup filled half-way with chocolate milk. We both agreed that the artist here was trying to communicate something much bigger than simply showing

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what a half-cup of chocolate milk looked like. I felt the artist was trying to show an idea of “unfinishedness” from an interrupted childhood, a sense of nostalgia and longing; my friend saw an image of wasted privilege, the chocolate milk that was left behind in a non-biodegradable paper cup, which was ready to burden the environment. Our different interpretations of this art piece were likely due to our different past experiences, as we are so influenced by our past experiences (Dewey, 1934). We could both be wrong, or we could both be right; the only way to find out the artist’s objective was to talk to him or her in person. Or perhaps that was the artist’s goal, to encourage the viewers to apply meaning to this art from their own perspectives, to create meaningful dialogue, hence the “Untitled” he or she so thoughtfully put there.

My friend and I—even though we are close friends—still have different life experiences; therefore, we examine art through different perspectives. The ABR methodology acknowledges and appreciates the different subjectivities the viewers might have so ABR researchers always leave some room in their representation for the viewers to savor, reflect, and interpret on their own. The viewers use their lived experiences, personal perspectives, cultures, and economic, social, and political positioning to examine, understand, and evaluate the arts.

Evaluation of ABR

When we attend a musical, ballet, or concert, we evaluate the performances by their visual and sound pleasures. When we read a book, we judge it by how the author is able to move our emotions by organizing and developing the story. Whether an art utilizes language or not, there is always a meaning behind the art. As an ABR researcher, we are using the arts not just for the audience’s pleasure, but also for finding and

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representing research findings; thus, we ought to think about ways to evaluate our work. Of course, just like attending an art event, it is helpful to already have some basic knowledge of the subject in order to evaluate the art. Otherwise, there is a possibility of wondering of “what am I looking at?” An ABR researcher needs to have a basic understanding, or a “rubric,” per se, before evaluate the art.

However, due to everyone’s different worldviews and personal perspectives, evaluating an ABR does not have a unified standard. Many quantitative scholars have prejudice against ABR because it lacks clear guideline on how to evaluate based on art (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). As Leavy (2015) precisely put it, evaluating ABR is “a messing terrain” (p. 268). Nonetheless, even the messiest terrain is passable, if one applies caution and dedication. There are criteria one can use in order to evaluate an ABR, and they serve as the checkpoints for crossing that messiness.

According to Leavy (2015), evaluation criteria include methodology; usefulness, significance, or substantive contribution; public scholarship; audience response; aesthetics or artfulness; personal fingerprint or creativity; ethical practice (p. 268-283).

First, one must look at the methodology and consider whether it fits the purpose of the research. Is the approach of such methodology holistic or synergistic? How was the data analyzed? How was the art translated and was the translation accurate? Was the research transparent, leaving room for audiences to explore on their own; or was it explicit, lead the audiences’ focus to where exactly the researcher wanted them to be?

Second, an ABR researcher could ask, does this add meaning, and is it useful? If it adds meaning, then the research has purpose—one small finding can illuminate something that is universal. If it is useful, it has a purpose in life. In order to answer

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these questions, one must demonstrate the authenticity and trustworthiness of the researcher, the arts, and the findings.

Third, a successful ABR has public scholarship. ABR is most likely to be used for social justice issues; its findings should be accessible to the general audiences. The ABR findings should make a change in society, whether it is to change an attitude, to start or to stop doing an action, and/or to implement a policy. For example, when I lived in Virginia, I had no idea about the poverty level in some nearby communities. Living in the city, I was oblivious to the lives people lived in mining fields and small mountain towns. My roommates and I one day attended an art exhibition; artists traveled around these underprivileged areas and took photos of the children that lived there. All the photos were black and white, and the message they left me was also black and white—profound, strong, and long lasting. We stood in front of one photograph for a very long time: it was a little girl aged six or so, and she was playing with a torn-up doll that her father found in a trashcan in the city. This photograph shook us, and it immediately made us feel like we have the responsibility to do something for this little girl and all the other children like her. For Christmas, we hosted a party to collect toys and school supplies for children that lived in poverty in nearby communities. We all have read about poverty in print, but it was not until we saw the arts, we actually did something.

In 2015, the photographs of the little Syrian refugee boy, Alan Kurdi, found dead on a beach in Turkey shook the world, and it launched a worldwide dialogue on humanitarian needs for the Syrian refugees. Many people started to pay attention to the Syrian civil war after seeing that photograph. By the time the photograph of Alan made debut, the Syrian civil war had been going on for nearly five years, but it was not until

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then that people across the globe learned the seriousness of the Syrian refugee problem.

This directly relates to the fourth criterion, which is whether the ABR promotes audience response. The ABR allows multiple meanings, and they should encourage the audiences to think, experience, and reflect on all the possibilities.

The fifth criterion is the aesthetics or artfulness of the arts. Do we put on the artists' hats when doing ABR? Does our work have aesthetics? Do we create meanings in an artful way, so that it grabs the audience's attention and "stick" to them? Does our work show authenticity in an artful way? In other words, did we balance between presenting good art and accurate data?

Sixth, does the ABR have the researcher's personal uniqueness? What makes this particular ABR stand out from others? Just like fingerprints, no two people have identical styles. As an ABR researcher, we need to find ways to let our own style show through our research; our different styles will attract people with similar tastes to ABR. In a way, we promote ABR by letting our own personalities shine, and this is not something traditional research methods can offer.

Last but not least, an ABR researcher must practice ethics. For example, the ABR researcher should put the participants first; the ABR researcher and participants' relationship should be trusting, participatory, and open. The researcher is responsible for properly and ethically portraying the participants, both in research writing and/or when representing the data in public. An ABR researcher should always check with his or her participants to ensure all data are sensitively reported and represented. It is very essential that an ABR researcher develop a personal relationship with the participants first, before a working relationship.

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Barone and Eisner (2012) listed six criteria for a good quality ABR: (1) Incisiveness: did I get to the core of the issue? (2) Concision: did I do it concisely, or keep it to the minimal (this is especially important for poetry); (3) Coherence: are all the forms and parts together? (4) Generativity; does this research go places, see something new, or discover something different? (5) Social significance: why is this study needed and what gap does it fill? and (6) Evocation and illumination: people should be able to feel something by this research; they should be embodied with the research.

According to above researchers (Leavy, 2015; Barone & Eisner, 2012), it is only when an ABR possesses all these mentioned criteria can it be considered successful. All of these criteria require much time, energy, and dedication from both the researcher and on the participants' part; they once more remind us just how rigorous doing an ABR actually is. An ABR is not just about the end result, but also the journey itself.

ABR and Marxist and Critical Pedagogy

The purpose and nature of ABR align with those of Marxist theory and critical pedagogy, which are detailed in Chapter 2. ABR stems from the same humanistic epistemological foundation as Marxist-humanism and critical pedagogy and is a tool for social justice issues (Eagleton 2011; Leavy, 2015). From his earliest writings, Marx was concerned about freedom for all. Marx argued that in a capitalist society, people are alienated from each other and therefore cannot function as free individuals, but it is only through liberation that each human can be truly free (Dunayevskaya, 1958). Moreover, critical pedagogy encourages us to have a consciousness for freedom, and to be fully free means to have the freedom to think, express, and be creative (Freire, 2000a, 2000b). For

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these reasons, ABR supports a Marxist critical pedagogy research, because art is expressive and meaningful, thus a freeing experience.

From a Marxist critical pedagogy lens, ABR provides different perspectives to view the same issue and offers various ways leading to understanding. It uses art to describe lived human experiences that we otherwise may not know. By using artistry in service to scholarship, ABR makes studies accessible to the public and evokes them to action. Additionally, an ABR researcher thinks like an artist and focuses on “showing” the audience instead of just “telling” them; therefore, the audience can see and understand in ways that can be more fully expressed through art. Due to the nature of ABR in that it centers on the true, real, and lived human experience, it provides ways to heal those who are vulnerable and deserve social justice in our society (Leavy, 2015). Its ability to bring liberation in social justice issues make ABR fit well in a Marx framework. Furthermore, because ABR proposes there is more than one way leading to understanding, it breaks down the binary and questions the status quo. In the case of looking at mainstream news media, ABR can perhaps guide us to see beyond the big corporation media’s hegemony and challenge their ideology. Thus, ABR can lead us to greater critical thinking and enhance the potential to challenge capitalist relations.

To evaluate an ABR in a Marxist framework is to assess whether it aligns with the characteristics of Marxist research. My study extends from a Marxist-humanist perspective: whereas a classical Marxist study has a greater emphasis on class, a Marxist-humanist one prominently addresses the dialectic tenet of Marxist theory. From the Marxist-humanist perspective, class, race, and sexism are dialectically related, and they together impact and support capitalism. Extending from the characteristics of a classical

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Marxist research (Agostinone-Wilson, 2013), a Marxist-humanist would evaluate ABR in terms of the following:

1. It is anti-capitalism/anti-imperialism. World peace only comes through those who protest capitalism and imperialism, hence a Marxist evaluation for ABR would first look to see if the message is against capitalism/imperialism. For example, is the art against gaining power through war? Does it have anti-colonization intentions? Does it promote freedom to all classes, races, and sexes? Is the ABR researcher willing to question and challenge capitalism and imperialism, even if most in academia are comfortable with the status quo (Eagleton, 1983)?
2. Rejection of hyperrelativism. Individual experiences are relative due to one's social, economical, and cultural backgrounds, but a Marxist research rejects hyperrelativism, which overly stresses all the individual background factors instead of viewing the oppressed groups as united entities. For instance, a Marxist-humanist would view the proletarian class as a whole, the colored women as a whole, or the LGBTQA as a whole, in order to address their needs and develop theories that could be used for social change. Theories developed from observing a group rather than an individual are necessary because they provide guidelines for applying action (Agostinone-Wilson, 2013). Though from a Marxist-humanist perspective, an ABR should be able to unveil human experience patterns, through the representation of one individual, it could reflect the urgency of many. ABR treasures the individuals' unique experiences and believes that one individual's narrative could illuminate the experience of a much larger population. To be more precise, ABR is about both the individual

experience and the collective experience—by deeply examining the individual experience or narrative, ABR is able to expand from that and shine light on a much wider population, thus creating empathy within the readers/viewers. The empathy ABR helps to create leads people to action. To connect this concept with a Marxist-humanist framework, empathy is an important attribute in understanding the concept of alienation, because without empathy, one cannot be truly conscious of others' struggles. One of the famous Buddha's quotes says, "one flower shows one world, one grass shows the world," and ABR is much like this saying. By gazing into the small, we could see the big picture; by valuing the experience of one, we could gain empathy for the whole. ABR is connecting the dots between the individual and the whole, finding pathways between the vivid individual narrative that arouses empathy and motivates those who experience the work to connect it to large social issues. Additionally, ABR allows the viewer/reader/audience to move back and forth from connecting to one story in ways that generate empathy to provoking action for critical social change for the whole.

3. Direct address of class and its dialectical relationship to other antagonisms, such as racism and sexism. The inequality we see in the world such as race, gender, and sexuality all can be found in the root of class (Agostinone-Wilson, 2013; Callinicos, 1992; Monzó, in press). In a Marxist view, one must treat class as an imperative entity that maintains capitalism but it recognizes that class relations are sustained through antagonisms, such as race, sex, sexuality, etc.

Understanding the complexity of class and its relationship with other antagonisms

requires one to look at the historical roots within our society. A Marxist framework requires the arts-based researcher to dig deep at the historical roots of the problems and must address the role of class, race, sex, and other structure that work in tandem with class to sustain the capitalist order (Monzó, in press).

4. Research as not just description but also praxis. Having a consciousness for freedom is necessary for social change, only if the consciousness is centered on praxis (Freire, 2000a). Social changes happen through actions that extend from thinking. An ABR in Marxist research would suggest, encourage, and take action. Its goal is to make changes in the world and not just illustrate the problems.
5. Necessity of collectivity in analysis and solutions. A Marxist research encourages people to unite and work together to form a collective thinking and praxis. A capitalist ideology alienates and separates people (Dunayevskaya, 1958), hence it could be difficult to gather collective analysis and solutions. However, an ABR via a Marxist lens bonds people's ideas and actions together to bring forth a collective energy for liberation.

Methods

This study examines how the media depicts the fall of Aleppo and also how the Syrian people are represented. It is important to begin the description of the methods I employed in this study by first pointing out that neither the Syrian people, nor Syrian refugees, are a monolithic group. Rather, they are diverse across social class, education, gender, age, and a host of other factors. In no way is my intention to minimize these differences. However, the media rarely mentions these factors in their news stories and thus they do present a flattened image of the Syrian people, that fails to capture the reality

of diversity of any group. Thus, while aware of the importance to recognize this diversity, I was not able to make such distinctions since these were not captured in the majority of news sources I reviewed.

Narrative Inquiry

It could be quite a task to list all things that are considered “the arts,” since people with different cultures and backgrounds define art subjectively. Nonetheless, humans across all cultures use some forms of art on a daily basis, such as visual imagery, narrative, music, dance, storytelling, and poetry (Leavy, 2015). ABR is an “umbrella” that covers all these art forms. The media itself includes visual imagery, narratives, and music, therefore is considered an art as well. For the purpose of studying the US news media’s representation of Syria and its refugees, I will use methods of narrative inquiry and critical discourse analysis.

Our humanity is rooted in narrative and its power, and as a narrative, storytelling is an imperative part of our daily life (Leavy, 2015). Storytelling, dated as far back as the beginning of civilization, has been a long-living form of communication to document history and transmit ideas, be it written or verbal. Narrative inquiry as a research method is using textual analysis to examine the written narratives and aiming to find the hidden meanings—the underlying “truth” (Leavy, 2015).

In academia, narrative inquiry can be used for any and all fields, and it is not limited to qualitative studies alone; in the past twenty years, narrative is gaining increasing popularity among researchers (Leavy, 2015). What qualifies a study as an ABR is that there is artfulness combined with the study (Barone & Eisner, 2012). When we tell stories in an artful way, something amazing happens. In my personal experience,

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those people who are described as “fun” and “interesting” are always great storytellers, because it is not necessarily the storylines, but how one tells a story that really leaves an impression.

While much narrative analysis focuses on participants sharing their own stories, the stories media tells—whether in the words of others through interviews or in their own words when re-telling the story—are also aspects of ABR. They too include elements of story construction, subjectivity in deciding what to tell and how to tell it, and they carry emotions to engage the audience in a variety of ways (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

There are three types of narrative portraits that serve as data representation (Leavy, 2015): (1) creative non-fiction, a written true story that documents exactly what happened with the author’s creative flair; (2) fiction narrative, a short story that is told from the author’s viewpoint, as what has happened in the author’s eyes; and (3) fictive, a story that is fictional, but it was created in order to reflect the truth behind the real story. An ABR researcher can choose any of these styles depending on how the researcher chooses to resonate with the readers.

I would argue that the majority of news journalists have their own “listening guide” when they conduct interviews and report news stories. For example, a news journalist might record an interview or an event with an audio recorder, a video recorder, or written texts. The journalist revisits the document and checks facts before creating the truthful news to inform the audiences. Therefore, the news stories are creative nonfictions, in that they represent data to the audiences.

Visual Arts-based Research and the Use of Photography

We live in a visual world. Visuals serve as advertisements, entertainments, and decorations, and they can almost be found in every corner of our society. The ABR researcher could use visual arts as a method of collecting and representing data. Visual arts opens our eyes to new perspectives, contains ambiguous meanings, brings up emotions, and is well fitted for social justice research (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Leavy, 2015). Particularly, visual arts are popular among scholars who are feminist, postcolonial, and in general use a critical lens (Leavy, 2015).

Visual arts include many forms, such as photography, collage, sculpture, painting, sketches, and quilting; there are many opportunities for the ABR researcher to use the visuals to gather and represent data (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Leavy, 2015). Visual arts are participatory; they open audiences' eyes to new perspectives and evoke emotions. In addition, visual arts represent the data visually to the audiences, either accompanied with or without texts, and leave a lasting impression (Leavy, 2015). The old saying "a picture is worth thousand words" demonstrates the importance of visual representation to us humans.

To gather data for research, the ABR researcher could ask the participants to use visual arts to express their experiences, and the arts would tell the stories for the participants (Leavy, 2015)—for example, asking refugees to take photographs of their lived experience growing up in a refugee camp. Then the ABR researcher would gather all the visual arts produced by the participants and distill out the key elements. For instance, if most of the photographs from the refugees show little children playing together, then the researcher could determine that having a solid friendship had helped

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that particular refugee to survive the refugee camp. Then, the ABR researcher would use visual arts to represent the data. The researcher takes the themes and key elements portrayed in the visual arts produced by participants, and then represents them to the public in a form of visual art. Take the refugee photography for example: the ABR researcher might choose to pick out three most recurring themes and present those photographs to the public.

Words often lie in the center of qualitative studies, but the visuals have such power that complements the words in qualitative research (Leavy, 2015). Besides the aesthetic appeals, the visuals are powerful for making sense and presenting the data (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). The sociology and anthropology fields started the method of using photography for qualitative research as photographs directly reflect reality, and this method is gaining popularity in other fields (Leavy, 2015). Although for many quantitative researchers using the visuals as a research method is a rather biased method, none can argue with the fact that images promote dialogues and stir emotions, which generate meanings (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). Photographs and texts work in harmony, and it is evident particularly in news stories. When reading news stories, one can often find photographs that accompany the stories. Additionally, powerful photographs on news magazine covers are paired with thought-provoking captions that guide the audience's thinking and understanding. For example, the disturbing image of an Afghanistan young woman on August 9, 2010 *TIME* cover with the caption that read "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan" (2010). Such texts along with the unsettling photograph directed the readers to an emotional state that is more powerful than just plain text alone, and vice versa.

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Through the lens of a camera, a photojournalist documents and presents what happens in Syria to the audiences. The lens of the camera is also the view of the photographer, because the photographer ultimately decides what moment to capture and how to present it to the audience. In a way, we see through the photojournalist's eyes. Just like an ABR researcher, photojournalists use imageries they capture to collect and present data to the audiences.

When using photographs for data analysis, one must consider the contexts of the photographers when they took the photographs (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). For example, what circumstance was the photographer in, what population is the photographer trying to market, and how was the photograph created—for instance, was the photo candid or staged, were any special effects used? An ABR researcher must consider all these questions during data analysis. In addition, if any text accompanies the photograph, such as captions or descriptions, the text should also be taken into consideration when analyzing the photograph, as well.

Critical Discourse Analysis

In order to examine the journalistic narratives found in news media, I used critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is embedded with the idea that power relations are practiced, established, and reinforced through discourse (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), and it is particularly helpful in political intervention and promoting social change (Machin & Mayr, 2012). I incorporated CDA in my study to examine how the US news media used narrative to either help reinforce or reconstruct the power structure between the US government and Syria, as well as how the big corporate media uses discourse to push its agenda through its reporting on the siege of Aleppo in 2016.

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The media does not directly tell the readers what to think, but its choice of texts and images indirectly guide and influence audience's thinking. For example, we can see a vivid difference between the phrases "John Doe boasted his story" and "John Doe told his story"; the one verb difference paints entirely differently images of the subject John Doe, without any other information provided on the subject. In CDA, the researcher not only pays attention to language used but also asks the question "why" the language is chosen and what is the significance behind this language selection. In other words, CDA digs deep into the narrative, looking way beyond the dictionary meaning of words and aims to discover the true intentions of the writer.

CDA applies to study of the visuals, as well. The visuals tell stories that are not presented in texts, and at the same time, the carefully selected pictures accompany the text by both contributing and constructing meaning to the text (Machin & Mayr, 2012). When examining a picture, the CDA researcher does not miss any detail; factors such as color, lighting, details, composition, shapes, and structures are all worth analyzing. These elements within a picture leave space for readers' interpretation, to encourage the readers to think a certain way without using any words. Words alone simply cannot accomplish this goal, along with the visuals—together they transmit meaning to the readers. When looking at an image, the CDA researcher also considers what the readers' views are and how they might relate to the subjects in the image. The distance and the angle of a subject, for example, play a part in how the readers understand and interpret the meaning a picture is trying to convey. I use the images below (Figures 1 through 3) as examples of how I interpret the photographs within the articles I gathered for my study:

Figure 1. Damage at the Omar bin Abdulaziz hospital on July 16 in the Maadi district of Aleppo after a barrel bomb struck just outside during government air raids on rebel-held district of the city (Hubbard, 2016).

From reading the caption, I understood that this was the aftermath image of a hospital room that pro-Assad forces bombed during the siege of Aleppo. The viewers could see that this hospital was very basic. The first thing that stood out to me was the bright red blood on the white sheet. Grotesque and gruesome, the large patch of fresh blood suggested that a heavily injured patient was just lying here before the pro-government force's air attack. It appeared people in this room evacuated quickly, because there is

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still a half-full bottle of water standing on top of the medical machine, and half of the bed sheet was dragged on the floor, indicating that hospital workers carried the patient out of his/her bed in a hurry. The bed mattress had large wet spots, which also indicated that not long before the photograph was taken, there were people in this room. The fallen curtain and debris suggested the air strike hit the hospital, and it caused chaos in this room. This photograph, to me, has a sense of urgency, emptiness, and sadness. The viewers might wonder what happened to the patient in this room and worry about the well-being of all the other patients in this hospital. Thus, this photograph served as evidence for the article's claim about Assad and his allied forces' cruelty toward Syrian civilians.

Figure 2. Syrian pro-government forces in the Masaken Hanano district in eastern Aleppo on Sunday as regime forces seized it from rebels, in this photo from the Rumaf Syrian-Kurdish activist group (Dewan, Kourdi, & Karadsheh, 2016).

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This was one of the very few photographs that showed Syrian men, and just like the other ones that did, the Syrian men were dressed in military clothing. In this photograph, these pro-government military men looked relaxed, their guns are drawn, and they were walking slowly. It even looked like they were chatting among themselves. The background showed a destroyed district in eastern Aleppo, the area US-backed forces used to control before the siege. The wreckage in the background suggested heavy bombing and intense war had happened here, and after these pro-government military men won the battle, they were enjoying a victory walk in the area they seized.

Figure 3. A Syrian girl walks amid the wreckage of damaged buildings and shops in the western city of Aleppo, Syria on Dec. 5. Hassan Ammar/AP (Margolin, 2016).

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The human subject of this photograph was a young Syrian girl, and she looked small and fragile surrounded by the large amount of wreckage shown in this photograph. The viewers can see that the buildings around her were torn, and parts of them were buried by other buildings' debris. Behind this little girl, broken pieces of concrete on top of the shop's roof seemed like they could fall off anytime, adding a sense of uneasiness to the photograph. The building behind the shop looked like some civilians still lived there, because the viewers can see some clothing hanging to dry outside some balconies. The young girl was making her way down a steep slope. Perhaps she came from that civilian building, but we do not know where she was going. From her body language, I sensed that she was being careful with her steps. Her slightly bent knees, squeezed tight fists, and downward gaze indicated she was careful with each step. Her arms were extended out, as if she was using them to help her balance. There was white concrete dust on her dark pants and shoes, indicating the neighborhood was full of dust from the war. What perplexed me was the faint smile on the young girl's face; it made me wonder if she was posing for the photographer or simply happy to be outside. In other words, was this photograph candid or planned? Nonetheless, this photograph served the purpose of proving the article's claim that Aleppo was destroyed after government forces recaptured the city.

