

Sanctuary, Purgatory

Razi Jafri

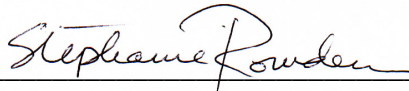
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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design
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Ann Arbor, Michigan

May 4, 2022

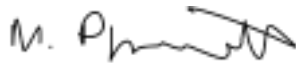
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UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



Jafri, Razi | MFA '22

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Abstract

Sanctuary, Purgatory is the result of research in South Korea on a small group of Yemeni refugees who arrived there in 2018. The completed project is a short documentary film that combines elements of cinema verite while also incorporating elements of the personal documentary. Interviews, verite footage, archives, and video conferencing footage from Zoom create the visual language of the film. The film focuses on one Yemeni refugee named Omar Alwahaishi who is stuck in South Korea on a temporary visa, while his wife and kids remain in Yemen and his parents are living in the United States. Themes of the film include migration, refugee issues, human rights, friendship, family reunification. The project also brings into questions about filmmakers inserting themselves into the frame of the documentary and issues around the boundaries between filmmakers and protagonists.

The film is presented and viewed through an installation at the Stamps Gallery on the campus of the University of Michigan. The installation is an enclosed theater space that allows viewers an unobstructed manner to watch the film. The film is followed by a pre-recorded Q and A led by Angela Yoonjeong McClean a postdoctoral fellow in Sociology at the Nam Center for Korean Studies at the University of Michigan, whose research interests include international and forced migration and includes myself, Omar Alwahaishi, and Il Lee. The film is 36 minutes and the Q and A is 24 minutes long for a one-hour viewing experience.

This thesis paper will include a discussion of the historical, political, cultural, and creative contexts of my project. I will also discuss my process and methodology and reflections on the experience of creating this project.

Keywords

Refugee, Asylum, Moral Panic, Personal Documentary, Contemporary Art, Islamophobia, Counter-space, Heterotopia, Protagonist

INTRODUCTION

no one leaves home unless

home is the mouth of a shark

you only run for the border

when you see the whole city running as well

— Excerpt from “Home” by Warsan Shire,
Somali-British Poet

In the summer of 2021, I traveled to South Korea to conduct research on and begin shooting a documentary film about a small group of Yemeni refugees living there since 2018, entitled *Sanctuary, Purgatory*. My research will expand on the understudied topic of Yemeni refugees living in Korea by adding a unique perspective, that of the refugees themselves. Although my project focuses on Yemeni refugees living in South Korea, the film and this paper will also serve as mediums to explore larger issues such as human rights, Islamophobia, anti-refugeeism, and global migration.

The story centers around Omar Alwahaishi (see fig. 1), a Yemeni refugee stuck in South Korea on a temporary visa in a Kafkaesque dilemma while his wife and kids remain in Yemen and his parents reside in the United States. As my friendship with him deepened over the course of production, I entered the frame of the film as an advocate and friend to Omar in order to help him reunite with his family.

As a documentary filmmaker my creative practice is necessarily in the field working closely with people and communities. My practice incorporates my interests in social activism, specifically around raising awareness about Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination



Figure 1. Portrait of Omar Alwahaishi in Seoul. August 8, 2022.

and human rights issues. My practice can also take me to familiar or unfamiliar spaces. I feel comfortable with different cultures and have been lucky enough to have experienced many different ones both in my hometown of Detroit and abroad. Thus far, my work has focused on documenting various Muslim communities in the United States, exploring issues like faith, identity, visibility, and also challenges such as Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination. I've also worked on stories about human rights and refugees, and due to contemporary geopolitics, on many displaced people around the world today happen to be Muslim, which is where many of my interests intersect. These interests have taken me to the Greek Island of Lesbos, where I volunteered as an aid worker and photographer in the infamous Moria Refugee Camp at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis. I've also spent time with refugee communities in Germany, and right here at home in Detroit. My previous films covered similar themes, such as Hamtramck, USA, which explored life and democracy in America's first Muslim majority city and Ashura in Detroit, where I documented the stunning Ashura holiday rituals of the Iraqi Shia refugee communities of Detroit.

For my MFA thesis project, I decided to build on these experiences and challenge myself as an artist and filmmaker in order to pursue an even more complex project. In late Fall of 2020, I began researching a small group of Yemeni refugees living in South Korea. From my perspective, the presence of these Yemeni nationals in the East Asian country, so far from their homeland and in a culture so different from theirs, was intriguing. However it also exemplified just how global and complex the current refugee and migrant crisis was and how many individuals it was affecting. Therefore, in the Summer of 2021, I traveled to South Korea to continue researching and begin filming a documentary about these Yemeni refugees who had been residing there since 2018. These refugees arrived in South Korea after fleeing the civil war in Yemen which started in 2014. They first went to Malaysia, which has vexing restrictions on refugees from working, starting businesses, or going to school. After learning about an island in South Korea that had a visa

waiver policy for tourists up to 30 days, they decided to fly to Jeju Island. Initially, just a few came, but later, the bulk of them arrived in the spring and summer of 2018. Their arrival led to mass protests around the country and presented a watershed moment for Korean society in terms of how it views refugees, migrants, multiculturalism, Islam, and foreigners in general.

I wanted my research to expand the understudied topic of Yemeni refugees, particularly ones living in South Korea by adding a unique perspective, that of refugees themselves. Although my project focuses on Yemeni refugees living in South Korea, the film along with this paper will also serve as mediums to explore larger issues such as human rights, Islamophobia, anti-refugeeism, global migration and the role of cinema and documentary films in illuminating these issues.

It took months of planning, starting in the Fall of 2020, to develop the idea for the documentary and plan for the travel, which I will expound on further in the methodology section. However, in my initial plan, I intended to produce a series of short "essay films" profiling several Yemeni refugees that I would encounter in my research and production during my initial ninety day stay in South Korea. During my sojourn in South Korea, I would go on to meet several individuals involved with the Yemeni refugee issue as well as over a dozen Yemeni refugees themselves and refugees from Syria, Sudan, and Iraq also. Being in Korea and working with people face to face in the field was necessary to develop deeper relationships with people which ultimately led to more trust. This trust allowed me to meet more refugees through their formal and informal networks from a range of methods from social media outreach to word of mouth introductions. My initial plan was to meet as many activists and refugees as possible and try to select a few within that group that I would interview and film for my project. Beyond the interviews, I wanted to film them in their social and professional lives. This proved to be challenging for several reasons. First, while some refugees live in major cities, most of them live in agricultural or

industrial areas in Korea, due to the limited types of jobs they could acquire. These regions are more difficult to access and take longer due to limited bus and train routes. Another restriction I faced with most refugees was that I wasn't able to get access to their workplaces in order to film them inside the factories or farms where they were employed. I was told that these types of requests might upset their employers or worse, jeopardize their employment. Therefore returning multiple times to meet with and film with them in order to develop a deeper story, wasn't feasible.

