

A Critical Look at Canadian Perspectives on the Global Refugee Crisis - Afifa Hashimi

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Regarding migrant justice, as with all issues, I feel that it is important to be aware of one's own place in relation to the matter. Though I have never been a migrant, my family has been profoundly shaped by migration: my father left Afghanistan to pursue post-secondary education in India and was unable to return to his homeland after graduating due to the Afghan-Soviet war, which led to his migration to Canada as a political refugee, where my mother joined him from India. I am acutely aware of the fact that I may not have grown up as a Canadian citizen on unceded Coast Salish territories if it wasn't for Canada's migrant intake. Therefore, I am grateful to the Indigenous peoples of this land, and glad that the plight of refugees is something that has brought about necessary government policies and media attention.

As a Muslim Canadian woman with this connection to migration, I have experienced mixed reactions to recent events. I was wary of the former government's [prioritization of Christian refugees at the expense of others](#), deeply troubled by the overall Islamophobic sentiment that characterized resistance to migrants in North America and Europe, and disheartened by the [hate crime committed against Syrian refugees](#) at a Muslim Association of Canada welcome event in Vancouver. Islamophobia is a form of prejudice that certain refugees experience, but I seek to stand in solidarity with all migrants, and against the wide range of xenophobia and racism they may face during their journeys of migration and settlement.

Like many Canadians, I have been happy to see the Liberal government keep its firm anti-xenophobic stance and recently [reach its goal of bringing 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada](#); this

milestone is definitely positive and worthy of celebration. However, as easy as it is to let warm fuzzy feelings envelop us upon hearing this news and block out all else, I am somewhat hesitant to be overcome by these feelings. It is imperative for Canadians to be critical of media coverage and refugee policies. This ensures that we are not viewing this situation in an overwhelmingly self-congratulatory light at the expense of honouring the lived experiences of refugees.

For those of us who have grown up in Canada, it takes conscious effort to resist media bias and the adoption of the “Western gaze” as a lens through which to view refugee crises. Media coverage must be critically examined – especially coverage that eclipses the narratives of Syrians themselves while simultaneously prioritizing Syrian refugees to the point where other refugee crises get scant attention. One significantly overlooked issue is anti-black racism against African migrants–perpetuated and often overlooked by non-black people like myself–which leads to their neglect by the Canadian government, even in cases where Canada itself is a direct cause of their displacement. All of the above begs us to take a closer look at the nature and magnitude of the attention that the Syrian refugee crisis is getting in Canada, and critically re-examine self-congratulatory Canadian stances on migrant intake.

Syrian Refugees in Canadian Media

Extensive media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis arguably began with [deceased 3-year old Alan Kurdi's photo going viral](#). The toddler was among thousands who perished in what was “[the deadliest year on record](#)” for migrant groups crossing the Mediterranean. Kurdi's story in particular may have struck a chord with Canadians as his family was travelling with the hopes of eventually joining family on Kwikwetlem territory, British Columbia.

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler asks the question: “[when is life grievable?](#)” Perhaps Alan Kurdi's photo and its publicization finally made Syrian lives grievable to the West, but has subsequent Canadian media attention been entirely appropriate? And what about migrants in other refugee crises? Are their lives less worthy, losses less deserving of grief?

The politics of journalism, and photojournalism in particular, are complicated. Do we need to see photographic evidence of human suffering to be able to empathize with others? Are there situations in which such photographic evidence can do more harm than good, desensitizing instead of inciting action? It seems that [some stories have focused more on the iconic nature of the photograph than the boy himself](#) in an arguably voyeuristic way, but it is true that Alan Kurdi's photograph is iconic for poignantly inciting an outpouring of grief and outrage, [spurring positive action in Canada as it caused the Syrian refugee crisis to move to center stage during a period of the 2015 federal election](#).

However, many have taken issue with more recent coverage of the government's refugee plan that they deem to be [too “feel-good” on the part of Canadians](#). Canadian efforts to help Syrians are certainly commendable and warm-hearted. However, multiple photo-ops of politicians greeting refugees, extensive praise of Canada's diversity and openness that lacks acknowledgement of the xenophobia and racism that refugees may face here, and media projects such as [CBC's “Open Arms”](#), all present refugee intake in an arguably self-congratulatory light, favouring the exhibition of Canadian perspectives that overshadow the personal narratives of Syrian refugees themselves. This intense focus on Canada's response to the Syrian refugee crisis has also overshadowed other refugee crises.

