

5-12-2017

# Cameras as Weapons of Resistance: Refugees Disrupting the Colonial Narrative Through Photography

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## Recommended Citation

Elder, Shannon, "Cameras as Weapons of Resistance: Refugees Disrupting the Colonial Narrative Through Photography" (2017).  
*Cultural Studies Capstone Papers*. 14.  
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**Cultural Studies Program**  
**Humanities, History, and Social Sciences**  
**Columbia College Chicago**

**Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies**

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**Cameras as Weapons of Resistance:  
Refugees Disrupting the Colonial Narrative Through Photography**

**By**

**Shannon Elder**

**Capstone Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies**

**Cultural Studies Program  
School of Liberal Arts and Sciences  
Columbia College Chicago**

May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017

## **abstract**

This project analyzes the photography project “#RefugeeCameras”, where German photojournalist Kevin McElvaney gave disposable cameras to refugees to document their own experiences. The project includes close examination of the photography collection and considers the photographic depiction of landless people by other landless people in juxtaposition to the concept of the refugee as a ‘terrorist’. The examination of these images will reveal how photographs become a tool that can disrupt ideological stances that harm innocent people such as Islamophobia and fear mongering towards refugees that are deemed a threat by the Trump administration’s Executive Order, “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States”. This comprehends the realities of the refugee crisis as a Postcolonial issue and resists the dehumanization of those who are commonly misperceived as a threat.

## **key words**

postcolonial theory

islamophobia

refugee

violence

#RefugeeCameras

resistance

myth

disruption

documentary photography

## **dedication and acknowledgements**

this is, modestly and with love, dedicated to those who have experienced the unthinkable and  
still have not been afforded the opportunity to be heard

thank you to –

Ian Hoffman

Sophie Fajardo

Temitope Famodu

each and every wonderful, inspiring woman within the GirlForward community

Ann Gunkel

Doug Powell

Charles Roderick

Carmelo Esterrich

the entire Cultural Studies Department



**origin: as if she has no name**

This is one of the world's most famous photographs. I'm sure you've seen it somewhere. While more recent, more gruesome photographs of refugees have spread their way across the globe recently, I open with the silenced Sharbat Gula. Sharbat Gula is a girl from Afghanistan who, at twelve years old, was photographed in a refugee camp in 1984 by Steve McCurry for *National Geographic*. It ran as the cover in June the next year, 1985. McCurry titled the photograph

"Afghan Girl". As if she had no name. The world would not know her name. They would only remember her face. (Azami) We must look back on this iconic photo and wonder, was it beneficial or was it harmful to the population it was meant to represent?

The photographer, McCurry, claims there have been positive things that have come from this image: more people volunteered in the refugee camps, more attention was drawn on the crisis, a sense of pride and self-respect emerged in Afghanis. According to *CNN*, "It also led *National Geographic* to set up the Afghan Children's Fund -- and meant that to this day, McCurry is never charged a fare by appreciative Afghan taxi drivers." (Simons) But Sharbat Gula was left voiceless.

Gula was nameless and her story wasn't known for nearly two decades, however many would recognize her photograph. According to an article published by the *BBC* in January 2017, Sharbat Gula "had no idea that her face had been famous around the world for almost 17 years." Before this interview with the *BBC*, she had only spoken to any form of media one other time in 2002. That's when McCurry tracked her down because of a documentary, 17 years after the fact, to find out who she was. (Azami)

McCurry, as an outsider, captured her image from an outsider's perspective, put it on the cover of a widely famous magazine, but didn't even know her name or anything about her. Photographers have a lot of power in whom, why, and in what way they choose to capture another's portrait; a very important decision to help or to manifest. It is with this in mind, we turn to the issues of millions around the world today.

The term refugee can be dehumanizing – the label categorizes and often substitutes for a person's name, face, their story, their experience and reality. A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their home because of war and / or persecution. For the sake of this project, I use the term refugee with full recognition of the complicated, problematic issues with this language.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the current refugee crisis is the largest humanitarian crisis ever recorded. There have never been as many displaced people worldwide than there are right now. 65.3 million people worldwide find themselves displaced from their homes, with 21.3 million of those people being refugees. More than half of these refugees are under 18. Every day nearly 34,000 people are "forcibly displaced as a result of conflict or persecution" (UNHCR "Figures at

a Glance”). A displaced person is someone who has left their home and is internally displaced within their home country (ICRC). BRYCS (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services) states refugees, “are defined under international law as being outside their home country and having a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (BRYCS “Refugee 101”).

World Vision stated in January of 2017 that the estimated 21.3 million people who have fled their home countries as refugees have left five main areas. Somalia has about 1.1 million people who have left as refugees, South Sudan with about 1.1 million refugees, Lake Chad Basin with about 2.2 million refugees, Afghanistan with about 2.7 million and Syria having the most with around 4.9 million people having left since the beginning of conflict about six years ago. About 300,000 people fled Syria in 2016 alone (World Vision).