This all changed when I met Omar in early August. As soon as I met him, he immediately became the focus of my project. He not only had a serendipitous connection to my home state of Michigan, he lived less than fifteen minutes away in the Haebonchon neighborhood. Omar's parents and three of his younger siblings lived in Dearborn, an inner ring suburb of Detroit with a large concentration of residents of Middle Eastern origin. Upon meeting him, I learned that he had to leave his wife and two young children behind in Yemen in order to find a country for asylum for all of them to live together safely. Also due to the war, two of his siblings along with their families, fled to Saudi Arabia and one brother joined Omar and also lives in South Korea. Thus the Alwahaishi family is currently separated over four countries, South Korea, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the United States (see fig. 2).

Reflecting upon this further, I cannot help but realize that Omar is just one person and the Alwahaishis are just one family. I decided to engage with his story for many reasons, but mainly due to our mutual connection to Michigan. However, due to the global refugee pandemic, there are undoubtedly millions who are separated from their families in similar ways. It's possible that one person's story can help others also reflect on the vast separations from their loved ones that refugees experience. Telling one person's story, by extension, allows us to tell a larger story about a group of people or a larger global issue.

The connection to Dearborn was too serendipitous to ignore. I knew

ONE FAMILY SEPARATED OVER FOUR COUNTRIES

*Due to the civil war which started in 2014, millions of Yemenis have been displaced internally and outside of Yemen. Many families have also been separated due to the fighting, including the Alwahaishi family. The vast geography of their separation, along with facts about the global refugee crisis and how it relates to South Korea are highlighted on this graphic.**

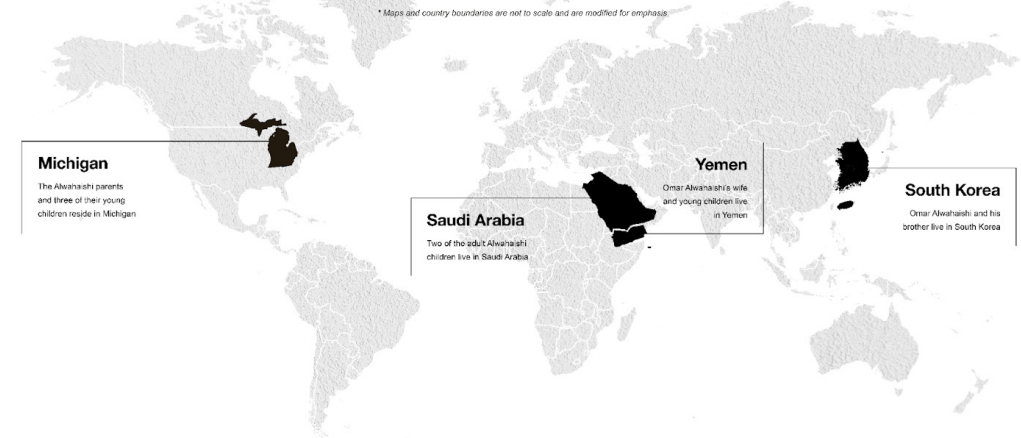


Figure 2. World map showing the different countries where the Alwahaishi family members are living as of April 2022

dozens of Yemeni families like Omar's, and under different circumstances, we might have met at a cafe, or at an event, or through mutual friends. I knew Dearborn very well. I had gone to college at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and years later would work there. Furthermore, much of my recent documentary photography work was based there and I have many personal and professional connections to the Arab and Muslim communities of Dearborn. While I've maintained friendships with many Yemeni refugees in South Korea, it felt very natural to choose Omar's story to work on. Another reason it was easier to focus on his story was that Omar had a job that was performed in public. He was a driver, delivering food on a motorcycle in the Gangnam neighborhood, which made it easy to film him doing his job. He also proved to be eloquent and charming and a natural on camera.

Despite living in a safe country and having a stable job, Omar faces unique administrative, cultural, and societal challenges living in South Korea, a mostly homogenous society where most foreigners perpetually feel like outsiders. Additionally, the separation from his family

members was unbearable. Under his current immigration status, he is not allowed to bring his wife and children to Korea to be reunited with them. Leaving Korea, even for a short trip also isn't feasible, as he may not be able to reenter, or his temporary visa might get rescinded. From my perspective, he was stuck in a Kafkaesque nightmare. This is where I was beginning to wonder if I could help him beyond our relationship through filming a documentary. Perhaps I could use my position as an American filmmaker with a broad network of friends and activists to help him get reunited with his family somehow. However, at the time, this would naturally bring up some questions. I was starting to feel that helping him would mean more than making the film. I didn't know about what potential challenges and complexities that would arise from such an intervention. I also needed to consider this dilemma within the ethics of documentary filmmaking and if it would even be allowed. These are some of the tensions that I explore in this paper.

Omar's attempts to survive in South Korea while trying to get reunited with his wife and kids and my efforts to help him is the main storyline of my film and an entrypoint to explore my research questions. Through this thesis project, which collectively includes a short film, this paper, and a gallery installation, I want to examine several research questions.

What are the challenges and benefits of collaborating with documentary protagonists?

What are the challenges filmmakers face when intervening in protagonists' lives, blurring the lines between filmmaker, advocate, and friend?

How can documentary filmmaking and social activism cooperate to create change for an individual or a group?

How can documentary film be used to enlighten the public about refugees, immigrants, and other marginalized groups?

BACKGROUND

The complexity of this project cannot be overstated. When developing the research and production plan as well as trying to help an individual, I needed to consider many contextual factors across history, culture, politics, foreign policy, migration, regional conflicts, and more. In order to maintain a scope for my work and understand the larger context that Omar finds himself in, I will expand on a few of them in order to establish the background to my thesis project.

The Widespread Refugee Crisis

According to the most recent Global Trends Report issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 82.4 million people around the world have been displaced from their homes, of which 11.2 million were newly displaced in 2020. This issue is only going to continue to get worse. Wealthier countries like South Korea will have to grapple with incoming refugees while convincing their citizens about the need for humanitarian aid and a collective sense of compassion for vulnerable populations entering the country. Furthermore, South Korea was not a major destination for refugees who left their homes as part of the political and social turmoil of the contemporary Middle East, as most refugees headed for Europe. This all changed when in 2018, a small group of about 500 Yemeni refugees arrived in South Korea after being denied permanent asylum or residency in Malaysia. While the number of refugees entering South Korea was low, it exemplifies how far reaching the effects of this global crisis are. Also, while the global refugee crisis continues, individual families like Omar's are divided by vast geographies causing irreparable generational damage due to their unnecessary separation. What makes this project additionally unique is that we rarely get to see the toll that these experiences imprint on families around the world and through the film, viewers will

get to see it through Omar and his resilience and determination to remain connected and eventually be reunited.

The Conflict in Yemen and Yemeni refugees

The primary root cause for Omar and other refugees having to leave Yemen is the civil war which started in 2014. It was precipitated by the instability fostered in the aftermath of the Arab Spring protests of 2011 where millions of citizens across countries in North Africa and the Middle East took to the streets in civil protest against government corruption, low wages, political instability, and a myriad of other issues rampant across countries in the region, which left citizens angry and frustrated with their leaders.

