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The Burden of Balance: Postcolonial Critique, Peace Journalism, and the Differential Activation of Media Ethics in *New York Times* Opinions on Syrian and Ukrainian War Refugees

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Abstract

Wars are mediated in part through the figures of the displaced they produce. This article compares how the opinion pages of *The New York Times* represented refugees from two wars, the Syrian civil war (2015–2016) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022–2023). It reads through postcolonial media ethics, which asks how journalism's universal norms carry the unmarked histories of colonialism, and brings that reading into conversation with peace journalism. Both populations appeared as burdens. Syrian refugees carried a burden of character. They were called upon to answer for a threat they were imagined to pose and were admitted to sympathy only as they displayed Western markers. Ukrainian refugees carried a burden of capacity. Their proximity to Europe was presumed. Their character was never questioned. The coverage also remembered empire selectively, recalling some imperial histories and passing over others. The norm of balance makes the difference most visible. Writers who supported Syrian admission repeatedly conceded or reproduced the case against it. The article theorizes this pattern as the differential activation of media ethics, reads it as a form of cultural violence, and weighs the postcolonial reading against alternative explanations. It proposes that a postcolonial interruption of journalism's normative vocabulary is a condition of peace journalism, since wartime hierarchies of representation may prefigure the hierarchies of return and reconciliation.

Keywords: postcolonial media ethics; cultural violence; mediated war; refugee representation; differential activation; journalistic balance; peace journalism; hierarchy of victims; critical discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

Since a major escalation of the Syrian civil war in 2014 and 2015, a near-constant and urgent stream of Syrians fled the conditions of war in their country. Countries in the Middle East and Europe took in the majority of them. The war, which began in 2011, ended only in December 2024, when a rebel offensive ousted Bashar al-Assad after more than five decades of his family's rule. Yet, even after the war's end, millions of Syrians remain displaced abroad and inside the country as Syria's fragile political transition continues (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Then, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a war that remains ongoing at the time of writing. This war has also driven Ukrainians from their ravaged country, with Europe once again hosting many of them. The American response to the two displacements was strikingly uneven. The administration of then President Obama set a goal of resettling 10,000 Syrian refugees in fiscal year 2016.

It exceeded the goal, granting refugee status to 12,587 Syrians (Connor, 2016b). Within a week of taking office in January 2017, President Trump suspended the entry of Syrian refugees indefinitely (Federal Register, 2017). Under President Biden, 271,000 Ukrainians were admitted to the United States (US) within the first year of the invasion, more than 117,000 of them through the new Uniting for Ukraine program (Ainsley, 2023).

These asymmetries of admission were accompanied by asymmetries of mediation. Wars today are fought and legitimated as much in media environments as on battlefields, and the figure and identities of the refugees occupy a pivotal place in that mediation. How the displaced are represented tells publics what kind of war produced them, who its victims are, and what obligations the war imposes on distant spectators in an otherwise globalized and highly connected world. The US media representation of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees is thus bound up with the geopolitical power dynamics through which each war itself is narrated. In the opinion pages examined here, the Syrian civil war reached American readers already routed through the residual imaginary of the post-9/11 War on Terror, in which the Muslim-majority Middle East figured as a source of danger. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was narrated from its first days as an assault on Europe and, by extension, on the West itself. Welcoming Ukrainian refugees became, in that telling, a performance of wartime solidarity against Russia. Examining refugee representation comparatively across these two wars therefore illuminates not only the politics of representation but the discursive legitimation of war and its consequences.

In this article, such an examination is carried out through critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the editorials and op-eds published in *The New York Times* (NYT), read through the lens of postcolonial media ethics. According to Rao and Wasserman (2007), postcolonial media ethics allows for universal media ethics to take into "account the history of colonialism, differences of powers between nations and peoples, and the importance of indigenous theory" (p. 29). Both countries carry imperial histories of their own. The coloniality this article examines lies in the frames through which Western journalism decides which histories to remember and which of the displaced to recognize as its own. The theoretical section that follows develops the distinction. The central argument developed here is that the disparity in their representation ran through journalism's own ethical principles. Norms such as balance, neutrality, and humanization were activated unevenly across the two populations. The article reads that unevenness through the unmarked Eurocentric histories within which those norms operate, histories that sort war's victims into categories drawn from the language and practices of colonialism.

The analysis is guided by three research questions, set out in full in the Materials and Methods in Section 3. They ask how each population was represented, when and in what forms the norm of balance was applied, and how those patterns may be read through postcolonial media ethics. The answers complicate any simple opposition between worthy and unworthy refugees. Both populations appeared as burdens. Syrians carried a burden of character, called upon again and again to answer for a threat they were imagined to pose. Ukrainians carried a burden of capacity, figured as a strain on the societies that received them and at times as a weapon in Putin's hands. Only the Syrian refugee, however, was made to bear the burden of balance. The argument is addressed to peace research as much as to media studies. Peace journalism has long maintained that the conventions of war reporting help to reproduce the conflicts they cover. Its remedy has been the reform of those conventions. The analysis developed here suggests that the remedy may underestimate the problem. The conventions themselves can carry colonial histories. Until those histories are interrogated, even the most scrupulous practice risks sorting the displaced into unequal orders of concern.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Mediated War, Worthy Victims, and the Politics of Refugee Representation

Media representation can be inclusive and diverse or can reinforce stereotypes and biases (Hall, 1997). Historically marginalized groups have often been underrepresented or misrepresented in the media. Such misrepresentation perpetuates harmful stereotypes and limits the public's understanding of these communities' experiences. Representations of otherness, in their many forms, work to naturalize relations of power and dominance (Spencer, 2014). In a media-saturated society, to be absent from the center of representation is to be diminished in public life itself. In the case of refugees, these stakes are magnified because media representation can influence and incite political action, shaping public perceptions through the language and imagery used to describe the displaced.

Within scholarship on war and media specifically, the differential valuation of war's victims has a long genealogy. Herman and Chomsky (2002) demonstrated that US media systematically distinguish between "worthy" victims, those harmed by enemy states, whose suffering is personalized and amplified, and "unworthy" victims, those harmed by the actions or allies of one's own state, whose suffering is abstracted and minimized. Chouliaraki's (2006) analysis of the spectatorship of suffering similarly shows that Western news constructs hierarchies of distance and relevance that regulate whose pain solicits emotion and action from audiences. In the specific context of forced displacement, Malkki (1996) identified the representational operation that makes such hierarchies possible, namely the dehistoricization of refugees into "speechless emissaries" (p. 390), pure embodiments of need stripped of the political histories that produced their displacement. Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) extend this line into the European "refugee crisis," showing that even sympathetic visual coverage tends to oscillate between massification and infantilization, rarely according refugees the status of political and historical subjects. Chouliaraki's later study of voice in the same crisis, with Zaborowski, gives the point empirical weight. Across eight European countries, refugees were quoted far less often than politicians, and their voices grew fainter still after the Paris attacks of November 2015 (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). What this body of work establishes is that refugee representation is a constitutive element of war's mediation, extending far beyond a simple humanitarian response. Media portrayal of refugees translates the reality and meaning of war for distant audiences, and how they are portrayed inherently judges the conflict itself. Yet, ethical responses to these representational failures have largely been formulated within Western media's normative traditions. It is there that a postcolonial critique must intervene.

A related literature on deservingness shows how such hierarchies are drawn within a single crisis as well as between crises. Holmes and Castañeda (2016) trace how the arrivals of 2015 in Germany were divided into deserving refugees and undeserving migrants, a distinction that carried the weight of life and death. Holzberg et al. (2018) find that the German press assembled its deserving refugee from three materials: economic productivity, state security, and gender relations. The deserving figure, in other words, is composed. It is built from criteria the host society sets and the displaced are asked to meet.

Two further traditions locate the sorting of the displaced outside journalism's ethics. Any account of those ethics must reckon with them. The first concerns the relation between the press and political power. Bennett's (1990) indexing hypothesis holds that news tends to mirror the range of views voiced by political elites, so that coverage turns two-sided where elites divide and settles where they agree. Diab (2026) brings a related logic to the comparison at hand, describing a cycle of reinforcement in which politicians and news outlets amplified each other's portrayals of Ukrainian refugees as deserving victims and of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa as a threat or a burden. The second concerns security. Huysmans (2006) shows how migration and asylum in Europe came to

be governed as questions of insecurity, until the figure of the migrant was legible chiefly through fear. Both traditions bear directly on the patterns this study examines. Neither, however, addresses the ethical vocabulary through which journalists convert elite division or security anxiety into the routines of fair reporting. That vocabulary is the subject of the present study.