Furthermore, what is *not* showing in the texts and visuals is just as important as what *is* showing, and what is absent has an ideological importance. What is represented and what is purposely left out can have "social consequences" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 102), as it controls which information gets the spotlight, directly placed in the public's view and grabbing their attention, and which information gets the silent treatment that the

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public does not even get a chance to be aware of its existence. For instance, if a particular group were constantly presented to the audience when talking about a topic, then the audience would likely associate that particular group with that particular topic. Vice versa, if a particular group is constantly underrepresented, either in texts, visuals, or both, they forego the chance to voice their opinion and/or influence the audience. One example of media overrepresentation is the number of blacks and Hispanics which are considerably more in number than whites in US prisons (Blacks and Hispanics are overrepresented in U.S. prisons, 2018), but the media does not mention the economic factor that caused this statistic, such as only about half of the black and Hispanic offenders are able to pay bail compared to whites who committed the same category of offense (Steffensmeier & Demuth, 2000). Essentially, the amount of arrests might be the same across all races, but those with lower economic status, who cannot afford to post bail, get to be counted as a part of the prison statistics. When the media leave out this important background information, it is easy for the audience to assume that the minorities commit more crimes.

Nonetheless, we must be aware that sometimes the media would purposely overrepresent a particular group of people when talking about a specific issue, thus creating a negative image of that particular group of people and encouraging prejudice and stereotyping from the audience (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011). However, even though the media helps to establish stereotypes, it also has the power to construct meaning and create new images of the less dominant groups, so we can consider ways of using media to support social justice.

We often see photographs that accompany news stories. The photographs appeal to our visual senses, and they guide our imagination further as we read the stories. For this study, I use the photographs in the news stories as supplements to my narrative data analysis. I pick out common themes, repeated moods, and main focal points of the news photographs, then categorize them as I would with the narrative. Assuming the news sources pair the photographs with the narratives intentionally, examining the visuals provides a better understanding of the narratives they complement. The combination of narrative inquiry and visual analysis methods serves as a guide on the path to answer my research questions.

Criteria for Selection of News Sources

Social media is a powerful tool for pushing political agendas, and provides a chance for audiences to engage in two-way communication, which is a unique characteristic of this particular media (Seo & Ebrahim, 2016). In comparison, mass media such as news magazines is often one-way communication, where the messages are sent to the audiences without inviting the audiences to interact, except the possibility to write a letter to the editor or leave a comment below an article. However, mass media provides a sense of authority and authenticity (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Greenwood & Jenkins, 2015; Seo & Ebrahim, 2016). In other words, people tend to believe the information they gather from mass media, even if the mass media also have hidden agendas that are designed for persuasion (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). For the purpose of this paper, media perspective is limited to mass media, mainly online news magazines' perspectives on the current Syrian conflict, because social media representation deserves its own separate study.

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The main criteria for this study are news articles from mainstream US news media. Since we live in a technology-dominant era, the amount of information we can find via the Internet can be overwhelming. Thus, my data collection criteria was limited to the following:

1. The articles must cover the event of the siege of Aleppo as the main topic and are written in 2016. The reason for choosing the siege of Aleppo is its significance in the Syrian civil war. Aleppo is the largest city in Syria and has been divided into West and East parts of the city due to the war. Before the siege, Assad and his allies controlled the West of Aleppo and US-backed rebels and militia controlled the East. After the siege, Assad regained the control of the entire city of Aleppo, which indicated that US involvement in the siege failed. I looked for articles that were dedicated on reporting on the event of the siege of Aleppo, and although there are many articles that covered this particular event, I only chose the ones written in 2016, because that is the same year of the event. The news articles written in 2016 provide more of an real-time follow-up of the event.
2. The articles must come from mainstream US-based news sources, as well as an alternative news source to serve as a check and balance to the mainstream ones. I chose mainstream news because they are more popular and easier to access by the public, thus, influential to the public. I chose *Truthout* as my alternative news source because it is a non-profit and radical left news source that is known for its critical articles and news pieces. Additionally, even though foreign news sources, such as the *BBC*, offer great insights on the event, I chose to only focus on US-based news media outlets, because I hope to make sense of US interests in

Aleppo, Syria and its region, as well as how the US-based news media may be either aligned or opposed to supporting the US government's involvement and/or any corporate interests in the region.

3. The articles are searchable via known Internet search engines, Google and Internet Explorer. The Pews Research Center (2014) found that print magazines are suffering from subscription sales and that people are more interested in seeking news online, thus I chose electronic news articles for this research. I used key phrases to pull up all news articles that addressed the siege of Aleppo in 2016. The key phrases I used were "Aleppo 2016," "siege of Aleppo 2016," "Syria Aleppo," "fall of Aleppo 2016," "Syria 2016," and "intervention Aleppo 2016."

There is no news source that has an absolute neutral political perspective; all US news media sources hold either a liberal or conservative perspective, although they differ in degrees (Ideological placement of each source's audience, 2014). Even though there is no bias-free media source, audiences are free to interpret the news on their own, but might be persuaded by commentators or journalists. The news audiences are active information seekers, as uses and gratification theorists Katz, et al. (1973) have so stated that audiences are voluntary members and actively pick the media that satisfy their needs. Therefore, I gathered mainstream media news articles to examine how the US popular news media portrayed the siege of Aleppo to the public, and compared them with the news articles I found in an alternative news source, *Truthout*, in order to see if they differ in statements and/or opinions. Figure 4 shows a spectrum of various well-known US news media sources' political perspectives.

Ideological Placement of Each Source's Audience

Average ideological placement on a 10-point scale of ideological consistency of those who got news from each source in the past week...

American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q22. Based on all web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see About the Survey for more details.) ThinkProgress, DailyKos, Mother Jones, and The Ed Schultz Show are not included in this graphic because audience sample sizes are too small to analyze.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4. Ideological Placement of Each Source's Audience (2014), from the Pew Research Center.

It is noteworthy to point out that the Pew Research Center is a liberal organization that still falls within the rims of capitalism. Although it seeks equity by providing information from both sides of the political spectrum, because it does not challenge capitalism, many alternative news sources are left out of their list. Hence, after I looked at the mainstream news sources, I wanted to compare and contrast them with an

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alternative media source, in order to serve as a comparison to see whether a non-corporate-funded news source would report the siege of Aleppo in 2016 differently. For this reason, I chose *Truthout*.

Truthout is a radical left news source, one that is not corporation-owned. Additionally, one can identify the stories in *Truthout* as significantly different than some of the mainstream corporation-owned liberal news sources. *Truthout*'s headlines consistently represent an anti-capitalism/anti-imperialism ideology, and it does not contain any advertisements. It maintains its circulation by readers' donations, thus it does not represent any corporation. For collecting data from *Truthout*, I went to its main Web page and used its search bar to pull out all articles that contained the same key phrases I used for mainstream news sources. Table 1 lists all the news sources I used in the study, and a complete list of the names of the articles I used is in Appendix A. From the table below, one can tell that the mainstream media is controlled by either large corporations or individuals that run large corporations, and they make millions or even billions in profit each year; on the other hand, the alternative media contains neither advertisements nor endorsement, and it depends on readers' donations to keep the publication running. The readership of the mainstream media is in millions per day, while the readership for the alternative media was unavailable. One thing that could explain this difference is that the mainstream media corporations must create media kits in order to attract investors and advertisers, therefore they must disclose the number of viewers publicly. On the other hand, the alternative media's goal is not to make profit, and its budget purely relies on those who agree with its mission, therefore it does not need to present its viewership in order to persuade financial gain.

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Table 1

News Sources Used in This Study

Name of News Source	Mainstream or Alternative?	Readership	Ownership	Profits
Los Angeles Times	Mainstream	1.2 million daily; 2.1 million on Sundays. Online and print combined: 4.4 million weekly. (About the Los Angeles Times, 2019)	Local biotech billionaire, Patrick Soon-Shiong	\$1 billion annually (Los Angeles Times' Competitors, n.d.)
Fox News	Mainstream	371.67 million visits in the last six months (foxnews.com, 2019)	Fox Corporation	\$2.75 billion (Thomas, 2019)
Huffington Post	Mainstream	7.41 million in the last six months (huffingtonpost.com, 2019)	Verizon Media	\$146 million in 2014 (Sebastian, 2015)
NBC News	Mainstream	Over 58 million visitors per month (About NBC News, 2019)	Comcast	\$324.8 million annually (NBC News's Competitors, n.d.)
The Atlantic	Mainstream	42.3 million monthly (The Atlantic reaches, 2017)	Emerson Collective	\$39.2 million annually (The Atlantic Competitors, n.d.)

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Table 1, continued

Name of News Source	Mainstream or Alternative?	Readership	Ownership	Profits
CNN	Mainstream	200 million monthly (CNN worldwide fact sheet, 2019)	AT&T	Projecting \$2.5 billion in 2019 (Toonkel, 2018)
TIME	Mainstream	35.6 million from desktop between January and December 2018 (Digital audience, 2019)	Marc Benioff, <i>Salesforce</i> billionaire	\$173 million in 2017 (Silber, 2018)
The Guardian	Mainstream	47 million monthly (Guardian US reaches, 2018)	Guardian Media Group	\$254.4 million GBP yearly (includes Guardian US revenue) (Waterstone, 2018)
The New York Times	Mainstream	4.3 million paying subscribers for both digital and print (Peiser, 2019)	Sulzberger family and Carlos Slim	More than \$709 million in 2018 (Peiser, 2019)
The Washington Post	Mainstream	80.8 million in June 2018 (The Washington Post Had, 2018)	Jeff Bezos, the owner of Amazon	\$709 million annually (Washington Posts's competitors, n.d.)
USA Today	Mainstream	97.4 million online visitors in April 2018 (About USA today, n.d.)	Gannett Company	\$3 billion annually (USA's competitors, n.d.)

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Table 1, continued

Name of News Source	Mainstream or Alternative?	Readership	Ownership	Profits
The Daily Beast	Mainstream	More than 1 million reader per day (About us, n.d.)	InterActive Corp (IAC)	\$25.6 million annually (The Daily Beast's competitors, n.d.)
The New Yorker	Mainstream	34.5 million readers (The New Yorker Brand Overview, n.d.)	Samuel I. Newhouse, Jr.	\$115 million in 2018 (Read, n.d.)
Truthout	Alternative	N/A	Nonprofit	Mainly depends on readers' donation. Small amount of donation comes from a few foundations (About Truthout, n.d.)

Prior to conducting my research, I assumed that I would find a tremendous amount of news articles by using my key phrases, and I was worried about how to keep my data manageable. To my surprise, I had to dig a while to even find 20 articles that fit my data criteria. By the time I gathered the 20 articles I am using for my study, I had already reached the tenth "o" (i.e., the eleventh page) on Google Web search. Within my Google search, *Truthout* articles did not come up at all, but I was able to find six news articles by searching on *Truthout's* Website. Therefore, I had a total of 26 articles for my data analysis.

Applying Critical Discourse Analysis

To use critical discourse analysis is to de-neutralize a discourse and reveal the true intention behind such discourse, as Machin and Mayr (2012) concluded: “CDA typically analyses news texts, political speeches, advertisements, school books, etc., exposing strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface but which may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends” (p. 5). I aimed to use CDA in my study to connect the dots between language, power, and ideology within the news articles that the readers are not able to pick out by simply reading through the articles, as Van Dijk (1993) stated that CDA is used to reveal social relations of power. I wanted to make what was hidden be brought up and presented to the people. In order to achieve this, I paid attention to the word choices used in the articles, because they are chosen for a purpose, and considered their significance in developing power and ideology.

I used Saldaña’s (2015) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers Third Edition, 3rd edition* as a guide for my textual coding process, and the specific coding method I used for my research is the “Generic” coding method (p. 73). Additionally, every news article in my data collection except the ones from *Truthout* contained photographs, thus I inspected the visuals each time I read the articles. Vis-à-vis the visuals, I read the captions under each photograph, documented the mood and the composition and the focus point. I chose to examine the textual and the visual contents together, because they as a whole made up the complete articles.

To execute the coding process, I first printed out all the news articles in Web view format for an easier coding process. I then read each news article and examined the

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photographs within the articles at least three times. The first time was to grasp the general ideas behind each story, to get a sense of the overall mood of the photographs, and to highlight any phrases or words that caught my attention and made me believe the journalists used them in order to create a particular understanding and feeling toward the message. For instance, I highlighted a phrase or a word that stressed a point of view or emphasized an attitude toward the event. As I was reading each article, I made notes on the margins to document my thoughts and findings. This first round of coding is what Saldaña referred to as “Descriptive Coding” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 73). Next, I re-read the article to find any key phrases and key words that repeated throughout the article, adding more notes on the margins, as well as looking to see if I could group certain themes together into a main theme. For example, I grouped phrases “Aleppo was in dust,” “the ruined city,” and “torn buildings” into one category that described the condition of Aleppo after the siege. The second round of coding is “Pattern Coding and/or Focused Coding” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 74). The third round of coding is to check to see if I could indicate main themes and their sub themes, as well as to make sure I did not miss anything from the first two rounds of coding.

Since the Internet has a vast amount of information, I set criteria for when to stop looking for more news articles to add to my data collection, so I could keep my data manageable. After I selected and coded 20 mainstream news articles, I stopped searching for more because I no longer found new information that was not mentioned in previous articles. I began seeing the same commentaries and similar themes in all the articles, and no new information was present in any further search; in other words, I have gathered

enough data to support my study and reached the point of data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

My Data Representation

I chose to use a narrative portrait to present my findings in the next chapter. Through the memoir of a 17-year-old Syrian girl I named Myriam, her memories of living in her hometown Aleppo, resettling to the US with her parents, and studying how the US news media depicted the siege of Aleppo in 2016 were documented. This fictive piece presents my data findings and guides the readers to the themes through an art form. I chose to write a fictive memoir to represent my data because I always enjoy reading memoirs. I find the first person narrative provides nuance to a story and really allows the readers to get into the mind of the narrator. A memoir is a self-reflection piece that documents one's life story and while doing so, it subsequently documents history (Janken, 2016; Waxman, 2008). A memoir evolves one theme or a specific timeframe, whereas autobiography is a chronological record of someone's entire life. Thus, for the purpose of this study, I believe a memoir is the appropriate choice.

During this creative narrative writing process, I was happy to find that I was able to make connections between my own story of immigration to a small town in Pennsylvania when I was a young girl and the experiences and feelings expressed by the Syrian refugee community, as found through my studies of the Syrian war and communities and I was able to place these connections in parts of the story in a fictive form. ABR allowed me to reflect on my own experience and use it to add meaning to the fictive piece I created, as Bryan (2012) reasoned:

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We are our stories. Each of us has a personal narrative careening around in the head, a library of personal drama, waiting to be expressed... We cannot leave these stories behind when we enter a classroom or schoolhouse. They are an important part of who we are. (p. 161)

This relatedness between our personal stories and how they stay with us to influence our work was evident in my memoir-writing progress.

I included endnotes in my fictive memoir to validate that this memoir was based on actual data. The memoir was the creative art piece in my study. I gained inspiration from reading on any Syrian refugee experience I could find, both online and in books, but I faced the challenge of not having a Syrian refugee to talk to in person to check my understanding of the situation. The fictive piece was a diary at first, then I decided to make it into a memoir instead, because I believe the story of Myriam in a memoir form is able to document more of her complex feelings and distance memories. A fictive memoir also provides me more options for nuance and allows me to go deep into the story.

When we say a narrative is “fictive,” often the connotation is that the narrative is made up from imagination and therefore not the truth; however, the fictive form within ABR is not the opposite of truth, but rather another way of understating the truth. To design a story based on carefully observed events and lived experiences is referred by Barone (2001) as a “narrative construction,” which can be further defined as “researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize or configure them by means of a plot into a story or stories” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). The narrative construction can take a variety of forms such as short story, life story, poetry, autobiography, or novel (Barone & Eisner, 2012). It draws the readers’ attention in through artful storytelling,

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present vivid fictive details that reflect the truth, and leaves the readers with meaningful messages that would inspire them long after reading the story. Throughout the narrative construction, the readers develop empathy for the main character(s), and the readers go back and forth from having empathy for the individual(s) in the story to having empathy for a much broader group, thus the fictive in the ABR form encourages understanding and promotes action for social change. To evaluate my fictive narrative's usefulness in research, I need to ask the following questions: (1) Does such narrative illuminate profound issues that exist in society? Does it have generalizability that the readers/viewers can relate this narrative to other experiences outside the narrative itself? (2) Does it provoke new questions to the readers/viewers that they otherwise would not have encountered? Lastly, (3) does the narrative encourage the readers to have critical discourse that I would like them to have? (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Some of the more traditional scholars, particularly in the Western culture, argue that using the fictive form to present data is the opposite of presenting legitimate data (Barone & Eisner, 2012). In their mind, data is either fictive—creatively made-up stories that are the opposite of truth—or non-fictive—the unquestionable and ultimate truth. However, Barone and Eisner (2012) argued that all human-made artifacts would be considered fictive, as they are expressions of the researcher and representation of the data; therefore, the field of social science is no different than a fiction. In ABR, the fictive is not the oppose of truth, but a different way to show the truth that could lure the readers in with its uniqueness and creativity. Thus, it presents the truth in an artistic lens, which offers the readers/viewers a different way of understanding the truth. In ABR, a researcher does not categorize something as “black or white,” but rather considers the

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nuances that make up each and every element, then presents the data with carefully designed details so that it can resonate with the readers/viewers in more depth. Hence, in ABR, we do not draw a distinctive line between the “fictive” and “non-fictive.” Instead, we look at a fictive piece’s ability to illuminate the truth and motivate the readers/viewers to act for a more just world.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

As an ethical researcher and from a Marxist critical pedagogy lens, I recognize that neutrality does not exist. However, I do believe that an objective truth exists and careful data collection and documentation allows us to apprehend an objective reality and even challenge preconceptions and ideologies. I consider myself on the far left side of the political spectrum and anti-capitalist; therefore, I never go to sources like *Fox News* as my choice of learning the current events. However, I acknowledge and respect the fact that many people, including some of my family members, prefer *Fox News* over any liberal news sources and they are influenced by its stories and opinions. On a regular basis, I receive world news feeds to my email from various radical left news sources, such as *Truthout*, *Huffington Post*, *The Guardian*, *BuzzFeed*, *New York Times*, and *BBC*. Moreover, I have always trusted *Time* and have been a subscriber in prior years. From my personal experience, I do not find *Time* to be obvious in its political standpoint, although I do sense that it is leaning toward the left slightly. Nonetheless, whenever I read a controversial news story, such as when the US, UK, and France decided to strike Syria in April 2018, I always make an effort to check the same news story from both sides of the political viewpoints; however, I never use extreme sources that appeal to a niche audience, such as the *Rush Limbough Show* on the very conservative side.

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While I cannot necessarily say a story is objectively true or false, because the information I received is secondhand information, in some cases it is possible to determine the extent of truth by identifying half-truths or missing information. In addition, I trust and respect all the selected news sources as if they were human participants. After all, there were humans behind each news story and photograph.

During my research, I did encounter some concerns and challenges. The biggest one was my personal background, which makes me an “outsider” to the community I aim to stand for. For someone who is neither a Muslim nor Syrian, I wanted to make sure my work is ethical and honors the cultural aspects of the Syrian refugees. Particularly in writing the memoir, I needed to get inside the mind of a Muslim Syrian refugee girl. I read as many Syrian refugee diaries I could online, and I read a book called *Outcasts United* on the story of refugee youths from Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East resettling in a small town in Georgia. Still, I sought to verify with actual Muslim women that my representations of them, via Myriam, rang true to their own experiences or the experiences of other Syrian refugee women they knew and if Myriam’s story was believable from their perspective. I knew that one of the ways I could make sure my memoir show authenticity was to talk to a Muslim Syrian refugee in person, but I did not know any Syrian refugees on personal level. Fortunately, a dissertation committee member with connections to Muslim communities knew some Syrian women refugees. While they did not feel comfortable talking to me directly, the committee member acted as a “messenger” between these women and me. Through my committee member, I sent three questions, listed in Appendix B, via email, specifically asking what they brought with them when they fled their country, what they wish they had brought, and whether

they kept a journal or diary. Their answers would provide me some insider perspectives in my creation of the fictive memoir. My committee member received responses from three Syrian refugee women and emailed me their answers to each of my questions. I used these responses as a form of member check on the authenticity of Myriam's memoir and made changes accordingly. This is also an important factor in the trustworthiness of this work.

There are four elements of my study that make it trustworthy. First, because the news articles I was able to find via Google were all mainstream news sources that are owned by large for-profit corporations, I selected *Truthout*, a small non-profit organization, as a comparison to detect any similarities and differences in the reporting of the siege of Aleppo 2016 with mainstream news. *Truthout* as a news source did not even come up in my Google search result once, even though it contained six articles on the siege of Aleppo 2016, all written in the year 2016, therefore, it is not easily accessible for the public to view its contents, if one has never heard of this particular source before. Thus, *Truthout* serves as a check for the themes I found within mainstream news, as well as a check for what the public is learning about the siege of Aleppo via mainstream news. Second, there is a strong theoretical and methodological framework guiding my work. Before I even started my research, I identified that my worldview complies with a Marxist-humanist perspective; therefore, my work relies on a strong Marxist-humanist theoretical framework that guided me through each step of my research process. When I began gathering data for my study, I established my intention to use ABR as my methodology to lead me through my data collection, data analysis, and data representation. ABR provided me strong guidelines as how to combine scholarship and

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artistry throughout my work, for example, how to use a narrative portrait to reflect what I found within the news articles, and in what ways to make that one portrait to illuminate a much broader problem that deserves the public's attention. In the end, the Marxist-humanist theoretical framework helped me to make sense of my findings, to wrap my research up in answering a big question, "so what does it all mean?" My theoretical and methodological frameworks worked smoothly together for my study. Third, in order to make sure I presented authenticity and honored the Syrian refugee experience in the memoir, I researched extensively on the Syrian refugee experience, especially their experience in refugee camps, their journey from Turkey to Greece via sea and land, and their resettling process to the US. Moreover, to build a strong foundation for the memoir of Myriam, I spent time reading and studying any resources that would provide me with an "insider" voice and inspire my writing. For instance, I read a book titled *Outcasts united: The story of a refugee soccer team that changed a town* (St. John, 2013). This book documented a true story, and it provided me valuable insights on how refugee youths balanced their lives after they resettled in Clarkston, a small town on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia, where the majority of the town residents were white. This book talked greatly about the struggle of refugee youths as they faced cultural and religious differences and the challenges they had when interacting with their new community. Even though none of the refugees mentioned in this book came from Syria, and the book focused on the stories of refugee boys, it did open my eyes on the experience of Muslim refugee youths that came from the Middle East.

Another book I read to prepare my memoir was *Burning country: Syrians in revolution and war* (Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016). This book was recommended by

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one of my committee members, and it gave me a glimpse of how Syrians are living their lives amid an ongoing civil war. The book presented the reality of living in a war-torn country, and how Syrians dealt with their complicated nation. After gathering information from academic journals and the news on the experience of Syrians inside Syria during the civil war, this book was a good supplement and added to my understanding of what it is like to live in Syria during the time of war. In addition, I researched how to create a memoir, as well as reading memoir examples before and during my creative writing process. The responses I received from the Syrian refugee women through my committee member helped me in bringing the heroine in the memoir to life.

Lastly, I am providing the sources of all the news articles I used for my study in Appendix A, which contains the titles and the direct links to the articles that the particular themes emerged. Thus, the readers could easily view the articles and the photographs mentioned in this study.