Yemen was no different. The years of dysfunction, incompetence, and corruption took its toll on society, thus everyday citizens and organized groups took to the streets in protest. The ensuing instability allowed various groups who were previously pacified under the status quo, to begin vying for control in 2011. One of these groups, the Houthis, a Shia religious and political movement that emerged from northern Yemen, took on a militant dimension and took over key parts of Yemen, including the capital, Sanaa. They were able to achieve this through the financial and material support of Iran, a majority Shia country vying for power and influence in the region. The other main group involved in the fighting are the aligned government coalition forces, who are supported mainly by Saudi Arabia and the UAE (United Arab Emirates), with artillery, weapons, fighter jets and other support from the United States, Great Britain, and France who are selling these materials to Saudi Arabia and UAE directly (see fig. 3).

Finally, other secessionist groups based primarily in southern Yemen, and to make things even more complicated AQAP (Al Qaeda of the

YEMEN

Key players in the conflict

In March 2015, a **Saudi-led coalition – backed by the US** – intervened militarily in Yemen in a bid to **fight the Houthis, restore Hadi's government**, and reverse what they say is growing **Iranian influence in the region**.



Figure 3. Map highlighting the geography around Yemen and the various countries and factions involved in the conflict including regional neighbors, support from American and European countries, and various armed groups (Map courtesy of AJ Labs and Al Jazeera).

Arabian Peninsula), and ISIS or more specifically the ISYP (the Islamic State of the Yemen Peninsula) are also involved. Months after taking control of the capital, in early 2015, the Houthi's also dissolved the Yemeni parliament, causing further instability in the conflict. Today each of these groups controls different parts of Yemen and continue to fight for control over those regions and that of the entire country (see fig. 4)

The situation in Yemen is an absolute worst-case scenario. Millions of Yemenis have had to flee due to the conflict, which is made even worse by a myriad of other issues faced by Yemenis everyday such as poverty,

a recent cholera outbreak, inconsistent electricity and internet, a broken healthcare system, famine, and Saudi led blockades on the country, which prevented international aid from getting into the country for a period of time. According to the UNHCR, four million Yemenis remain internally displaced. Today, most experts in the field are calling the situation in Yemen the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

As the conflicts have waged on, these groups have been actively recruiting men to fight in their ranks against their enemies. Not wanting to be forced to join one of these groups, Omar decided to leave Yemen. He explains this in the opening moments of Sanctuary, Purgatory, over a phone call with me. Among the many challenges he is facing today is that the different groups have also been recruiting child soldiers to join their parties (Al Jazeera Jan. 2022). Thus Omar is deeply concerned about his son being recruited by one of the belligerent groups.

Conditions that allowed refugees to arrive in Jeju Island

Once the civil war began in 2014, many Yemenis who had the means to leave, did so. This is when Omar and his family members became refugees themselves and began to flee from Yemen as well. As Yemeni nationals, countries that would allow them to enter without a visa, and subsequently apply for asylum, were few and far between; thus, they didn't have many options. Therefore, thousands of Yemenis decided to flee to Malaysia. Despite not being a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, Malaysia is a country which in the past has acted to protect persecuted Muslim populations from places such as Bosnia, Syria, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Malaysia does also allow the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) to operate an office in Kuala Lumpur and register refugees who enter the country. However life in Malaysia proved to be painfully difficult for Omar and the thousands of refugees living there due to government restrictions prohibiting UNHCR card

holders from working, starting businesses, or attending school. Violations of these rules carry severe consequences, including deportation or even prison.

These were the restrictive conditions Omar found himself in when he arrived in Malaysia in 2018, joining the thousands of Yemeni refugees who had already been living there since 2014. While many had hopes that conditions in Malaysia would change and allow for more rights and opportunities for permanent asylum, for others it was too unbearable and they decided to seek other options in the region and beyond. Then rumors started spreading among their community in Kuala Lumpur that there was a Korean island, named Jeju-do, off its southern coast that allowed tourists to enter without a Visa for up to ninety days. While this wasn't allowed in mainland Korea, it presented an attractive option for these refugees who were desperate for better living conditions and job opportunities. A small number of Syrian, Iraqi, and other refugees had already entered South Korea through this loophole, but no particular group entered the country in large numbers. When Omar heard about Jeju Island, he too decided to fly there in hopes of finding a more stable situation for himself and eventually his family.

Before moving further into Omar's story and how my documentary evolved after meeting him, it's helpful to step back and understand the conditions that were in place that allowed Yemeni nationals to even enter South Korea through Jeju island to begin with, Omar being among them. In post-war Korea, Jeju was a place that Koreans visited, but foreigners rarely did. This began to change in the 90's and early 2000's. This also coincided with the rise in the Chinese middle class, who were starting to make up larger percentages of the tourists who visited Jeju. With China's moneyed middle class rising, Jeju granted visa-free access to Chinese tourists. By the end of the 1990s, when an aspirational *Korean Wave* or *Hallyu* of pop culture, fashion, dramas, film, and more were washing across China, the timing was perfect and Chinese tourists came to Jeju in the millions; many also bought properties and vacation homes. Island roads were overrun with tour buses

shuttling hoards of Chinese tourists from Jeju International airport to hotels, restaurants, attractions, gift shops, and duty-free stores. Becoming a prime destination for the bottomless supply of Chinese tourists looked like Jeju's future (Asia Times June, 2021). Eventually Chinese tourists became the overwhelming majority of the visitors to Jeju island. According to the South Korean news agency Yonhap, Chinese tourists made up 85.3% of the 2.6 million foreign visitors to Jeju Island in 2015 (QZ Sept. 2016). However due to the geopolitical reality of the region with respect to North Korea, things began to get complicated. Due to an increasing North Korean missile threat, in July 2016, the U.S. Department of Defense and the South Korean Ministry of National Defense announced in a joint statement the alliance's joint decision to deploy a U.S. THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) antimissile apparatus in South Korea. The THAAD system reached initial operating capability on May 2, 2017.

However, Beijing perceived THAAD as mostly directed at China and as a regional security concern according to its official statements. Chinese observers claimed the THAAD deployment signaled the expansion of the U.S.- allied ballistic missile defense architecture in the Asia Pacific, weakens China's nuclear deterrent, and confirms long standing fears of U.S. containment of China. Beijing has used economic coercion, among other tools, to try to compel Seoul to abandon the THAAD deployment. These levers used against South Korean businesses, groups, and individuals reflect a Chinese government pattern of adverse actions toward other countries it perceives as defying or undermining China's national security interests, although the Chinese economic coercion against South Korea is greater in scope and depth.

As a result, Chinese regulators rejected several applications from Korean airlines to add charter flights between the two countries. In March 2017, the Chinese National Tourism Administration ordered travel agencies to stop selling package tours to South Korea. This is a significant hit to South Korea's tourism industry—according to the Korea

Tourism Organization, visitors from China accounted for 47 percent of all tourists and 70 percent of sales at duty free shops in South Korea in 2016.⁶¹ June 2017 data from the Korea Tourism Organization shows only 254,930 Chinese tourists visited South Korea, down from 758,534 in June 2016—a 66 percent drop. (U.S. - China Economic and Security Review Commission Paper).