Ethical approaches to media reportage promise to improve representational practice. Plaisance (2009) suggests that there needs to be more work done in order to be pluralistic: "The fact that we must work in and respond morally to an increasingly pluralistic world often complicates the ethical dilemmas we face. We cannot be absolutists in any sense" (Plaisance, 2009, p. 238). Hamelink (2000) urges media practitioners to undertake a "bottom-up," or inductive, approach to moral decision-making. While these pursuits are critical and worthwhile, they fall short of addressing how such pluralistic undertaking can be brought about when the principles leading to such an undertaking are prescribed by and emanate from a dominant Western perspective. This aspect of who gets to define concepts of media ethics becomes pivotal when it comes to representing refugees of war. Refugees coming from Syria and Ukraine bring with them historical, cultural, political, local, and global situatedness that needs to be taken into consideration when their conditions are being represented in global media.

2.2. Postcolonial Media Ethics as Interruption

Some key principles of universal media ethics include truth and accuracy, independence and impartiality, fairness and balance, privacy and humanity, and accountability (Ethical Journalism Network, 2023). However, when applied to the representation of different cultures and communities in times of conflict, especially minorities such as refugees, these principles do not always translate to ethical reporting from the perspective of the communities being represented. One remedy is to apply media ethics from a postcolonial perspective.

The postcolonial lens employed in this article rests on the field's foundational insights. Said (1978) demonstrated that Western representations construct the colonized "other" as an object of knowledge and control. Bhabha (1994) revealed the constitutive ambivalence of the colonial stereotype, which must hold the colonized subject as simultaneously pitiable and menacing. Bhabha also described the colonial demand for mimicry, in which the colonized subject is asked to resemble the colonizer and is recognized only as "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Spivak (1988) asked whether the subaltern can speak at all within dominant representational structures. It is these insights that postcolonial media ethics scholarship carries into the specific domain of journalism's norms and practices.

Rao and Wasserman (2007) contend that attempts to expand universal principles of media ethics to include non-Western perspectives do not always work. They examined two ethical concepts from South Africa and India respectively. *Ubuntu* holds that the values of the community form the basis of ethical decision-making and that the individual and community are interdependent. *Ahimsa* demands not only abstention from harming others but also the absence of any wish to harm. Rao and Wasserman (2007) show that "non-Western indigenous theories and complexities of postcolonial identities need to be integrated into a discussion of global media ethics" (p. 46). Shome (2019) takes an even more urgent step when she suggests that simply "dewesternizing" media is not enough. A postcolonial "interruption" is necessary to question "...unmarked (North Atlantic) histories and temporalities through which we engage and understand media" (Shome, 2019, p. 307). Shome's conceptualization poses the following questions:

> ... what might it mean to think of media (as history, as object, as culture, and as social life) when the postcolonial non-West or the Global South is not simply

> conceived of as "difference" but perhaps as a starting point for engaging media and media history? What reorientations does this call for? What lives (so far neglected), what histories (yet to be narrated) might become visible then? These issues are not just about media but about knowledge production itself. (Shome, 2019, p. 307)

Rao (2008) further suggests that postcolonial media ethics proceeds *along with* Western, global, indigenous, and local concepts so as to bear the local upon the universal in a non-coercive way. Rao maintains that non-Western and indigenous thought warrants recognition as theory in its own right, fully capable of analyzing the ethical practices of media.

This article analyzes data from US media representation of Syrian and Ukrainian war refugees through a postcolonial lens as suggested by Rao and Wasserman (2007), Rao (2008), and Shome (2019). Such an approach enables scholars to determine to what extent ethical reporting practices imbibe postcolonial ideals such as historical contexts and local epistemologies when reporting on refugee lives, and how the representation of refugees of different wars, histories, ethnicities, races, and religions differs in US media. Additionally, a postcolonial lens in media ethics helps in the understanding of the absence and presence of certain discursive tropes, such as historical specificity of wars (Shome, 2019) or colonial legacy (McPhail-Bell et al., 2013), that expand, limit, or manipulate the ways in which specific refugee communities may be perceived in the court of public opinion. Applied to the mediation of war, the lens asks how the ethical vocabulary of journalism, formed within unmarked North Atlantic histories, takes part in the sorting that the worthy-victims literature documents.

One clarification is required, since the comparison involves a people whose own history is entwined with empire. Ukraine lived for centuries under Russian and Soviet imperial rule. Mälksoo (2023) reads the full-scale invasion as an imperial war, one that mainstream postcolonial studies, attentive chiefly to the racial hierarchies of Western empires, has been slow to recognize. The coloniality at issue in this article is of another order. It concerns the interpretive frames of Western, and here American, journalism, together with the unmarked whiteness (Shome, 2019) that places some populations near and others at a distance. A Ukrainian refugee may be the subject of one empire's history and, at the same moment, the beneficiary of another's frames of recognition. Holding both in view keeps the analysis from treating Ukraine as nothing more than Europe's insider.

2.3. Peace Journalism, Cultural Violence, and the Grievability of the Displaced

Peace research supplies the second theoretical anchor of this study. Galtung (1969) distinguished direct violence from the structural violence built into institutions and life chances, and he later added a third term for the symbolic realm. Cultural violence names those aspects of culture, among them religion, ideology, language, and science, that make direct or structural violence look and feel right, or at least appear acceptable (Galtung, 1990). Journalism belongs squarely within that realm. When news coverage renders the exclusion of one displaced population reasonable and the embrace of another self-evident, it performs the legitimating work Galtung assigned to cultural violence, and it does so beneath the threshold of anything recognizable as bias.

A tradition of scholarship has pursued this insight into the newsroom. Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) argue that the routine conventions of war reporting, including two-sided framing, elite sourcing, and an orientation toward violent events, predispose coverage toward escalation, and they propose peace journalism as a repertoire of alternative choices. Hackett (2006) cautions that such choices remain constrained by the structures within which journalists work. Wolfsfeld (2004) demonstrates that news values themselves, with

their appetite for drama and immediacy, sit in tension with the slow and undramatic work of peacebuilding. Their suspicion of two-sided framing bears directly on the present study, which follows the norm of balance into the coverage of war's displaced. What unites these interventions is a shared assumption. The norms of journalism are treated as neutral instruments that have been badly used and could be used well. The present study places that assumption in question.

Two further concepts need to be mentioned within the context of sorting of war's displaced. Butler (2009) argues that war is waged partly through frames that apportion grievability, so that some lives register as losses while others never rise to the level of loss at all. Opotow (1990) describes moral exclusion as the placement of persons outside the boundary within which considerations of fairness and justice are understood to apply. Read alongside Herman and Chomsky's (2002) worthy and unworthy victims, these concepts suggest that the sorting of war's displaced takes place in the symbolic register as well as in policy. The two registers may reinforce each other. The contribution this article offers is to examine how that sorting operates within the ethical vocabulary of journalism itself.

Postcolonial critique supplies peace journalism with a genealogical account of why the norms it seeks to retrain keep misfiring in war coverage. Peace journalism, in turn, supplies postcolonial media ethics with a normative horizon beyond critique. If cultural violence legitimates exclusion, a journalism capable of witnessing all of the displaced equally would work toward what Galtung (1990) called cultural peace. Cultural peace, in his account, lends legitimacy to the positive peace he had earlier defined as the absence of structural violence (Galtung, 1969). The interruption Shome (2019) demands thus acquires a practical stake in the conditions under which wars end and the displaced return.