The next chapter is the memoir of Myriam, an arts-based depiction of my research findings. In this memoir the reader will glimpse what life is often like for many Syrian young women who have experienced civil war, displacement, and migration. The memoir details the media coverage of the fall of Aleppo. Through the character of Myriam, I will provide an in-depth analysis of the meanings behind specific discourses and visual representations utilized.

Chapter 4

Narrative Portrait, an Arts-Based Representation of Results

To recap, the research question is as the following:

How does the U.S. media depictions of the siege of Aleppo in 2016 reflect its capitalist social relations?

The three subquestions are:

- 1) Which elements of the siege of Aleppo in 2016 get the most attention? In what ways and why?
- 2) What are some ways are Syrian refugees depicted and for what purposes? How and in what ways is U.S. humanitarian policy reflected? What is the role of racism in this?
- 3) How are corporate and government interests tied to the media and how does this impact media coverage?

To present my findings within an ABR perspective, I created the following fictive narrative portrait:

Narrative Portrait: Selected Memoir Entries by Myriam

I sat down by my desk and opened my brand new journal. It is a simple looking one, mint-colored, hard-covered notebook with the words “My Thoughts” in gold cursive letters on the cover. My parents gave this to me soon after we resettled in our new apartment here in the US. “We know how much you love writing,” my mom exclaimed. My dad added gently, “Sorry we couldn’t give you a journal last year.” I hugged them tight for this thoughtful gift. I opened its hard covers, closed my eyes, flipped the pages between my

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fingers and inhaled deeply—I love the smell of paper in new books and notebooks, This smell brought me back to my life in Aleppo, especially in springtime. My parents would gift me a journal each year on my birthday, and it was the thing I most looked forward to at those annual celebrations. I wrote in my journal every day. Even when we traveled to visit family, I would bring my journal with me. When the flowers bloomed beautifully outside, I sometimes picked up the petals I found and placed them joyfully between the papers of my journal. The flower petals would eventually dry inside my journals; some even left stains on the papers, and those would also leave faint fragrances. I always received hard-covered journals, ones that had light sky blue lines inside. My parents told me if I took good care of them, the hard-covered journals would create a lifetime of memories. So I did take great care of my journals; I kept them clean and stacked them neatly on my bookshelf when I was done writing. I would peruse past journals from time to time, which was like visiting old friends. However, none of us could have predicted what would happen to my country. Hard-covered journals, like many other things, don't stand a chance when there is a war.

I started journaling at age 10, and I cannot believe that was six years ago. Ever since we left the refugee camp, I have not really sat down and reflected on my life in Aleppo and the unsettling/resettling journey that got my family here. Maybe it is because I tried to avoid reminiscing about that time of innocence before the war and the wonderfully ordinary life in our hometown. Reflecting on those joyful times would make me miss Aleppo even more. Today, as I am sitting here writing in this brand new notebook, I am starting to miss my old volumes even more, the ones lost in the sea but engraved indelibly in my mind.

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The idea of starting a memoir never escaped my thoughts entirely. I guess I was just waiting for a “right time” to actually begin. A couple days ago, my English teacher, Ms. Newett, encouraged the class to start writing a diary or a memoir, because she believed that it was a great way to reconstruct our lives while practicing writing. I took this as a sign: it is time for me to document my life again in the form of a memoir. I don’t care if no one else reads it, because I’m writing mainly for myself. Not many people know what I have seen or what I have gone through, and sometimes, I even catch myself trying to forget parts of my past because they so devastate me emotionally, but I know I must face my past. My history is a significant part of who I am today.

December 2, 2017

I had a safe and sheltered childhood. My family lived in the largest city in Syria, Aleppo. My father owned a rug store in the central bazaar, and his business was very successful. In the evenings when we gathered around the dinner table, he would tell us about the diverse people whom he met in his shop and dramatically narrate the interesting stories they told him. Some of his customers were tourists, who happened to wander into his shop when they visited the bazaar. On my father’s phone, he has pictures of himself posing with these tourists standing in front of rolls of carpets. “They love our country!” my father would say proudly. “They told me they’ve never seen any carpets with designs like these!” One time, he told us that an old Norwegian man wanted to buy one of the most expensive carpets as a wedding gift to his daughter, so my father waived the hefty shipping fee and promised him the carpet would arrive at his daughter’s home in Oslo soon after her wedding day. I loved hearing stories of the travelers who came to my father’s shop. I often wished that one day I would be able to travel around the world and see many foreign places and people

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myself. Many local hotels and restaurants did business with my father, and sometimes, he even sold internationally, shipping rugs and carpets to business establishments in Turkey, Lebanon, China, the US, and parts of Europe. My mother stayed at home to take care of me and my brother, Yossef. My grandmother also lived with us, and she made the best kebab karaz. I still remember the smell of sour cherries, fresh from the market. I would sit with my grandmother in the kitchen, helping her pit the cherries in preparation for cooking kebab karaz. Sometimes, I couldn't help myself and popped cherries in my mouth when my grandmother wasn't looking, but even when she caught me doing it, she would just smile and keep on doing her business. The air smelled tart, sweet, and spicy—from sour cherries, sugar, cinnamon, and pepper. While the sour cherry sauce was simmering on the stove, my grandmother would proceed to make the lamb meatballs. The meatballs always came out the same size and I was always amazed at her precision. "If you practice a lot, you can achieve perfection," my grandmother used to say to me as she moved busily around the kitchen. "When you get married, you will be a great cook, too." When kebab karaz was finally served, Yossef and I would eagerly grab pieces of bread and devour the dinner. Back then, my brother and I played outside a lot with our friends, so we always looked forward to dinner. Aleppo had many gardens full of colorful, fragrant flowers and I could hear birds singing everywhere. Life was predictable, full of comfortable patterns and warm relationships back then, well, at least before 2012.

In 2011, we heard about the Arab Spring happening over in Dara. I overheard my father, mother, and grandmother discussing it at home, but I didn't understand exactly what was happening to my country. I remember all the adults watched the news constantly and

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everyone was aware of the change in Syria. However, back then, daily life for me went on as usual. My father sold carpets, my mother worked to keep the house, my brother and I went to school and played outside, in the gardens or in the streets, with our neighborhood friends.

In 2012, all that changed. The war had extended to Aleppo and everyone was on high alert. Buildings in the city began to shutter as businesses started to close. Fewer and fewer tourists visited my father's carpet shop and eventually, the shop was closed in 2013, because the bazaar was bombed. My family lost its main source of financial support, just like many other families. Fresh fruits and vegetables became rare, and then bread, too. Gunshots and bombs started to become a daily occurrence for us. The once blue sky gave itself over to smoke and ash grey. The nighttime sky lit up a fiery-red from the bombs. The air clogged with dust which often smelled of gunpowder. I could no longer sleep through the night, because the sounds of bombs interrupted my dreams, up to 10 times I remember counting once. I could no longer hear the birds singing; I like to believe that they escaped to somewhere peaceful, and I desperately wished that we could too. This reminds me of an American song, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. It captures how I felt.

Eventually, by 2014, school closed. My brother and I were restricted now to play inside, because out on the streets, there were soldiers and fighters carrying guns at every corner. We were either bored or scared, so our mother created activities and games for us to do inside the house. I could always turn to reading, but it was very hard on Yossef because he was still a very young boy.

On November 3, 2014, Yossef sneaked out to play in an empty field near our home, a place where he used to play with his friends. No one heard him leaving, because the sound of a closed door was masked by gunshots in the distance. By the time my mother realized

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Yossef was missing, it was too late. Our neighbor ran into our house with blood on his shirt and told my parents that Yossef stepped on a hidden bomb, and he died instantly. My mother fainted right then and there, my grandmother yelled at the sky as she tended to my mother. My father fell on his knees, screaming and imploring Allah repeatedly, “Why!?” That was the first time I have ever seen him cry. I stood by my door and my mind went blank, I didn’t know how to process this information; how I wished it were a dream. But it wasn’t. I sat on my bed silent, still with a shock and grief beyond words. I don’t remember how much later I finally broke down in tears. I was so angry with everyone; I raged that my innocent brother died from a death trap that was meant to kill someone else, furious that Yossef became yet another sacrifice among the various factions fighting in Aleppo, our once beautiful city.

Grief-stricken, my father carried Yossef’s dead body and angrily confronted the soldiers near the empty field, only to have them to beat my father to the ground with their guns. Our life was never the same after that day. The pain of losing their only son was too great for my parents. The only thing I could do was to be as strong as possible, and I tried not to ask my parents for anything, because I didn’t want to bother them or cause them more grief. I started helping around the house more. I felt I grew up all of sudden. A couple of months later, my mother was cooking in the kitchen when a corner of our house got hit by an air strike. A large piece of the roof fell on my mother and hot oil from the stove splashed on her face. Luckily, she survived the fall, but her beautiful face was permanently marked. Today, there is still a large scar on the right side of my mom’s face, which she constantly tries to hide with her hijab.

By 2015, we experienced food shortages. We no longer had enough bread. Fresh vegetables and fruits became so rare that I was afraid I would eventually forget what an apple

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tasted like. It was during that year my father decided our family needed to flee Aleppo in order to survive. He used the savings from his carpet store to pay a smuggler to get us out of our country. I was so scared, but I knew at least I was with my family. Some of my friends have already lost one or both of their parents; I was lucky to still have mine. The smuggler told us to only take absolutely necessary items. The first items I grabbed were a few favorite books and my journals, all six of them. My bag was heavy, but to me, everything in there was an absolute must-have item. I helped my mother gathered her items, too, a gold bracelet that my father gifted her after they were newly weds, a watch she had for years, and some family photos. We sat together and spent some time to look through each photo, especially the ones of Yossef. Then my mother wrapped them carefully in a velvet pouch. Before my mother put the pouch in her bag, she sat back down on bed and took out one photo that was the four of us—her, my dad, Yossef, and me—and placed it inside the shirt pocket she was going to wear on the day we leave home.

We first went to a camp outside of Aleppo and stayed there for about a week. Our temporary shelter was basically just a tent placed on the dirt-covered ground, and I remember there was a puddle of water right in front of our tent. Some young boys from other tents liked to come in front our tent so they can play in the puddle. They made a lot of noise as they stepped in and out of the shallow water, laughing and talking loudly at each other. Normally, I would get irritated if someone caused that kind of disturbance within a close proximity to me, but I knew to these boys, this puddle of dirty and murky water was their only source of entertainment. I imagined regretfully that if Yossef were still here, he would have joined these boys, too. I knew our life would be very different from that moment. We began our journey as refugees.

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One day, we packed up all our belongings and followed the smuggler's instructions to meet him in Turkey. From there, he would help us to get on a boat to cross the sea and travel onward to Lesbos, a small island between Turkey and Greece, where we could start seeking a new life as refugees somewhere in Europe, or even farther away, to resettle somewhere in North America. We just needed to reach Europe first in order to apply for refugee status, then to see if the country of our choice would accept our applications. The whole process seemed very complicated to me back then, but my parents comforted me that everything would be OK. They clung to our faith and prayed. Our entry into Turkey was quite smooth, for which we were very grateful. My parents had the rest of their savings in US dollars—very little left after paying the smuggler—hidden inside their shirts. We had one backpack each, and that was all we had left.

We continued our journey and reached the shore after the sun has set. By then, the temperature had dropped and the shore was full of people, moving like dark shadows. There was so much noise and chaos at the shore as we waited for someone to take us to the sea the next morning, when the water is most calm. My grandmother got separated from us during the chaos. We tried to search for her in the darkness but had no luck. When the sun rose, we were rushed or pushed on an inflated boat immediately. The boat looked more like a rubber raft, and we were loaded together tightly, but though we looked everywhere, we could not find my grandma. The smuggler started the motor. We did not know what to do, except to pray for her safety, hoping she would either get on another boat, or somehow get connected with extended family members who had emigrated to other cities.

We then began our journey to Greece. The boat was packed full of people with different dialects who were escaping their homes just like us. I did a quick count, there were

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a total of 17 people, including me, overloading this little inflated boat. Some people were from Syria, some were from Afghanistan, and some had fake Syrian passports that we had no idea where they were truly from. During the boat ride, we encountered some big waves that threw us left and right. The smuggler yelled at us to start lightening the boat by tossing things overboard. We needed to shed the weight from a possible sinking boat. People started to dump things into the waves, and the ocean swallowed them immediately, but that did not help our situation. The smuggler yelled again and said we need to get rid of everything except our passports, unless we all wanted to die. Some people next to me began to cry, and I started crying, too. I hugged my bag filled with my favorite books and journals, and I gave them a kiss. The man yelled again, "Hurry!" I yanked my bag open and grabbed one of the journals—I did not have time to *pick* one, and I wouldn't know which one to pick because they were all precious to me—I quickly ripped the papers from the hard covers and tucked them into my shirt. I figured these papers do not weigh much, and if I just get rid of the hard covers, I could save at least a part of my journals. I jammed the papers into my shirt, and then I turned to the sea and tossed my bag and that one set of hard covers into the waves. My belongings disappeared quickly and with them my heart sank too. As the boat was rocking dangerously, I felt the papers scratching my skin, but that feeling somehow brought me comfort. I knew I saved a piece of who I used to be with me, a token of the life I used to have. I sat there and stared at the sea, and my tears would not stop. My mother hugged me tight, "it's ok, Myriam, you will always have your memories." Perhaps that was all I had. I hugged my mother back, our bodies pressed tightly together, my torn off journal pages, with the random fragments of my former life, crunched between us.

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When we saw Lesbos' shore, everyone in the boat cried again, but this time, they were tears of joy. We thanked God for safety, but from the look of everyone's face, I knew we were all nervous. When the boat was approaching Lesbos, all the men jumped off to waist deep water and helped push the boat to rest on the shore. Some Greek men rushed to us and helped with the boat. They offered their hands to women and children to help us to get off. It was a strange feeling to have my feet touching solid ground again. It felt good to be able to move my legs again after that cramped boat ride, but I could still feel my body slightly moving back and forth. A man in front of me kneeled down on the beach and kissed the black pebbles. People were hugging each other. We were all so relieved. However, we could not spend much time for celebration, because there was still a long way ahead of us. We immediately started trekking toward Mytilene, a port where we can get our paperwork processed by Greek officials, and from there, we could take a ferry to Athens, then embark on our journey to some other major cities in Europe.

It was a challenging walk, rife with obstacles. There were several steep hills and the weather must have been above 33 degrees Celsius. Our group was silent, trudging in single file toward our destination. Soon, families with young children and elderly started to slow down and fall behind the line. We took a break underneath a large tree for shade. I looked around and I could see the shimmery blue water of Turkey's coast in the distance. There were some hotels, restaurants, cafes, and shops ahead of us; some people were sunbathing on lounge chairs.

It was such a contrast to see those people enjoying the sun with near to nothing on, while we sat underneath a tree fully clothed. The group rested about 10 minutes and started

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going again, we stopped at the shop to purchase some water and snack, and we received curious glances from the people sitting outside the café.

“The locals here are used to seeing refugees passing,” the shop clerk told us. “But the tourists, they are the ones who like to stare!” I have never had anyone stare at me before, so I avoided eye contact whenever we passed people sitting outside cafes and restaurants.

Although I did not see their faces, I could sense people’s eyes on us, they hid their glances behind their dark sunglasses, moving their heads from left to right as we walked pass by. This one young woman did not think we would notice, but I could see from the side of my eyes that she took out her phone and took some photos of us, or maybe she was taking a video. I wondered if she was going to post it on her social media and what caption would she write to her friends.

Would this be how people would perceive me—like a never-seen-before exotic animal—once we resettled in a new city? A panic crept up on me physically taking my breath and emotionally making me feel anxious and fearful.

Once we finally reached Mytilene, we waited several days for the Greek officials to process our paperwork. In the meantime, we stayed in a tent again, passing each day hoping to hear back from the officials. There were outdoor showers, separated into men’s and women’s, and people could hang their wet clothing on ropes between the trees. Some Iraqi and Syrian men played volleyball in the evenings, with two men holding a piece of fish net between the teams. My father joined them and played, too. I saw him smiling for the first time in a long time. My mother seemed more relaxed, too. As long as I was with my family, I was happy.

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Our paperwork was approved after a few days waiting in this camp. We boarded a ferry and headed to the port of Athens. Once we arrived in Athens, some Greek officials checked our passports and other paperwork, took our fingerprints, and gave us some food and water. From there, we must go to northern Greece to a UNHCR refugee camp called Lagkadikia and register for refugee status. If all went smoothly, my parents shared, the UNHCR would process our claim quickly and recommend us to a country to resettle. By the time we registered in Lagkadikia camp, we were physically exhausted. The long days of traveling this past week has taken a toll on us, especially my mother. Our temporary home in Lagkadikia refugee camp was basic, but it provided us what we needed—shelter, water, food, safety, and a community. The tents were close to each other, and every one of them had blue “UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency” print by the door. The first night at the refugee camp, I slept like a rock. I knew the future was still uncertain for us, but at least we were one step closer to making a new life together as a family.

The very next day, we went to see an official to apply for resettlement. We were aware that not every application got granted, and people often didn’t get to resettle in their country of choice. In fact, many refugees stalled there, waiting for their future decided for them.

“What is our choice of host country?” I asked my father.

“I have a distant cousin who lives in the US—I haven’t spoken to him personally for over a year, but I know he married an American woman and moved to a state called Michigan to be close to her family,” my father answered.

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I vaguely remember one of my aunts mentioned this uncle during a family gathering, but I have never met him. I heard he was hoping to bring his bride to visit family in Syria but because of the civil war, he was not able to.

“So, we are going to America?”

“Let’s see what they decide, sometimes it’s not up to us, what we want.” My father paused. “But again, we don’t have any other family outside Syria. If we go to a new country to live, it’s nice to have family there, but if they placed us somewhere else, we’d be grateful, too.”

“Yes, as long as we don’t stay in camp for too long. We won’t be picky. I want you to still have a childhood,” my mother said.

A warm lady helped us with our application to resettle in the US. She told us the refugee agency would review our case and determine if we were a good fit for the US. If they decided that we were, the agency will make the contact with the appropriate US department and submit their recommendation to them. Thus, we started our waiting game at the camp. Days passed with not much excitement each day, but I made some friends with some other girls in the camp. My parents also made acquaintances with some other adults, too. My friends and I did not have much to play with, but we made do by looking for interesting shapes of rocks, playing hide and seek, or just being free to run and make up games.

There was one day when some volunteers came to the camp and passed out school supplies to us children: books, pens, pencils, papers, notebooks, and some art supplies. We were ecstatic. I got a notebook that had plastic yellow covers, and inside, there were light blue lines just like my old journals. I did the usual: flipped the pages of paper between my

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fingers and took a deep breath. It didn't smell the same as my other brand new notebooks, perhaps it's because it has traveled a long distance to get to me. The volunteers said these supplies were donated to us by kind people all over the world. I felt so blessed that there were strangers out there had compassion for us. I didn't know who they were or where they were from, but I knew we were not forgotten. I caressed the yellow notebook, a precious gift to me.

When I lived in Aleppo, I always wrote in my own room. I enjoyed a moment of solitude when I journal, and I didn't like to be interrupted. Now, I have gotten used to writing with one or both of my parents in the tent with me, and I also have written sitting outside our tent, while kids kept running up to me and asking me what was I doing. At times, I had to make an entry short so I could join my friends for a group game. The notebook was very sturdy, but I was careful with how much I write in it because I didn't want it to run out of space. It eventually ran out of space, so I just used plain papers to write my journal entries, then fold them and put them into my yellow notebook. The once thin yellow notebook became overly stuffed, so I placed a rubber band around it to help close the covers together.

My refugee friends and I had a lot of fun with the art supplies. We drew on discarded cardboard boxes that laid on the ground, and used different colors of paint to leave our handprints on an old wall. We were careful, however, not to get any paint on our clothes, because it was hard to come off and washing clothes was such a pain for our mothers. Sometimes, we colored the rocks or made animal faces on them. Thinking back on this time, we really had fun with whatever resources we could find.

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A month later, we got the news that the refugee agency passed our applications to The State Department of US, and my parents and I were beyond happy to hear this news. We were another step closer to rebuilding our life. However, the wait for the next step was long and dull. We kept thinking the next day, someone from the US department would come and interview us, but we would get disappointed. The refugee agency told us that the US government takes much longer to process a refugee's application, and the process is much more rigorous and lengthy than the western European countries. So we waited and waited.

Then one day, I was playing outside with my friends when my mother came and found me. "Hurry, Myriam, come home with me," she extended her hand and grabbed mine. "Someone from the US is here to interview us!" I jumped up and followed her, and we met my father in an office. There sat a man and a woman, and their badges had the US flag on them. There was also a translator. They greeted us with a smile and told us they would need to conduct one interview with each one of us. The man took my father into a room, the woman took my mother into another, and I waited for my turn with the UNHCR worker. When the woman finished interviewing my mother, she let me into the interview room. She was nice, but I couldn't help to be nervous sitting across from her. I prayed my answers would be appealing to her, because I didn't want to ruin our chance to resettle in the US. The woman asked me many questions during the interview. First, the questions were basic ones, such as what was my full name, how old was I, my address in Syria, etc. then the questions got deep. In a soft voice, she leaned forward and asked me to describe for her my experience with the war in Syria, how was my life in Aleppo during the conflict, how has my life changed, and what terrified me if I had to continue to live in Syria? I sat there and spent a long time telling her what I have heard and saw during the conflict in Aleppo. When I

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started telling her the tragedy of my brother, I started crying and just could not finish my story. She offered me some tissues and her eyes were moist too. So we both sat there in silence for a while, I eventually calmed down. “I don’t want to die,” I looked right at her. “Or even worse, to see my parents die.” That was the end of our interview.

The three of us gathered again in the office and the officers photocopied our passports, took our fingerprints, palm prints, and photographs. They documented our eye colors, hair colors, and took our heights and weights. When they finished, they told us that the next step was to wait to see if the US decline or accept us, and if they send us any further instructions, we must act upon them. They warned us that this process could be long, but we were willing to wait. We have gone this far and we weren’t going to give up.

A year passed before we received instruction to meet up with US medical personnel for our health assessments. The lady who assessed me was chatty while she examined my eyes, ears, nose, and throat, took my blood pressure, listened to my lungs and heart, pressed down on my abdomen, and drew several tubes of my blood. She asked if I knew anything about the US, and I told her no. I knew very little, if any, about this place we might end up living in. “You will be just fine,” she comforted me. Then she told me both of her parents were first generation immigrants to the US, her mom was from Cuba and her dad was from Poland, they met in college and fell in love. “They had a tough time at first, being in a new country, speaking a new language, and all that. But they learned everything very quickly and ended up really liking living in America. They are happy. Now, they are on a cruise to Alaska.” I smiled and nodded my head. I was actually getting a little excited for the possibility to resettle in the US.

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Another six months or so passed, and we got the news that our applications were approved! We were hugging, laughing, and crying at the same time. We had gotten used to the camp life, but we were also very ready to settle somewhere that we could rebuild a normal life. Some of my friends had already left for their new countries by then, and some of them were still there. We had new members to our friends' circle, and we were used to seeing people check in and check out of the camp. Now, it was finally my family's turn to leave. That evening, I drew a sketch of the camp and our tent on a piece of paper, and put it together with the journal inserts I ripped out a year and half ago.