In order to compensate for this significant decrease in tourist revenue from Chinese tourists, new routes opened up with direct flights to Jeju Island from other neighboring countries. Jeju islanders were thrilled to hear the news in December of 2017 that the budget airline AirAsia had just begun operating direct flights between the island and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, four times a week (Korea Times, June 2018).

Thus the conditions were laid for a small influx of refugees, including Omar, to enter the country through this accidental visa loophole.

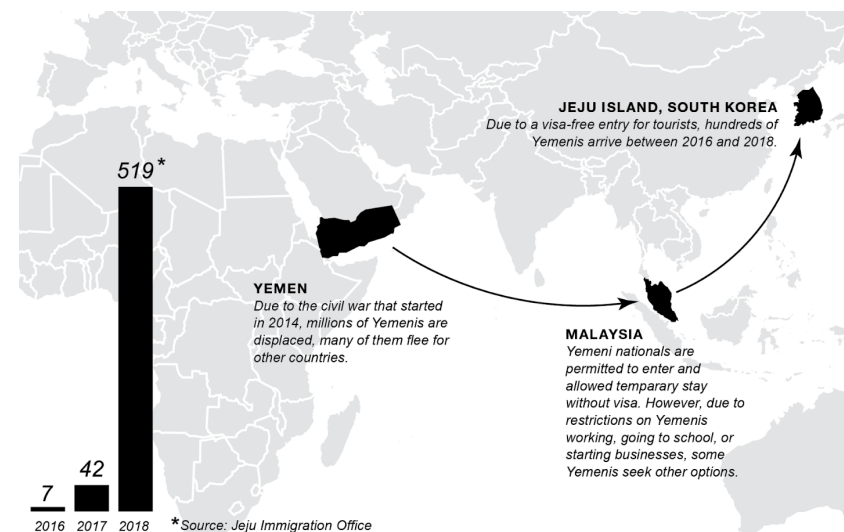


Figure 5. Map showing the route most Yemeni nationals took between 2016 - 2018 in order to arrive in South Korea.

Among the Yemeni refugees, 7 arrived in 2016, 42 in 2017, and 519 arrived in 2018, the year that Omar arrived, causing immense uproar and awakened an anti-refugee and Islamophobic sentiment that spread across Korea (see fig. 5).

Yemenis Arrive in Jeju Island and the Ensuing Moral Panic

As the refugees arrived in Korea, they hoped to build stable lives for themselves, instead they experienced an immediate wave of anti-refugee and Islamophobic protests. However, South Korea is a signatory to the Geneva Convention and party to the 1951 convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees – the two key legal documents that form the basis of the UN Refugee Agency, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Additionally, in 2012 Korea enacted an independent and comprehensive domestic legislation concerning the recognition and treatment of refugees pursuant to the international standard on refugee protection. Therefore it is bound by those agreements to process refugee applications and provide asylum for what they deem to be legitimate asylum applicants. Therefore in the summer of 2018 it processed hundreds of asylum applications, although only granting permanent refugee status to two Yemeni refugees. A few dozen of them were deported and the rest of the few hundred refugees were allowed to remain in Korea temporarily through “humanitarian visas,” which need to be renewed annually. Omar is also a holder of this humanitarian visa. The visa essentially allows the refugees to stay in Korea, but it’s not a permanent residency. The status also limits the refugees in the types of jobs a humanitarian visa holder can obtain. They are restricted to working in factories, farming, agriculture, fishing, and other types of physical labor, regardless of a refugee’s education, training, or professional background. While in Korea, I met Yemeni refugees with advanced degrees in business administration or

Figures for “Liberal international norms and restrictive domestic institutions: Explaining South Korea’s disjointed stance towards refugee protection”

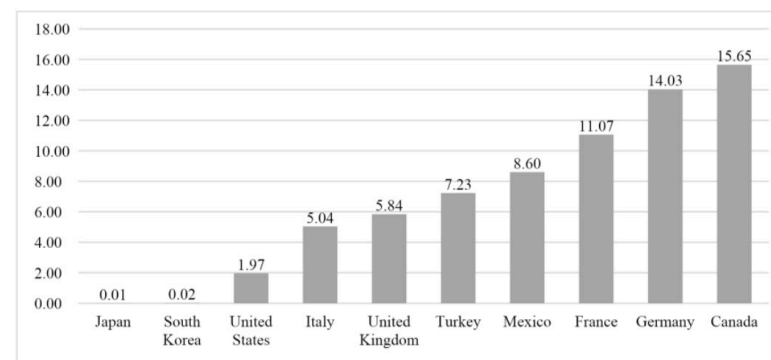


Figure 1. Number of recognized refugees per one billion GDP in USD, 2019

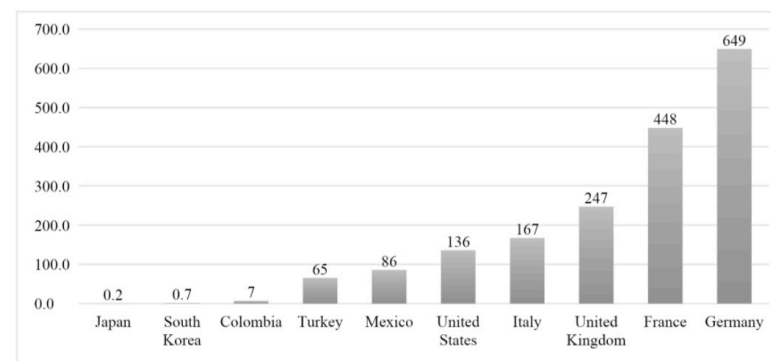


Figure 2. Number of recognized refugees per one million people, 2019

Figure 7. Graph showing number of recognized refugees per million people, 2019 (Courtesy of Angela Yoonjeong McClean)

English, but they are not allowed to work in cognate fields.

As recent events continue to unfold in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, wealthy and stable countries will continue to see a steady influx of asylum seekers. Korea has seen a consistent rise in its number of refugee applications since 2013, when it enacted the Refugee Act to address the needs of refugees. In 2014, the number of refugee applications was 2,896 and rose steadily to 15,451 by 2019. Concurrently,

the refugee claim acceptance rate dropped from 11% in 2013 to 1.5% in 2019 (Korea Herald, Jan. 2021).

Yet, relative to other states with comparable economic, political, and social capacity, Korea accepts exceptionally few refugees and asylum-seekers. For example, in 2019, among the top ten member countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with the highest gross domestic product (GDP), Korea ranked second to last in the number of refugee recognitions, at 0.02 and 0.01 refugees per GDP (in billions USD), respectively (see fig. 6). Similarly in 2019, Korea recognized less than 1 refugee per one million people, again ranking second to last among the top ten OECD countries with the largest populations (see fig. 7). In recent years (2014-2018), the refugee recognition rate (RRR) of Korea has stood at 1.5 percent, compared to the average of 22.5 percent among the top ten OECD countries with the highest GDPs over the same period (UNHCR 2022). The East Asian region's stance towards refugee protection has thus been highly disjointed, inconsistent, and puzzling: on the one hand it displays outward commitment as members of the international refugee regime, and on the other, fails to follow through with said commitment (McClean).