2.4. Refugees of Two Wars in Global and US Media

2.4.1. Global Media

Since the mid-2010s, there have been significant conflict zones in the world resulting in mass exodus of people from their country of origin only to enter host countries as refugees. The escalation of civil war and conflict in Syria, the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Palestine war are just a few of these conflicts. The locations of these conflicts have forced many refugees escaping war situations in their own country to seek refuge in European countries. As a result, scholars have studied Europe's encounter with refugees more intently. In their study of the representation of refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and migrants (RASIM) in newspapers of the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland, O'Regan and Riordan (2018) found that there was strong reinforcement of a "them and us" discourse and a predominantly negative construction of RASIM, who are represented primarily as a terrorist threat to the UK. However, the analysis of the Irish corpus revealed "a more positive, neutral or ambivalent stance, less evidence of a xenophobic tone and less concern with national sovereignty, border control and immigration compared to UK coverage" (O'Regan & Riordan, 2018, p. 761). They attributed the difference to the intense Brexit debate then roiling the UK, uncovering an important connection between RASIM representation and the tenor of local politics.

In an earlier study on how asylum seekers in the UK are referred to in mainstream media as "asylum shoppers," Moore (2013) found that by indexing the vulnerabilities of these individuals and condensing complex destabilizing anxieties of asylum seekers, their identities are effectively subverted by the prevailing order. Moore contends that "asylum shopping" indexes complex social anxieties associated with Britain's postcoloniality, but also with its status as an advanced industrial democratic nation-state conditioned by political and cultural forces of neoliberalism.

Gallant (2022) examined Syrian and Ukrainian refugee representation in German media. Gallant found that media shaping of discursive knowledge construction regarding refugees happened through racist and sexist prejudices. German media also took it upon themselves to explain what constitutes "good" refugees. Syrian refugees are identified as Muslims, and religious and cultural Islam is hardly distinguished from militant Islamism, such that the refugees' presence is feared. On the other hand, support for Ukrainian refugees is "buoyed even by members of right-wing parties as an act of European solidarity thus focusing on cultural-geographic commonality" (Gallant, 2022, p. 4). Gallant found that young, unaccompanied Syrian male refugees are hardly represented as victims but rather as threats. By contrast, Ukrainian refugees were depicted as helpless women and children.

As a fourth example, Irom and Gibbons' (2023) analysis of Reuters artifacts in representing Rohingya refugees revealed that even emergent media have not necessarily made pronounced gains over traditional media. Their study shows that "even with cutting-edge technology, media engagement with the refugee crisis remains fundamentally ambivalent. Media representations reflect close ties with the modalities of global inequities as well as the attempts to transcend those" (Irom & Gibbons, 2023, p. 593). Their call for a "vigilant media ethics" in humanitarian journalism, alongside Irom's (2019) Levinasian reading of the visuals of Syrian children, underscores that communication ethics remains an unfinished project where refugee representation is concerned. Read together, these studies document the sorting of the displaced. They leave unexamined the ethical vocabulary through which the sorting proceeds. That vocabulary is what the present analysis places under scrutiny.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine generated a rapidly growing body of scholarship on the differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees relative to those displaced by non-European wars. Much of this work was prompted by widely criticized on-air commentary in Western outlets in the first days of the invasion that described Ukraine as "relatively civilized" in contrast to Iraq or Afghanistan, remarks that made the racialized underpinnings of the coverage briefly and unusually explicit. Systematic studies confirmed the pattern beyond individual gaffes. De Coninck (2023) theorized a "refugee paradox" in Europe's starkly divergent reception of Ukrainian and Afghan refugees. Ajana et al. (2024) found that British press coverage framed Ukrainians through an "it could have been us" register of proximity and sameness unavailable to Afghan and Syrian refugees. Most directly relevant to the present study, el-Nawawy and Elmasry (2025) conducted a quantitative content analysis of five elite American newspapers, explicitly invoking Herman and Chomsky's worthy/unworthy victims thesis, and found that the papers were significantly more likely to humanize Ukrainian refugees and to frame Syrian refugees as threats and aggressors. Later work suggests that this deservingness proved durable. In Czech and Polish news media, Ukrainian refugees were still presented as deserving well into 2024, though the grounds of their deservingness had shifted from who they were to how they behaved (Zogata-Kusz et al., 2026).

This emerging literature convincingly documents that a hierarchy exists in Western war coverage of the displaced. The present study takes that hierarchy as its point of departure. Working principally within framing theory and content analysis, the literature has measured the hierarchy with care. It has given less attention to the ethical framework of journalism as a site where the hierarchy is sustained, and less still to the colonial genealogy that a postcolonial reading brings into view. Through a postcolonial media ethics critique, the present study asks how journalism's own principles, balance chief among them, were applied to each population. The disparity may then be read as something ethical practice itself carries, a possibility that framing studies have largely left unexamined.

2.4.2. US Media

Postcolonial critique has turned to US media as well, tracing the persistence of colonial attitudes in how refugees, immigrants, and migrants are represented, marginalized, or exoticized. For example, Alam's (2021) study revealed that violent Islamic extremists, a disastrous country, and human rights violations emerge as the dominant frames to describe Bangladesh in two American newspapers, the NYT and *The Washington Post*. Although Alam's study did not involve representation of vulnerable groups attempting to enter the US or those who are already precariously situated in the US, it does show from a postcolonial theoretical perspective how "Orientalist discourses work to carry out a cultural logic of the Western hegemony" (Alam, 2021, p. 384).

Aswad (2019) studied discursive constructions of Syrian refugees in the NYT during the 2016 presidential election. The timeline for this study coincides with the Syrian refugee data collected for this article, although the theoretical underpinnings and purpose of the study are different. Aswad found that, "despite empirical impartiality, the *New York Times* routinely engaged in homogenizing representations of Syrian refugees as equivalent to those of other nations, bolstered by an assumptive attitude toward the historical, social, and political determinants behind Syrian refugeeism" (Aswad, 2019, p. 370). Aswad's findings form a crucial platform from which to launch the present analysis. Specifically with regard to Syrian refugees, Aswad's study already problematizes how even in meeting one of the Western tenets of media ethics, namely neutrality, there is inherent bias in the NYT's representation during the presidential election of 2016. Approaching the corpus of Syrian refugee data from a postcolonial theoretical standpoint and comparing it with the representation of Ukrainian refugees furthers the understanding of applied postcolonial media ethics and the politics of representing displaced communities due to different wars.

3. Materials and Methods

The study addresses three research questions (RQs). RQ1 asks how the NYT's opinion journalism represented Syrian refugees in 2015 and 2016 and Ukrainian refugees in 2022 and 2023. RQ2 asks when, and in what forms, the journalistic norm of balance was applied to each population. RQ3 asks how these patterns can be read through postcolonial media ethics, and what they imply for peace journalism's account of war reporting.

The NYT was aptly selected for multiple reasons. It has the largest circulation among US metropolitan newspapers, is considered one of the country's most influential news publications, and has wide global outreach: "As the national newspaper of record, it has long been viewed as responsible for setting the country's media agenda and setting the standard for other newspapers" (Aswad, 2019, p. 361). As such, Aswad states, the NYT is instructive in so much as it signifies institutionally sanctioned cultural constructs with myriad social and political consequences. For this study, data collection was restricted to editorials and opinion journalism, encompassing editorial board articles, staff opinion columns, and guest essays, mainly because these stories are not governed by the principles of news objectivity and the authors' ideological perspectives are manifested more explicitly (Ha, 2017; Alam, 2021). Letters to the editor were excluded. Both corpora consist of such opinion journalism. Holding genre constant means that differences between the corpora cannot be traced to the conventions of different journalistic forms.

The study uses CDA to analyze the data. CDA allows for language to be viewed as a form of social practice and is concerned with systematically investigating hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse (Fairclough, 2015). The method also allows for engagement with not only a range of discourse analytical paradigms, but also with critical social theory (van Leeuwen, 2006), in this case the lens of postcolonial theory of media ethics. CDA is an essential tool in "the critique of the hegemonic discourses and

genres that effect inequalities, injustices, and oppression in contemporary society" (van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 291), and hence an appropriate choice for analysis of the data corpus in this article. It is also particularly suited to the study of mediated war, given the foundational CDA work on the discursive legitimation of immigration control and state action (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), whose discourse-historical sensibility informs the analysis of discursive and argumentation strategies as well as lexical and grammatical choices here. Articles were analyzed line by line, according to article headlines, descriptions and stories of refugees, quotes, and intertextual references. CDA identifies discursive patterns and the assumptions they carry. It does not by itself establish what caused those patterns. As such, the analysis keeps the two claims apart.