Before we could leave for the US, we had to go through cultural orientation training. It was a series of six classes that taught us how to adjust to our new life in the US, and each class was about three hours. We sat in a room and several teachers came in and taught us. On the first day, the teachers went over the procedure we would need to go through in order to travel to the US, and how the US would process our resettlement once we arrive. I didn't remember this part much, because I was very overwhelmed by the loaded information they were giving to us. My parents, however, listened with attention and took notes. Then we learned about the local refugee agency in our new community, and how they would help us throughout the resettling process. I was happy to hear that someone from the agency would be waiting for us at the new place, because I felt close to these people already. Each day also contained language lessons on conversational English, which we all studied diligently after each class. The teachers covered some other topics, as well, such as how to adjust to the US culture, US laws on immigration, learning English post-arrival, the school system, housing, healthcare, financing, transportation, travel, employment, and ways to get involved with our new community. The six classes went by fast, I absorbed as much information as I could,

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and I knew my parents grew more confident each class. They told us we would need to continue this training after we arrive in the US. We were ready.

Finally, in June 2017, we got on a plane headed to the US. It's been nearly two years we waited in the refugee camp before our asylum application for the US was approved, and this day finally came. A worker from the Refugee Agency helped us to get our documents and other things together. We didn't have any belongings, just some clothes that we used in the camp, and of course, I packed my yellow journal and the stack of papers that was the remaining of my old journal from Aleppo. These were my most prized possessions. The night before our departure, I picked up a little rock from outside our tent and put it in my backpack. Somehow I already started missing this place.

On the day we left the camp, I said goodbye to all of my friends and wished them best with wherever they would go. A man from the refugee agency drove us to an airport, helped us with getting the tickets and boarding the plane. The money for the plane tickets was a loan to us, which my family had to pay back within six months of arriving in the US, but it was interest-free, and our first three months' expenses in the US were covered by the US government, so we didn't have to worry financially too much. After walking us to the gate, the man from the agency bid his farewell, too. When he was shaking our hands before he left, I wanted to ask him to stay and travel with us, because I was scared. I knew he wasn't able to even if I asked, but I couldn't shake this feeling of nervousness and uneasiness, I thought I was going to throw up.

December 8, 2017

I vividly remember the day we arrived to the US. After a very long flight, we first landed in O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, where we went through a lengthy custom

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process. An airport official picked us up from our gate and walked us to the immigration hall. I still remember how nervous and clueless I felt when my family was sitting and waiting underneath a sign that read “Asylums and Refugees.” We were physically exhausted from the long travel, but we tried to stay awake because they could call us at anytime. Sitting next to us was a family from Somalia. They had one man, two women, and one small child. Dressed in their traditional clothing, they looked nervous, too. I sat there and watched large groups of people waiting in long lines to go through US immigration. I watched them separating into two sections: “Visitors” and “US Citizens and Permanent Residents” and walking up to awaiting officers behind the glass booths. The immigration officers wore blue uniforms and they seemed stern and intimidating. One thing that really fascinated me was that for the first time in my life, I saw people mixed together with many different skin colors, who spoke different languages, and dressed in various ways. I thought to myself that the US must be a very welcoming place, because just look at all these diverse people—they gathered here from all over the world, trying to enter to the US.

Finally, a lady came and took us to a special room to process our immigration documents. She was also our translator and we followed everything she told us to do. We handed our paperwork and passports to an immigration officer behind the desk. The officer first placed our passports under a small black machine that shined green light; then he held up each passport and carefully examined our faces. He asked us some questions, then the translator lady repeated his questions, we answered, then the lady repeated back to the officer. The officer next checked our documents, typed on his computer, and spent some time reading on his monitor. He was a quiet man; I tried hard for some visual sign, but I had no clue what he was thinking. After he was done checking the documents, he twisted a little

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metal ball with a long neck toward us and asked us to stand in front of it one by one. It was a camera! I wasn't sure if should smile so I didn't. Next, he took our fingerprints, all ten of them. After all that, he reached over and grabbed a big white square stamp. With several loud sounds, he stamped our documents and passports. "Welcome." He flashed us a wide smile and handed our passports back to us.

"Now you all are good to go!" the translator lady told my family.

"Really?" my mother asked and I felt her hands gripped my shoulders a little tighter.

"Yes, and let's go to your connecting gate."

We had arrived in the US!

The next lag of our flight was not long, and I was finally able to fall asleep. I woke up from my nap and saw my dad's arms crossed, bobbing his head from dozing off, and my mom sitting quietly next to me with her eyes closed. None of us have slept for over 20 hours, our nervousness of coming to a new country, uncertainty for my grandma back in Syria, and the adrenaline of excitement for a new life kept us restless until now. Our case manager, a man named Daniel, picked us up from the airport and drove us to his office, and there he gave us an orientation: a brief introduction of the town, the place we will need to go to learn English, where to take public transportation, where to shop for groceries, how to seek medical help, etc. Daniel also gave my parents a list of companies that worked with the government by providing job opportunities to refugees, they could contact them and find jobs they were able to do. After the orientation, Daniel drove us to an apartment building in the middle of a tree-lined street. It was a three-story square apartment building and we would stay on the second level, in apartment 2A.

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The moment Daniel opened the door for us, I eagerly stick my head in and looked around—the kitchen is on the left, a phone attached to the kitchen wall, a large window with blinds on one side of the living room, a dining table, four chairs, light beige carpet that still had freshly vacuumed lines, a door on the right leading to two separate bedrooms, with one bathroom tucked in a corner. There were even some basic housing items such as cookware, eating utensils, laundry soap, dish soap, toilet paper, and paper towels. In the closets, there were some clothing items. We were so grateful. I was ecstatic because I thought I had to share a small space with my parents, just like we did in the camps, but instead I had my very own room! That day, we were finally resettled.

We were alone and lonely when we got here. The pain of losing my young brother and the unknown situation of my grandma has turned our once happy family into a sad one. My father found a job in a local car manufactory, and my mother found work in a large chain grocery store. We were starting to slowly rebuild our life. Daniel helped me to enroll in a nearby public school and picked up school supplies. I think life is now slowly getting better, but I know my friends and the rest of my family back home were still living in war, and my immediate family is still suffering deep inside.

September 11, 2018

Who am I? Since I arrived here, I often question my identity. It's been little over a year since we relocated here and I am still trying to figure out how people perceive me and how should I best act in this society. I remember the morning of the first day of school, I debated if I should wear my hijab to school. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror for at least 10 minutes, putting on my hijab and taking it back down. I was never one who spends so much time getting ready, but that morning, I simply did not know what to do. My hijab is

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a part of me, it is a part of my identity as a Muslim, and I am proud of what it represents. At the same time, I was worried about how the people at my new school would perceive me, because I know I would probably be the only one wearing a hijab. I was worried to look too differently from my classmates and I was worried that I wouldn't be able to connect with any of the girls in my class, that I would end up with having no friends at school—what a dreadful thought! I stood there and debated until my mom told me we needed to leave soon to school, then at the last moment, I put on my hijab. I already felt I lost so many parts of me, so I could not afford to lose yet another important part of who I am.

By now, my English has gotten much better, and I am a lot more used to my new home, but I know I am still an “outsider” here. Today, my school had a moment of silence after second period to honor those who died in 9/11. Afterwards, I was walking to a class when a kid passed me in the hallway, purposely bumped into me and said, “Are you gonna bomb our school?” There were other kids with him but none of them said anything. They all just stood there and looked at me, as to see if I would start a fight. I was furious and went to my counselor to report what just happened. That kid got in trouble, and my counselor told me that he would be expelled from our school, if he ever said anything like that to me again.

It felt good to know that I am protected, but I know deep inside, many other people have a similar attitude toward me like that kid. I felt it when we go out as a family; I felt it when people gave us extra glances when my mother used to walk me to school wearing her long robe and hijab; and I felt it when I speak with my family in Arabic on the phone. On the outside, I dress just like the other girls in my school, I wear blue jeans, sneakers, and T-shirts, but inside, I struggle with my place here. I feel I stand out like a sore thumb. Today, I went home and cried my eyes out. I sat on my bed and questioned why would that kid, who does

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not know me as a person, threw such an insulting question to me? What makes people like him assume that, just because I am a Muslim, I would do anything to harm others? I have read there is a phenomenon called “Islamophobia,” to refer to those people who really dislike Islam and Muslims, and this prejudice is flamed by the news media and often used for political purposes. The teachers and classmates all have been nice to me, but that one question from that one person made me feel isolated, and I am now doubting if people really accept me here. I lost my brother, lost my friends back home, lost my grandma, and lost my home. They are all vanished parts of who I am, therefore I don’t believe in myself as whole anymore.

December 18, 2018

I am on winter break, but today, I am bored. Jing is traveling with her family right now during the break, so I have no one to hang out with during the day. Jing is my best friend here and I’m so glad I met her on the very first day of school. I was so scared the night before school that I barely slept, but I quickly enjoyed going to school after meeting Jing. Having a best friend in school really makes school more fun.

Jing and I have many of the same classes, and we always eat lunch together. Being the only two non-American born kids in our class, we connected right away. We took the same ESL tutoring sessions, both love spicy food, and our favorite class is art. We both juggle between living our native cultures at home and learning the American culture outside our home, in a way, we support each other as we learn to adapt to our new life in this small Michigan town together.

We have been best friends since my sophomore year, the year I started the school here. Jing’s parents are first generation Chinese immigrants, they come from a small city in

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the south of China, but she told me there are two million people living there, which seems so crazy to me. I told her about my hometown, Aleppo, which is the largest city in Syria and has about 1.8 million people. Jing's family is atheist, and mine is Muslim, but we started a friendship fast. We often exchange stories about our lives before we came to the US, our favorite foods that can only be found on the streets of those familiar corners, our best friends back home, the games we used to play, and how we celebrated the holidays. Sometimes, I would go over to Jing's home after school, and her mom always has fruits for us.

Sometimes, Jing comes over and she enjoys the atayef my mom makes, and she said that they remind her of the fried Chinese dumplings, but with cheese in the center instead of meat. We study together, play outside together, and eat lunch together in school. We are super close.

But there are things I haven't yet shared with Jing. The dark and sad memories I had of my city before my family escaped to the US—my brother's lifeless body, dangled in my father's arms, my mom's ruined face, my grandmother's cry, the sound of bombs in the distance...things I try so hard to forget but always reappear in my dreams. I don't like to share them with others. I don't want to have to repeat what I have seen, because telling those stories would be like reliving those moments again, so I kept those memories to myself. All I told Jing was how beautiful Aleppo was before the war, how the bazaar was filled with people, families hanging out in the square, children playing on safe streets. I also told her that things have changed in Aleppo because of the war, so my family fled. I did not go into much of my personal experience, such as our scary boat ride to Lesbos, or the condition of our different refugee camps, because I am not ready to fully expose myself, not even to my best friend.

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I sealed the bad memories of my past deep in my brain, reasoning that if I didn't think of them, they wouldn't resurface.

February 5, 2019

Something unexpected happened today, so unexpected that I caused a scene when I jumped out of my seat during lunch. In a nutshell, today I broke my silence and told Jing my story of becoming a refugee.

During lunch, Jing was sitting across from me as usual, and she was watching a video on her phone. She was particularly homesick today because it is Chinese New Year, the biggest holiday in China. She told me on this holiday back in China, family members would all gather together, no matter how far someone is from home, he or she would try their best to make the trip home. On New Year's Eve, the adult would make dumplings together and chat about the upcoming year, and all the children would get new clothes to wear. They would have a larger than normal feast right before the clock hits midnight and the adults would give the children *Hong Bao*, a red envelope with cash to signal well wishes for good luck for the next year. Jing said that when the Chinese New Year rolls around here, she gets very sad because there is no celebration envelope for this special holiday where we now live. Unlike big cities that have large Chinatowns, such as New York City or San Francisco, there is no Chinese community here that could share the joy and tradition of this holiday. I understand how she felt, being so far away from family and friends on a special holiday is hard, much like how I miss Eid al-Adha.

We were just sitting there when all of sudden, I heard loud machine gun shots and bombing sounds from Jing's device. The gunshots and the bombing noise were constant, and

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they only got louder and louder. Some were close and some were far, much like the sounds I used to hear before leaving Aleppo. I suddenly realized that my memories were back to haunt me, no matter how hard I tried to forget them, they are here to stay, perhaps with me for my lifetime.

Prompted by the familiar sound and almost like a reflex, I stood up so fast that I made the table move. My chair dragged on the floor with a loud squeaky noise. Jing looked up at me puzzled. I felt several pairs of eyes were fixed on me.

“What’s wrong, Myriam?” Jing asked.

“What is that?” I was panting. “Is it news about Syria?”

Jing studied me for a second and said, “No, my family back home sent me a video of them setting off fireworks. Everyone goes crazy with those on Chinese New Year Eve,” pausing for a while, then she seemed curious. “Why did you ask that?”

I sat down and contemplated if I should tell her noises like that reminded me of my once beautiful hometown being bombed. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to relive my memories by telling Jing what I have witnessed. In our high school, no one really talks about what is going on outside this country. Kids here are more worried about who to ask out for prom, who is the new head coach for the football team, and how to best prepare for SAT. There is a Political Science class that is taught by a very popular teacher, Mrs. Walsh, but that is an AP class so only a small amount of people are in it and I am not sure if they discuss Syria. No one has ever come up to me and asked about my country. Sometimes I wonder if they even know where I am from. But again, I don’t really open up to anyone besides Jing, and even Jing doesn’t know everything.

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I decided it's time to tell her why I jumped out of my seat. I think I realized that by telling my past to someone, I would feel relieved because then I would not have to keep my past as a secret anymore. So I told Jing about my life in Aleppo, what happened to my family and how I ended up here. I told her the sound I heard from her phone reminded me so much of the sounds of bombs and gunshots going off in the distance, and the ones dropping from the sky. Even worse, sounds like that reminded me how I lost my brother—to a bomb explosion. I explained to her that I still am scared of these sounds, because they bring me back to those bad memories right away.

“Today, where Chinese children are laughing and clasping their hands with the sound of fireworks, children in Syria are scared and hiding from the same sounds.” Jing's eyes got really big and wide as she listened. She said she was sorry; she didn't know, and I told her I didn't blame her.

February 6, 2019

I do not blame Jing for not knowing much of my background before I told her all this. I am used to the fact that people here know little or nothing about me or others like me. There is world news on the television and people are on social media daily, but unless one does something digging, Syrian refugees hardly make the headlines. In 2016, when Aleppo fell in the hands of Assad, I was nervous but excited to get some updates on the people from my hometown. I read relevant stories on the siege of Aleppo from several major news outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *The New Yorker*, *NBC*, *The Huffington Post*, *Time*, *USA Today*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, just to name a few. They did talk about the sad aftermath, but they all left me wondering: where are the updates on the refugees? There was simply a lack of humanitarian aspect in their reporting.ⁱ

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It is very sad for me to see there is such a strong need for humanitarian help in Aleppo and many more refugees are born from this siege. For instance, *The Washington Post* wrote that citizens from both sides of Aleppo were suffering, and it especially stressed the exact number of civilians in the West part of Aleppo, the part that was controlled under Russia and Assad—250,000—all of them were without enough food or medicine, and many of them were children. This number is surely shocking to me, and I felt very sad to see such a large amount of people suffered from the siege. I also really want to find out how many people from my hometown were suffering from the US held side, and how many people were left in my city? All the big news sources keep mentioning the high number of total deaths, but only from one side of the city. I have family and friends from all over Aleppo, why can't I find any statistics on the entire city? There was one photograph that stood out to me, because it featured a street that looked familiar to me. It showed distraught-looking Syrians gathered on the side of the road, waiting to get on dust-covered busses that would lead them outside the city. In the distance, torn buildings barely standing and stalled vehicles with their windows shattered. The entire picture was grey toned, and the only color in it was the green paint on the busses. This little bit of green suggested hope to me, as if those people waiting were about to go on a new journey that would offer them some hope. However, by the end of the article, I still did not find any information on what happened to the people that escaped. Where did they go, where did they resettle, did they make it out ok, none of these questions were answered.

Going through the articles, I noticed that it is a pattern for these news sources to only provide an exact number of people in need from the East side of Aleppo, as if those suffered from the West side was not worth mentioning. In addition, they used the word "people" to

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categorize the sick, wounded, died, and the escaped, therefore there was no particular information on refugees.

To this day, I often wonder what happened to the people who used to live in those torn buildings? Where are the children who used to play on those streets? Are we, the innocent victims of this proxy war, simply rendered invisible?

February 10, 2019

Today, I decided to search more in detail on what the news here says about the siege of Aleppo in 2016. I feel I could dig more things from the news stories. What did they say that was the cause of this siege? Would they explain all the events happened prior to the fall of my city? Who is to blame? I want to know how the news educates people here about the fall of Aleppo, because in a way, that is how people here understand why my family and I are here.

I was expecting to find overwhelming information on Aleppo, but to my surprise, I had to dig in the Internet to find the ones I did; perhaps the US news is not that interested in the siege of Aleppo in 2016. Nonetheless, the ones that wrote on the event were all major US news sources, so I know they speak volumes in the readers' mind. From what I can see from the news online, Aleppo is destroyed. I can only imagine the horror over there because one source said that Aleppo's streets were "full with dead bodies."ⁱⁱⁱ Underneath that title, there was a large photo of a single Syrian girl walking on wreckage in East Aleppo. The bombed shop next to her looked wobbly, as it would fall on her at any moment. Her pants were covered with white dust, maybe she has been walking in the ruins for a while. She held her arms by her side, fists squeezed tight, as if she was using her arms to keep her balance as she walked down the small hill of destruction. The building behind her was a residential one, I

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could tell by the bed sheets people laid outside their windows to dry, but all the glass on the windows was gone. Seeing her photograph gave me flashbacks of my childhood in Aleppo, where I used to run down the street to find my friends so we could play. I was about the same age with this little girl, but thankfully I was able to play in an intact city.

I finally found a photo of the East side of Aleppo, but this one featured no people but only buildings. It was a bird's eye view of eastern Aleppo, all I saw were buildings—not ruined—and a cloud of smoke in the distance. The smoke indicated that there was either conflict or fire happened in that area, but the article did not specify which one. I wanted more updates on the people from eastern Aleppo because some of my relatives lived there, but there simply wasn't much information. The news definitely wanted to focus on the western Aleppo, the side that was besieged by Assad and his allies. However, if the news mentioned that the “city of Aleppo” was in trouble because of this siege, then shouldn't they pay the same attention to both areas of the city?

There is so much visual destruction in the photographs: Aleppo looking grey and dusty, destructed buildings lined the empty streets, chunks of fallen concrete piled on the sides of the road. This is not the Aleppo in my memory. I saw lonely children playing on top of those fallen concrete piles, elderly people dying in hospitals, distressed mothers holding their little babies, but one thing was very obvious: there were hardly any Syrian men in the photographs. The only Syrian men in the photographs were fighters and military forces carrying machine guns, walking, shooting or aiming, and they were all pro-government forces. The majority of the photographs of these pro-government military men were taken in the West of Aleppo, documenting them either aiming at a target or planning their next battle.ⁱⁱⁱ There was one picture of a group of military men strolling down a war-

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torn street, they were all smiling, and their body language appeared relaxed. Their guns were not raised and they seemed to be in a good mood.^{iv} However, these were pro-government men walking in eastern Aleppo right after they gained control of the area, which explained why they looked happy and relaxed. I could tell there was a big battle that happened here by looking at the bombed buildings and streets, also the dead trees behind these fighters. These men were the only alive beings in this photograph.

The fact that the news preferred to feature photographs of pro-government military men from the West of Aleppo suggested to me that the West was the one to blame for the humanitarian disaster after the siege. Despite the destruction caused by the siege, the pro-government force was happy as long as they were able to recapture eastern Aleppo. From the news I was able to find, there was only one lonely photograph of a rebel fighter shooting toward the pro-government forces.^v The man in this photograph was by himself, isolated in a dark room. He was kneeling down on the dirty ground and aiming his gun from the only light source of that photograph—a very small window. The overall mood and tone of this photograph reflected little of hope for this man, because while the military force in the western side were shown in groups in open spaces, he was shown isolated, cramped in a dark space, and alone. This man looked like he was fighting against the world.

The fighting men from eastern Aleppo were not highlighted, and there were no detailed photos of Syrian men in civilian clothing from any side. With their military uniforms, these featured Syrian men can seem intimidating. Why is the news not showing civilian Syrian men, but only the women, children, and the elderly? Are the men not a part of those who suffered from the war? I think about the male relatives in my family, the one uncle who loved crackling jokes, my other uncle who always spoke softly, and I think of my

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father. People always told me I got my father's eyes, and my tender demeanor is surely inherited from my father, too. My father is tall but gentle, and when he walks, he hunches his back just a little. I remember how hard he cried over the death of my brother, and wondered why Syrian fathers like him were not represented in the photographs.

The news only chose to show photographs of certain groups of people, to be more precise, pictures of military Syrian men and pictures of Syrian children. To me, this lack of civilian Syrian men in the news suggested to the viewers that the Syrian men are excluded from the rest of those who were affected by the siege, but in reality, they are in just as much pain as their wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters. The men in my family, immediate and distant, are all family oriented and care about their loved ones. Sadly, the photos in the news here do not show that. Those healthy adult men in the photographs were all fighters that took up the responsibility to combat, rather than to care for their families during this time of need.

I went back to the articles and tried to see how Syrian women are depicted, thinking that there would be some photographs of Syrian women, but alas, I was disappointed again. Out of all the articles I found, there was only one article that showed a photograph of a Syrian woman: a sick elderly woman, probably around my grandmother's age, wrapped in layers of heavy blankets being carried out of the East of Aleppo. Her eyes were shut tight, her body was limp, and her hair was white and messy. She appeared lifeless from my point of view and she is the only focused subject in this photo, everything else is blurred.^{vi} They are using this poor old woman's photograph to show the cruelty of the siege, I thought to myself, they did not get her name or tell the readers what happened to this old woman—was she sick or injured? Was this in her house or in a hospital? They only used the word “elderly” to describe her and I wish they could have at least told us what put her in this

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situation. This photograph made me miss my grandma even more and I grew more worried for her safety. This was the only photograph of an Aleppo woman I could find among all the articles I gathered, which baffled me as why the news would not show the faces of any mothers, sisters, and wives in Aleppo. There is a lack of civilian Syrian men in the news and there is also a lack of representation of civilian Syrian women, this really surprised me.

Among all the photographs I found, there were two featured Syrian children, or to be more precise, Syrian young girls because there were no Syrian boys depicted in the photographs—another thing that shocked me. I even went back to the articles and did a double check, but no, there were no Syrian boys in any of the photographs. There were only Syrian girls in the photographs. The first photograph was a small girl with pigtails standing in the middle of the photograph, holding a really large poster that read “#StandWithAleppo Please Stop the bombing and **end** the siege.”^{vii} It looked like this girl made the poster herself because it was handwritten in a childish way, and the poster was also very large that it covered the most of the little girl’s body so all the readers can see are her head and a part of her legs. I bet if she held the poster vertically, she could hide herself completely behind it. She was standing in front of what appear to be a large pile of fallen concrete, obviously, the siege has destroyed this area where she was standing. Even standing in front of destruction, this little girl was smiling, and I could not tell if she was standing there holding the poster when the photographer just happened to pass by, or someone asked her to pose there with a poster and smile for the camera. Moreover, I wonder if this little girl made this poster herself, or someone instructed her to make one, also, were those her own words, or someone told her what to write? Since there was no caption explaining this photograph, I really do not know the story behind it. I do not think the articles should simply showed the photograph of

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this child without even giving the readers any background of it, but this photograph was placed next to the section that talked about how Assad and his support forces bombed Aleppo and left the people there in shambles, so I assume this little girl was from the east side of Aleppo, and she was probably standing in her now destroyed neighborhood. However, if my assumption were true, then why was she smiling? I remember how terrified and sad I was when I saw my neighborhood was falling into pieces because of the civil war, and there was no way I could be smiling at all in front of a camera.