According to Al Jazeera, as of last October Jordan and nine other developing countries hosted more of the world’s refugees than any of the world’s wealthiest nations. These ten countries account for only 2.5 percent of the world’s economy. Amnesty International says “many of the world's wealthiest nations "host the fewest and do the least", highlighting a stark contrast in the number of refugees taken in by countries near crisis-hit areas and by wealthier nations with similar populations elsewhere” (*Al Jazeera* "Ten Countries Host Half of World's Refugees: Report"). According to the Pew Research Center, The United States resettled nearly 85,000 refugees in 2016, with nearly 39,000 of those refugees being Muslim, which is a higher number than ever before (Krogstad and Radford).

Photojournalist Kevin McElvaney (who's work has been seen in *AlJazeera*, *The Atlantic*, *The BCC*, *Fox News* and *The Guardian*) was frustrated with the representation of the refugee crisis in media as he saw it in December of 2015. All of the images seemed the same. So as a photographer, he wondered, "Can I photograph this in a different way? ... Does the coverage miss something or [have] the wrong focus?" (#RefugeeCameras) With these questions, he considered the fact that outsiders photograph the refugees in their situations and tell their stories for them. Outsiders decide what is important to tell and what is not.

McElvaney came up with an experiment that would give the refugees a voice, give the refugees the ability to decide what is important and what is not. Photography would be an artistic medium that would allow others to "see the individual behind the anonymous concept of refugee". (#RefugeeCameras) Three days after coming up with the idea he was on a plane to Izmir, Turkey. He took fifteen disposable cameras with him, each with a pre-paid return envelope. The cameras were handed to women and men from a variety of nations traveling through a variety of countries along the refugee migration route. Two of the fifteen cameras were handed specifically to women. Three months later he received seven cameras back to him by mail.

The remaining eight cameras were either confiscated by border authorities, lost along the way, still remain in Izmir or are missing altogether (as are the refugees who were given them). McElvaney's project is an attempt to document a crisis from a new perspective. And, as his website says, allow "the refugees themselves the opportunity to document their own journey through photography." (#RefugeeCameras)

On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017, a week after Donald Trump took office as the President of the United States, Executive Order “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” was signed. This immigration order, also commonly known as the ‘refugee ban’, suspended the entry of immigrants and non-immigrants from seven countries for 120 days after the order was signed. The countries included in the suspension were Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen. The ban on Syrian refugees was not set to expire within 120 days like the other countries, with the order stating that, “the entry of nationals of Syria as refugees is detrimental to the interests of the United States”. The order also suspended the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days from the date it was signed and gave priority to Christian refugees over Muslim refugees. (Liptak)

Considering the statistical realities of the refugee crisis and its existence being a direct result of colonization, this essay connects postcolonial theory with the current humanitarian crisis. With the crisis understood in postcolonial terms, the project continues on to draw the essential connection of this postcolonial issue with Islamophobia within the United States as it is seen in the Executive Order.

This essay examines McElvaney’s photography collection #RefugeeCameras as a method of resistance against Islamophobia. All the cameras that were returned to him contain photographs taken by refugees from countries that are predominately Muslim. By looking at the photography project as a collective whole and the representation of the landless within it, these representations are then contrasted with myths that justify Islamophobia. The analysis intervenes to better comprehend the realities of the refugee crisis from a first-person perspective. Documentary photography as seen at work in the

#RefugeeCameras project operates as a method of violence against colonial oppression and as a method of advocacy amidst frightening political rhetoric within the United States. This essay strives to re-humanize those who are commonly misperceived as a threat, despite their non-optional choice to flee.

### **the largest Refugee crisis in history: a postcolonial issue**

Postcolonial criticism is a theoretical framework that focuses on the relationship between colonial powers and the people they colonize (the colonized). Postcolonial theory examines issues surrounding power, politics and economics in the postcolonial world. Key concepts of the theory include nation, nationalism, migration, national identity, violence, colonial hegemony, oppression, identity, community and dehumanization. Postcolonial theory brings many questions to the table in regards to the structure of society in a postcolonial context and the double consciousness that exists from colonizing forces. An analysis of the current refugee crisis is not complete without considering the implications colonialism has had on the crisis' initial existence.

Postcolonial theory considers the concept of resistance in all of the shapes resistance can take form, in and outside of the struggle for independence (Purdue OWL). Understanding the effects of colonization on both the colonized world and the colonizers' world allows us to make sense of 'othering' as it takes place as the Western world rises to power. Postcolonial critique serves as a method of anti-colonial thinking to challenge the international dominance structure and change the way we process and understand the world around us.