As more people apply for asylum in different countries, governments will have to balance this reality with the anxieties of their citizens who fear outsiders or the dilution of national values and norms through immigration, refugees, or multiculturalism. In the case of Korea in 2018, there was a huge learning curve partly due to the existing lack of diversity and lack of knowledge about foreigners from small war-torn countries in the Middle East like Yemen.

Thus, Omar's story is part of a larger narrative, not only about Yemenis in Korea, but also immigrants, refugees, and migrant workers. All of which get conflated in common discourses within Korean society and are also part of larger global debates which are also intertwined with Islamophobic sentiments and a general fear of foreigners. In the case of the Yemeni refugees who arrived in Jeju Island in 2018, the Korean



Figure 8. Photo showing anti-immigration activists attending a protest against a group of asylum-seekers from Yemen, in Seoul on June 30, 2018. (ED JONES/AFP/Getty Images)

public reacted with hyperbolic alarm. Protests erupted in cities across Korea and a mass petition to demand the government to stop allowing refugees from entering the country was launched (see fig. 8). The public online petition garnered over 700,000 signatures from hysterical citizens. This is the context in which Omar was trying to build a new life for himself in.

These protests were also fueled by the media, social media, and online platforms which spread fake news and misinformation such as the popular Korean platforms Naver Cafes and Naver News Portals (Sheikh). The mass protests and media sentiment can be best described as a “moral panic.” In sociology a moral panic is a mass movement based on fake or hyperbolic perceptions of or ideas that don't represent any sort of real threat or danger. Moral panics spread widely within a society and are stoked by politicians and media sometimes with the objective of increased social control. Moral panic theory was developed by the late South African sociologist Stanley Cohen in his

book *Moral Panic and Folk Devils*. Cohen's basic thesis can be discerned initially from a citation in the very first paragraph of his book:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; (Cohen, 9).

A key element of Cohen's idea of moral panic is his emphasis on public and mass reactions. In the Korean context, this manifested itself in the large-scale protests across the country over what in reality was a very small group of refugees seeking asylum in the country. However, it is important to understand the other societal factors in Korea that were working against refugees, like Omar, when they arrived in Korea.

Feminists, Evangelical Christians, and Korean Nationalists: Strange Bedfellows in the Anti-Refugee Movement in South Korea

Prior to the Yemeni refugees arriving in Jeju Island, 2018 was already turning into a complicated and tumultuous time. The previous president, and first female, Park Geun-hye, had been impeached recently and was sentenced to twenty five years in prison in April of 2018 after being found guilty of abuse of power and coercion. Additionally, the mass movement #metoo was spreading all over the world and began to take shape in Korea in 2018 across many industries including media and entertainment, politics, sports and more.

Simultaneously, there was a lot of fake news migrating to Korea about the problems caused by refugees in the United States but even more so from Europe, which was still in the midst of its own refugee crisis.

These factors created the perfect recipe for a moral panic about the refugees to take shape across Korea. The mass movements across Korea were fueled by three main groups: feminists, evangelical Christians, and Korean nationalists. Each had their own set of fears associated with refugees but also overlapped in unusual and unexpected ways.

Feminists

In light of the #metoo movement in Korea along with stories coming out of Europe about refugees perpetrating sexual harassment and sexual assault against European women in places like Germany and Sweden, led to their concerns about male-perpetrated violence against Korean women. Despite the reports of violence against European women being proven to be false, the initial speculation alone reinforced the Western narrative that connected Islam and violence.

These feminists were also suspicious and antagonistic towards those who were in favor of receiving refugees.

Evangelical Christians

Like in other countries, evangelical Christians were deeply concerned about the spread of Islam in Korea through these asylum seekers. Ironically, tens of thousands of Muslims already lived in Korea and the largest group of international students in Korea are from a Muslim country, Pakistan. However their insecurities about losing devotees of Christianity to Islam, led them to be one of the main groups heading up the protests.

Korean Nationalists

Nationalist movements in Korea hold long-standing grievances over immigration, globalization, and the presence of Muslims in Korea, in firm opposition to its imminent multicultural future. These groups hold antagonistic views towards foreigners in general, but they developed a particular hatred towards Muslims and refugees during the time when the Yemeni refugees arrived.

All three groups were also influenced and driven by their Islamophobia, which has rapidly been spreading all over the world since 9/11. Due to the current events of the modern middle east, millions of refugees in the past decade have been from Muslim majority countries. Thus global Islamophobia and anti-refugeeism formed into a singular force that many people have latched on to. It helps to have a functional understanding of what Islamophobia is. In his book *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*, Todd H. Green describes Islamophobia as: *The fear of and hostility toward Muslims and Islam that is rooted in racism and that results in individual and systemic discrimination, exclusion, and violence targeting Muslims and those perceived as Muslim* (Green, 38)

From China, India, Israel, France, to the United States, in recent years Islamophobia has seemingly spread everywhere. And while its forms vary from place to place, Islamophobia as a political tactic is effective because it works (Vox, Jan. 2020). The post 9/11 era permitted many governments to abuse, surveil, or detain Muslims under the guise of fighting terrorism. Islamophobia can also be stitched to other fears such as the fear of immigration and refugees. Which is what was happening in South Korea during their anti-refugee protests. Looking at the case of Omar, due to trends outside of his control, the odds were against him in Korea and likely many other places he might consider migrating to. However, among the things these groups failed to understand were basic facts about why Yemeni refugees ended up in Jeju Island in the first place.

Omar's Journey to Korea

Like all refugees, Omar never intended to leave his homeland. He grew up first in a small town in central Yemen named Al Baydah and later the family moved to a larger home in the capital Sana (see fig. 9). Throughout much of his life, he was without his father, who was living and working in America, while sending money home to support the family.

Omar's father, Mohamad, was like many Yemeni men from the poor gulf country who over the years had to temporarily migrate to neighboring countries or countries in the region in order to make money that they could send home and support their families with. Occasionally, these men would travel even further from Yemen to places like the UK,



Figure 9. Photograph of Omar Alwahaishi as a young boy in Al Bayda, Yemen (Photo courtesy of Mohamad Alwahaishi)

Canada, or the United States. Regardless, most of these men desired to return home to Yemen and eventually re-settle there with their families. Mohamad's plans were similar. He left Yemen in 1991 to attend school and make more money and send it home to support his family while saving up to build a large home for everyone back in Yemen and eventually move back there himself.

For a while, Mohamad was able to work towards these plans, however everything changed when the war broke out in 2014. Yemen quickly began to descend into a deeper chaos as the conflict wore on. During this time, Yemenis faced all kinds of challenges, but Yemeni men were more susceptible to specific types of threats due to recruitment and forced conscriptions by the various groups fighting in Yemen at the time. As the situation worsened, Omar and the rest of the Alwahaishi family began to leave. They first left for Saudi Arabia, with Omar and his brother making attempts to enter Europe through Armenia. When that plan failed, this is when he learned about some Yemenis who were successfully able to enter Malaysia and settle there without fear of persecution, so in 2018 and so he decided to leave for Malaysia. But Omar quickly realized that the conditions in Malaysia were not ideal for resettlement and he left as soon as he learned about Jeju Island's visa-free tourist policy (see fig. 10). Though he applied for asylum as a refugee when he arrived, it was not granted; however he was instead given a temporary "humanitarian visa" which would have to be renewed every year. The visa contained many restrictions on the types of work he could do and worse, it prevented him from bringing his family to Korea so they could live together.. Despite these challenges, he has remained there since.