I believe the individuality of this child is lost, the article was just using her innocent image to prove their point and get the readers emotionally involved, much like how they used that sick elderly woman's image. Isn't it fascinating that this little girl was holding a poster asking the siege to end, yet the article only mentioned one participant of the war? To achieve peace, do we not need all parties to take responsibility and stop their military involvement? No doubt Assad has caused suffering for the Syrian people, but so are the others who are participating in the civil war. This article does not mention this.

The second photograph that showed a Syrian girl was a really large photo, a lot bigger than the other ones I have found within the articles. In this photograph, there was a girl walking down a small hill that was either covered by debris or made by debris from destroyed buildings. She was obviously the main focus in this photograph, but it is the contrast between this casually walking girl and her surroundings that made a strong impression to me. I could see her surrounding was a big pile of broken concrete, and the roof of the building next to her looked like it was about to fall down anytime, very apparent that this location has been affected by the war. This background screamed, "this is the bad aftermath of the war!" to me, but when I looked at the girl, her lips slightly curved upward to

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give her an appearance of smiling. It seems she was being careful walking down that hill of debris, her arms to her side and her fists were tight, as if she was using her arms as balance. Her knees were bent in a way that indicated she was taking careful steps, and her eyes were aiming toward the ground. This is how people walk if they are trying not to slip and fall. Also, there was white dust covering her dark pants, so she must have been walking among the dusty debris for a while. The caption underneath the photograph read, “A Syrian girl walks amid the wreckage of damaged buildings and shops in the western city of Aleppo, Syria on Dec. 5. Hassan Ammar/AP.” Again, I was not sure if this girl was posing for the photographer or this was a candid shot—was she walking with her friends or family or was she out there by herself exploring the ruined neighborhood? This photograph was showing the part of the city that is controlled by Assad’s forces and the article, just like all the articles I have found, talked about how Aleppo was destroyed by Assad and Russian forces. I started to notice a theme here.

I had to go back and look at the girl in the photograph again. This time, even though she appeared to be smiling, I felt a sense of loneliness and sadness for her. I do not know if she was out with her friends or family, but someone at her age should not be playing in war destroyed areas. I wonder if she remembers what Aleppo used to look like and if she often thinks about how her environment used to be different. Her smile could either be a result of knowing someone was capturing a photograph of her, or feeling happy that she could finally come out to play after all the bombing. I vividly remember the days where I was so bored from the confinement of having to stay inside. I had no friends to play with and talk to, phone lines were down and no parents would let their children outside because of the gunshots and bombs. When we moved to our first camp, I was extremely happy to be

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outside again, I did not care if the outside was dirty. I stepped through puddles of water, used mud to make little sculptures, and ran up and down the dirt road to express my joy for being outside with my new friends. This photograph in the article did not tell me anything other than this girl was walking in a ruined city, but her image is such a big contrast to the rest of the photograph: life versus death, movement versus silence, youth versus ruins, and hope versus despair.

I took a nap today and in my dreams, I became that little girl, carefully walking among the wreckage of Aleppo. I saw my brother's and my friends' shadows walking ahead of me but I could not see them clearly, my vision was blurred by dust. I called out their names and reached out my arm trying to touch them, right before I woke up.

February 12, 2019

I saw on TV that some politicians are starting their campaigns for the presidential election in 2020. I know that back in 2015, the now President called all Syrian refugees "young and strong men" on television. I think about the families I met during our resettling journey and know that cannot be a true statement. What about me? A high school girl who constantly questions who she really is? My mother, who has not smiled much since my brother's death? What about my father, although he does have a tall and strong physique, we can tell he is putting on a façade of being emotionally strong and tough for our family? None of us are "young men," and we certainly are not "strong." I question the photographs in the news are just reinforcing the idea that all Syrian men pose a concern for national security, and they do not need any protection nor sympathy from the people here in the US. Or, maybe the news is purposely selecting Syrian girls and elderly woman to be in the photographs to show the cruelty of war, because they look more vulnerable and are more likely to gain viewers'

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sympathy. It is a spiral: the media only show civilian Syrian women, children, and the elderly to arouse emotion in the audience and purposely leave the civilian Syrian men out of the pictures, then this lack of pictures of Syrian civilian men reinforce the idea that they are not the ones that need people's concern, because look at them—they look tough and are carrying large guns, ready for battle.

The photos of these gun-carrying Syrian men give the viewers the illusion that they are fearful and capable of destruction. I got chills when thinking if people actually believe that all Syrian refugees are young and strong men like the ones showing in the photos, then of course they would not want any Syrian refugees like my family to come here. Or, people might have a negative connotation when they hear that my father is from Syria, and automatically think that he is someone they need to stay away from. What do people think about the refugees created by the siege of Aleppo? I started to do research on what happened to other families in my city after the siege.

I tried over and over again to find some updates on those who became refugees due to the siege of Aleppo, but I had no luck. The articles paid detailed attention to the scarce food and medical help caused by the siege, but no mention of the people that were forced to leave their homes. Where did others go and how are they doing now? There is no update, as if we evaporated in the air, just like the dust they showed in the photos.

February 15, 2019

All the news reading in the past few days left me more confused than ever. I started reading them because I was curious about how people here understand what happened in my city and what prompted my family to leave Syria. However, now I am more interested in

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what was not said in the news. Every painter knows white space in a painting is also a part of the art, so the unsaid words in the news are also a part of the story.

Although none of the news articles said it, I can sense that they want to say what happened in Aleppo was fate. They gave out a message that what the civilians in Aleppo have gone through was all designated, and that no one could escape this destiny. According to them, there is no peace in the Middle East, and there is no end to this civil war in Syria. So many phrases suggested the idea of fatalism—the inevitable outcome Aleppo was bound to have, no matter what people do.

Reading the articles made me realize that these journalists view Aleppo as a city in shambles, one that is not going to escape the fate of being torn and burnt. Phrases I saw that described Aleppo were that it “will likely” to “continue to burn,” due to its “fate.” The war has “no signs of ending” and it will not “end anytime soon” because it “seems likely it will continue unabated.”^{viii} These phrases made me sad because I was hoping to see they offer a sense of hope and positivity for the future of my city. The articles showed that no one knows when the war in Syria will be over, or how it can be over; they believe that there is no solution for peace in our country. The news said Syria is destined to be a war-torn country, and Aleppo is destined to keep on suffering in the near future. The news indicated that the end of the war in Syria is nowhere in sight, and much like many other countries in the Middle East, it will not escape a doomed outcome, as if we have always experienced war and turmoil. I clearly remember the days when everything was perfect, when my hometown was not gray but colorful, people were not despaired but happy, we heard birds chirping, not bombs dropping. Aleppo was not always like this, and I refuse to think there is no good future for Aleppo and for Syria.

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Although the news articles did not believe there would be an end to the war, they surely knew who to blame for all the tragedy happened in Aleppo. The culprit, according to these news articles, is Russia. I read article after article on how Russia teamed with Assad to create a now disastrous life for the people in Aleppo, and it was the Russian military's involvement that are leaving people in Aleppo with extremely limited food and medical assistance,^{ix} I don't know much about the country Russia, but it seems the news here really do not favor this country, because all fingers are pointing to Russia on the case of Aleppo. At the same time, they mentioned little to nothing about the other countries that are fighting on my country's soil.^x

Assad's tyranny is made worse by teaming up with Russia, and they choose to purposely target the civilians, the everyday people.^{xi} What made me really sad was when I kept reading how many children died due to their reckless attacks.^{xii} The articles said there were a large number of innocent civilians who died in this siege, and by civilians I think that included men, women, the elderly and the children. However, the news only really highlighted the suffering of children—female children to be exact—to show the ruthlessness of Assad and his allies. Yes, the news only needed to mention how demoralizing Assad and Russia's forces are to the children in Aleppo for me to have a clear picture that Assad and Russia are seeking power no matter what damage they caused. Imagine, if they did not care about the children's lives, would they care at all about the lives of other civilians? Of course not!

It is clear that Assad and Russia have an "I help you and you help me" working relationship, where Assad needs Russia's armed forces and Russia needs Assad for gaining power in the Middle East, and their names always go hand in hand in these articles. Because

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Russia is the “big bad wolf,” Syrian civilians need the US’ protection so that is the reason and justification of US entry to my country, as in Assad needs Russia like Syria needs the US.

Tonight, I looked at the map of Russia on the Internet and scrolled through some photos of this country. There are some beautiful churches. The tops of the churches reminded me of onions, but really colorful ones. It looks like Russia has the largest lake, and its winter seems cold and extremely long. Looking at these pictures online, I questioned if Russia is really responsible for causing my family to lose our home and resettle in a foreign land. Or is it the one that caused my young brother’s death? How about all the other tragedies happening in Syria, in Aleppo? Is Russia the Syrian people’s enemy?

February 24, 2019

During breakfast this morning, I mentioned to my parents what I have been researching after school these past few weeks. It is not very often that all of us sit down for a family meal, because my parents work in shifts. Sometimes, my father had to work at a night shift and wouldn’t be back till 10 pm, and sometimes, my mother had to get up at 5 am for a morning shift. They also work on the weekends from time to time. Therefore, whenever all of us sit down to eat together for a meal becomes our precious family time. I have wanted to tell them what I found with my little project with the US news articles. After I told them what I have been reading in the news about Aleppo, my parents gave each other a look as if to say, “This is terrible, and we have no idea about this! Now how should we respond to our daughter?” After about five seconds, my dad crossed his arms and asked me, “So these news sources, do your friends in school read them, too?”

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“I don't know if *everyone* reads them, but they are quite popular. They were the ones that came up when I Googled ‘Aleppo 2016’.”

“Are there any other websites that talked about what happened in Aleppo in 2016?”
My mom asked.

“Well, there were some others,” I replied. “But these ones I looked closely at, they are American news sources and they are considered ‘mainstream’ news sources here. People in my school often use these websites during their presentations, and they talk about the things they read on them, too.”

My mom sank back in her chair and thought for a moment. “Myriam, do you think it is a coincidence for these American news sources to report what happened to our city in these particular ways?”

My dad nodded his head and looked at me, too.

“I wouldn’t call it coincidence because they all pretty much talked about the same things...like I mentioned, I noticed their stories shared the same themes and I didn’t find certain things I was hoping to find.”

“What did you hope to find?” My dad asked.

“I was hoping to find their explanation of how our city got to the point of where it is now, and who all are responsible for what the people of Aleppo suffered through...what we suffered through. I wanted to know just how many dead and left the city from the entire Aleppo, not just one side...also, what happened to those like us, who became refugees from this chaos. Where did they go and how many escaped? I guess I was hoping to read a little bit of hope for our country.” I felt the tears coming. “Because one day, I would like to go back,” I replied almost inaudibly.

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My mom grabbed a napkin and started wiping her eyes, too. I know she was thinking of my grandma, and the life we used to have at Aleppo. We have talked about the hope that one day, we would return to our city and have a place called home in Aleppo again. Now, reading that this war might not ever end and there is little to no hope left for Syria, I feel our dream is slipping through our fingers.

My dad placed his arms on us. “Don’t be sad. Hope is in our hearts.” Then he turned to me and said, “I’m proud of you, Myriam, for noticing these facts about our beloved home. I’m wondering what other sources are saying. Like you said, the ones you found were mainstream to you. Could it be your next project to see what are some other sources—maybe from the ones that are less mainstream—say about Aleppo? I would be interested in what you could find out.”

My father always has great ideas and he is good at thinking from others’ perspectives. What he said really inspired me, so I decided to start some digging tomorrow, to find what the less popular and less known sources have to say about Aleppo.

February 26, 2019

I had an eye-opening conversation with my favorite teacher, Mrs. Marcella, after school yesterday. Mrs. Marcella was my history teacher last year and that was one of my favorite classes. I believe she made the class enjoyable. I remember one day during class, she told us a little bit about her experience being an undergraduate student in University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and how her teaching is inspired by an ethnic studies class she took. The class was not a requirement for her major, she said, but it really stayed with her, even years after she graduated. I asked her later about the class and it sounded fascinating. I wish we had an ethnic studies class here, too, many of the kids in school would surely benefit from

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it, because they live in a cookie cutter world and I hear them make insensitive comments about other races and cultures regularly. Just the other day, Jing annoyingly told me that someone was making a joke in front of her, saying Chinese parents name their children by throwing random things down the stairs—whatever the sound it makes, they would name their child after it. Afterwards, this person even made a high pitched sound with Jing's name, "Jing~!" along with a hand motion as she was throwing something down.

"The other girls all started laughing but I was angry," Jing sighed. "But my culture teaches us to be kind and to save face, even when someone is being rude. I don't know how to stand up for myself!"

To make the matter worse, Jing told me one of the girls realized that she was not laughing, so she put her hand on Jing's arm and said, "Come on, this is just a joke! Don't be so serious!" Jing had to squeeze out a fake smile, just so that she could make the other girls feel comfortable. "It sucks!" Jing said her favorite phrase when she complains. I empathize with her. Unlike my culture, and Jing's, people here do not like personal questions, such as how old are you and how big is your house, but sometimes I wish they would ask us more questions about our ethnics, our cultures, and our ways of life.

So yesterday after school, Mrs. Marcella stopped me in the lobby and asked me how I was doing lately, and during our conversation, I told her about what I have been researching on the Internet regarding the siege of Aleppo in 2016. I also told her that I wanted to look at a source that is not so popular and less mainstream, but I was stuck on where to look. She told me about this online news source she subscribes to, *Truthout*. According to Mrs. Marcella, this is a non-profit, alternative, and radical news source that often offers different yet critical perspectives than those big corporation news sources. She sent me the link to the

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main page of *Truthout* and encouraged me to take a look at what it had to say about the siege of Aleppo, and that she is excited for what I am doing and cannot wait to hear what I find. I was looking forward to begin my research on this alternative source, and mostly I was excited to see if I could find some hope reading from this source.

I typed in “Aleppo 2016” in *Truthout*’s search bar to pull up all the articles on Aleppo and just like what my dad said, I did find some differences in the news in *Truthout*. There were a total of six articles written on the siege of Aleppo in 2016, and that is a higher percentage comparing to the popular mainstream sources I found. Another thing I noticed was that there were no photographs in *Truthout*’s news articles. This makes sense since *Truthout* is an independent, non-profit news source that probably does not have much money to purchase stock photos like those big news corporations do.

One theme that *Truthout* shared with the other news sources was that Russia is the culprit, along with Assad’s cruel forces; it is to blame for the suffering of Aleppo residents. However, it was also very easy for me to see the difference of themes in *Truthout*. It stressed the seriousness of the Syrian refugee crisis continues with the siege, there is an urgent for humanitarian aid, and that it concluded the US is also a responsible party for the disastrous condition of Aleppo. Finding these two different opinions excited me. Surely the other sources pointed out how badly the civilians in Aleppo were affected by the siege, but they just stopped there, mentioned nothing about those who became refugees or call for help for those in dire need. *Truthout* did not place all the blame on Assad and Russia, and it made its readers aware that the US is not excluded from the blame for the chaos in Aleppo in 2016, and it urged the US to make changes to its refugee policy. This reminded me that in one article in the mainstream news, it did mention some doctors in Aleppo wrote to President

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Obama and asked his help during the siege, but the article said the doctors were “accusing,” as to say their claim was not legit.^{xiii}

What made me happy to see, though, was that although *Truthout* did talk about how destroyed Aleppo was after the siege, the theme of fatalism is much less in their news stories. The articles had phrases such as Aleppo is now “one giant graveyard”^{xiv} and that dead bodies of Aleppo residents—many women and children included—were “littering the streets”^{xv} to portray an image of terrible aftermath, and these phrases made me cringe. I can just picture how gloomy my city has become after the siege and I mourn in silence for those who died. Thankfully, the articles did not suggest what happened to Aleppo was inevitable, that means maybe, and hopefully, one day my beloved city would see peace again.

It is of course great to see some different views and opinions from this alternative news source, but unless one purposely searches for it or is already subscribed to it, this information does not come to the public’s view easily. This made me think about how heavily influenced people are by the popular, big corporation news and how important it is to be conscious to know that there are other views on the same issue out there, if people just make an effort to search for them.

May 16, 2019

I just turned 18 today, which marks me officially entering adulthood. My parents gifted me this new journal today—a spiral hard-cover notebook decorated with white marble and rose gold geometric designs. I love it. We don’t do elaborate birthday celebrations like many of my American peers, but I do look forward to getting a journal each year on this day. Writing in a brand new journal for the first time always feels like a rite for me. I would first open the journal, close my eyes, flip the pages inside between my thumb and index finger

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and finally inhale deeply. The intoxicating smell of fresh paper indicates the starting of yet another year, and I always wish the year ahead is just as inviting as this smell. Reflecting on my life so far, I am thankful for what I have experienced, even though I am still trying to understand and learn more. Life seems like an unfinished project or work in progress sometimes.

Jing treated me to ice cream after school for my birthday. We went to the mall and I got my new favorite flavor, peanut butter, a flavor of ice cream I have never had before coming to the US. As we were sitting by the table, Jing asked if I was still doing my project with the news articles.

Honestly, my parents asked me about it, too, and I told them I have been taking a little break from my project. For one, I was spending so much time on it that it was starting to take away time needed for my schoolwork. With the last day of school coming up so soon, I need to fully focus on my various projects and papers. Also, it was mainly because it was leaving me more questions than answers. I wanted to find a way to make sense of it all. I know I found out “how” the US news articles wrote about the siege of Aleppo, but not yet “why” they did it, but I am eager to find that out, eventually. During this process, I got frustrated and it was affecting me emotionally. I am extremely proud of the city I come from, therefore I found myself getting defensive and protective when I read negative news on Aleppo, and I especially had problems with the news’ fatalistic tone toward my country and my city. On top of that, being so far away from home, and not be able to check things out with my own eyes means I can only rely on these news sources to give us updates. I don't like to be passive, but I don't have a choice.

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It is a tradition for people to make wishes on their birthdays, and today, I wish that peace would arrive soon in my country. I wish for true and unbiased media so that I can really know what is going on in my city and learn why things have escalated to the current state of Aleppo. I dream of a world without borders, where people can travel as they please and do not have to seek a new life outside their home countries, because the world we live in is without violence, famine, poverty, and injustice.

When people in the US watched the bombs light up Aleppo's sky, just how many of them even thought to critically question the stories written by the popular news media? When they read the updates on Syria, or any other country where a war is present, how many of them would search for the civilians' voices and consider multiple perspectives and narratives? Would people just take these news articles for the complete truth at face value? With US media owned by six huge conglomerates, who was asking whose point of view was represented? Who would encourage public education to teach children how to think critically? Why doesn't everyone see how important this is? I have so many questions, and for now, all I can do is to have hope and keep pondering these questions.

ⁱ In examining the coverage of the siege of Aleppo in 2016 in the following news publications: *CNN*, *The New Yorker*, *The Daily Beast*, *The Washington Post*, *Fox News*, *The Guardian*, *NBC*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times*, no article mentioned the status of those who became refugees due to the siege, but rather, the devastating aftermath in Aleppo such as destroyed homes, shortage of medical supplies and food scarcity was emphasized in all articles. The articles paid much attention to the degree of destruction yet not providing any humanitarian focused information for the refugees or even those who still reside in Aleppo after the siege.

ⁱⁱ *NBC News*, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ *CNN*, 2016.

^{iv} *CNN*, 2016.

^v *NBC News*, 2016.

^{vi} Photograph from *CNN*, 2016.

^{vii} Photographs from *CNN*, 2016

^{viii} Phrases extracted from *The Guardian*, 2016; *The New York Times*, 2016; *The New Yorker*, 2016; *The Guardian*, 2016; *CNN*, 2016; and *The Daily Beast*, 2016.

^{ix} All the articles mentioned Russia as Assad's ally in the siege of Aleppo, responsible for purposely attacking Aleppo civilians.

^x In the selected articles, Russia was the most mentioned country, followed by the US, and only *The Guardian* named Iran as a participant besides Russia and the US.

^{xi} In describing civilians in Aleppo suffering, all the articles called Russia responsible for aiding Assad to regaining control over the Eastern Aleppo through dehumanizing attacks on the civilians. Only one article in *The Washington Post* mentioned that Assad received support from Iran, and some rebel forces fighting against Assad received weapons from the US, however, the rebel forces' names were not given.

^{xii} In reading the articles' reporting on the death of civilians, they often stressed the death toll of Aleppo children, and/or pointed out there were children among those died from Assad and Russia's attack.

^{xiii} *The New York Times*, 2016. In the article "In Syria, battles for Aleppo seem as endless as the war itself," page 4.

^{xiv} The counterrevolution crushes Aleppo, 2016. *Truthout*.

^{xv} The world, not just Assad, is to blame for Aleppo tragedy, 2016. *Truthout*.

Chapter 5

Overview of the Findings

The story of Myriam represents many. Although a fictional character, her first-person narrative depicts a lived Syrian refugee experience that resembles the reality that many Syrian refugees face: losing loved ones due to the civil war, fleeing one's home country in search for safety, waiting in limbo in refugee camps, and facing many challenges once resettled in a new community, such as adjusting to a new culture and enduring racial prejudice. As the readers can see from Myriam's memoir, there are five main themes found in US mainstream news media:

1. Invisibility of the Syrian refugees

The news articles documented in detail the devastating aftermath of the siege of Aleppo in 2016. Through their vivid descriptions of the torn buildings, bombed highways, and destroyed hospitals, the news articles presented their audience a clear picture of a war-torn Aleppo after the siege in 2016. Additionally, the news articles focused heavily on the devastating living conditions for Aleppo residents after the siege, pointing out that Aleppo civilians had little to no access to medicine and faced severe food shortages. For these reasons, many Aleppo civilians lost their lives or became homeless after the siege. Nonetheless, the news media mentioned nothing on the Syrians who had to flee Aleppo because of the siege; in other words, the Syrian refugees, who were one of the unfortunate products of the war, were made invisible in the news articles' discourse. Even though the media stressed the severity of the

unlivable condition in Aleppo, it paid no attention to those who survived the siege and became refugees.

2. Appearance of complexity of the siege

The mainstream news media presented the siege as a very complicated event, one that was too difficult to understand for the general audience. The news articles did not provide the audience any background information on what led to the siege of Aleppo. In addition, the news articles mentioned little to nothing on the exact military involvements from the US-backed forces, but rather, they heavily stressed the Russia-Assad alliance and described the horrific aftermath of the siege. Using narratives that vividly portrayed the atrocity in Syria, the news media then suggested events such as that the siege occurred in the Syrian region often. Furthermore, the news articles indicated that the end of Syrian war is nowhere near in sight and suggested that the situation in Syria is beyond the public's ability to understand and control.

3. A sense of fatalism for Syria and its region

According to the mainstream news media, what happened in Syria and the city of Aleppo are due to "fate," a pre-determined destiny that no one has the power to change or alter the outcome. Prior to the siege of Aleppo, Syria has become the ground for various proxy wars participated by several countries; however, the mainstream news media did not address them as responsible parties for the chaos in today's Syria, but simply explained the unsettledness in the region as a pre-designated event. When something is considered a result of fate, it implies that there is nothing humans can do to achieve a different outcome; hence, it normalizes a laissez-faire attitude toward Syria and the Syrian refugee crisis.