Postcolonial theory, while relevant to the refugee crisis in many respects, might be most important in the way it addresses nation and landlessness some of the most relevant issues of our time. Postcolonialism analyzes landlessness in a historical context and seeks to understand how and why landlessness has become an issue at all. Colonialism has everything to do with the control of land; it is the purpose of colonialism. When colonizers seek to gain power and control over land (and the people living there), it takes land from the colonized. The land in the Middle Eastern region has been divided up by the colonizing force; an outsider who drew lines and nations in places that they benefited from. Of course those borders were drawn without consent from the locals living on the land, which do play a role in the conflicts we see today in many places around the world. When there are conflicts in these areas, it forces people to leave their homes, creating the landless, the refugee.

While acknowledging the issues with the ways the British and French created the borders for Middle Eastern countries, it's even more important to consider the other, less visible roles that colonization has been at work in the area. In an article for *The Atlantic*, policy expert Nick Danforth describes some of the historical roles colonizing forces have played in escalating conflicts. "In Syria, the French cultivated the previously disenfranchised Alawite minority as an ally against the Sunni majority. This involved recruiting and promoting Alawite soldiers in the territory's colonial army, thereby fostering their sense of identity as Alawites and bringing them into conflict with local residents of other ethnicities. The French pursued the same policy with Maronite Christians in Lebanon, just as the Belgians did with Tutsis in Rwanda and the British did with Muslims in India, Turks in Cyprus and innumerable other groups elsewhere." The

issues we are seeing in the region today are complicated. By focusing solely on the colonial borders as the issue, it makes it seem as if violence between differently identified groups is a natural occurrence. Colonizers also play a role in the inflamed tensions between different groups. (Danforth)

What exactly is our seemingly inherent concept of ‘nation’? Robert Young says, “The nation is a kind of corporation. It is the border that allows another nation to recognize it as a nation, to send its representatives there, so that it can participate in the global community of nations. A community without communal values.” (Young 60) It recognizes the separation and division that nation and nationality bring to the global world of humanity. Nations and borders go hand in hand - nations must rely upon borders heavily for control purposes. Borders, which are imaginary and mythological, are a process of exclusion, inclusion, and separation. A particularly problematic terminology that postcolonialism addresses is citizen and citizenship, which are terms from the same machine as nation, both which were coined after the French Revolution in the late 1700’s.

The core of postcolonial analysis centers on, “linguistic, cultural, and geographical transfer, transformations of positive and negative kinds: changing things into things which they are not. Or showing that they were never that way in the first place.” (Young 139) Refugees are ‘landless’ people. They are, almost always, the colonized subject; not fully recognized, heard or understood. The term refugee was created by the United Nations after World War Two in 1951, which made it a legal term categorizing a certain type of individual. Postcolonial theory brings to light these ways of social categorizing and how they can, and often do, draw barriers between human beings. These types of

categorization not only form borders between people but then work on ideas of nationality; borders on borders.

Franz Fanon in “On Violence” speaks to how the colonizer “...dehumanizes the colonized subject.” This dehumanization works to ‘other’ someone. The colonized subject is boiled down to something other than human because of their lack of adopting the (debatably) important characteristics of the modern colonizer lifestyle, such as capitalism, Christianity and consumerism. According to Fanon, truth hurts the colonizers more than anything else. Colonizers are in charge of making history, they get to decide how things are remembered and what things are included. History is constantly being shaped to the colonizers idealized truth, disregarding actual truth and what is good, right, and factually accurate.

Both the colonized and the colonizer are in dispute over physical land that is the central struggle of colonialism. Fanon points out that there are human similarities between the colonizer and the colonized that are inherent, how both set of people are in need of the same basic living necessities. If the dominating colonizer is the same as the colonized in terms of human characteristics, then the colonized can realize there is no longer a need to allow colonizers to instill fear in them because their ‘domination’ is actually an illusion.

For Fanon, when it comes to revolution, when it comes to liberation, when it comes to decolonization, when it comes to reawakening, all of these acts are acts of violence. Violence is not just blood shed. Violence can be language. Violence can be action. Violence can be a radical lifestyle. Being radical is being violent. The term ‘radical’ means to overhaul, to get to the root, to go all the way. Art can be violence. That is what

this project looks at – how photography in the hands of the colonized is an act of violence against colonial oppression. Usually the representation of refugees and their situations is left to journalists from colonizing countries. This photography project is a violent transformation in that type of journalism. This project brings representation first hand and allows the colonized to represent themselves.

Benedict Anderson claims in *Imagined Communities* that, “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.” (Anderson 3) He discusses the difficulty of defining terms like nation, nationality, and nationalism, and the necessity to consider their history and creation as well as their evolved use in understanding their modern role of legitimacy. Anderson, like many postcolonial thinkers, notes the ‘emptiness’ in the concept of nation. He provides the definition of the word as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” (Anderson 6) Anderson explains the ‘imagined’ part of the nation as having to do with the fact that most people within a nation will not know each other or come into contact with one another but yet think of themselves as a cohesive whole. He then continues to say that the concept of nationalism “invents nations where they do not exist,” (Anderson 6) as if to say these peoples *would not have* had their nationalistic commonalities without the existence of the nation first.