The themes reported in the Results in Section 4 emerged from the author's close reading of the corpus. Each article was read in full and more than once. Patterns were noted as they recurred within and across the two corpora, then grouped and refined until they settled into the four themes that organize the Results. The postcolonial lens informed that reading. The themes themselves were drawn from what the texts presented, and they were named in the vocabulary of postcolonial critique only once they had taken shape. Several findings surfaced in this way without having been anticipated. Among them were the framing of Ukrainian refugees as a burden on host societies and as an instrument of an adversary's strategy, along with the distinction between likeness asserted for one population and likeness demonstrated by the other. When the themes were settled, the corpus was read again so that a set of specific indicators could be recorded for every article. These included whether a threat or security risk was attached to the refugees, whether a writer who supported admission reproduced or conceded the opposing case, whether displaced people were quoted directly, whether the history or causes of the war were discussed, how religion and the composition of the refugee population were invoked, and whether admission was justified by its benefits to the host. Counts reported in the Results record the number of articles in which an indicator appears at least once. They describe the corpora and carry no statistical weight.

Eurocentric framing, a central term in the analysis, refers to discourse that positions Europe and its extensions as the unmarked norm against which other peoples are measured (Said, 1978; Shome, 2019). Because the term names a relation, no single textual feature is Eurocentric in itself. A feature becomes evidence of Eurocentric framing when it is distributed unevenly between the two corpora, attaching to the non-European population while it is withheld from the European one. The frame was therefore operationalized through three indicators, each defined by a coding rule and read comparatively.

The first indicator concerns the locus of threat. Every passage attaching risk, danger or burden to refugees was recorded and classified by where it places the source of that risk. Dispositional attribution locates the risk in the refugees themselves, in their faith, their culture, their susceptibility to radicalization or their capacity to assimilate. Situational attribution locates it outside them, in the capacity of host societies or in the strategy of a third party. The indicator is met when dispositional attribution concentrates on one population, and the difficulties of the other are framed situationally. Speckhard's (2015) warning that "the longer these refugees are left to languish in despair in camps the more prone they become to radicalization" was coded as dispositional. Friedman's (2022a) account of Putin driving Ukrainians westward "with the purpose of creating such intense social and economic burdens" was coded as situational.

The second indicator concerns the terms of likeness. The reader in question is the implied reader the texts address, the "we" of an American opinion page. The analysis makes no claim about how actual readers, with their varied religious, regional or class positions, received these articles. Passages aligning a refugee population with this implied reader

through religion, region, appearance, occupation or class were recorded and classified by their argumentative status. Likeness is *presupposed* when it is offered as a premise needing no support. It is *conditional* when it must be established through evidence that the refugees display Western, secular or middle-class markers. The indicator is met when likeness is presupposed for one population and conditional for the other. The Polish volunteers' "They are Christians" (Stockman, 2022a) exemplifies presupposed likeness. Kristof's (2015f) young woman "in jeans with makeup and uncovered hair" exemplifies conditional likeness.

The third indicator concerns the reach of imperial memory. For each article, the analysis recorded which imperial or colonial powers were named in accounting for the war and the displacement it produced. The indicator is met when a non-European empire is remembered and a European empire is left unnamed. Kallas's (2022) recollection of her mother's deportation by the Soviets in 1949 names imperial history in the Ukrainian corpus. No Syrian article names the French Mandate or the British and French colonial order in the region.

Because the postcolonial lens informed the reading, the analysis also searched each corpus for evidence that would complicate its interpretation. Syrian articles that defended refugees without reservation, and Ukrainian articles that framed refugees as a burden, were sought out and are reported alongside the dominant patterns. All 77 articles were read and coded by the author. CDA is an interpretive method. Unlike content analysis, it does not rest its claims on agreement between coders (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Its interpretations are made accountable in other ways, through transparency about procedure, a deliberate search for counter-evidence and the anchoring of every claim in the language of the texts themselves (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). The present analysis observes all three. Once coding was complete, each article was re-read against its coding in a second pass. Every quotation reported in the Results was checked against the full text retrieved from the database.

The advanced search function of the ProQuest U.S. Newsstream database and the search terms "Syrian refugee," "refugees from Syria," "Ukrainian refugee," and "refugees from Ukraine" were used. The two collection windows were designed to capture the comparable peak period of each war's mediation in the US. For Syria, the date range was 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2016, spanning the most intense movement of refugees from the country and the US presidential election cycle in which the Syrian refugee question became a campaign issue. This window falls in the fourth and fifth years of a war that began in 2011. It was chosen because these years mark the peak of Syrian displacement toward Europe, when a record 1.3 million people sought asylum there in 2015, and Syrians formed the largest group among them (Connor, 2016a). They also mark the period in which Syrian refugees became a sustained subject of American political debate (Aswad, 2019). For Ukraine, the date range was 1 March 2022 to 15 June 2023, spanning the first fifteen months following the full-scale Russian invasion, when refugee movement and US admission policy were at their most intensive (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2023; The White House, 2022). The analysis therefore compares each refugee population at the height of its wartime visibility.

Although developments since mid-2023, including subsequent shifts in US policy toward Ukrainian arrivals and the end of the Syrian civil war with the fall of the Assad government in December 2024, fall outside the corpus, the peak-mediation design captures the formative period in which each group's discursive image was consolidated. Indeed, the Syrian war's conclusion renders that corpus fully historical, allowing the wartime construction of the Syrian refugee to be examined as a completed discursive episode whose consequences, as the Conclusions note, continue to unfold. The Ukrainian corpus, by contrast, documents the formative phase of a war that remains ongoing at the time of writing, during which US policy toward Ukrainian arrivals has continued to shift. The

comparison thus pairs the completed wartime construction of one refugee population with the foundational construction of another whose mediation is still unfolding. The analysis accordingly makes claims about the collection windows themselves and refrains from claims about coverage beyond them. Evidence from host countries indicates that public support for Ukrainian refugees declined after the period studied (Fomina & Pachocka, 2024; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). Whether the NYT's opinion pages followed that decline is a question for future research.

Both searches were limited to the NYT and to the ProQuest document type Commentary, which includes editorials, op-eds, columns, and guest essays. The Syrian search returned 1005 records, of which 199 were Commentary. The Ukrainian search returned 769 records, of which 36 were Commentary. Once 25 duplicate records were removed, 174 unique Syrian articles remained. Every remaining article was then read in full and screened against a single relevance criterion. An article was retained when at least one passage represented the refugees themselves, describing who they were, what they experienced, or how they should be received, admitted or treated. Articles that mentioned the refugees only in passing were excluded. So were articles about the war or its diplomacy that contained no refugee content, along with articles about other displaced populations. Eight Syrian items met the criterion but had been published outside the newspaper's opinion section, as news analyses, critics' notebooks, a question-and-answer explainer and a personal essay. These were excluded to hold genre constant. The final corpora contain 60 Syrian articles, comprising 21 editorials and 39 op-eds and columns, and 17 Ukrainian articles, comprising one editorial and 16 op-eds and columns. A log of every excluded article, with the reason for its exclusion, is available upon request. The difference in volume between the corpora partly reflects the longer Syrian window and the election cycle that fell within it. It is reported as a description of the corpora and is not treated as a finding. Image captions were part of the text analyzed while the images themselves were not analyzed.

The design has limits that bear on how its findings should be read. It examines opinion journalism in a single newspaper, so it cannot speak for news reporting or for the American press as a whole. Most importantly, CDA can identify discursive patterns and the assumptions they carry. It cannot establish that colonial legacies caused those patterns. The Results therefore report what the corpora contain, and the Discussion weighs the postcolonial reading against other explanations.

4. Results

The two corpora were read for how each population of refugees was represented and for when the norm of balance was summoned in that representation. A difference in the terms of the debate appears before any single text is examined. In the Syrian corpus, admission is a recurring point of contention. Writers argue for it, argue against it, or argue for it while granting the case against. No article in the Ukrainian corpus argues against admitting Ukrainians. Its questions concern logistics, such as how many to resettle, how to fund the countries that host them and how to "encourage refugees to move on to countries that have more capacity to host them" (The Editorial Board, 2022). One population's admissibility was a matter of debate, the other's a matter of logistics.