Until meeting Omar, I had filmed with several Yemeni refugees in hopes of producing a series of shorter documentaries that profiled their lives in South Korea. For this purpose, I spent time traveling to many cities and regions in Korea to attend meetings and film with Yemeni refugees (see fig. 11). I would often have to go to rural or industrial regions due

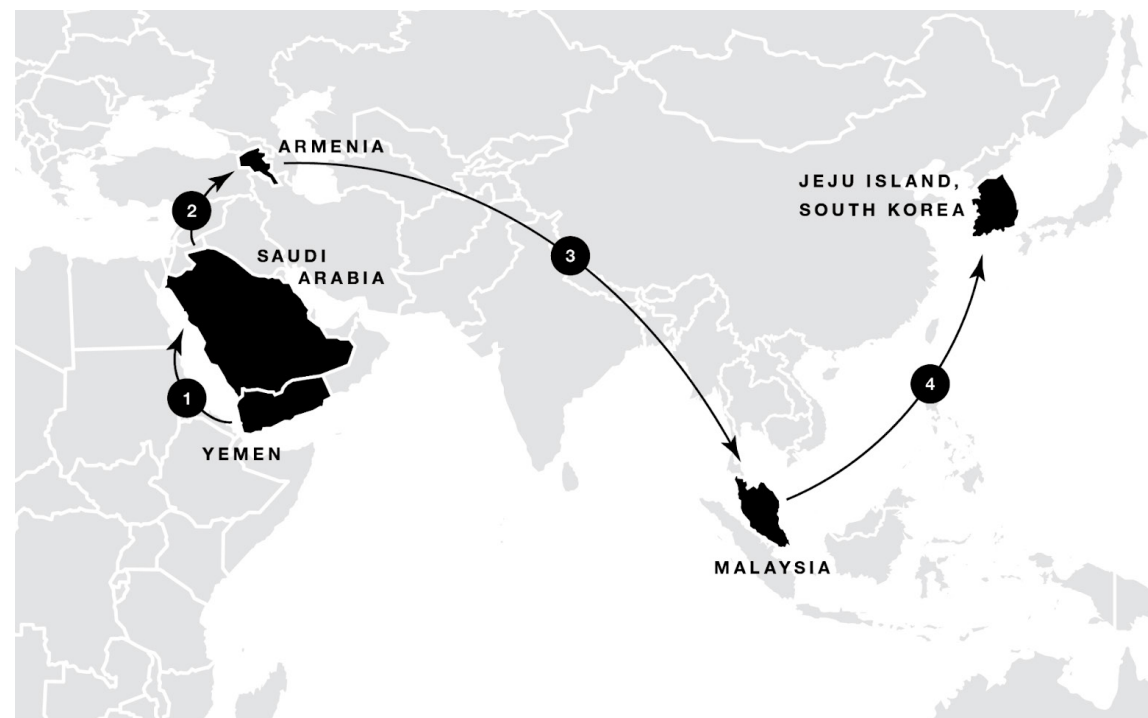


Figure 10. Map showing Omar's journey to South Korea with stops in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia prior to arriving in Jeju Island.

to the Yemenis being placed there for jobs in factories or on farms, this came with many challenges, which I will elaborate on more in the methodology section because it reveals some of the challenges faced by documentary filmmakers and another reason I chose to focus on Omar.

Soon after meeting Omar, I knew that my project would need to pivot and focus on his life in Korea and efforts to reunite with his family in order to truly reveal the complexity of what individuals like him face. Also, his connections to my hometown made it even more obvious that he could be a lens through which to tell the story while I could also help his cause, and perhaps my attempt to help would reveal the true difficulties each individual is facing. As I began filming with Omar and learning about his story we also began to bond as friends.



Figure 11. Filming with Ahmed Askar in the outskirts of Ulsan, South Korea in Summer of 2021.

Once I decided to focus on Omar, I was able to dive deeply into stories about his life in Yemen and Korea and how he'd been trying to build a life there while facing many challenges and obstacles. He's survived in Korea by working different types of jobs. Shortly after arriving and being granted permission to stay, Omar found work on a fishing boat working as a deckhand for a Korean family that ran a small fishing business on Jeju Island (see fig. 12).

The job on the fishing boat was extremely challenging due to the conditions on the water, the unpredictable weather, long hours, physical labor, and of course Omar's lack of experience working in such an environment. The saving grace in that job was the kindness of his employers, which cannot be said of most fishing boats that employed refugees or migrant workers on their ships. From my interviews with other refugees, I can recall many instances of mistreatment ranging from withholding pay to verbal and even physical abuse. These conditions also exist in factories and farms that employ refugees and migrant workers. Due to his humanitarian visa, he was allowed to move off of

Jeju to other parts of Korea and he eventually found a factory job in the shipbuilding industry in the southern coastal town of Mokpo, but the conditions there were also challenging. (see fig. 13).

Eventually Omar moved to Seoul and found work as a driver for the Korean food delivery app Shuttle, which is what he was doing when I met him in August 2021 (see fig. 14). He took those jobs because he didn't have a choice at the time. He preferred this job for many reasons. He didn't feel stuck on a boat or in a factory, he could be outside and it allowed him to meet new people and interact with different kinds of people. In the film he talks about his life in the factory as being extremely repetitive and like being in a prison. One drawback to working for Shuttle is that he is employed under the table which makes it dif-



Figure 12. Photo of Omar working on a fishing boat off the coast of Jeju Island, South Korea in 2018 (Photo courtesy of Omar Alwahaishi).



Figure 13. Photo of Omar working in a shipbuilding factory in Mokpo in South Korea in 2018. (Photo courtesy of Omar Alwahaishi)

difficult for his employer to claim him as an employee, which creates additional problems for him as well. His connection to Korea is, therefore, precarious. Like the other refugees living in Korea, it was important for Omar to maintain gainful employment so he could continue to support his wife and kids back in Yemen.

Omar's story is part of a bigger narrative and the bigger issues of refugee rights, asylum, and global migration. Documentary films have been employed effectively to raise awareness and highlight all kinds of societal, environmental, and political challenges. I hope to do the same with my camera and my creative practice. I will expand more on these films in the subsequent sections.



Figure 14. Film still from *Sanctuary, Purgatory*. Seoul, South Korea, August 2021

CREATIVE CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The Relationship between Documentary and Social Change

There has been a recent discovery by environmental scientists and researchers about the relationship between documentary films and their potential for societal change. This phenomenon known as the “The Blackfish Effect,” refers to the impact that the 2013 documentary, *Blackfish*, had on SeaWorld and similar amusement parks. The film highlighted the shocking maltreatment of orcas and other marine mammals and the sometimes fatal consequences of keeping orcas in confined captivity. The release of the film correlated with a sharp decline in Seaworld attendance (see fig. 15).