Speaking on the relationship between community and nation, Anderson says, “[the nation] is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such

limited imaginings.” (Anderson 7) These mythological constructions of nations and communities are creating invisible borders that are dividing the human race. These deep divisions create a serious sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’, without adequate justification. This process of division, this othering is what we see at work in the current refugee crisis.

When considering the ways in which we create mythological borders and divisions, we must take a second to evaluate the way myth works and operates within our society. In *Mythologies*, Barthes calls myth “a type of speech...everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse.” (Barthes 107) Everything can be myth, all it takes is for someone to believe in it and for it to be perpetrated by a semiological system. Myths have signs that go with them, “a signifier and a signified.” (Barthes 111) Nationalism is a myth. Citizenship is a myth. Islamophobia comes with a set of myths, too, as we will get into shortly.

Nationalism works together with territorialization, the competitive essence that comes with the concept of nations and the ‘othering’ and hierarchy that is inescapable within this type of structure. Creating this ‘other’ is key to the West’s rise to power. As Edward Said says, “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient.” (Said) Western culture created the concept orientalism which ‘others’ and mystifies Middle Eastern culture. These mythological communities are the core basis for exclusion, inclusion, and separation, which all work together when drawing boundaries between groups of humanity as we see in nations, nationalities, the East and West.

## **islamophobia: muslim Refugees as terrorists**

When considering the phenomena of migration, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of people, no matter what the circumstances, “remain throughout their lives firmly attached to their immediate locale, to the known and familiar – even in the most difficult of times.” (Spellman 1) Through spread of myth, anxiety and fear are bred in the countries these migrants move into. Especially in a post 9/11 world the representation of Muslim immigrants and refugees have been met with intense terror.

The construct of race came into existence during the Enlightenment era, when certain personal characteristics were determined to lie within categorical divisions. Eventually the white supremacy system of oppression formed out of those divisions, then generalized statements about Muslims formed out of those divisions. As capitalism grew, Europe began to dominate trade, colonize, and build empire. The labeling of Muslims as enemies is a long, complicated history that goes back before Europe’s colonizing streak. Deepa Kumar, in *Islamophobia: The Politics of Empire*, takes an extensive look at the history and rise of the fear in Europe, how “During moments of conflict, political elites mobilized Islamophobia as a means to advance their larger agendas.” (Kumar 24).

After World War Two, The United States was the leading imperial force throughout the world. US imperialism is a different take on Europe’s empires, going about things in new ways. But the United States still kept to the tradition of shaping the Muslim as an enemy. “While the story starts in Europe, it continues in the United States, which took over the mantle of colonial overlord in the “Muslim world” (Kumar 39). Kumar believes that Islamophobia relies on five main distorted myths about Muslims: Islam as a monolithic religion, Islam as sexist, Muslims as being incapable of reason, Islam as

violent, and Muslims as incapable of democracy. These myths are stereotypical in nature, they keep Muslims as the feared ‘other’ and have been seen replayed consistently across news, media, and political realms.

The United States has played a pivotal role in the politics and realities of the Middle East way before 9/11. In the 1970’s, US banks such as Citibank, Chase and Goldman Sachs started a banking system in Saudi Arabia based on desire for oil. The US “secretly suppl[ied] arms to Iran” (Kumar 71). The US also “undertook a program of recruitment and toured people like Osama bin Laden...around the region” (Kumar 72), who later would form Al-Qaeda. With the need for oil, the US didn’t mind making deals with the Taliban.

Despite appearing to be humanitarian through different actions and political moves, the US was working to gain power and resources. If someone wouldn’t make a deal with the US, they became an enemy of the US. This is how Islamophobia ties directly into the building of empire. As Kumar says, “imperialist nations, particularly the United States, have played an active role in formenting the rise of Islamism.” (Kumar 93) Kumar considers Islamophobia to be the new “green scare”; the follow up to the Communist red scare of The Cold War.

Refugees, immigrants, and Muslims specifically have been seen as posing a high threat in the United States since 9/11 and it has ties on both sides of the US political spectrum. “From [September 11<sup>th</sup>] on, US policy was geared toward “keeping Americans safe” from Muslim “evildoers.” These claims fly in the face of reality.” (Kumar 113) We have seen and still see this at work throughout politics, media coverage, and national security endeavors. It is seen in the January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017 Executive Order titled “Protecting

the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States”. The order gives priority to Christian refugees over Muslim refugees. The ‘refugee ban’ essentially named Muslims as ‘terrorists’ since the major religion in every country on the banned list was Islam.