Read through postcolonial media ethics, the corpora yield four themes. They concern colonial power and control over image creation, the terms of subaltern voice, and historical amnesia and the selective memory of empire. A fourth theme addresses hybridity, assimilation and the terms of admission. A closing section draws the four together around the uneven application of balance.

4.1. Colonial Power and Control over Image Creation

Postcolonial theorists argue that the dominant powers in society control representations of marginalized groups, including RASIM, through media. This control reinforces stereotypical portrayals, framing these groups in the classic Orientalist manner (Said, 1978) as either threats or romanticized "others." In US media, the RASIM debate has often been framed as a national security concern, which favors exclusion over inclusion in debates about border control and immigration policy. In the Syrian corpus, a threat or security risk is attached to the refugees in 39 of the 60 articles. Writers endorse the threat, report it through the words of others, or raise it in order to rebut it. Even the rebuttals let threat set the terms of the argument. Often the pattern unfolds within a single article, where an account of humanitarian crisis sits beside an acknowledgement that some refugees may be radicalized. Such representation tends to blunt the positive image refugees could garner through more nuanced reporting. For example, Speckhard (2015) writes, "The Syrian refugee crisis, building in a horrifying crescendo over the past four years, has set in motion a debate in this country: Should America open her arms to the 'huddled masses yearning to breathe free,'. . ." Exactly two paragraphs later, Speckhard continues:

> No doubt it is important to weed out radicalized individuals seeking entry into the United States. But while the Islamic State has threatened to embed itself among refugees heading to the West, terrorists don't need to go through the entry process to operate in our country.

The article seems to provide an impassioned plea to allow refugees a less extensive and more concise vetting and entry process to the US. However, the juxtaposition of opposing and moral binary extreme imagery blunts the impact of the plea. On the one hand, "huddled masses" seems to point to the humanitarian crisis. On the other, words such as "radicalized," "threaten to embed," "terrorists," etc., create a much more powerful imagery of Syrians as possessing the mercurial ability to oscillate easily from one end of the innocent-guilty spectrum to the other. Speckhard goes on to locate the risk in the refugees themselves, warning that "the longer these refugees are left to languish in despair in camps the more prone they become to radicalization." This oscillation is consistent with the ambivalence Bhabha (1994) locates at the heart of the colonial stereotype, which must hold the colonized subject as simultaneously pitiable and menacing. It also carries the vocabulary of the War on Terror, the discursive frame through which the Syrian war itself reached American audiences, into the figure of the refugee. The refugee thus arrives pre-narrated by the war's dominant Western storyline. Here is another example from Kristof (2015d):

> As anti-refugee hysteria sweeps many of our political leaders, particularly Republicans, I wonder what they would have told a desperate refugee family fleeing the Middle East. You've heard of this family: a carpenter named Joseph, his wife, Mary, and their baby son, Jesus.
>
> Just two paragraphs later, Kristof wrote the following:
>
> Yes, security is a legitimate concern. And, yes, we can't rule out the possibility that a terrorist will slip in with the refugees. Among refugees admitted to the U.S. since 9/11, there has been about one arrest for terrorism offenses for every 250,000 refugees, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Kristof contends with the anti-refugee stance of right-wing politicians by symbolically comparing "desperate" Syrian families with the family of Jesus. This parallel translates the refugees' claim into the idiom of the dominant culture. Their suffering becomes legible only when recast in the Christian vocabulary of mostly white, middle-aged, male, Christian

politicians in the US. This can be read as an instance of the claim of the subaltern heard only in the colonizer's language. At the same time, the proximity of this parallel to the positioning of the other side of the debate about how "security is a legitimate concern" and how "a terrorist will slip in" provides an out for anyone vacillating on the border of the refugee debate. Later in the same column, Kristof concedes that "Sure, some Syrians are terrorists," before turning to the Syrian doctors and rescue workers he admires.

Kristof's concession is typical of the corpus. Some writers adopt the security frame outright. Wergin (2015) argues that the influx of refugees "is also a security crisis for Europe." Douthat (2015) warns of "the challenges of assimilation" in a Germany taking in hundreds of thousands. Others carry the threat onto the page through the words of its proponents, as when the editorial board quotes Representative McCaul's "federally funded jihadi pipeline" (The Editorial Board, 2015a). Nguyen (2016), himself a former refugee, names the ambivalence to which the corpus keeps returning when he observes that "the refugees may be threatening or pitiful." Two articles also report violent acts by Syrian asylum seekers in Germany in 2016, among them the bombing in Ansbach (Sauerbrey, 2016; The Editorial Board, 2016b). The Discussion returns to these events as part of the context that made threat salient.

The Ukrainian corpus attaches no threat to the refugees. Its images are of hardship and of the hosts who meet it. Goldberg (2022) describes a Berlin station where "Families were slumped on the floor. Some people clutched pets." Biden (2022) recalls meeting "women and children who were unsure what their lives would be." Ukrainian refugees do carry a burden in this coverage, though of a different kind. Five articles cast them as an instrument of Russian strategy. Friedman (2022a) describes Putin driving refugees westward "with the purpose of creating such intense social and economic burdens" that NATO states would press Kyiv to concede. Kallas (2022) calls the flight of millions "one of the tools of his hybrid warfare." Others warn of pressure on host services and of resentment to come, as when the editorial board cautions that "Over time, resentment of Ukrainian refugees may grow" (The Editorial Board, 2022). The burden in these passages lies in the capacity of host societies and in the course of the war. It never lies in the character of the refugees. The Syrian refugee appears as a possible danger in his or her own person. The Ukrainian refugee appears as a strain on others, or as a weapon in another's hands. In terms of the first indicator, threat in the Syrian corpus is dispositional and in the Ukrainian corpus situational. Even where journalistic standards appear to be met, with facts reported and diverse perspectives provided, a postcolonial critique brings into view the discursive power the media exercise over the images of Syrians and Ukrainians.

The images differ most sharply in how each population's likeness to the implied American reader is established. For Ukrainians, likeness is stated as a premise. The Polish volunteers Stockman (2022a) interviews offer three reasons in quick succession: "Ukrainians are neighbors." "They are Christians." "They are fellow Slavs." The editorial board speaks of "European refugees" (The Editorial Board, 2022). Friedman (2022b) explains Europe's welcome by observing that "Ukrainian menfolk are fighting to defend them, too." For Syrians, likeness has to be demonstrated. Kristof (2015f) introduces a young woman "in jeans with makeup and uncovered hair" and elsewhere presents another as "this freedom-loving woman" (Kristof, 2015e). White (2016) assures readers that "Many are professionals, including lawyers, dentists and engineers." Laitin and Jahr (2015) describe a receiving community "58 percent of whom were Christian." Kristof (2015c) instructs his readers to "Remember what a Syrian immigrant looks like—the father of Steve Jobs."

This asymmetry between presupposed and conditional likeness gives textual form to the second indicator of the Eurocentric frame. Proximity to Europe's unmarked whiteness (Shome, 2019) is presumed for one population. The other is admitted to sympathy to

the degree that it displays Western, secular and middle-class markers, a pattern that recalls Bhabha's (1994) account of colonial mimicry. Read in Galtung's (1990) terms, the coverage performed cultural violence. It made the endless adjudication of one population and the frictionless embrace of the other look equally natural while observing every professional propriety.

4.2. The Terms of Subaltern Voice

Postcolonial critiques emphasize the silencing of subaltern voices, or those from the margins of society, in mainstream media. RASIM, especially from non-Western backgrounds, are often portrayed as voiceless and dependent on the benevolence of the dominant culture, what Malkki (1996, p. 390) terms "speechless emissaries." The representation of Syrian refugees in this study bears out part of this critique. The majority of their coverage could fall under the heading of policy debates. They involved discussions and debates about the responses of different countries and international organizations to the refugee crisis and furious positionalities with regard to America's internal politics. Moreover, given the complex nature of the Syrian conflict, considerable coverage discussed security concerns related to refugee flows and border issues. Some articles criticized Europe's handling of the crisis (Ignatieff, 2015; The Editorial Board, 2015b). Others set Trump, Obama and Clinton against one another (The Editorial Board, 2015d; Wehner, 2015; The Editorial Board, 2016a). Still others praised Canada for its compassion (The Editorial Board, 2015f). Within this debate, Syrian refugees do speak. Displaced Syrians are quoted directly in five articles. Mortada (2016) gives several Syrian women and men room to describe cooking, faith and loss in their own words, among them a woman in Istanbul who insists that "There must be bread and salt between us." Cohen (2016) records the account of Mulham, a young man from Aleppo, of a war in which "you realize there are five wars!" His is an analysis of the conflict offered by a refugee himself.