The film not only affected attendance at SeaWorld’s parks, but also its revenues and stock price, leading its executive leadership to make drastic changes in the company (see fig. 16).

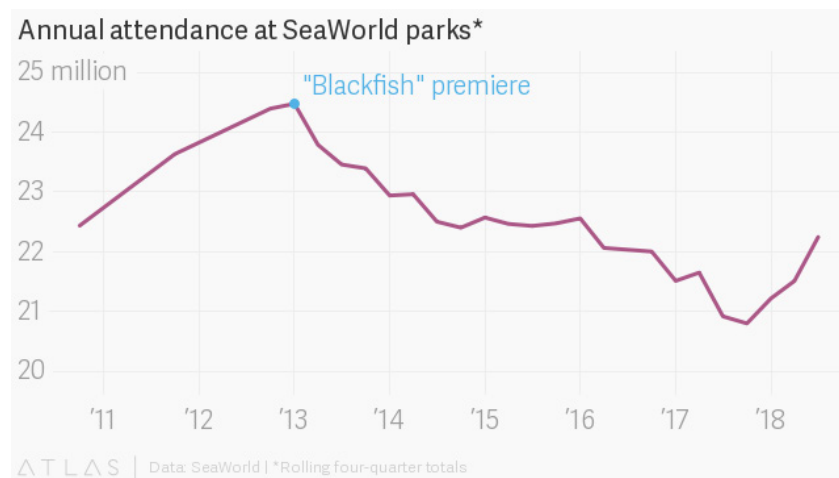


Figure 15. Annual attendance at SeaWorld Parks between 2011 - 2019. (Chart courtesy of Atlas)

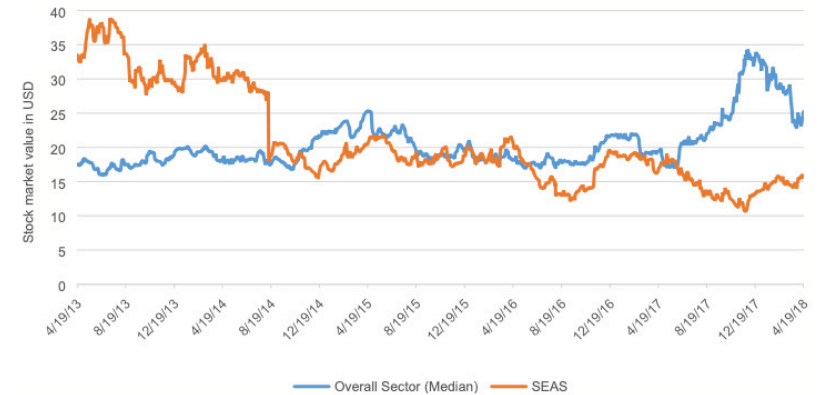


Figure 16. SeaWorld’s (SEAS) stock market value from April 2013 (SEAS Initial Public Offering) to April 2018; for the same time frame, the median stock value of other companies listed in the same category as SEAS on NASDAQ (Chart courtesy of Boissat, L., Thomas-Walters, L., Verissimo, D).

“The Blackfish Effect” has been studied and written about and the findings show a clear connection between the release of the film and its influence on the public. From a paper entitled, *Nature documentaries as catalysts for change: Mapping out the ‘Blackfish Effect’* the authors write:

There was a consensus among stakeholder groups that Blackfish induced negative publicity for SeaWorld and a change in people’s perceptions of captivity. As a result, attendance at the park decreased and the market value of the company dropped (Boissat, L., Thomas-Walters, L., Verissimo, D, 1185).

The researchers found that overall, *Blackfish* had an influence, directly and indirectly, on the three outcomes of interest—SeaWorld’s orca breeding policy, its new orca show, and its market value.

“The Blackfish Effect” can also be understood across other societal issues and how documentary films can affect large cultural changes and other films have had a similar effect. For instance, the 2004 documentary *Supersize Me* was made as a wake up call against the increas-

ing spread of obesity across the United States. While McDonalds was never the sole cause of the obesity epidemic, it represented a host of other problems within the larger crisis that go beyond its food, such as marketing its unhealthy fast food to young children. Although director Morgan Spurlock has remained coy about the impact of his film, it's not a coincidence that many fast food chains now offer healthier options. Just a few weeks after the release of the film, McDonalds itself introduced healthier alternatives and discontinued its supersize portions.

Another example is Errol Morris's 1988 documetary *The Thin Blue Line*, which led to the release of main subject Randal Adams after serving 12 years of a life sentence after being convicted of murdering a police officer. After its release, repeated legal attempts finally resulted in a retrial allowing new evidence—some documents that Morris had unearthed in his research, and videotaped interviews used in the film—which allowed Adams to finally be released early due to errors in the handling of his case and trial.

These films do not act alone in affecting cultural change; there are often other societal factors, such as existing concerns and campaigns about the related issues, as well as the institutions that come together to validate, promote, and amplify these films.

CREATIVE INFLUENCES

Due to recent conflicts and instability in the Middle East and the resulting migration and refugee pandemic, there have been a number of recent films focused on this topic. They range in style and span across non-fiction documentaries and fictional films. As the project evolved with Omar, I began to consider my own inclusion into the frame of my film, something I did so with a great deal of apprehension, since I was afraid of appearing self-indulgent. I will explore these feelings and my decision to become part of the story further in the methodology section. Therefore, I also explored personal documentaries, where the director, or directors decided to include themselves in the film as part of the story they were directing.

Fictional films also presented some interesting examples of films to study while working on my thesis. Thus ultimately, I looked at three types of films, documentary films about refugees, personal documentaries, where the director of the documentary is part of the narrative, and one fictional film. The documentaries about refugees I'm including here are *Human Flow* (2017) directed by conceptual artist, filmmaker, and activist Ai Weiwei and *Midnight Traveler* (2019) directed by Hassan Fazili. Personal documentaries I included are *Icarus* (2017) directed by Bryan Fogel, and the co-directed *Faces, Places* by artists Agnès Varda and JR. I decided to include one fictional film, *Limbo* (2020) directed by Ben Sharrock about four refugees awaiting the results of their asylum claims in Scotland.

Documentaries about refugees

Human Flow

Human Flow is a feature length documentary film directed by the Chinese visual and conceptual artists Ai Weiwei (b. 1957). *Human Flow* brings attention to the immense gravity and vast geographies of the current global refugee crisis. The film uses stunning cinematography to capture landscapes and aerial drone footage over refugee camps and to follow the mass migration of refugees from place to place. The film also uses interviews from subject matter experts, human rights activists, heads of state, and the refugees themselves. One of the main themes of the film, how compulsory it is for people to leave their homelands under current conditions, is summarized in a line from one interview with a young female refugee from Afghanistan:

No one leaves their country lightly. You only put yourself through the hardship of fleeing in order to find safety. To find peace somewhere.