The issues going on in Syria have been compared to (and said to be worse than) actions by Hitler by White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, which is a comparison drawn by Jean Bricmont in *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell Wars* that the “ideology of our times, at least when it comes to legitimizing war, is no longer Christianity, nor Kipling’s ‘white man’s burden’ or the ‘civilizing mission’ of the French Republic, but is a certain discourse on human rights and democracy, mixed in with a particular representation of the Second World War. This discourse justifies Western interventions in the Third World in the name of the defense of democracy and human rights or against the ‘new Hitlers’” (Bricmont 20).

While the US sought to indefinitely ban Syrian refugees and immigrants, it bombed Syria in April of 2017 on the basis of photographs of dead children in the aftermath of a chemical weapons attack. Using a historical equivalent, Kumar says, “The humanitarians were quite content to carry out their foreign policy agenda on the dead bodies of children.” (Kumar 126) Making generalizations about a particular category of people is the basis for war, neo-colonialism, and the struggle of millions of people seeking refuge. Using Islamophobia as an ideological tool, the US justifies political and social actions.

The issue of migration is an issue of the nation state – the concept of nation exists to protect those included as part of it from outside parties; an issue of ‘us’ versus the ‘other’. Migrants pose a mythological threat to a country’s culture, traditions and norms. Nations

work to protect and enforce a particular type of national identity. Immigration laws and regulations then determine who is 'okay' and who is 'not okay' within that so-called identity.

The executive order, also commonly known as the 'refugee ban', suspended the entry of immigrants and non-immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen). Syrian refugees were indefinitely banned for the reason that, "the entry of nationals of Syria as refugees is detrimental to the interests of the United States". (Liptak) People are being profiled because of their origin rather than for having done anything wrong. Despite the contagious fear mongering and the deliberately constructed high threat of home-grown terrorism within the borders of the United States, the amount of Muslim-American terrorist suspects & perpetrators every year since 2001 has been under 50 people, with 20 in 2011. (Kurzman 2)

There were 20 suspects and/or perpetrators in 2011, in comparison to the total amount of murders in the United States in 2014, which, according to the CDC, was at the staggering number of 15,809 people. 10,945 of those people died at the hands of a firearm (CDCP). If our fear of terrorism in the United States is based on the fear of our citizens being killed, it seems as if our phobias and efforts are extremely ill placed.

By 2010, the fear mongering towards Muslims became an issue within and on American soil – the enemy wasn't only in the Middle East, it was in the US. Bringing us back to the "green scare": the fear of our neighbor, fear in our town, in our city of the 'homegrown terrorists'. (Kumar) We see this shift reflected in the Trump Administration's policies, refusing to provide a safe space for refugees because the

rampant fear of terrorists in ‘our’ land; the common fear that Muslims want to take over the US and it’s government.

It is important to remember that being a refugee is a process that one goes through despite the term being commonly used to label of a type of person. For an example let’s consider the process a refugee undertakes between being forced to flee their home country and being resettled within the United States. First, a refugee flees their home country. Upon arrival outside of their home country’s borders, the refugee must register with UNCHR, where they consider whether or not that person qualifies as a refugee within the guidelines of the law. From there, UNCHR must refer that person to the U.S. Embassy. At that point, there are many agencies that are contracted with the US government that then create a case file for that specific person. From there, an officer from the Homeland Security Department has a face-to-face interview with the refugee to determine if they qualify as a refugee within the guidelines. The case file is then submitted for “final approval of submission”, and simultaneously while this takes place the refugee receives a medical examination and cultural orientation. If accepted, the refugee is met at the airport in the United States and taken to the placement apartment that the agency has prepared for them (U.S. Department of State).

A common misperception is that upon arrival in the United States the refugee’s struggle is over. However, the resettlement process can actually be just as challenging as the refugee process itself. Upon resettlement, refugees must take on the task of learning English, getting jobs, assimilating into the culture and often times continuing to struggle with issues of trauma, depression and mental illness. Identity is a true struggle that refugees face, both during and after the experience.

All migration issues after World War Two, such as the current humanitarian crisis, are deeply tied to economics. With the rise of globalization has come a deepening divide between the wealthy of the world and the poor of the world. Around 60% of all migrants were later found in the world's more wealthy countries. (Spellman) These migrants pose a threat to the overall international systematic structure: the divide of North and South, the divide of wealthy and poor. While economically and electronically we are in a very globalized and interconnected world, nations continue their harsh fight to control immigrants in attempt to keep the wealthy of the world getting wealthier and the poorer of the world getting poorer.

### **#RefugeeCameras as resistance: an examination**

Humans identify with image before they learn to speak. Sight is a particularly important sense; it is how we identify ourselves within the world around us. Most of the world's population doesn't visit art museums. However, in cities in particular, image is everywhere and is inescapable. We come into contact with so many images we often don't remember contacting them.