Where Syrian voices enter the security debate, they speak to deny an accusation. Heba, interviewed on Lesbos, insists that "We have no connection to terrorism" (Kristof, 2015e). Rahaf, an 18-year-old in a camp on the same island, says "We're not terrorists. We're running away from war." (Kristof, 2015f). Their voice enters the opinion pages on the condition that it answers the charge laid against them. Several articles defend Syrians through the voices of other refugees instead. Somali residents of Roanoke (Macy, 2015), Somali and Afghan learners in Mechelen (McDonald-Gibson, 2016) and Nguyen's memory of his own flight from Vietnam (Nguyen, 2016) stand in for Syrians who do not appear. The Syrian refugee was *spoken about* and *spoken for* far more often than he or she was permitted to speak. When permission came, it was often permission to plead innocence, a condition close to the subalternity Spivak (1988) describes.

The Ukrainian corpus offers no comparable voice. No displaced Ukrainian is quoted directly in any of the 17 articles. The only words from inside the displacement arrive as text messages that a woman trapped in Mariupol sent to her sister, "We're so scared." (Stockman, 2022b). Ukrainian refugees are described with sympathy and at length, yet the speaking is done by their hosts. Polish volunteers, mayors and prime ministers explain the welcome in their own terms. An opera singer serving stew at the border tells Stockman (2022a), "We were in the same situation in 1939." Poland's prime minister vouches for the refugees to Friedman (2022b), saying "They are working and paying taxes." Policy toward Ukrainians was never in question. The case for their entry required no testimony from the refugees themselves.

From a postcolonial standpoint, the difference in voice lies in its terms. Syrian refugees were permitted to speak chiefly as defendants. Ukrainian refugees did not *need* to speak at all, because their hosts vouched for them. Read through the lens of mediated war, the

pattern also performs a second function. Because Syrian refugees spoke mainly to answer an accusation, they seldom spoke of the war they had fled. That war reached American readers less through their testimony than as a policy problem debated among American elites. The Ukrainian refugee, vouched for by Polish volunteers and European leaders, made the Russian invasion concrete, intimate, and morally unambiguous for American readers. Voice functioned here as the currency of grievability (Butler, 2009). The refugee whose welcome others attested could be mourned with, welcomed, and helped. The refugee who had to testify to his or her own innocence remained a problem awaiting adjudication.

4.3. Historical Amnesia and the Selective Memory of Empire

Postcolonial theory suggests (McPhail-Bell et al., 2013) that media narratives often display a selective memory concerning RASIM history. The contributions of these communities to the nation-building process are occasionally celebrated, while past injustices, such as the displacement and genocide of indigenous peoples, are relegated to the periphery. The Syrian corpus does not ignore the causes of the war. Eight articles discuss American or Western responsibility for it. Ignatieff (2015) asks, "If we've been arming Syrian rebels, shouldn't we also be helping the people trying to get out of their way?" Cohen (2015) insists that "the Syrian crisis cannot be disentangled from the spillover of the Iraq war." Several articles address Obama's culpability in the continued rule of Bashar al-Assad, then Syria's president and a brutal dictator who would remain in power until December 2024. For example, Wehner (2015) writes,

> What made Mr. Obama's assault on Republicans particularly outrageous is his hypocrisy, by which I mean the president's failure to act in any meaningful way to avert the humanitarian disaster now engulfing Syria. It's not as if options weren't available to him.

This critique of the president was directed more towards his stance against Republicans than towards the causes and prevention of the civil war in Syria. The responsibility the corpus acknowledges is recent and American. It runs through the Iraq war, arms to rebels, and a red line left unenforced. A longer history is missing altogether. No article in the Syrian corpus mentions the French Mandate or the colonial past left behind by the British and the French up until 1946, whose interest in Syria was bound up with oil and the strategic routes of the region. Even Mortada (2016), who tells Syria's history through its food, passes from the Fertile Crescent to the Ottomans and stops there. Anyone following the NYT opinion pages would learn of America's recent entanglement in Syria. That reader would learn nothing of the colonial history that shaped the state from which the refugees fled.

This is what historical amnesia looks like in discourse, an instance of the unmarked histories that Shome (2019) calls on postcolonial critique to interrupt. It is also, in Malkki's (1996) terms, a dehistoricization with direct consequences for how the war is understood. A war stripped of its colonial genealogy appears as inexplicable, endemic regional violence, its international authorship traced back no further than the last American administration. Its refugees appear correspondingly as products of a chaotic elsewhere, detached from a shared history.

When it came to the Ukrainian corpus, the war's causes were often compressed into the will of one man. Biden (2022) calls the invasion "Unprovoked aggression." Friedman (2022b) reports a conviction among Europeans that "this is so much Putin's war." Yet the Ukrainian corpus remembers empire readily. Kallas (2022) recalls that "My mother was only a 6-month-old baby when, in 1949, the Soviets deported her." Stockman (2022a) visits a Polish village "swallowed by the Soviet Union in 1939." Stockman (2022b) and Sloniowska (2022) trace Soviet and post-Soviet history at length. Imperial history is therefore available

to this coverage. It is named when Russia is the imperial power and left unnamed when the imperial powers were European. This is the asymmetry the third indicator records. These articles put forward an almost comfortable inevitability about the prospect of helping Ukrainian refugees to enter the US. Notably, this same level of discursive certainty was not accorded to Syrian refugee representation. The selective memory here is double-edged. For Syria, forgetting colonial history rendered the war illegible and its refugees suspect. For Ukraine, remembering the Russian empire while compressing the present war into "Putin's war" rendered the conflict morally self-evident and its refugees pre-approved.

4.4. Hybridity, Assimilation, and the Terms of Admission

Postcolonialism highlights cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), wherein RASIM members bring diverse perspectives, practices, and identities to their new homes. However, the US media's focus on assimilation and the promotion of a singular "American" identity diminishes the richness of these cultural interactions. In an article by Laitin and Jahr (2015), the authors extol the benefits and virtues of settling large numbers of Syrian refugees in Detroit. Touting the solution as a win-win, the authors mention how the Detroit metropolitan area is facing massive population loss and how resettlement of Syrians in this area would bring about urban rejuvenation that would benefit all. In the same article, the authors point toward the idea of assimilation of Syrians and also talk about the existing diverse social fabric of Detroit. While cultural hybridity is being acknowledged as important in this article, what is jarring is that the whole project is offered as a neoliberal solution to the social crisis in Detroit that fails to acknowledge the deeply human crisis the Syrian refugees are experiencing. They mention:

> . . . both parties can agree that resettling destitute, innocent refugees is consistent with America's moral and ethical commitments; it would send a powerful message to President Bashar al-Assad, the Islamic State and the world about American compassion and ingenuity.

The "showing" of American compassion *is* front and center. The neoliberal aspirations for Detroit *are* being masked in the use of the word "ingenuity." Notably, even this most sympathetic proposal in the Syrian corpus justifies refugee admission as an instrument of war messaging, a signal to be sent to Assad and the Islamic State, confirming that the refugee's admissibility was routed through the war's strategic narrative and not through the refugee's own claim. The underlying discursive choice being offered is that Syrian refugees should occupy vacant cities, not cities that already have existing populations. Every consideration is from the point of view of the host culture. Hybridity, which in Bhabha's (1994) sense transforms both cultures in the encounter, is thereby reduced to a unidirectional demand for assimilation. While the impact of the influx of Syrian refugees on the local economy, social fabric, and infrastructure of the host city is mentioned, there is no discussion of how the Syrians are supposed to contend with these life changes.