4. The Cold War mentality still exists

Instead of providing detailed background information on all parties involved in the siege of Aleppo in 2016, the mainstream news media only stressed Russia's alliance with the Assad government, and their joint-effort military involvement in the siege. Moreover, all but one article chose not to discuss US participation in the siege. Even though one news article mentioned both sides of the city of Aleppo endured great suffering, all the news articles described in detail the cruel and ruthless war tactics of the Russian forces, while no reporting was done on US forces' damages to the city. The mainstream news media made it clear that Russia was helping Assad during the siege by using inhumane war strategies, such as target-bombing civilian housings, schools, and hospitals in order to gain control of the entire city of Aleppo, and their actions left Aleppo civilians to struggle for survival. Thus, Russia was described as a great obstacle for anyone who was against the regime change in Syria, and due to this reason, Aleppo needed the US in order to liberate those who suffered from Assad and Russia.

5. Racial relations is evident in our news media

For Syrian refugees, the asylum process to the US is a long and complicated journey. Even though the US has established a refugee policy for those who flee their home countries due to war, prosecution, and natural disasters, it attempts to keep the Muslims refugees out of the country. This anti-Muslim sentiment, especially after 9/11, is racist and inhumane. A racialization process is evident in the news media narrative, where the media tends to heavily focus on Muslim terrorist attacks targeted against Western, white, and Christian peoples and regions, but has little coverage on

attacks against non-Western, non-white, non-Christian ones. Moreover, although the majority of the terrorist attacks happen in Muslim countries, such as Syria, and the majority of victims are indeed Muslim people, the US news media pays little attention to this fact. At the same time, terrorist attacks conducted by anti-Muslim groups and individuals are on the rise on a global scale, and it is likely that they are encouraged and prompted by the racial relations portrayed in the media.

Understanding the Findings Through a Marxist-Humanist Lens

Invisibility of the Syrian refugees. With all the coverage of how the siege threatened Aleppo citizens' livelihood, the mainstream news media was silent on the Syrians who became refugees due to this siege. The news articles did not dedicate any narratives to those civilian victims who had to flee their homes because of the war in Aleppo. In short, the news articles simply made the refugees invisible to the audience. This deserves our attention, because people already tend to be less sympathetic toward those who are distant from themselves, as Adam Smith (2006[1759]) stated:

Provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions [sic] of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude [would be] an object less interesting to him [a] paltry misfortune of his own. (p. 132)

Because the US audience/viewers never saw the Syrian refugees fleeing Aleppo in the news, the possibility of them feeling sympathetic toward them is slim. Furthermore, because there is limited information on Syrian refugees in the US mainstream news, it negates the importance of the Syrian refugee crisis we are facing today, which is the largest humanitarian crisis since World War II. When something is made invisible, it is deemed unimportant, as

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in the phrase, “out of sight, out of mind.” In this way the audience is not confronted with the harsh reality this particular group must face. With little information on the dire humanitarian need of the Syrian refugees and/or few or little reminders, the public is unlikely to start any action in helping the Syrian refugees. This approach at reporting the Syrian crisis focuses the audience’s attention on the war, destruction, and political context but removes the question of who is accountable for the Syrian refugees. As a result, the public is likely to not even consider this question and does not hold the government accountable for the large amount of Syrian refugees seeking asylum. In this way, the news media fails to fulfill its function as a government check and balance.

Media and political ideology. This invisibility of Syrian refugees in the articles of the siege of Aleppo demonstrates the power that mainstream news media has to influence public opinion and policy of what is important and what truly matters. The choice of what to report and what not to report can result in selective information, half-truths, and even deception through omission. The invisibility of the Syrian refugees in relation to this particular context supports an administration that sought to limit Muslim immigration, because our media reflects and is reflected by the political ideologies in this country (Bhatia & Jenks, 2018). For many in the public, what they read in mainstream media becomes their reality. As Marx (1859) explained, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”

Therefore, what the people encounter in their daily lives directly affects their beliefs and their values. When the mainstream news media do not place Syrian refugees in front of them, they do not see the refugees as a part of the reality of the siege, and by making the victims invisible, the news media further supports US troops’ intervention in Syria. If the news

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media draws audience's attention to the victims of the siege, they would be aware of how the US intervention in Syria is negatively affecting the Syrian civilians, thus be less supportive of the US military presence in the area. To care about the fate of others and develop social consciousness regarding the reality of the Syrian people, we have to first be conscious of the plight they face. Thus, in order to support the Syrian refugees and alleviate the crisis, we must create conditions wherein the public so it can first become aware of the extent of the problem. Without even this minimal awareness, building the social consciousness among the public to challenge the war and support the refugees is unlikely.

How news corporations benefit from the invisibility of the Syrian refugees.

Additionally, because the media constructs reality, if one event receives more news coverage than another, it is bound to gain more public attention. For instance, different terrorist bombing incidents around the world receive different levels of news media coverage in the US (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2017). The answer lies in the fact that the big corporation-owned news media select and depict stories that would best fit their ideology of what matters. In the case of the siege of Aleppo in 2016, what mattered according to the US news media was the aftermath of the war, but not the solution for the war or for the Syrian refugee crisis. Although Western media aim to portray an image of the West entering conflicts for humanitarian reasons (Simons, 2017), it is not hard to see via a critical lens that the US involvement in Syria reflects imperialist accumulation. For example, the US has taken over the majority of Syria's oil fields, natural gas, and fresh water sources (Webb, 2018). The news articles said many Syrian civilians lost their homes, but there was no reporting on what happened to them after the siege, given that they were now homeless. The Syrian refugees are not humanized through the US news media narrative, because mentioning them

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as victims of the war would hinder any future accumulation. If the news media truthfully reported the condition of Syrian refugees, then it may negatively impact corporate interests or government interests. For instance, after seeing how the Syrian civilians suffered on both sides of Aleppo after the siege, the audience/viewers might urge the government to stop its military involvement in Syria, or propose the government to make a peace treaty with Assad and Russia, but that would prevent the US from establishing its power in the region, as well as losing control of certain natural resources in Syria. However, it is hard for the public to have empathy toward the Syrian refugees if they are shielded away from the audience's eyes, thus providing the news media an opportunity to continuously support US accumulation and control power in Syria and its region.

The different proxy wars carried out on the soil of Syria are acts of imperialism, where the imperialist countries impose themselves onto other countries for the purpose of capital gain. Luxemburg (2015) identified imperialism as a key element of capitalism, the necessary act which allows the imperialists to expand and develop new markets in pre-capitalist places, in order to gain more productive forces and to prompt more consumer markets in these pre-capitalist places. The news media, which is a communication vehicle for transferring information to the public, “enable capital to expand in space and to create a global zone of capital investment, accumulation, exploitation, and political influence” (Fuchs, 2009, p. 384). In our society today, people witnessed how the War on Terror post 9/11 has extended to a global scale, and how the War on Terror, like any other war, is violent in nature and caused the lives of many innocent civilians. Hence, there is an increasing interest to look into Marx's theories of imperialism to make sense of the war (Fuchs, 2009). By not showing the statistics of the Syrian refugees who suffered because of the siege, the

real intention of imperialism is not fully portrayed, thus, it helps the imperialists to accomplish their goal.

Appearance of the complexity of the siege. The collected news articles did not give any explanation of what caused the siege of Aleppo in 2016, which could leave those who are not up to date with the Syrian crisis baffled on how the city has reached the point of total destruction that the news articles described. In mainstream news media reporting, the circumstances of the siege of Aleppo are made to appear to be too complex to understand for the public—and the media assume that the public would not understand—but it is not necessarily the case, nor should the media presume the public's inability to comprehend. Moreover, the media's assumption of an incapability of the general population is a dehumanization of the public, and it aids in normalizing class relations as authentic and deserved based on capacity. Perhaps if the media portrayed the news in its full complexity, the need for greater critical thinking in the public would become an obvious necessity, making schools and education more accountable to developing high levels of critical thinking.

For the public to be fully informed, the news media must provide sufficient background information on how the Syrian civil war has progressed up to the point of the siege of Aleppo in 2016. For example, the news media chose not to inform the readers of the proxy war between the US and Russia in Syria, which started years before the siege in 2016, but instead, gave the impression that Russia joined Assad for the sole purpose of regaining control of Aleppo, and the US-backed forces only intervened because of Assad and Russia's cruel attack on the civilians. If the audience were not aware that the various proxy wars in Syria had caused the war to last longer than most have expected, then they would not hold

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the participating parties accountable for what happened in Aleppo. By not explaining the proxy wars that contributed to the complexity of this siege, it is easier to mask the involved parties' (i.e., US, Russia, Iran, Iraq, UK, France, Germany, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Lebanon) imperialist intentions and interests for accumulation and power over the region. The news media reporting on the siege of Aleppo in 2016 focused solely on Assad and Russia's objective—to regain control of Aleppo, a geographically crucial city for the Syrian civil war (Simons, 2017), while hiding any possible US' imperialist objective in Syria, such as accumulating oil, gas, and water resources and establishing power in the region (Webb, 2018).

The news media articulated that humanitarian intentions were the driving force for the US to intervene in other countries' conflicts, but paid no attention to the capital gain the West aimed for in other countries (Kumar, 2017; Simon, 2016). For instance, as previously mentioned, the US now controls many vital oil, gas, and water sources in Syria by winning battles against Syrian pro-government military and Russian forces (Webb, 2018); therefore, the statement that US intervention in Aleppo is purely humanitarian is questionable.

The media contributed to the terrible aftermath of the siege as a part of the complex nature of Syria and its region, one that is always chaotic and hostile. In doing so, the news media normalizes the war as an occurrence that happens all the time over in Syria and its region, also sending a message that Syrians and/or the Muslims are socialized to be complex and aggressive. While perhaps the news media does not explicitly state or not intend to make the people appear this way, the lack of information about the people along with this notion of complexity of the war makes it easy for the audience to simply believe these stereotypes.

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Thus, the news media discourages people from wanting to seek more information and learn more about Syrians and interact with the people.

By news media making the Siege of Aleppo in 2016 seem like it is beyond the audience's understanding, the public is encouraged to let the authorities (i.e., the government) handle it, because they understand more than we do. This both gives the government a "free pass" to execute whatever decisions it chooses and gives the American public a "free pass" to be less involved and not have to worry or take responsibility for what the US engages in Syria. As a result, the audience is unconscious about any imperialism intentions the government has in Syria. In addition, no source suggested the possibility of a feasible solution in the near future. This sense of complexity portrays a picture that Syria and the Middle East region are always in turmoil, and there is no solution for peace because things are just too complicated for the rest of the world to understand, which leads to the next theme evident in the articles reviews – that of fatalism.

Fatalism. The news media communicates to the audience/viewers in a way that suggests what happened in Aleppo was inevitable; thus, it discourages the public from thinking of solutions of how to fix the problems the siege has created for Syria and its people, because the media advocates there is nothing that can be done. The mainstream news articles used a discourse of fatalism when describing Aleppo after the siege, instead of critically analyzing all the responsible parties' involvement in the event. For example, some phrases the news media used included "likely it will continue unabated," "will likely...still standing in ruins," and "just as likely that Aleppo will continue to burn...people will continue to suffer and die." The word "continue" suggested there would be no solution to end the chaos in Syria and it is inevitable that wars like the siege of Aleppo would happen in Syria again. In

addition, the mainstream news articles suggested that there was no hope for the future of Aleppo and Syria, and they used fatalism as a reason to predict a continuous devastation in Syria in the future. By creating a narrative that used the concept of inevitability to explain a human-caused, seemingly complex issue, the mainstream news media then over-simplified the siege of Aleppo. Thus, they further indicated that there was nothing the public can do for the unsettledness in Syria, and therefore promoted an attitude of seeing the catastrophe in Syria as “out of our control,” which granted no need to call for public action.

Fatalism is the ideology that things happen according to their fate. In other words, the end result was determined to happen and no one has the power to change this pre-fixed outcome (Rice, 2018); therefore, there is a sense of serenity and calmness (Shupe & Bradley, 2010).

Fatalism proposes that if things fall to their ultimate destiny no matter what, then no one and nothing can alter or change the outcome, because it has already been written. It is similar to the Buddhism belief in having a “Zen” attitude toward life, an intuitive mindset of letting go and have things run their own course (Shupe & Bradley, 2010), because both concepts do not believe in using conscious effort to change the end result. However, it is critical to understand the differences between accepting fatalism and being Zen. Having an ideology of fatalism means one plays a nonchalant, not-my-problem attitude toward the unfortunate events happening to other human beings, because the person makes sense of what happened to others as inevitable, and additionally, fatalism is seeing what might happen in the future is *also* inevitable, which prevents people from seeking out solutions for improving the future (Taylor, 1962). On the other hand, being Zen is more about remaining peaceful inside your own self without stressing over the outcome, because you have done all that you can for something, therefore it is better to be content with any possible end result than actively trying

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to control it (Shupe & Bradley, 2010). The former has the tendency of avoiding to provide any help for others' problems, thinking one is powerless in changing or altering a result for others (Rice, 2018), and the latter focuses on having a peaceful state of mind because one is led by intuition and is grateful for whatever follows. Hence, the news media used narratives to suggest a doomed future for Syria reflects the ideology of fatalism.

A capitalist society gives its people a false promise that everyone has equal opportunity to achieve equal outcome in life (Downey, Titley, & Toynbee, 2014). Under such assumption, people often make sense of the inequality in society by believing the rich must have been born intelligent, raised by wealthy families, and/or have worked hard, and in contrast, the poor are just the opposite. Therefore, both the rich and the poor get exactly what they deserve. This premise that everything is fair and just in a capitalist society promotes the ideology of fatalism. For instance, when someone has done everything he/she can to improve his or her life but still faces an unfortunate outcome, then this person could easily conclude the end result as his or her fate. How else can we explain that in a seemingly equal society, some become affluent and some do not, even if they put in the same or greater effort? A capitalist ideology lets one overlook the fact that processes of production determine the socioeconomic differences that set people apart. The claim of equal opportunity for all has people in a capitalist society believe that through their own doings, the poor could achieve the privileges the capitalists have, while ignoring the unequal starting points the capitalists have already laid out for the society. Thus, there is no such thing as an equal society under a capitalist system, and in order to explain the gaps between class, the doctrine of fatalism perhaps becomes the only sound reason for those who do not have the

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answers. It is an ideology that serves to make the people complacent in the face of inequality and to accept their lot of poverty, racism, sexism, and other oppressions in society.

Interestingly, it would seem that the narrative of meritocracy is a contradiction to fatalism and yet in the U.S. they are in dialectical relation, since some people do get to achieve and change their so-called “fate” while others are perceived too “weak-minded” or “lazy” to move up the social ladder. Thus, under capitalism these two contradictory concepts together holding up the capitalist system by preventing dissent. Since this fatalism is part of our “common sense” (Gramsci, 1971), then it becomes easy for the public to accept that what is happening in Syria is inevitable, part of a long-standing tradition of war and fighting which is often used to characterize the Middle East.

The media is not just a mere informative tool for the public, but it is also a propaganda tool. The media serves as a gatekeeper that decides what information and issues the audience should think about and more importantly, how to think about them (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011). Today, we live in a technology-advanced era, where the rich and the powerful control our mainstream news media, and determine what and how to educate the public on important domestic and international issues. When those with less wealth and production power have only limited access to information, and the limited information was manipulated to fit the big corporations’ capitalist intentions, they become dependent on these big-corporation-controlled news sources and are unaware of the biased information they receive on a daily basis.

The mainstream news media uses fatalism to portray Syria as a doomed country, one that is not chosen to ever enjoy peace and freedom. Thus, the fatalism ideology presented in the mainstream news media discourages the public from taking any action of improving the

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current situation in Syria. The fatalism shown in the mainstream news media guided the audience to picture Syria as a third world country, filled with barbaric people living in terrible conditions and struggling to survive. The mainstream news media failed to mention the prosperous past in Syria, and the normal life of Syrian people before 2011, prior to the civil war, but used a narrative that suggested Syria has never escaped an unfortunate path of war and turmoil. After describing how Aleppo suffered from the siege, the mainstream news media employment of fatalism to make sense of it all only oversimplifies the reality of the siege, distracts the audience from fully understanding the cause of war, prevents them from asking who is responsible for the siege, and discourages them from thinking of any ways to prevent similar events from happening in the future.

The strong emphasis on fatalism helps the imperialists to hide their true intentions, as well as to downplay the destruction they caused in Syria and its region. The mainstream news media did not narrate the siege of Aleppo as a human-caused, preventable event, but rather, it hid the responsibility from all those involved in the siege of Aleppo and placed all the blame on a divine higher power that no one was able to control. Hence, using fatalism is a tool to prevent the audience from asking the critical question “why,” and encourages them to stay as passive outsiders to the event. If we aim to make a change toward social justice, we cannot believe in fatalism and treat injustice with silence. Instead of standing back and let things “take its course,” we should have the belief that we can change the unfair situations in the world by having hope and taking action.

Cold War mentality. Even though the Cold War has officially ended, the majority of people in our society still associate Russia with the former Soviet Union and consider it as a major threat to the US (Zimmerman, 1977). The dissolution of the U.S.S.R. did not break

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people's perception of Russia as a communist country, although it has since transitioned to a capitalist society. People in the US continue to view the relationship with Russia as “us (capitalism) vs. them (communism)” (Plakhina & Belyakova, 2016). Because the mentality that communism is bad is still prominent in our society, a campaign against communism continue to exist, thus, a media narrative that is against Russia fuels an anti-communism ideology.

Winning public opinion is the equivalent of winning a war (Simons, 2017). Gramsci (1971) especially told us the importance of winning the war of position, which is the war of ideology. Therefore, the role of media is crucial in achieving an agenda and creating narratives that influence the public emotionally. The mainstream news media used strategic words and phrases to depict Assad's and Russian forces as cruel and ruthless, thus to create a sense of fear in their narrative, much like the news media once did in announcing the War on Terror. Meanwhile, the US-backed rebel groups were labeled as “good,” as the mainstream news media justified their participation in the siege by explaining their armed involvement in Syria was for humanitarian purpose only, and in particular, to save the helpless Syrian young girls, who suffered from Assad and Russia. In a way, the US played the role of a “savior” that must fight against Assad and Russia, the “villains” in the siege (Simons, 2017). Moreover, the mainstream news media presented clearly the number of civilian deaths caused by Assad and Russia, while mentioning nothing on the destruction and death toll caused by the US-backed forces in the siege of Aleppo. Only one of the 20 articles acknowledged that US-backed forces were also responsible for the disastrous outcome in Aleppo, but this information is pale in comparison with all the news articles' detailed description of the large amount of deaths caused by Assad and Russia. Thus, a strong picture

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of “us versus them” was created, where “us” was good and our action was justified, “them” was bad and therefore must be intervened.

Moreover, the photographs used in the articles created an emotional rhetoric to arouse the viewers’ anger toward Assad and Russia by showing exclusively images of Syrian young girls and the female elderly being affected by their involvement in Aleppo. The readers are confronted by photographs of innocent Syrian girls surrounded by war wreckage, and a picture of a helpless, limp, and near-death elderly Syrian woman. Even though the news articles did not mention the individuals’ names or go into details about the background of these photographs, these images were placed next to paragraphs that described how Russia had damaged Aleppo and ruined Aleppo civilians’ lives. For any reader/viewer that has a sense of sympathy, these sad photographs, together with the narrative, helped to accomplish the agenda of making the viewers/audience feel angry, disbelief, and/or disgusted with what Assad and Russia have done in the siege. However, through a Marxist lens, these photographs can be viewed as propaganda used by the big news corporations in order to hide US’ real interests in Aleppo. Because there was no description and no photographs of how US intervention affected Aleppo and its citizens, showing the sad images of Syrians suffering from one participant of the siege limited the readers’ exposure to the whole truth. Furthermore, the mainstream news media favored photographs from the west of Aleppo, the area controlled by Assad and his pro-government forces, and these photographs displayed great destruction and devastation. All these visuals achieved one purpose—to prove the claim that Russia and Assad used inhumane tactics in Aleppo was true, and to further legitimize US intervention in the siege against Russia and Assad. However, the mainstream news media chose not to include any images of Syrian boys or adult Syrian men,

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but rather only showed Syrian adult men in roles of active war fighting members. Even when setting an anti-Russia agenda, the mainstream news media still did not forget to racialize the Syrian people.

The mainstream news media portrayed the siege of Aleppo in 2016 as a “bad battle” (Simons, 2017) by describing vividly how Assad and Russia had evil intentions and would do anything in order to win the siege, and the articles gave examples of how they caused great suffering for the Syrian people, such as cutting off their essential life supplies like food and medicine. The news media stressed that Aleppo is a key city in the Syrian civil war, and if Assad and Russia won the siege, the future of Syria and its region would not be positive. When the US-backed forces, which the news media described as troops with the goal of liberating Syrian civilians from Assad and Russia’s cruel treatments, lost in the siege, this “bad” war became even worse, because US’ defeat allowed Assad and Russia to regain control of such an important city. The anti-Russia narrative was very prominent in all mainstream news articles and one can always see Russia was mentioned whenever there was description of chaos and destruction in Aleppo. Even in some of the article titles, Russia was the main subject in sentences that stirred fear and anger in the readers.

On the other hand, the mainstream news media tended to spend lots of time and effort in describing US involvement in the Middle East as humanitarily necessary and therefore, its War on Terror is considered a “good” war (Simons, 2017), no matter what disastrous aftermath it leaves in the region. Take the US battle in Mosul, Iraq for example. The battle started in October 2016 and lasted for nine long months. In this particular war, even when US-led air strikes bombed Mosul neighborhoods and killed thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians, the mainstream news media downplayed or even omitted the damages caused by

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the US forces. NPR reported that the number of dead Mosul civilians reported to a local morgue was nearly 5,000 after the war started, with more lifeless bodies yet to be dug out under the rubbles (Arraf, 2017). This number was more than twice the estimated ISIS fighters in Mosul, which the US military said to be at 2,000. However, when confronted with this shocking figure of civilian deaths, the US made the statement that its goal in Mosul was to kill ISIS and to “protect” the Iraqi civilians. Later, the US media referred to these dead Iraqi civilians as “war casualties” (Arraf, 2017), a term it never used when describing the Syrian civilian deaths caused by Assad and Russia in Aleppo.

Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, once said, “Western outrage over a Russian bombing campaign in the Syrian city of Aleppo is hypocritical because Western governments are carrying out a similar operation in the Iraqi city of Mosul” (Russia: West Hypocritical on Aleppo, 2016). He pointed out an imperialist hypocrisy, one that overly exposed Russia’s destructive war strategy in Aleppo, Syria while hiding US invasive action in Mosul, Iraq. Both Aleppo and Mosul are Middle Eastern cities, and both sides’ civilians are suffering from wars extended by foreign military interventions, but whenever the US chooses to intervene or invade a Middle Eastern country, the US media supports its imperialism by painting the US as the hero, who is much needed by the suffering civilians in the Middle East region. As Kumar (2017) pointed out, “the United States claimed to have invaded Afghanistan to ‘liberate’ its women, and, in classic colonial form, white men became heroes” (p. 2162). This statement draws a connection with the famous *TIME* magazine cover, titled “What would happen if we leave Afghanistan,” featuring a young Afghan woman with a mutilated nose. This particularly disturbing image of that young woman was used to validate US involvement in Afghanistan, to presume to the audience that if the US

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stopped its war in Afghanistan, every Afghan woman could become a victim just like the one on the magazine cover.