Photography, with its powerful 'realism', is then a method of creating histories, spreading ideologies and instilling emotion. We become aware of violence in the physical sense and/or war globally through constructed means; images are specific and the ones presented to us in media are specific. Visual methodology is the way an image becomes 'reality', left up to the viewer to be interpreted.

The examination of the #RefugeeCameras photography collection must begin with a look into the photographer who led the project. Kevin McElvaney is a German photojournalist

passionate about “documentary, reportage and portraiture” photography styles (McElvaney). His publications include *Al Jazeera*, *The Atlantic*, *BBC*, *Daily Mail*, *Fox News*, *The Guardian* and *Wired*, among many others. *Al Jazeera* is one of his many clients. His work consists of many different portraiture and reportage projects from around the world.

Photography is a means of politics; a political statement. There is a responsibility on the photographer in where and how they direct the viewer to the subject. Photography can speak on pain, war, and darkness in ways that can be impossible by any other means. There are many ethical issues around a photographer from the outside of any given situation choosing how to represent and depict the subject and their struggle. The issue of the outsider photographer is especially relevant to photojournalism. McElvaney recognized these issues in regards to photojournalism of the refugee crisis, which is why he decided to conduct the #RefugeeCameras project.

Realizing that the media wasn't giving refugees their own voice, this project attempts to let those who are often depicted from an outsider's perspective decide what is important and what is not in the representation of the refugee crisis. McElvaney went to Turkey and distributed fifteen disposable cameras to refugees he met along the way. The cameras were handed to women and men from a variety of nations traveling through a variety of countries along the refugee migration route. Two of the fifteen cameras were handed specifically to women. The cameras were given with pre-paid return envelopes to make return easy and the participation in the project free.

Around three months later he received seven cameras back to him by mail. Of the other eight cameras he gave out, two were confiscated by border police, two were confiscated by Turkish coast guard, one was lost along the way, and three are missing altogether due to loss

of contact. Those seven refugees who were able to return the cameras to him were all male and all from the Muslim-majority countries of Syria, Iran and Iraq.

While attempting to give voice to both genders in the project, McElvaney says that, “it was also harder for me to get in touch to women than men. Besides that there have been 2 families and the father was ‘in charge’ of the photos lets say. In total there have been four women involved. Unfortunately those two women who photographed have been those, who lost their camera or it was confiscated.” The fact that cameras were taken from people at the border, when they likely haven’t been able to take many belongings with them in the first place, speaks to how the camera can be (and often is) seen as a threat.

The photographs that make up the #RefugeeCameras project are a reflection of those who were able to pass through security checkpoints and who were not, who was able to stay in contact and who was not, and who was able to survive the journey and who was not. All of this is outside of any control from McElvaney once he passed along the materials. Speaking to a higher number of males involved in the project, he also notes that, “men had to join the ‘military service’ in Syria. The state contacted them, so they have been pressured to leave the country or they have to fight against their own people -> so many Syrians I met there left because of that at that time.” (McElvaney) The thought that Syrian men have practically been drafted with high pressure into military service is not often considered or relayed in Western media. Refugees are faced with challenging decisions and sometimes face no choice at all. To fight or to leave? To potentially kill and die or to leave your family and home? Decisions most of us will be lucky enough to never have to consider, let alone make.

The #RefugeeCameras collection has its own website. Not all photographs from the returned cameras are included in the online presence. There are a total 26 images from the cameras in the online format. McElvaney reduced the selection for the online version of #RefugeeCameras because he thought there were too many images for the website. I think this is possibly because of the idea that with too many images, the viewer wouldn't take the time to see images from each camera. (The entire project in full, with all images, is being exhibited around Europe. This essay refers to #RefugeeCameras in regards to the online presence only.) When clicking to view the selected images included in the online presence of the project, an acknowledgement by McElvaney prefaces the images. In his acknowledgement he writes:

The refugee 'crisis' appears in the media every day

Every day I saw almost the same pictures

It always frustrated me

As a photographer I asked myself:

Can I photograph this in a different way?

Will I see exactly this, when I am there by myself?

Does the coverage miss something or has the wrong focus?

All these question had no satisfying answers, but I realized:

We always decide what is important to say and what is not

We always photograph the refugees in their situations

We are those who tell their stories

We

I knew I wouldn't be able to overcome these barriers in my head and decided to start a risky experiment:

Let's try to give the refugees a voice

Let's try to let them decide, what is important to say and what is not

Let us see the individual behind the anonymous concept of a 'refugee'

Let photography be the medium for this

3 days later I was on a plane to Izmir with 15 single-use cameras in my bag and envelopes to send them back to me.

These are the people I met and a selection of photos, that came back to me.

Some of these images are in color and some of these images are in black and white. Some use flash and some don't. All are images in a film format versus digital. The main theme of the images are methods of transportation; boats, buses, trains, or on foot. Other reoccurring themes such as moments of waiting and portraiture are seen throughout the collection. McElvaney did not edit any of the photos in the project in any way except for exposure and color corrections.