The demand for assimilation reaches well beyond Detroit. Five Syrian articles question whether the refugees can fit. Douthat (2015) faults a "utilitarian universalism" that he finds "blind to the realities of culture, the challenges of assimilation, the dangers and inevitability of backlash." Even Kristof (2015a), writing in sympathy, recalls a refugee family's poster of Saddam Hussein and adds, "I wondered how that adjustment would go." Nguyen (2016) reports that to some Europeans "these refugees seem un-European for reasons of culture, religion and language." In Belgium, a municipal integration program "teaches cultural norms, like the role of men and women in Belgian society" (McDonald-Gibson, 2016). No Ukrainian article questions the refugees' fit. Somin (2022) mentions assimilation only as something that employment will ease. Hybridity in Bhabha's sense surfaces rarely in either corpus. Sloniowska (2022) describes Ukrainian identity as "porous, inclusive,

multilayered." A Damascene caterer interviewed by Mortada (2016) recalls the scent of her Christian neighbors' Easter biscuits and of her Muslim neighbors' iftar, saying of the first, "This is the smell of Easter."

Instrumental arguments for admission appear in both corpora. Somin (2022) urges the US to "secure valuable strategic and economic advantages" by welcoming Ukrainians and Russians. The editorial board imagines Syrian newcomers as "the infusion of youth and energy that an aging Europe needs" (The Editorial Board, 2015b). The Laitin and Jahr proposal is one instance of this wider pattern. The difference between the corpora lies in what the Syrian refugee must prove before any such argument can be heard.

4.5. The Differential Activation of Balance

Throughout the Syrian corpus, there are many NYT articles that criticize the anti-refugee stance, talk about showing compassion, fiercely oppose extreme rhetoric by Republicans, especially Donald Trump, and question Obama's leadership during this refugee crisis. Many also press for larger numbers. Eighteen articles describe the American commitment as paltry, tiny or pitiful, from Kristof's (2015b) "pathetic" to the editorial board's "That paltry number sets a terrible example" (The Editorial Board, 2015b). However, these articles carry an underlying tone of justification for why Syrian refugees should be allowed to enter the country. Their plight, their history, and their culture alone are not enough as a representation strategy. Following principles of universal media ethics, the NYT articles overtly fight for the inclusion of Syrian refugees in American society. In 20 of the 60 articles, however, a writer who supports admission also repeats or concedes the case of the naysayers in order to meet the ethic of "balanced reporting." Thinking from a postcolonial mindset, the burden of "balance" seems ultimately to become a burden carried by the Syrian refugees, especially when they were never given the same footing as other, more desirable, minorities. The balancing takes four forms.

In the first, the writer adopts the security case. Wergin (2015) and Douthat (2015) do so outright. Wehner (2015) faults Obama for refusing to acknowledge the critics' concerns, complaining that in the president's politics "such balance has no place." In the second, the writer supports admission while granting the risk. Kristof (2015c) allows that "Yes, security is critical." Governor Inslee (2015) grants that "we have a legitimate concern for our safety and security." The editorial board opens its defense of refugees with the clause "Though there are real fears of terrorism" (The Editorial Board, 2015c). In the third, the opposing case is reproduced at length so that it can be refuted, as when the editorial board quotes Trump's fear of a "Trojan horse" before setting him beside Joseph McCarthy and George Wallace (The Editorial Board, 2015d). In the fourth, which may be called defensive demography, refugees are made admissible through statistics on age and sex. The editorial board reports that "About 2 percent are single males of combat age" (The Editorial Board, 2015c). Another editorial describes the refugees as "most of them women and children" (The Editorial Board, 2015e). Only the first form adopts the security frame. Each of the four, however, leaves the Syrian refugee answering a charge that the Ukrainian refugee never faced.

There is no such balance in the Ukrainian corpus. No article reproduces an argument against admitting Ukrainians. None questions their character, their capacity to assimilate or the legality of their presence. Religion and cultural alignment do appear, though only as affirmation, in the Polish volunteers' "They are Christians." (Stockman, 2022a) and the editorial board's "European refugees" (The Editorial Board, 2022). Seven of the 17 articles go further and name the unequal treatment of refugees from Syria, Africa, or the Middle East. The editorial board acknowledges the double standard and passes over it, concluding that "the answer to a double standard cannot be to close the doors to Ukrainians" (The

Editorial Board, 2022). The coverage thus recognized the hierarchy while continuing to reproduce it. Herein lies the article's core observation about media ethics in wartime. The ethical norm of balance was differentially *activated*. It was summoned whenever Syrian refugees were discussed and set aside whenever Ukrainian refugees were. The analysis reads this pattern through the unmarked colonial histories within which the norm operates. On this reading, the practice sorted worthy from unworthy refugees in a manner that answers closely to Opotow's (1990) account of moral exclusion. One population was placed outside the boundary within which fairness is owed by the very practice that claims fairness as its purpose.

5. Discussion

The politics of representation, media ethics, and postcolonial ideals converge in this case study. On the surface, the NYT opinion coverage examined here honored universal ethical journalism practices. It avoided overt stereotypes, refrained from stigmatizing marginalized communities, and guarded against misinformation. Read through the postcolonial lens, however, the coverage carried discursive means of knowledge production about refugees that sat at a crossroads with these putatively universal ethical principles.

Syrian refugees bore the brunt of representational tropes freighted with colonial legacies. Their image creation was tightly controlled. Their character was recurrently impugned as a threat to American security, even by writers who argued for their admission. Their colonial histories were excised from the narrative. They were permitted to speak chiefly in their own defense. Their cultural hybridity was ultimately subordinated to demands for assimilation and to American ambitions. Given that these articles appeared in one of the most powerful media voices in the world, and in its opinion pages where ideological perspectives are most explicit, the reach of such representations is potentially global. Ukrainian refugees were represented in a different register. They, too, appeared as a problem, as a strain on host societies and as an instrument of Russian strategy. Their character, however, was never in question. Their likeness to the American reader was taken as given. This asymmetry is consistent with the persistence of EuroAmerican colonial selection processes, at least in the discourses of US media.

These findings align with the scholarship reviewed earlier. The bifurcated welcome documented here confirms, in the register of opinion journalism, the hierarchies that Gallant (2022), De Coninck (2023), and el-Nawawy and Elmasry (2025) measured in news coverage. The Syrian refugee of these pages is recognizably Herman and Chomsky's (2002) unworthy victim. Malkki's (1996) speechless emissary needs some qualification, since Syrian refugees do speak in the opinion pages, though largely to answer an accusation. The analysis also extends Aswad's (2019) finding of biased neutrality in the same newspaper. Where Aswad showed that empirical impartiality could coexist with homogenizing assumptions, this study suggests that the ethical norms themselves can carry the bias.

5.1. Weighing Alternative Explanations

The patterns documented here invite more than one explanation. The postcolonial reading is offered as the most coherent among several. Its strength depends on what the others leave unexplained. Five alternatives deserve consideration.

The first is geopolitics. Herman and Chomsky's (2002) propaganda model predicts that victims of an adversary state will be treated as worthy and humanized. The Ukrainian case fits the prediction. Russia was the adversary. The opinion pages framed the welcome of Ukrainians as part of the contest with it, as when Somin (2022) urges admission partly to "strengthen our position against him." The Syrian case fits less well. Syrians were fleeing a government that Washington opposed and that Russia and Iran defended, along with

an Islamic State that the US was bombing. By the logic of the propaganda model, they too should have been worthy victims. Geopolitics thus accounts for much of the warmth extended to Ukrainians. It cannot account for the suspicion extended to Syrians.

The second is indexing. Bennett (1990) argues that news tends to index the range of views expressed by political elites, presenting both sides where elites disagree. In 2015 and 2016, governors, members of Congress and presidential candidates divided sharply over Syrian admission. Ukrainian admission in 2022 met near consensus. Indexing therefore predicts much of the balance found in the Syrian corpus and its absence in the Ukrainian one. It is the strongest alternative, since it explains when balance appears. It leaves open why elite dissent took the form of a suspicion directed at a Muslim population as a whole. It also leaves open why writers who rejected that suspicion so often granted it in their own voice, as in the concessions documented in the Results.

The third is the salience of terrorism. The Paris attacks of November 2015, the San Bernardino shooting and the 2016 attacks in Germany gave the threat frame concrete occasions. Some of those attacks involved Syrian asylum seekers (Sauerbrey, 2016; The Editorial Board, 2016b). No comparable events accompanied the Ukrainian displacement. Salience explains the timing and intensity of the threat frame. It explains less well why the threat attached to a nationality and a faith. Kristof (2015d) notes that "the Paris attackers identified so far were of French and Belgian nationality, not Syrian," yet the suspicion fell on Syrian families. The movement from individual attackers to a whole population of the displaced is the step the postcolonial reading illuminates.