Syrians aren't the Sole Sufferers

While the nature of Canadian media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis has left some wanting, it is hard to contest the fact that the magnitude of media coverage this crisis has received is disproportionate compared to others. When thinking about migrant justice, it is crucial to recognize that the current global refugee crisis certainly has not started with, nor will it end with, the displacement and settlement of Syrian refugees. [Data from the UN Refugee Agency](#) shows that Syrians account for 41 per cent of European Mediterranean Sea arrivals so far in 2016, Afghan migrants 27 per cent, Iraqi migrants 17 per cent, and other migrants the other 15 per cent, many of them from African countries. Non-Syrians are included in the tragically record-breaking count of those who perished at sea, but many media outlets have focused more on Syrian deaths in the aftermath of Alan Kurdi's tragic story. Not that Syrian refugees are undeserving of attention—on the contrary—but room must be made for sufficient coverage of multiple refugee crises, for ignorance leads to more suffering. Displaced migrants who have not attempted to cross the Mediterranean are experiencing strife in the Middle East and Africa, with many currently receiving less assistance than those being accepted into Western countries. Iraqi refugees in Jordan and neighbouring countries (displaced by the American-led invasion of Iraq, and other conflicts) are [poorer than ever due to funding cuts by organizations and aid agencies](#) that have diverted their focus to Syrian migrants.

North and Central America have their own growing refugee crisis as well: [domestic and gang violence continues to force thousands of Mexican and Central American women and children to seek refuge in the United States, many suffering violence and detention on their journeys](#). The rate at which this crisis is unfolding ([five times as many of these migrants entered the U.S. in 2014 compared to 2008](#)), compared to its severe lack of media coverage, is alarming, especially since migrant numbers in this region are increasing as migrants from Africa and the Middle East [are also taking this route](#).

While Syrian refugees currently outnumber migrants of other nationalities in certain regions, the global refugee crisis is so widespread that Syrians do not make up the majority of migrants overall. Regardless of this fact, many question whether initiatives that specifically targets Syrian refugees are fair. Canada's relatively quick intake of Syrian refugees undoubtedly has had a positive impact, but preferential treatment raises serious questions about equality, ethics, and the relative perceived worth of human lives.

African Refugees and Anti-black Racism

African refugees have been living in refugee camps for years, eagerly awaiting entry into Canada, so how is it that [further limits have been placed on their migration so that Syrian refugees can be prioritized](#)? The answer lies in anti-blackness, as former African refugees such as [Daniel Tseghay and Josiane Anthony](#) (originally from Eritrea and Togo, respectively) assert. Myself and other non-black Canadians, especially those with connections to migration, must open our eyes to the rampant anti-black racism underlying the historical lack of media and government attention on African refugees compared to other migrants.

To return to the politics of journalism and its potential for complicity in oppressive systems, Kurdi's example showcases the positive power of photojournalism, but the contrast between this image of a light-skinned child and those of darker-skinned children is stark for many – and not just in a visual sense. We shouldn't need photographic evidence in order to empathize, but

similar photos of African children certainly exist and [none have incited comparable international action](#). Constant media-showcased imagery of violence against black and brown bodies in other parts of the world (compared to a lack of gory coverage of Western tragedies, such as the November 2015 Paris attacks) arguably showcases the harmful downside of this kind of photojournalism, as many Canadians have been desensitized to African suffering. This blend of media narratives and deep-rooted anti-black racism has tragically [served to harmfully naturalize black death](#), as Tseghay and others say. This has unjustly led to the overshadowing of African suffering, and the prioritization of non-African refugees by countries like Canada that have historically been, and continue to be, exploiters of African labour and a subsequent cause of population displacement in Africa.

Are the lives of African migrants worth less, less grievable, less worthy of attention? Definitely not, yet the abovementioned media coverage and certain government policies may suggest that Canada believes otherwise.

Former African refugees are praising the humanitarian efforts that allow Syrians to settle in Canada. They are also criticizing the [“two-tier” system](#) that allows unlimited (up to the 25,000 goal) Syrian refugee intake while maintaining strict government-imposed caps on the intake of other migrants: [“only 35 private sponsorship applications were received for all non-Syrian refugees in Jan. 2016, compared to a monthly average of 387 in 2015.”](#) Syrian refugees deserve settlement in Canada, yet restrictions on non-Syrian refugees are harmful to the severely overlooked African migrants who continue to suffer as their already lengthy wait times ([average: 45 months, upwards to 6 years](#)) are further lengthened. This is especially troubling given the case of the Eritrean refugee crisis. The Canadian government currently neglects Eritrean refugees, yet plays a role in their displacement; [these refugees are fleeing conditions created by the Vancouver-based mining company, Nevsun](#), which continues to expand operations even as the crisis grows.

And what about measures to ensure the dignified treatment of refugees that Canada does accept? I was glad to see Canadian politicians [rightfully condemning the Islamophobic attack in Vancouver](#), but I am disheartened by the disparity between this and the lack of attention on oppression of diasporic African communities in Canada. Muslim Somali refugees also experience Islamophobia, as well as anti-black racism, an intersection overlooked by many. Furthermore, diasporic Somali-Canadians, regardless of religion, may find the [“Western dream a nightmare”](#) instead of the rosy picture of peace and prosperity that Canada promises.

I feel that as Canadians we should strive to take a closer, more critical look at current refugee policies, their implications, and media attention surrounding refugee crises. It is easy to gush about the warm-heartedness of Canadians [who knit tuques for Syrian refugees](#) and welcome them with open arms, but much harder for many to confront the harsh reality of Canadian neglect in African refugee crises for which Canada is partly responsible. As difficult as this is, recognizing these truths and taking informed action are essential in the fight for global migrant justice.