It is important to consider whom a photographer is working for and their reasoning for presenting the image, especially in relevance to mainstream media journalism and representation of war. Often times the photographer is left without credit, presenting the image without any background of the person who captured it. I came across this often while searching for a refugee photography project for this research. There are many photography projects involving refugees, but many do not give credit to the refugee who created the image. #RefugeeCameras attempts to give as much information as possible about each 'photographer'. The information given to the viewer includes their name, their home country, and a variety of background information that is seen in the journal and captions.



Refugees sit on the floor in an overcrowded train in Germany.

Amer received his camera on December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015 in Lesbos. Amer is from Syria and writes, that he is happy to join the photo project. Unfortunately he wasn't familiar to use the single-use camera right and as a result, just a few images have been made. He traveled with his brother Hashem and both stay in Verden, Germany now.

A father sleeps with his arms on a Athens to

Saeed Iran. He left he converted and was in the killed / this. To cross from Germany, he himself in Afghan

been rejected to cross the Balkans since November 17, 2015). In Germany he made his case clear and lives as an Iranian now. Today he lives in Hanau, Germany.



from Syria his child in bus from Idomeni.

comes from Iran because to Christianity risk of being arrested for the borders Macedonia to registered Lesbos as an (Iranians have



In Serbia the refugees used a stop to search for berries and other food in the forest nearby. Many ran out of money until that moment.

Firas received his camera on Dec 10,2015 in Moria, the registration camp on Lesbos. Firas is from Iraq a flee from ISIS/Daesh after they invaded his city. He wrote, that ISIS took everything from them, even their women. They raped them and killed the children. His family is still in Iraq and he had to cross Turkey illegally, because he lost his passport and belongs to a Yazidi minority. Firas lives in Hildesheim, Germany today.



Hamza holds up two boys after all refugees left the dinghy.

Hamza received his camera on Dec 08, 2015 in Izmir. He worked as a chemist and shared the camera with his friend Abdulmonem. Both are from Aleppo, Syria. They documented the landing of a dinghy on an unknown island in Greece. Hamza lives in Munich, and Abdulmonem near Rostock in Germany today.

News photography is always deemed ‘factual’, no matter if it is actually factual or not.

There can often be a significant relationship between photography and propaganda. The images are always deemed ‘objective’, even though objectivity is often hard (and I would argue impossible) to achieve. In a world where we are seeing the highest levels of displacement ever, we must question why and how media is portraying images of the crisis, what photographer captured the images, their history, and for what end goal.

Photography is a means of providing evidence. A photographer cannot remove themselves from their own taste and conscience, “always imposing standards on their subjects.” (Sontag 6) Photographs can act as reinforcement for gender roles and moral positions. “There can be no evidence, photographic or otherwise, of an event until the event itself has been named and characterized. And it is never photographic evidence which can construct...events; the contribution of photography always follows the naming of the event.”

(Sontag 19) Photography is always a representation of something after it has already been appropriated and categorized.

Images have power. Photography is not an unbiased representation of truth; just as any art form is impossible to remove from any level of bias. Photographs are often automatically deemed reality, when most of the time the “camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses.” (Sontag 23) Using photography as a means of solidifying and confirming reality is in turn, then, a method of consumerism.

Susan Sontag argues that “social documentary” photography is a representation of some of the most horrific and dark social issues, but are left simply as depiction, without any means to enact change. It is basically “an act of non-intervention.” (Sontag 11) Social documentary photography is defined as a “recording of how the world looks like, with a social and/or environmental focus. It is a form of documentary photography, with the aim to draw the public's attention to ongoing social issues. It may also refer to a socially critical genre of photography dedicated to showing the life of underprivileged or disadvantaged people.” (Wikipedia) The ability for social documentary photography to enact change can be questionable.

However, I would disagree that it is not all “an act of non-intervention.” (Sontag 11) In a world where colonization and empire still exist and still wreak havoc just simply under new guises, I see non-intervention as taking no action at all. I see non-intervention as staying silent. If social documentary, in the case of #RefugeeCameras, is in fact “an act of non-intervention”, then why do these images taken by refugee people themselves not appear on mainstream news networks? There is a reason they are not widely spread. Perhaps I agree that the project does not enact change. Maybe the project does not enact physical, measurable

changes. But it very well might change someone's mind. It shows a side, a human side, to this crisis that is not often acknowledged. Silence upholds the status-quo, speaking is a method of violent disruption and resistance.

We often associate the term violence with bloodshed, with physical tangible acts. However the word has multiple definitions. Violence can be, according to Merriam Webster, "1. a: the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy b: an instance of violent treatment or procedure 2. injury by or as if by distortion, infringement, or profanation 3. a: intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force b: vehement feeling or expression *also* : an instance of such action or feeling" (Merriam Webster) Fanon acknowledges that truth hurts the colonizers more than anything else. Giving the power to the marginalized and allowing them to tell the story of what the colonizer is doing and how it is affecting their life is something that doesn't happen for obvious reasons.