In relation to this particular study, the articles showed mostly young Syrian girls while depicting Syrian men as gun carrying fighters. At the same time, our media suggests that Muslim refugees are dangerous so that the population would be more concerned with allowing a greater number of refugees into the US. One way to explain this contradiction is that the young Syrian girls were used as a way to encourage the public—not to welcome refugees—but to support the US intervention in Syria and its region. There is the myth that the Muslim world denies freedom to women and girls and these pictures perpetuate this ideology by presenting an image that suggests the US is benevolent because it represents bringing freedom to Muslim women and girls (Kumar, 2017). In this way, the idea that the US intervention is imperialist suggests that this is for a good cause because Western ways provide women with equality. It demonstrated the news media's manipulation of language and images for the purpose of hiding imperialist interests from the audience, and to sway the audience's emotion in favor of one side's policy.

Additionally, the news media also omitted information on the damages the US caused in Aleppo and Syria, such as its economic sanctions on Syria, which included banning medical supply exports to the country, so it became nearly impossible for the hospitals in Aleppo to treat injured civilians, and moreover, the US sanction forbids any financial dealings with Syria, which raised food and gas prices significantly for the Syrian citizens, making it extremely difficult for Syrian people to purchase basic food items such as rice and flour (Cockburn, 2016). This contradicts the US' announced intention of entering Syria as a humanitarian aid, because it is not hard to imagine this "sanction siege" from the US greatly

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threatens the livelihood of Syrian civilians. However, the US news media chose not to address this issue at all, so the audience/viewers could only focus on Assad and Russia's involvement in Syria, and dedicate their full support for US intervention and imperialization in Syria and the Middle East region.

From the news articles on the siege of Aleppo, the viewers can see that the Cold War mentality still exists in the US media, and this mentality is most evident in the mainstream news media narratives. The mainstream media's strategy to inform the audience/viewers on the War on Terror mirrored what it once did in the case of the Cold War (Kumar, 2017). Where the War on Terror news reports depicted Muslims and Arabs as associated with terrorism—therefore they are dangerous and hostile (Kumar, 2017)—the Cold War news reporting posed Russia as an enemy and a threat to the US. Now, once more we see that anti-Russia narrative is reflected in today's mainstream news regarding the siege of Aleppo in 2016. This war we have against Russia can still be considered as “cold,” because the attack subtly takes place through our media, but is just as damaging as if we were involved in violent conflict physically (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011). Although it must be noted we are indeed participating in a “hot” war with Russia, too, in the form of proxy wars in Syria. Importantly, this reporting on this particular siege in Aleppo really connected all the essential messages from both the Cold War and the War on Terror: Muslims, Arabs, and Russia are threatening the US homeland security, and our society ought to fear and reject them; therefore, it is necessary that we as a nation must act upon this threat and establish homeland security by entering in wars with them.

However, just engaging in wars with these enemies is not enough. The authorities also need the US public to support their decisions, because wars can be long, expensive, and

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many active military members could end up injured, disabled, or even dead, leaving their love ones in great pain and despair. For this reason, the news media must use carefully planned narratives to persuade the public that if we do not enter in these conflicts, our entire nation could face great threat, and the world would become more chaotic. This idea would eventually become what Gramsci (1971) referred to as “common sense” value the dominant group manufactured for the society in order to keep the status quo. Once the public’s opinion is in tune with the media’s agenda, it is easier to hide the imperialist objective behind the wars. Gramsci (1971) informed us that hegemony is created by the efforts of both the state and the civil society in order to benefit the ruling class. Whereas the state builds hegemony through militarization and policing, the civil society does so through constantly reinforcing an ideology that normalizes the state’s actions. In the case of the siege of Aleppo, the state is establishing imperialization by using military forces in Aleppo, and the mainstream news media helps to create hegemony by normalizing and neutralizing the state’s involvement by using the narrative of fear for Russia.

Race relations. The US has established a humanitarian policy for refugees; however, its attempts to keep Muslims out of the country, especially after 9/11, makes it difficult for the Syrian refugees to resettle in the US (Hesson, 2012). The US refugee vetting process for Syrian refugees that are escaping the war is very lengthy, and the process is much more difficult than when the US admitted European and Asian political refugees that wished to escape communist governments during the Cold War (Felter & McBride, 2018). The US accepted political refugees that matched the political ideology in the US, but its resistance toward Muslim war refugees does not match its humanitarian claim in Syria and the Middle East region. Perhaps 9/11 has contributed to this fluctuation in our refugee policy, when the

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Bush administration put a temporary hold on all refugee applications to the US; however, with the increasing Muslim refugees entering Europe, a close scrutiny of Muslim refugees entering the US started with the Obama administration and was further reinforced by the Trump administration (Felter & McBride, 2018).

The media is imperative about building “racial identity” in a society, and once an impression of a race is built inside an audience, it is very difficult to remove that idea away from him/her (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011). Racial capitalism is a process where an individual or an institution uses racial identity to gain social and economic value (Leong, 2013), and our news media is practicing racial capitalism when it represents Syrians. The lack of representation of Syrian refugees in the US news media reflects a racialized capital, where an anti-refugee, especially anti-Muslim refugee, ideology penetrates the public in a discreet way. In an era where Arabs and Muslims are facing prejudice and discrimination, probably due to our media overly connecting Muslims with terrorism (Dixon & Williams, 2015), a lack of Syrian refugees’ presence in the news media hides their vulnerability from the public’s eyes, and thus sustains the image of the “terrorist” Muslim.

The news media reflects a racialization process when it reports world and domestic affairs. One example that is related to the reporting on the siege of Aleppo is that the news media gives much more coverage on Muslim terrorist attacks on non-Muslims than they do on Muslim terrorist attacks on Muslims, even though most terrorist attacks happen in Muslim countries and most victims are Muslim (Herrera, 2019). During the Syrian civil war, many Syrian civilians became victims of terrorist attacks, but their stories are hardly reported in our news media, and at the same time, the number of terrorist attacks targeting Muslims around the world is increasing but the news media is not reacting to this phenomenon as it would if

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the attacks were targeting non-Muslims (Herrera, 2019). Furthermore, the media tends to give more coverage to terrorist attacks, especially if they were conducted by Muslims, that targeted white and Western peoples and regions than those targeting non-white and non-Western ones (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2017).

Comparing the terrorist attacks at the Bataclan concert hall and Stade de France in Paris on November 13th, 2015, and the terrorist attack in Kenya's Westgate shopping mall on September 21, 2013, the amount of coverage for the two events in US mainstream news media differed significantly. Through large amounts of news media coverage in the US, the attacks in Paris were given a trending name of "Paris Attack" and received much of the US public's attention. As a result, this particular topic generated much empathy from the US public, so much so that a hashtag, #parisattack, was created for this topic and was trending on social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*. Soon after the news media's heavy coverage on the attacks in Paris, many *Facebook* users placed a French flag as the background for their profile pictures in order to honor those who died in the attacks, as well as to spread awareness of the incidents. This is an example of how the traditional mass media affect and influence the social media platforms, as discussed in an earlier chapter, the "CNN effect." On the other hand, the Westgate shopping mall terrorist attack in Kenya received much less news coverage in the US news media, including social media, which resulted in way less attention from the public, hence, there was not nearly as much dialogue created among the public regarding the attack in Kenya, it was much less than the dialogue on the attacks in Paris.

The question, then, is why the same type of terrorist attacks in two different regions of the world caused such different reactions from the US news media? In the US, the media

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tends to focus heavily on the victimized Western lives than those who are non-Western, and at the same time, the victims from the Middle East are more likely to be less mentioned and even stereotyped by the media (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2017). In general, the US media tends to focus less on victims who are non-Western, non-Christian, and non-white (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2017). In other words, the news media has control over which group of victims are humanized, and which group of victims are just statistics of an unfortunate event. The discourse of the news media influences the audience/viewers' perceptions. For instance, by calling the attacks in Paris the "Paris Attack," the audience/viewers pictured an entire city of Paris being targeted by terrorism. Since Paris is a Western city, it echoed sympathy and empathy among US audiences/viewers, and made many US audience/viewers fear similar attacks happening in their country, near or in their cities. Thus, it created the perception that the Muslim world is out to attack the Western world.

On the other hand, the news media referred to the terrorist attack in Kenya as the "Kenya shopping mall attack," which directed the audience/viewers to picture an incident that happened in one particular small place, and therefore it was possible that not many people were hurt from the attack. Furthermore, naming it "Kenya shopping mall attack" indicated that the attack was targeting a particular place instead of an entire city, and because Kenya is not a Western country, the US news media did not apply the Western value frame to describe the attack; therefore, they discouraged the audience/viewers from relating themselves to those who died from the attack in Kenya. Thus, the US audience did not view what happened in Kenya as a possible threat to their own country's security. The differences between these two attacks' depiction in the media reflect an anti-Muslim sentiment, where the attackers' race and religion were stressed heavily in an attack that happened in a Western

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city and furthermore, the news media sends a message that terrorism in the West matters more than anywhere else.

In today's society, we have become increasingly dependent on the media, almost to the point of an addiction. To prove this point, researchers found that people's addiction to social media has similar patterns to people's addiction to drugs (Smith, 2018). All the mainstream news sources in this study have their own social media platform, such as *Twitter*, *Facebook*, or *Instagram*, to name a few, and their users can easily gain access to these articles' contents via social media on their personal smartphone devices. Consequently, the media influences us on our daily consumption, normalizes specific views for us, and teaches us how to understand an event (Zayani, 2011). This power of media, if used with good intentions, can be utilized to achieve the goal of promoting harmony within a society; for example, the media creates solidarity by giving those who are underrepresented a platform to voice their experience. Nevertheless, if the media is used with negative intention, it could disrupt peace within a society, such as creating gaps between groups, deepening stereotypes and prejudices, and misinforming the public about reality. The media's ability to influence can be a double-edged sword, as Tehranian (1999) pointed out:

Communication can act as a process of free and equal exchange of meaning, development of epistemic communities, and advancement of social solidarity, and hence of peace and harmony among individuals and nations. Conversely, however, communication can also systematically distort perceptions by crafting phantom enemies, manufacturing consent for wars of aggression while stereotyping and targeting particular ethnic groups of nations into subhuman categories.

Communication empowers, but it empowers more those with greater competence

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and access to the means of communication. The ethical choice in communication is therefore focused on whether the communicator is aiming toward power-free understanding or systematic distortions and powerful manipulations. (p. 2)

Marx (1870) had already predicted for us that the media would be used as a tool for solidifying capitalist domination, because of its ability to develop ideology within the audience, and this ideology would eventually become a everyday consciousness for the people. If the media ideology spread a false reality, such information would be treated as the reality by the society, and furthermore, if there were no check and balance to the media, the public would not be able to know the truth at all. Hence, because the big corporations control today's mainstream news media, the information we obtain from the news is programmed with a capitalist ideology.

Often, media viewers/audiences are not aware of the financial relationship between the news outlets and the big for-profit corporations (Williams, 2017); therefore, they are unaware of the biased news they receive and assume the news media provide them a fair and just interpretation of the reality. Our democracy depends on journalism that is not interfered with or influenced by the rich and powerful capitalists; nonetheless, the mainstream news media we use daily are affiliated with big corporations' advertisements, which are necessary for capital accumulation. Furthermore, because capitalists own the US mainstream news media, whose main goal is to accumulate more capital, the mainstream news media industry needs to be financially sustained. In doing so, their messages must align with their capitalist owners' interests. As Marx said, "the primary freedom of the press lies in not being a trade" (p.71). This is why we need to find a balance by using alternative media sources, such as *Truthout*, the ones that are free of corporation endorsements and contain zero advertisements,

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in order to get well-rounded information so we can form critical understanding of the events ourselves.

Chapter 6

Implications

Before I even started writing my dissertation, I knew I wanted this study to be a useful project for practice and research, and not just something collecting dust on a shelf. Even if it is useful for just one person, in my opinion, is better than contributing nothing to the field. Now, after the research is finished, the important question is, who would benefit from this particular study and how? First, I hope for those who are interested in learning about the Syrian refugee crisis would find this study provides them some insights on how our mainstream news media is shaping our understanding of this underrepresented group. The lack of US mainstream news media representation of the Syrian refugees mystifies their reality for those who wish to understand more of this humanitarian crisis, and on the other hand, it further shields those who are not aware of the seriousness of the Syrian refugee crisis away from becoming conscious of the humanitarian disaster. This study hopes to develop critical media literacy for those who read and view news reports on the Syrian civil war, and encourage them to apply critical media analysis to other news stories on our major news networks.

Second, this study would benefit the field of education and communication. It adds a perspective for how to teach our students to be conscious media users, and furthermore, how to have a critically conscious mind when learning things that come from a for-profit information source. Additionally, because the mainstream news media is considered a type of mass media, their capitalist ideology influences a vast majority of the public, and this cannot be taken lightly. Perhaps this study would prompt a less biased way of mass media communication to the audience on the topics of world crisis, where there are real people

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facing dire needs for survival. Later on in this chapter, I will list some ways the mass media should present more truthful news, whether news in general or the news specifically on Syria.

Third, because this study unveils the codependency between the large for-profit corporations and US mainstream news outlets, it could advocate for audience/viewers to seek out and support alternative, nonprofit news sources. Without any financial obligations, a news source is more likely to expose the truth to its audience, because it does not have to abide to the dominant group's capitalist ideology. Our democracy is dependent on a free press, and the first step toward a truly "free press" is to get rid of all and any capitalist social relations of the news media, so that the news media would fulfill what it originally promised the people—to be the watchdog for the public and to provide checks and balances to the government. Therefore, this study encourages the readers to look outside the popular news media for gaining information and urges them to consume alternative media as a check for the mainstream news media they use.

Fourth, I hope this study would encourage scholars with artistic minds to use the aesthetics as a vehicle for provoking meaning and understanding to the public. Just as Paulo Freire (2000a) stressed the theory of praxis, the arts really help to turn the abstract, theoretical, and complex ideas—in this case, Marxist theory—into something more accessible, understandable, and appealing for those outside the academia realm.

Fifth, I hope my study would aid the humanitarian organizations in achieving their mission of supporting war refugees. The Syrian refugees are a vivid example of how wars destroy civilian lives, and no matter how a government justifies its involvement in a war, it costs innocent lives nonetheless. The Syrian refugees are a representation of many refugees in the world who suffer from violence, injustice, and disasters from their home countries, who

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have no other choice but to flee to a safer place to rebuild their lives. The refugees in our world deserve our empathy and advocacy.

Last, but definitely not least, I wish my study would ultimately benefit the Syrian refugees—the many Marias and Myriams out there that are either waiting in limbo for resettlement to another country, or have been displaced into their new communities. I hope this study could raise awareness of the hardships Syrian refugees face when they relocate to their host countries, such as their struggles with learning a new language, custom, culture, as well as the possibility of facing prejudice and racism sentiments from their community members. This study would not only spark empathy for the Syrian refugee community, but also prompt people to stand with them and act for social change. Moreover, just because our mainstream news media do not shine a spotlight on Syrian refugees, it does not mean they do not exist; sometimes, we just have to dig harder into our resources to learn more about their situation and needs. When our mainstream news media racialize Muslim Syrians, especially the male refugees, through their narratives and images, we know that their discourse contributes to the Islamophobia we notice in our society today. This sentiment stems from the capitalist large corporations' agenda, and therefore we need to reject and correct them. If we became allies of the Syrian refugees, we can better support them in their transition from a war torn country to a new place that is welcoming and caring to them.

Recommendations for How to Be an Ally for the Syrian Refugee Community

I wish this study to serve as guidance for those who hope to be an ally to the Syrian refugee community. Some recommendations include the following: first, those who want to support the community need to seek out information about the Syrian crisis beyond mainstream media, so that they can broaden their choices to learn about the crisis, the Syrian

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people, their history, their customs, and their experiences in the US. Second, allies should want to put themselves in spaces where they can interact with Syrians—or more generally, Muslim communities—in order to become involved as activists in the issues that are important to the Muslim and Syrian communities. Third, allies should avoid trying to speak for, or speak over, Syrian or other Muslim refugee communities. Instead, allies need to listen and follow their lead on issues on which they have greater firsthand experience. Fourth, allies need to be informed politically and to vote on issues supporting Muslim communities. Lastly, allies need to stand up when Muslims and/or other refugees are attacked verbally and teach their own friends and families to be critical thinkers rather than simply accepting media representations and/or the president's anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Recommendations for More “Truthful” Media

My study of the US mainstream news media’s reporting on the siege of Aleppo in 2016 calls for implementing new practices. First, we should search for answers on how do we as the public encourage better media, support the war refugees through the media, and protect our democratic freedom. Especially now, a time where there is criticism on the mainstream news media, people are aware of the problems that exist in the news. The idea of “fake news” is announced to the audience, and it reminds people that what we see and hear in the news might need deeper scrutiny. In other words, a sense of critical consciousness might already start to spread among the public. To “strike the iron when it is hot” we need to build upon this growing consciousness and find practices that would allow the public to demand and support more just news. For instance, we can improve public input by making the news media more interactive and participatory (Willems, 2013). We can also promote audience engagement by encouraging them to contribute and create news content (Lawrence,

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Radcliffe, & Schmidt, 2018). As a result, more just news reporting would better support the war refugees, or any other oppressed groups in our society. The Marxist lens suggests that as long as we live in a capitalist society, we cannot experience true freedom; nonetheless, we can implement critical pedagogy in our education system to teach critical media literacy so that the public can act as a check and balance for our media. It is necessary to reestablish media's role of a watchdog for the public, thus, to be able to demand better media that is less biased is the first step toward real democracy.

Granted, media cannot be fully responsible for presenting the public with biased information, because as long as it is purchased or supported by self-serving entities, it must oblige to certain views. In our society, some people have the financial ability to pay and therefore have their opinions displayed in the media, while some do not have the financial ability and therefore their interests and opinions are not as much represented in the media. Thus, bias is unpreventable in all forms of media, but perhaps even more so in the corporate for-profit media, because its survival depends on monetary support. The only way to create bias-free media is within a Marxist communistic society, where the news and other media sources are collectively controlled in a democratic fashion, so is there a greater likelihood of having equal and truthful representation. However, we cannot truly know how this will work since a Marxist society has never developed. We can witness the many attempts in history where some countries have tried to create such a Marxist communist society, but they all have turned into state capitalist societies where the state has the ultimate control and therefore the news has been biased toward state interests. Because we recognize that ideology is everywhere in our social life (McLaren, 2003), it is thus a long-term but possible implication to develop an alternative to capitalism based on Marx's writings (Hudis, 2012).

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Today, there is a large portion of the population beginning to question capitalism and are looking for a new social order (The Open University, 2012), and a Marxist perspective is especially important with regard to refugee communities because global capitalism can only be brought down through transnational efforts. However, socialism cannot take hold in one country alone. A socialist alternative considers that all people are important, rather than any one group or country first. Therefore, it requires a new humanism that will reconsider values, and ultimately. Such a vision challenges the need for physical borders (Monzó & McLaren, 2015). In a class-less world, the world's resources would be accessible to all and the production would be organized by people; hence, all people would have equal access to resources. The reason people migrate in our day is because people in the "developing world" are highly exploited, impoverished, and/or pushed out as a result of the imperialist policies of the Western world. Under a socialist alternative, this would not be the case, thus eliminating the need to move to more industrialized countries that promise greater opportunities.

Furthermore, we need to make sure that the news reporting appropriately represents the diversity of peoples and places of that topic. For instance, instead of only showing faces of young Syrian girls, the articles on the siege of Aleppo should also contain images of Syrian women, men, ethnic minorities, and other civilians in order to present a holistic picture to the audience. A "truthful" media does not pick and choose just one type of people to put in audience's view, but rather appropriately presents all those who were involved. Perhaps the media can achieve this by the editors examining all the articles written on Syria from their particular outlet to see if the representation is balanced. Additionally, in their pursuit of truth, journalists should be protected when they specifically seek out the aspect of the story that is less favorable to the US, although it may be common sense or subconscious

for them to avoid sharing this perspective when they work for for-profit corporations that have capitalist interests. Nonetheless, journalists should be encouraged to find out perspectives that are not beneficial to the US, and they should feel at ease for doing so by a guarantee of job security. When journalists report on international issues, they should work with cultural experts and cultural guides so they can have an insider view of the issues, and they should provide the audience the credential of the people they work with. This will ensure the news stories are culturally responsive and the representations are appropriate for those shown in the reporting.

Implications for International and National Policy toward Syrian Refugees

There are implications for international and national policy regarding the provision of humanitarian aid to war refugees. For the war refugees who wish to resettle in the US, their application process is especially strenuous, as the International Rescue Committee (Refugees in America, 2019) stated that the hardest way to enter the US is through a refugee status. In addition, as reflected in Chapter 2, the US is more lenient toward political refugees that are seeking protection from a communist regime than war refugees that are escaping from violent conflicts in their countries. Additionally, there is a common narrative in the media by our politicians that we should admit only the Christian Syrian refugees, thus suggesting the majority of the Syrian refugees, who are Muslim, should not be permitted entry to the US (Syria's Beleaguered Christians, 2015; Eibner, 2017; Maza, 2018). Thus, this leaves many Syrian war refugees who wish to rebuild their lives in the US waiting in refugee camps much longer.

This policy is based on a narrative of fear (Bentley, 2014; Disney, 2017; Fandl, 2017; Kellman, 2015), and it is not a humane practice. In the fiscal year of 2018, the US admitted

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more refugees from these four countries than from other origins: Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma, Ukraine, and Bhutan (Cepla, 2019). It is evident that the US did not favor refugees that come from countries where the majority of the population is Muslims. We need a refugee vetting policy that does not use race and religion as a measuring tool, but one that is clear from US political alliance or ideologies and treat every refugee the same, regardless of their race and religion. Moreover, the policy should view war, hunger, and poverty as equally important reasons for people to seek refuge in the US. The first step we can take to bring down the narrative of fear is to establish the message that Muslim people do not warrant greater scrutiny than others. The US news media's reporting on the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 was heavily used by anti-Muslim groups as the reason why we need to block Syrian refugees from entering the US (Kellman, 2015); however, they failed to mention that in this country, the rise of white nationalism poses just as dangerous a threat to our national security, and that the white nationalists' terrorist attacks happen more often than Muslims in the US. For example, the shooting in a Charleston, SC church in 2015 and the attack in Charlottesville, VA in 2017 were both white nationalism acts; however, President Trump announced to the public that he did not believe white nationalism is a dangerous problem we face today (Trump says, 2019), even though white nationalist terrorism is happening at a global scale, such as the bombing and mass shooting in Norway in 2011 and the most recent one, the New Zealand Mosque attacks in March 2019. Hence, we need to have a refugee Cvetting policy that does not contain any prejudice toward Muslim Syrian refugees, or any Muslim refugees in that matter.

Furthermore, in general, war refugees do not get to choose which 28 resettlement countries they are allowed to resettle. The UNHCR submits refugees' applications to a

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country that it believes is suitable for them, and then it is the prospective host country's decision whether or not to accept the refugees (Refugees in America, 2019). I believe this process is appropriate for the refugees who do not know or care where they want to resettle, so the UNHCR can make a suggestion based on the refugee's personal background. Also, it is appropriate for those refugees who just want to leave refugee camps as soon as possible and therefore want the first available country they can resettle. In this case, the UNHCR could select a country that has an easier and/or faster refugee vetting process so the refugees can start their new life as soon as possible. However, for the refugees who are not in those categories, this process could be adjusted so it is more humane by asking refugees their preferences (e.g., top three settlement countries). Of course, the UNHCR cannot promise a refugee that he/she would get to resettle in the country of their top choice, because every country has a different refugee vetting process, policy, and quota, but if UNHCR could submit refugees' applications to their preferred countries before making a decision for them, it would promote a better resettlement experience for the refugees.