The fourth is the composition of each population. Ukrainian men of military age were largely barred from leaving, so the refugees of 2022 were mostly women, children and the elderly. The editorial board itself observed that "most men are required to stay behind in Ukraine to fight" (The Editorial Board, 2022). This helps explain the gendered imagery of the Ukrainian corpus. It does not explain the difference in threat. The Syrian refugees admitted to the US were also mostly women, children and the elderly. Writers had to establish the fact with statistics in order to defend them (The Editorial Board, 2015c). Defensive demography was required of one population and unnecessary for the other.

The fifth is proximity. Ajana et al. (2024) show that British coverage framed Ukrainians through an "it could have been us" register unavailable to Afghan and Syrian refugees. Proximity, however, is itself what needs explaining. In the corpus, it is built from religion, region and appearance, the categories through which coloniality has historically sorted populations. It is presupposed for Ukrainians and conditional for Syrians. Race and religion, often treated as rival explanations, are better understood as the medium through which a colonial reading operates.

Each alternative explains part of the pattern. Geopolitics accounts for the warmth toward Ukrainians, indexing for the timing of balance, salience for the intensity of threat and composition for the gendered imagery. What remains is the shape of the asymmetry itself. Threat attached to one population's character alone. Likeness was demanded of one population and granted to the other. Imperial memory ran in one direction only. These three asymmetries correspond to the indicators of the Eurocentric frame set out in the Methods. The postcolonial reading accounts for this residue more fully than any of the alternatives. It is offered as the most coherent interpretation of the pattern. Establishing its causes would require evidence about editorial practice that lies beyond textual analysis.

5.2. Differential Activation and Peace Journalism

The departure from the literature reviewed earlier, and the theoretical contribution the article offers, lies in what may be called the differential activation of media ethics. Prior scholarship has located the hierarchy of the displaced in framing choices, visual

grammars, and spectatorial relations. The present analysis locates it one level deeper, in the conditions under which journalism's normative vocabulary is switched on at all. The burden of balance was imposed on the refugees of one war and waived for the refugees of another, which means the disparity cannot be remedied simply by applying existing principles more consistently. Refugees do not arrive in discourse unaccompanied. They arrive inside the narrative of their war. In the coverage examined here, a war narrated through the War on Terror imaginary was accompanied by refugees who had to argue for their innocence. A war narrated as an assault on Europe was accompanied by refugees whose innocence was assumed. Ethical norms, on this reading, behave as colonially coded switches. The war narrative appears to govern when they are activated. Media ethics that do not interrogate the colonial histories embedded in those narratives risk reproducing their hierarchies, however scrupulously their principles are followed. The differential activation of media ethics may therefore be especially characteristic of war journalism. Where ordinary reporting encounters its subjects directly, war journalism often encounters the displaced through the geopolitical story of the conflict that produced them. That story, more than the refugee, appears to decide which ethical principles will be summoned. Herein lies what postcolonial critique offers peace journalism. The reform of reporting conventions, the heart of the peace journalism program, is unlikely to succeed on its own terms while the narratives that govern when those conventions awaken remain colonially coded. Postcolonial analysis renders those codes visible and therefore available for interruption.

A comparison organized around two refugee populations risks reifying the hierarchy it seeks to expose. The hierarchy traced here belongs to the coverage. The Ukrainian refugee of these pages is itself a construction, gendered, spoken for by hosts and enlisted in a geopolitical contest. The coverage also recognized the hierarchy in its own words, as the Results showed, even as it went on to reproduce it. The critique therefore concerns the editorial apparatus that produced two unequal figures of the displaced. It measures neither community against the other. In exile, displaced communities already compete for visibility, resources and political legitimacy. A peace-oriented journalism would decline to stage that competition on their behalf.

6. Conclusions

This article asked how the opinion pages of one newspaper represented the refugees of two wars and when its writers summoned the norm of balance. The answer is not that one population was humanized and the other ignored. The NYT argued for the admission of both, but on different terms. The Syrian refugee had to be defended against a charge of threat, often by writers who granted the charge in the act of answering it. The Ukrainian refugee was a burden to be shared, not a danger to be weighed. Balance, the most procedural of journalism's ethical commitments, became the hinge of that difference. The findings are bounded by their material, which comprises a single newspaper, its opinion genres and two windows of time. Within those bounds, they suggest that a hierarchy of the displaced can be sustained by the very principles meant to guard against it.

The aftermath of the Syrian war offers a sobering postscript. When the Assad government fell in December 2024 and the civil war ended, several European countries suspended the processing of Syrian asylum claims within days. Millions of Syrians remained refugees abroad. The country's transition was marred by renewed sectarian violence and mass internal displacement (Human Rights Watch, 2026). This study cannot show that the wartime coverage it traced led to those decisions. The coverage was American, and the suspensions were European. The correspondence is nonetheless instructive. A worthiness never anchored in the refugees' own claims was a worthiness that could be withdrawn

as soon as the war narrative that framed them had concluded. Whether the discursive certainty accorded to Ukrainian refugees will survive the eventual end of their war remains an open question. How the mediation of a war's conclusion re-sorts its displaced is a productive site for future research.

These consequences carry the argument into the terrain of reconciliation and transitional justice. Whether displaced people can return, under what conditions, and with what claims upon the transitional order are questions shaped partly in discourse before they are settled in policy. A population narrated for years as conditionally admissible may arrive at the end of its war with claims already discounted. The swiftness with which Syrian asylum processing was suspended suggests how readily a discounted claim can become a foreclosed one. The proposition that follows, which this study can frame though not test, is that wartime representational hierarchies may prefigure the hierarchies of peace. If they do, they would shape whose displacement is treated as resolved, whose testimony counts in processes of accountability, and whose reintegration is imagined as a public obligation. Reconciliation that proceeds atop such unexamined hierarchies would risk inheriting them. Testing the proposition would mean following the same outlets, and the same populations, from war into its aftermath.

For peace journalism, the findings deepen two of its long-standing concerns. Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) distrust two-sided framing as a habit that pushes coverage toward escalation. The corpus suggests that balance can also be distributed unevenly, summoned for one population of the displaced and waived for another. The question for peace journalism therefore extends from whether balance is practiced to when it is invoked, and on whose behalf. Its commitment to giving voice to those affected by war meets a similar refinement. Syrian refugees did speak in these pages, though chiefly as defendants. The terms on which the displaced are permitted to speak matter as much as whether they speak at all. The analysis also yields implications for practice of the kind peace journalism has long sought to specify. News organizations covering war and displacement could audit when the norm of balance is summoned and against whom, treating its selective activation as an editorial datum in its own right. Such an audit would need to look past the reproduction of opposing views. It would attend as well to the concession offered in passing and to the reassuring statistic, forms of balance that writers sympathetic to refugees supplied themselves. Sourcing protocols could require that displaced people appear as speaking subjects in coverage that adjudicates their futures, and that they be heard on more than their own innocence. Historical contextualization, including the colonial genealogies of the conflicts that produce displacement, could be treated as a component of accuracy. Such genealogies would take in every empire with a claim on the conflict, not only the adversary's. Training in conflict-sensitive reporting could place postcolonial media ethics alongside the established peace journalism canon, so that practitioners learn to interrogate the histories sedimented in their own normative vocabulary.

Ultimately, media organizations play a decisive role in shaping public discourse about war and its consequences. Awareness of bias, while necessary, is not sufficient. The Ukrainian corpus makes the point on its own. It named the double standard in the treatment of refugees and reproduced it all the same. A postcolonial interruption of media ethics, in Shome's (2019) sense, would ask war journalism to begin from the histories and epistemologies of the displaced themselves, not from unmarked North Atlantic starting points. It would recognize the influence of colonial legacies on war narratives. It would embrace the voices, histories, and hybridity of refugees on their own terms. The media might then move toward witnessing all of war's displaced on equal terms, and toward a public discourse in which no group of refugees must carry the burden of proving they are

worthy of refuge. That movement, modest as it may appear, belongs to the cultural labor on which any durable peace depends.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CDA	Critical discourse analysis
NYT	*The New York Times*
RASIM	Refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and migrants
RQ	Research question
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

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