



For security, these photos do not show the volunteers highlighted in the project.  
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# Three Syrian Voices:

## Dismantling “Otherness” Perceptions by Crafting Works of Creative Nonfiction

Hannah Choi | Dr. Sonia Badenas, *Primary Advisor* | Dr. Beverly Matiko, *Secondary Advisor*  
Department of International Languages and Global Studies

### Abstract

Proliferation of anti-refugee rhetoric through repeated use of “Islamic State,” “terrorism,” and similar language reinforces perceptions of “otherness” toward marginalized, asylum-seeking Syrians whose individual voices are rarely if ever heard by Western populations. In the Fall of 2017, while working for eight weeks in a school for Syrian refugees in the SDA Middle East North Africa Union, I interviewed three young Syrian volunteers. The resulting three works of creative nonfiction grow out of an effort to **understand**, **appreciate**, and **share** experiences of individual Syrians with an audience socially predisposed to ascribe an overarching identity to people of this demographic.

### Methodology

This creative nonfiction thesis is organized into the three following phases:

#### Phase 1: Preparation

In the initial phase, I consulted literature published on the public perception of Syrian people as influenced by Western media, methods of “doing the work of hearing” (Scheyvens, et. al) in order to give agency to those who often cannot speak up for themselves, and the importance of treating subjects as humans with moral agency; studied short story cycles and works of creative nonfiction and guides for such writing by well-known authors such as Viet Thanh Nguyen and Lee Gutkind; established the objectives and guidelines of the project; proposed methods of implementing those guidelines; and developed a timeline, made travel arrangements, and raised funds for field work.

#### Phase 2: Execution

The second phase involved a two-month visit to the field country, remaining unnamed for security reasons, in the Middle East. There, I observed, volunteered, and conducted interviews with three young Syrian volunteers at a school created for Syrian students who have suffered a lapse in their education due to the Syrian Civil War (2011–present). I continued studying similar literature from the preparation phase and explored the political

history in Syria and in several neighboring countries, and relations between them.

In this phase, I made initial contact with potential subjects, directly observed the subjects in school and/or in their homes, and conducted interviews with each. I noted the narratives and themes in each individual’s experience and crafted a piece of nonfiction incorporating scenes and events that lend to cohesive narratives of growth and self-discovery. The three creative nonfiction works are written and revised with the assistance and guidance of my primary and secondary advisors.

#### Phase 3: Evaluation

The final phase will consist of two first-person narrative essays that highlight the importance, the discoveries, and the challenges of speaking up for those who cannot speak up for themselves. These first-person narratives are also the platform from which I will evaluate the ethical and stylistic decisions applied in the second phase against my proposed guidelines set out for the project in the first phase.

### Process

**Creative nonfiction** is a genre that adopts many of the conventions of fiction (dialogue, plot, setting, etc.) to tell stories whose content is true or lived experience rather than imagined. The three creative nonfiction pieces based on the experiences of the Syrian volunteers incorporate interviews with the subjects, direct observation and notes, and published literature, and are paired with two first-person narratives that evaluate the process as described in the third phase. Though I intentionally did not view every interaction as writing material, many of the conversations with and observations of the subjects influenced the questions I asked in interviews and the themes I gathered from those interviews. Some external interactions, observations, and conversations are included in my writing as secondary details. Truly befriending these volunteers was a crucial step in understanding and appreciating their experiences.

The writing process involved organizing all interviews and observations; researching facts indirectly related to the stories such as political history or relations between countries; removing identifiers to protect the identities of the subjects; compiling interviews, observations, and facts into cohesive stories that naturally reveal underlying themes of hope and healing in the context of displacement; and evaluating through first-person narrative essays how this instance of and similar use of creative nonfiction can serve as a tool to speak up for the marginalized.

### Conclusion

Negative perceptions portrayed in Western media can help cultivate a culture of wariness toward a people group largely in need. Thus, the significance of giving others a voice is **not merely a political or social issue** but also a **moral one**, as a people group cannot be defined by a single narrative, especially a negatively charged one.

Though it may come with its fair share of challenges, entering into the lives of people who have experienced trauma and often continue to face major emotional, health, or financial challenges is valuable. Creative nonfiction is an effective tool for listening to unheard voices and giving those voices a platform to reach a wider audience. Nonetheless, there is a delicate balance between seeking just to share a captivating story or culture and using that platform as a way to **bridge societies** by highlighting often ordinary, yet **deeply human commonalities**.

### Bibliography

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