If a refugee has relatives living in the US, the UNHCR is more likely to consider submitting his/her application to the US (Gold & Blake, 2015); however, a refugee resettlement application to the US can take anywhere from 18 months to three years to process (Who is a refugee, 2015). Even though every resettlement country has its own refugee vetting procedure, the one in the US is particularly time-consuming. To give a brief overview, here is the process a refugee must go through in order to enter the US: (1) a refugee status is classified; (2) go through an extensive interview with the US State Department; (3) two to three rounds of background checks; (4) three rounds of biometric recordings; (5) get cleared by FBI and Homeland Security; (6) possibly another interview;

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(7) a face-to-face interview with a Homeland Security Officer, and if the interview with the officer is satisfactory; (8) go through several medical checks; (9) cultural orientation class; (10) another round of background checks before arriving in the US; then lastly (11) a final security check in a US airport (Hendricks, 2017). One can imagine this is a lengthy process, which makes entering the US a long and tedious journey for the Syrian refugees. If the various departments could expedite the war refugee application process, it would ease the uncertain waiting period war refugees endure in refugee camps. Moreover, if the UNHCR would send refugee applications to the US regardless of if they have relatives living in the states, it would provide many more war refugees a chance to reconstruct their lives in our communities.

The tragic event 9/11 aroused immigration debate in the US, and the US government started immigration enforcement as a method of fighting terrorism (Hesson, 2012); however, this enforcement brought a backlash against Muslims in the US and Muslim refugees who are trying to enter the US for asylum. Many Muslim Americans faced violence across the US, and many people who held tourist, business, or student visas were denied entry to the US because they come from perceived terrorist countries (Chishti & Bergeron, 2011). Furthermore, a tracking program was created after 9/11, which required male refugees from Muslim countries, who were 16 years of age and older, to register at every port in the US when entering and departing the country (9/11 and the Transformation, 2017). These implemented policies spread an anti-Muslim ideology in our society, especially during a vulnerable time for our nation. Surely, it is important that we protect our homeland security, but having a tightened immigration process for some people just because they are Muslims is a racist act.

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Race relations exist in the media we use daily. This is a scary thought, as many of us are dependent on the media and are constantly influenced by the media messages. The media portrays race relations in a way that is not obvious to the public, but its impact in the public is strong and long lasting. The media helps the dominant group to create hegemony in the civil society by normalizing their culture and belief, and racializing different groups of people through media messages. It is our responsibility as public intellectuals to recognize the race relations in our media today, and to expose the capitalist agenda to the public. One way to do this is through using critical pedagogy in our education system, where we can teach the next generation how to view the media critically and to be conscious media consumers (McLaren, 1995). The Syrian civilians are exploited by our news media for the purpose of justifying US intervention in Syria, and at the same time, our media exploits them for the purpose of spreading an anti-refugee, anti-Muslim propaganda. To eliminate this phenomenon, and to prevent similar exploitations happening in the future, the viewers/audience must realize there is a race inequality in our society that is evident in the media. It is unlikely for us to have control in what the mainstream news media depict in their messages; nonetheless, we should teach society how to recognize and challenge the racialization narrative.

Media Literacy

This study implicates the importance of critical media literacy in general education, and that it should be a required skill in teacher education and in colleges of education. When educators are fluent in critical media literacy, they would encourage their students to view the world through a critical lens, hence, preventing a banking media. When our students are educated in critical media literacy, they learn how to pick out and resist the capitalist media corporations' agendas. To educate our students is also to educate future generations, because

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our students take their learned experience and influence their children. As a result, more and more people would possess the skill of critical media literacy, and the public would then become less fragile of a target for capitalist ideology

Media studies in our education system should be started at an earlier age. We live in a technology-advanced age, and it is not uncommon to see a toddler or a young child sitting at a restaurant with an iPad or a smartphone, with their eyes glued to the screen. For adults, we commonly see people attached to their smartphones, as if the device was a part of their bodies. We no longer live in an age where we have to purchase news, but rather, news today freely “finds” us, bombards us with messages and advertisements around the clock. With ever-increasing choices of media sources in our era, it is interesting that we have less autonomy in choosing just and honest news. This is due to the media monopoly, where large corporations buy out the smaller ones, thus altering all other perspectives to their own. Furthermore, some of the large corporate owners that own US major news networks are not even in the industry of journalism; therefore, it is hard to say their interests in acquiring the smaller media companies lie in their passion for journalism. This capital accumulation changes the nature of our media, and it media users should be made aware of it. It might be beneficial to start educating the young children on how to critically consume media, before the capitalist media ideology sinks too deeply into their minds. With our technology constantly expanding and improving, media studies should be a part of school curriculum, and for adults, it is never too late to introduce them to the topic of media studies.

Critical Pedagogy

An important implication of this work is the need for utilizing critical pedagogy in studying the media, so that one can better develop critical media literacy. With a critical

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pedagogy's lens, as Crotty (1998) pointed out, people would begin to see the world in an entirely different way:

The difference between Freire and other philosophers is not that Freire is problem-posing and others are not: the difference lies in the problems they pose. The issue for Freire's students is not just that they have to learn something new... The problem is that their entire view of the world might be wrong and the task they have before them is to develop a completely new view. (p. 55)

Therefore, once people apply critical pedagogy to examine the news media, they would never go back to the way they used to look at them. Having a critical pedagogy mind does not just change the way people see the media, but it completely exchanges their old views with new ones.

Moreover, once we implement a critical pedagogy perspective, we could resist the media from "banking" their ideology into our daily life, such that we could have a critically conscious mind when being exposed to media messages. Critical pedagogy allows us to stand up against the dominant group, thus to liberate ourselves. Armed with the theory of critical pedagogy, we are no longer passive media users that willingly take media messages as they come to our smart devices or televisions, but we become active and selective media users that are fully aware of the capitalist intentions behind each media message, because we have achieved "conscientization."

Besides the concept of conscientization, critical pedagogy also emphasizes praxis, hope, and unfinishedness (Freire, 2000a). The way we bring our media consciousness from theory to practice can be practiced in our daily life as we consume media. Additionally, even though we are critical thinkers and are cynical of the news media, we must be hopeful that

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our actions could help our society move toward a more just and equal space. However, even if we have reached our goal, Freire (2000a) urges us to always recognize the unfinishedness in ourselves and in our society:

I hold that my own unity and identity, in regard to others and the world, constitutes my essential and irrepeatable way of experiencing the world as a cultural, historical, and unfinished being in the world, simultaneously conscious of my unfinishedness...

And here we have arrived at the point from which perhaps we have departed: the unfinishedness of our being. In fact, this unfinishedness is essential to our human condition. Whenever there is life, there is unfinishedness, though only among men and women it is possible to speak of an awareness of our unfinishedness. (pp. 51-52)

Thus, life moves as we continue to solve existing problems in ourselves and/or in our society. For instance, a problem's solution will bring up new problems, and the new problems then require new solutions. The unfinishedness within a critical pedagogue moves as an upward spiral, and it never ends. Hence, it is an ongoing task to liberate the public from big media corporations' capitalist ideology, because as technology continues to advance, and the news media industry continues to grow, we will face more challenges.

This is why it is imperative to incorporate critical pedagogy in education to teach critical media literacy. It can be a long-term project to make the public much more critical of the news and other types of media they consume, but we as educators and public intellectuals must face this challenge and take it as our task to build consciousness in the public. Bringing in critical pedagogy in classrooms facilitates learning and encourages students to read the words and the world, whether from the news or other sources, with a more conscious mind. Critical pedagogy helps students to recognize the hegemony existing in our media today,

therefore encouraging them to use alternative media to challenge and break the racialization and stereotypes in our society (Marmol, 2018). Hence, using critical pedagogy in the classroom leads students on a path of pursuing social justice, thus giving students a sense of purpose (Rodriguez & Huemmer, 2019). In particular, we could use critical pedagogy to teach the Syrian war, humanitarian crisis, capitalism and its alternatives so that the students and the society can understand the true connections between capitalism, discourse, and our international relations in the Middle East region.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many possible future researches that could extend from this study. First, this study is a case study; we could apply the same Marxist theoretical framework and arts-based research methodology to examine how US mainstream news media use other major conflicts in the world to reflect social relations. It would be fascinating to see if the US mainstream news media showed the same major themes in their reports of other major crises. Second, we could look at news sources that are not US-based and include their news articles on the siege of Aleppo in 2016 in the same study. For this dissertation, I only focused on US-based media sources in order to understand how the US public understands the siege of Aleppo, as well as to keep my data manageable, but I am aware that US media users could branch out and use foreign media sources, too. Therefore, for a future study, one could consider any and all news articles written in 2016 on the topic of the siege of Aleppo and to see the degree of differences in the news reports across the Internet, if there is any. Additionally, by expanding the news media sources to outside the US, we can see if the capitalist ideology dominates the news media outside the US.

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It would be interesting to see how the siege of Aleppo in 2016 is reported in other countries, particular in other Western countries that are involved in proxy wars in Syria, namely, the UK and France. Due to their imperialist accumulation in Syria, is their mainstream news media reporting similar to that in the US? How do their news media reflect the humanitarian policy in their own countries? We know that currently, there are anti-refugee and anti-immigrants protests happening in France, and at the same time, similar anti-Muslim and anti-Arab acts appear in the UK. One example of this are the horrifying acid-pouring attacks in the UK, where hateful people pour acid onto innocent immigrants simply because they appear to be Arabic or Muslim. These racist acts could be flamed by their media, and it would be interesting to see what the British and French news media are saying about the siege of Aleppo, and whether they also racialize the Syrian people through their discourse.

Third, a recommendation is to compare the US mainstream news reports to those in Russia. For the two countries fighting against each other in the siege of Aleppo, how do their news messages differ, and is the Cold War mentality also prominent in Russian news media? The US mainstream news heavily focused on the destruction in the Assad-controlled west part of Aleppo, in both narratives and imagery; thus, one can question whether the Russian news media would do just the opposite—show their Russian viewers the level of destruction from the US side, while providing little to no information on the damages it has done in Aleppo. Since the media is an entity of the state, I presume that the Russian news media display similar, if not the same, strategies as the US news media—place strong blame on the other party for the city's destruction, and justify its country's involvement in the siege of Aleppo by stating humanitarian purposes.

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Fourth, I would like to connect my personal background to the study and compare the US mainstream news with the ones in China. The Chinese government is not active in the Syrian civil war and was not a part of the siege of Aleppo; therefore, I wonder if there is more neutrality in Chinese news media on the topic. Moreover, I am curious if the Chinese news media reporting favors one particular participant in the siege—for example, does the Chinese news media stress the destruction caused by Russia, or does it emphasize the chaos caused by US forces in Syria? By knowing which side the Chinese news media blame for the disastrous aftermath of the siege, one can figure out the political relationships between the governments of China, Russia, and the US. One thing to note is that even though there is no private ownership of Chinese media, China is a state capitalist country, because the government controls everything. Thus, its news media must abide to the Chinese government's agenda, which means there is no free press, and therefore, no neutrality in its news media. Nonetheless, by comparing the differences and similarities between the US and Chinese news reports on the siege of Aleppo, we can find out how capitalist ideology penetrates both countries' news media, even though the two governments are very different in nature.

From my personal experience of using the largest and most popular Chinese social media platform, *WeChat*, I can see that this particular Chinese social media outlet features many civilian Syrian men when discussing the topic of the Syrian civil war. The photographs in *WeChat* showed Syrian men wearing civilian clothing, and many photographs depicted Syrian fathers carrying their children, looking distraught. Unlike the US news media, *WeChat* portrayed the Syrian men just as vulnerable as their female and children counterparts, all suffering from a long and terrible war. Nonetheless, because I do not have

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regular access to Chinese CCTV, I cannot validate the same messages are showing in Chinese traditional news media. However, since the Chinese government controls all media entities in China, it is hard for me to imagine the official Chinese televisions news would show very different messages and sentiments toward Syrians and Syrian refugees.

Nonetheless, a future study of how the news messages differ between the US—a country that was involved in the siege of Aleppo, and China—a country took no part in the siege—would be fascinating.

Fifth, a recommendation for future research is to broaden the time period of the news articles written on the siege of Aleppo. For this study, I limited my data collection to US news articles written in 2016, because I wished to get the most up-to-date reporting on the siege. However, it is possible for a future study to look at news articles written after the year of the siege of Aleppo, because new understanding and/or analysis might have emerged since 2016. Furthermore, news articles written after 2016 could provide valuable updates on how Aleppo has changed months or even years after the disastrous siege, as well as provide any available update on those Syrians who became refugees due to the war in Aleppo. If the major themes remain the same in the articles written after 2016, then we know there has not been a shift in large media corporations' capitalist agenda, and it is likely that the same agenda will be pushed onto the public throughout the duration of the Syrian civil war.

Lastly, a recommendation is to include US popular social media platforms for a future study. Social media contains vast information, so perhaps a more feasible way of doing so is to pick one particular social media platform, for example, *Twitter*, to compare the major themes between US mainstream news media and US social media. Our social media, even though filled with individuals' opinions, are still controlled by their respective million or

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even billion dollar corporations. Thus, the seemingly “free to express and connect” social media platforms are still being monitored by those who own them; therefore, there are hidden guidelines the users need to oblige. As an example given previously in Chapter 3, *YouTube* would take down videos or manipulate the number of viewership and subscriptions, if someone’s message does not agree with their agenda. This is a reflection of the dominant group controlling the dominated, under the guise of a free speech platform. However, because of the popularity of the social media, we cannot ignore its potential to persuade, influence, and sway public opinion. Thus, a future study that includes, or only focuses on, US social media’s reporting on the siege of Aleppo in 2016 would deepen our understanding of how the public learn the Syrian crisis and Syrian refugees.

Limitations

There are many limitations for this study. First, I do not share the cultural, social, and religious backgrounds with Syrian refugees. My emotion from reading the mainstream news articles thus stem from my own personal background, not from someone who could closely relate to Syrians or Syrian refugees. When I was creating the memoir of Myriam, it was a rather emotional process for me, because I must become Myriam herself and presume my emotions and my understanding regarding the war in Aleppo, the refugee experience, and the immigration journey to the US would be that of hers. Although I have done much research on the Syrian refugee experience, and I have a committee member who is a Muslim woman who serves as an ethical check for me, it would be an added authenticity if I shared similar backgrounds with real Syrian refugees.

Second, I am not in the field of journalism, therefore I do not know the exact process of how a news story is generated and processed in the US. This study examined published

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news articles that are the final products of news production, but it did not examine the various steps that led to these finished articles. How topics get decided, how the journalist for a particular story gets selected, and how the interviews are conducted—the answers for these questions could help us to gain a deeper understanding of how the dominant group gatekeeps the information that reach the public, one step at a time.

The third limitation is that I cannot speak on the translation accuracy of the interviews in the news articles. The interviews in the news articles were conducted with Syrian nationals, and I am not sure if the Syrian interviewees spoke English or Arabic with the interviewers. Additionally, I am not certain if the interviewers from the US news outlets spoke Arabic with native fluency. The articles were all written in English and did not address this issue. If the interviews were translated from Arabic to English, there could be a chance for misrepresentation because of language and cultural barriers. Hence, there is no way of knowing if the Syrian interviewees' messages are correctly expressed to the audience; and furthermore, just like the example of interviews appeared in *New York Times* discussed in a previous chapter, the news media could alter the interviewees' responses by omitting parts of their messages or even change the meaning of them in order to fit the news media's agenda. Because there is no indication of how the interviews were conducted, I was not able to fact-check the dialogues I read between the Syrian civilians and the interviewers.

The fourth limitation is on the photographs in the news articles. All news articles contained at least one photograph and the majority of them had human subjects in them, however, only a few of them had captions underneath that provided basic background information of the photographs. Many photographs in the news articles contained no background information at all, but rather, were simply placed within the articles. I would

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like to know more details on those caption-less photographs, especially the ones that featured human subjects. I believe a little background information would humanize the Syrian civilians we see in the photographs, and that they would be acknowledged as individuals by the readers. I am curious to know if the human subjects posed for certain photographs, or the photographers captured their images candidly. Furthermore, some photographs used in the news articles came from a visual media company, such as *Getty Image*, who sells editorial photographs and stock images for profit. In this case, the photographers for these images do not work for the news media corporations; thus, they might have had a different intention behind the camera lens than the journalists who wrote the articles. Additionally, for the photographs that were not purchased through a visual media company, I do not know if the individual photographers worked for the news media corporations, or they were freelancers that sold their work to these news media sources.

Lastly, when I was collecting news articles on the siege of Aleppo in 2016, I only used *Google* as my search engine. Although *Google* is a well-known search engine that is popular among Internet users, there are many alternative search engines available for people to use, such as *Bing*, *DuckDuckGo*, *Dogpile*, *Yippy*, *The Internet Archive*, *Yahoo!*, and *Swisscows*, just to name a few. Each alternative search engine has its own mission; for example, *DuckDuckGo* promises to protect its users' privacy, which means the users' Internet searches are not tracked by this platform, and additionally, *DuckDuckGo* does not contain any advertisements (About us, n.d.). The 20 collected mainstream news articles in my study all came from one search engine; however, if I used the same search criteria as I did with *Google*, other search engines might generate different news articles, and they might or might not demonstrate different major themes for my study.

Final Remarks

At the time of this writing, the war in Syria extends, which means more Syrian civilians would continue to die, and more Syrians would become refugees waiting for resettlements. Aleppo was one of many Syrian cities that fell victim to the various proxy wars happening in Syria, and as the war goes on, more Syrian cities and civilians might face demolition. The latest missile attacks in Syria were another example of how a proxy war prolongs the conflict in Syria. The most recent air strikes which happened in early July 2019 in/near the cities of Damascus and Homs were conducted by Israel, in an attempt to interfere with Iran's involvement in Syria, and its action caused innocent Syrian civilians' deaths (Kershner, 2019). At the same time, Syrian refugees continue to face anti-refugee sentiments in various places around the world. The most recent example of this was in June 2019: the Lebanese authorities discouraged businesses from hiring Syrian refugees and destroyed any housing in refugee camps that could turn into permanent homes, in order to pressure the Syrian refugees to return to Syria (Kohdr, 2019). It is a tough fight for the Syrian refugees to overcome the prejudice and racism existing in our world today, perhaps even more so than the physical Syrian war itself, because as Gramsci (1971) reminded us, War of Position takes longer to win than War of Maneuver; it is much more difficult and time-consuming to change people's way of thinking that is heavily programmed by the cultural hegemony.

This research project is not to claim I am an expert in Syria, but rather, it is a case study that demonstrates an example of how our mainstream news media is influenced by the capitalist society we live in. The siege of Aleppo in 2016 reflects any other major world events people might see/hear from the mainstream news media, and this research urges people to ask the key question, "why?" when they consume the information delivered by

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today's big media corporations. Additionally, this study encourages the public to draw a connection between the reporting on the siege of Aleppo and the reporting on other major events in the news media, to discover the major themes in other news stories and thus to see how the dominant group uses significant world events to infiltrate its agenda to the public. Though the story lines might be different, the structures could be similar. For instance, the reporting on the siege of Aleppo could share the same capitalist ideology used in the reporting of the Iran nuclear deal, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and the recent Huawei ban.

Moreover, the news reporting on the Syrian refugees which resulted from the siege, or the lack thereof, encourages the public to think of how the big corporation media use serious international and domestic humanitarian issues to not promote public action, but to advance their capitalist accumulation. Because of this, many vulnerable lives become invisible in our eyes; therefore it requires us, the news consumers, to be proactive in digging out the truth and humanizing the victims from imperialist practices. Currently, there are other humanitarian crises happening in the world, ranging from the consequences of violence/war (e.g., Syria, Iraq, Yemen, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Central African Republic), corruption (e.g., Venezuela, Mexico, Guatemala), political unsettledness (e.g., Ethiopia, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo), infectious disease (e.g., Yemen, Venezuela, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Syria) to climate change (e.g., Somalia, Burundi, Central America), leaving many people waiting desperately for humanitarian aid. The crisis that is the closest to home for us to witness is the chaos at the US-Mexico border, where many Central American families, children included, are waiting for asylum to the US but are facing inhumane treatments. This research study only

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focuses on US mainstream news media's discourse on the Syrian refugees, but it illuminates the way our news media portray many other vulnerable groups of people that deserve the public attention.

I started this research project as a novice researcher. At the beginning, my understanding of Marxist theory and arts-based research methodology was still in its infancy stage. From the day I first considered my research interest for my dissertation to the day I turned in my first draft, my research question, sub-questions, and dissertation title have gone through several editions. However, some things never changed: I always knew I wanted to revolve this research project around my interest in Syrian refugees, use a theoretical framework that best suited my subjectivity (i.e., Marxist-humanist theory), and practice a research methodology that not only is accessible to the general public outside the academia, but also is appealing to my right-brained self (i.e., arts-based research).

Now at the end of my research study, I have matured both academically and personally, but I am still a novice that is constantly learning from the vast amount of knowledge in the field of education. I am eager to see what future research projects I would be able to conduct based on this one—like planting a sapling in the ground, I look forward to seeing how far and how big the branches would reach. The “unfinishedness” of this research would push me on as a researcher, an educator, a critical pedagogue, a Marxist-humanist, and a conscious person who is a part of this world we all live in.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Articles Used in Research for Memoir

1. Hundreds leave besieged east Aleppo on first day of evacuation. *The Guardian*.
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2. In Syria, battles for Aleppo seem as endless as the war itself. *The New York Times*.
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3. Civilians under ‘imminent’ threat amid regime gains in eastern Aleppo. *CNN*.
<https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/28/middleeast/aleppo-syria-regime-forces/index.html>
4. The battle for Aleppo, Syria’s Stalingrad, ends. *The New Yorker*.
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-battle-for-aleppo-syrias-stalingrad-ends>
5. Assad’s savage Aleppo strategy: evacuate or die. *The Daily Beast*.
<https://www.thedailybeast.com/assads-savage-aleppo-strategy-evacuate-or-die?ref=scroll>
6. Aleppo siege leaves streets ‘full with dead bodies,’ humanitarian group says. *NBC News*.
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8. The latest: Russia upset by muted response to Aleppo attack. *Fox News*.
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9. Aleppo siege is ‘war of extermination’, says injured doctor. *The Guardian*.
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10. The battle for Aleppo, explained. *The Washington Post*.
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12. Syrian rebels launch offensive to break siege of Aleppo. *The New York Times*.
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13. Syrian rebels suffer intense air attacks after breaking siege of Aleppo. *The Guardian*.
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14. The siege of Aleppo could spell disaster for rebels fighting Syria’s Bashar Assad. *TIME*.
<http://time.com/4405037/aleppo-siege-mainstream-rebels-bashar-assad/>
15. Syrian regime says it has taken full control of Aleppo. *CNN*.
<https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/22/middleeast/syrian-regime-takes-full-control-of-aleppo/index.html>

16. The 'great epic battle of Aleppo.' *The Atlantic*.
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17. Doctors wage losing battle of Aleppo in Syria's civil war. *NBC News*.
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https://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-v-micallef/the-battle-for-aleppo-syr_b_9234146.html
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<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/exclusive-assad-siege-of-aleppo-could-be-imminent-experts-warn>
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Appendix B

Questions I sent to the Muslim Refugee Women via Email

1. What are some of valuable things, or the most valuable thing they brought with them?
2. Are there any things they wish they had brought with them?
3. Do Syrian children (age 10–16) write diaries/keep journals?