The colonizers makes history, the colonizers control mainstream media, it is the colonizer's job to convince everyone of their idealized truth and forget what is factual. So if an artist on the inside of media stands up, if that artist openly recognizes and speaks to how inaccurately issues are being portrayed, and that artist gives power to those who the colonizer wants powerless, the artist is being violent. The artist is being violent against the colonizer's violence. Sometimes violence must fight violence. As Malcolm X said, "We are peaceful people, we are loving people. We love everybody who loves us. But we don't love anybody who doesn't love us. We're nonviolent with people who are nonviolent with us. But we are not nonviolent with anyone who is violent with us." (The Society Pages)

With McElvaney being a well-established photo-journalist, the #RefugeeCameras project has drawn attention in media around the world including being featured in *Sputnik*

*International*, *PetaPixel*, and *AlJazeera* in 2016. In January 2017 he was in process of working on a new refugee photography project in which he joined the ship and crew of The Aquarius on its regular three week journey of rescuing refugees from The Mediterranean Sea. The ship is led by the non-profit organization SOS Méditerranée, the same organization in which he donates all proceeds from the exhibits of #RefugeeCameras to. (National Geographic)

### **solidarity, a conclusion**

In an opinion article for *Al Jazeera* Neil Howard, a research fellow at the University of Antwerp, discusses the role and responsibility of Western journalists that report on issues they are far removed from in reproducing the sensationalist, ‘sexy’ images. Although he looked specifically to representations of children as victims of trafficking, his article ends with the suggestion that it would be far better for, “journalists to spend longer with the people on whom they report, to let them tell their own stories, and to use the privilege of access to the global press to contextualise their stories in global structures of power and exclusion of the kind characterising life under neoliberal capitalism. Then they might start making a difference.” (Howard) This is the type of journalism the world needs – a type of reporting in which images are not made for the exoticized, mythological gaze in the way that National Geographic so often reproduces.

The type of journalism that Howard is suggesting is what is created in the #RefugeeCameras project. Every person has a history, a background, different views and life experiences. It’s impossible for those to have no impact on a project. That being said I think there are imperfections with the #RefugeeCameras project, just as in anything else.

McElvaney is a white European man who works for and has access to global media - a reflection of his privilege. When someone has privilege, should they use their privilege to give voice to those who have been silenced by others? Is it problematic for those with privilege to stand in to help give them voice? These are the issues and the questions that I leave this project wondering. In a world where Islamophobia is running rampant, where racism and xenophobia are unfortunately something we run into even in our most cherished inner circles, if we stand in a position to help I believe we should, no matter the extent.

If you stand in a position of privilege, or even if you don't, talking is better than staying silent. If you have privilege I believe you have a responsibility to use it to stand up for those who are oppressed in order for you to have that privilege at all in the first place. Speaking is a method of violence. Photography speaks. McCurry, despite his ignorance in using Gula's portrait in a corporate media setting and not asking her permission, was better putting the image out into a public space than never using it at all. I do believe there are ethical issues he should have dealt with in significantly better ways. But without that photo, maybe some people, specifically people in the United States, would have *really* never known about the issues people were facing elsewhere, especially in the mid 80's.

With the rise of technology and media in all forms, we as a society have the responsibility to do things in a better, more ethical way. Throughout his work McElvaney was sure to give voice. As a man of privilege in mainstream media, he went against the grain of how he saw others representing the crisis. His project is an act of resistance, a disruption of mainstream coverage, because it gives refugees space to have names, stories, and perspectives.

Before I began this project in August of 2016 I didn't know much about refugees; what these people have made it through, what they have risen above, in what ways they continue to struggle

upon resettlement. Let alone did I know (or understand) the complicated roles of empire and colonization on the reason they had to be labeled and categorized as refugees at all in the first place. As I began this project, I also began an internship at Chicago non-profit GirlForward. GirlForward provides opportunity and resources for high school aged girls in the Chicago area that have been resettled as refugees. (GirlForward) This project was inspired by this fabulous female community that I happened to stumble into – it has been influenced by the strong, beautiful, courageous girls that I've had the honor to be able to get to know.

There is no golden answer. The issues of empire, of colonization, of fear mongering, these are the same issues we've seen throughout history that have not left us. These issues, along with many other challenging issues we face at this time, are extremely intersectional and intertwined. We must recognize that. I encourage you to find a way to speak, no matter how small. Small actions can lead to change – they can lead to someone reconsidering their opinion, to making a difference in the life of one person. Small actions can lead to bigger actions, too, bigger changes. You either act or you don't. Standing up and acting is a way to disrupt. We must stand in solidarity for one other. That is the first step.

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