—Young Afghan refugee woman. *Human Flow* 2017

The film doesn't focus on individual refugees or families or groups of refugees, instead it surveys a vast geography of human movement. The film shows various refugees in times of crisis and how refugee flows can be classified into four causation categories: wars between states, ethnic conflicts, non-ethnic conflicts and flights from repression. The film also highlights lots of data and statistics on refugees which are presented periodically throughout the film, which have sadly only increased more in the five years since the documentary was released in 2017. For me, the key feature of the film is how it is able to convey the vastness and sheer volume of refugees moving from country to country today. This is also the major contrast with my film since I focus on one individual within the larger crisis. However, I found another aspect of the film relevant since Ai Weiwei is also in the film himself as

he shepherds viewers through a myriad of locations, immersing himself in the space. He embeds himself in refugee camps, participating in their economic and social lives. He is shown getting a haircut and dancing at a wedding in Gaza (see fig. 17). He serves as one of the common threads through each of these spaces, some which are thousands of miles apart.



Figure 17. Film still from *Human Flow*, 2017. (Courtesy of Amazon Studios)

Seeing Ai Weiwei on screen in these settings, potentially helps viewers connect more directly with the refugees on screen, was helpful and reassuring when I considered my own presence in my film and Omar's life. This is partly because there is something powerful about seeing someone who cares about refugees and is doing his best to see their humanity and share it with others. Perhaps I would play a similar role in my own film.

Midnight Traveler

Midnight Traveler (2019) directed by Hassan Fazili, is both a personal documentary and a documentary about a refugee and his family as they make the arduous journey from Afghanistan to Europe. The film-

maker documents his family's journey using three cell phones (see fig. 18). Hassan Fazili and his wife Fatima are filmmakers and cafe owners in Kabul, Afghanistan. In 2016, he produced a documentary about a Taliban leader who chooses to lay down arms in an act of peace, the leader is killed after the movie is broadcast in Afghanistan. The Taliban also put a hit on Hasan, which he is tipped off to, causing him and Fatima to flee Afghanistan with their two young daughters Nargis and Zahra. They use human traffickers to smuggle them through Iran and Turkey. They eventually travel through Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and finally end up in Germany where they await the results of their asylum application. Hassan, his wife and daughters film the entire experience using their cell phones.



Figure 18. Film still from *Midnight Traveler*, 2019 (Courtesy of Oscilloscope)

The journey is eventful and the use of cell phones as cameras makes the viewing experience deeply immersive. We get to see the trials and tribulations of the family's journey; however, we also get to see many moments of joy. The filmmakers are also the subjects therefore they are in a position to share the spectrum of emotions and circumstances that refugees experience. They get to show the viewers that being a refugee isn't just abject suffering. Refugees experience moments of mundane responsibilities and joy as well. This is best exemplified in a scene when Nargis is dancing to a Michael Jackson song cleaning her

family's dorm in a refugee camp in Serbia in what is normally a spartan and boring environment. For a moment you forget that she is a refugee living in a warehouse and simply see her as a young girl who could be anywhere in the world. I think these moments are extremely important and inspiring and inspired me to want to portray moments in Omar's life that are similarly ordinary experiences like speaking to his father over the phone about work. The moments with Nargis dancing or Omar talking to his dad over the phone are small but powerful ways that relate to our own everyday experiences. The world has normalized only their suffering and misfortune which limits our perspective of who refugees are and we don't get a sense of the range of their experiences as human beings.

Personal Documentaries

Icarus

In *Icarus* (2017) director Bryan Fogel, an amateur cyclist, decides to attempt to beat the international drug testing apparatus by embarking on a regimen of steroids to see if he can do it. He decides to document the experience so the film is a personal documentary from the very beginning. He decides to employ a scientist to supervise his performing enhancing hormone regimen. He is connected to a Russian scientist Grigory Rodchenkov, the former head of Russia's national anti-doping laboratory, the Anti-Doping Center. Rodchenkov is known for his involvement in the state-run doping program in Russia. For the first fifteen or so minutes of the film, things are progressing normally as Bryan and Grigory work together and begin to develop a friendship. Eventually allegations of a Russian state sponsored doping program are revealed in international media, endangering Grigory's life. Bryan intervenes, and buys him a plane ticket to Los Angeles for his protection. After arriving in the US, Bryan and Grigory speak to the US Department of Justice as well as the New York Times (see fig. 19).



Figure 18. Film still from *Midnight Traveler*, 2019 (Courtesy of Oscilloscope)

Eventually Grigory is placed under witness protection. I found a lot of relevance in this film because of Bryan and Grigory's friendship and how it evolved and deepened due to their joint efforts in raising awareness about the Russian doping system. Bryan also became emotionally invested in Grigory's life, his well-being, and ultimately his protection. I feel similarly about Omar, as I haven't been able to stand by idly when I know that Omar can use my help. If Bryan didn't completely break the rules and intervene, Grigory might have been assassinated by the Russian government, just as many other dissidents, critics, and rival politicians have. The decision was a risk, but it paid off for the documentary as well as because the story shifts to focus on Bryan and Grigory joining forces to help Grigory become the biggest whistleblower in Olympic history.

Faces, Places

Faces, Places (2017) is a collaborative and unconventional documentary co-directed by two artists, Agnès Varda and JR. Unlike *Icarus*, the relationship between the two protagonists is established from the beginning of the film. There is no clearly structured arc to this film, rather

it's about a shared journey of two artists who collaborate to document their experiences meeting as many ordinary people during a road trip through the French countryside. In order to bring viewers up to the present moment, as Varda and JR are about to embark on their road trip, they perform creative reenactments. There is a conversation between them at Varda's kitchen table where they discuss why they never met and all of the different ways they could have met. They discuss whimsical and fictional scenarios where they just missed each other, while hitchhiking or at a bus stop. However, they eventually meet and they're relationship goes from strangers to close friends. I feel an analogy to my relationship with Omar since we also could have met under different circumstances, but we met in Korea and we have also come together through a shared meaningful cause, of helping him reunite with his family. I used these reenactments to inspire my own retelling of how Omar and I met. The first time we spoke was over the phone, but I didn't record our conversation. A relationship can be a very compelling narrative for a film, and it helps to create and recreate a trajectory or an arc for the relationship. Therefore, Omar and I reenacted our first conversation along with other moments we didn't capture on film, but recreated. For instance, the Zoom conversation when we discuss him applying for the US tourist visa. *Faces, Places* is also directed by Varda and JR, and both are the main protagonists of the film. In the film, they travel through the French countryside in JR's photography truck, which contains a photo booth and a large format printer, and make large scale photos of everyday people in French villages. They install these massive photos on silos, warehouses, and other large structures. The result is that the people they encounter get to see themselves in a new light and are very moved by Agnès and JR's site specific installations. Through their experience of bringing spontaneity and joy to everyday people, a deep friendship and collaborative bond emerges from the experience of these two renowned artists working on something meaningful. In the same way that Omar and I have become close and as we too are trying to help find a solution to the seemingly insurmountable dilemma he is facing.

Fictional films

Limbo

Limbo (2020) is a fictional film directed by Ben Sharrock about four refugees who end up on a remote Scottish island awaiting their asylum processing to see if they can stay in Europe or not. *Limbo* perhaps carries the biggest parallels to Omar's life in South Korea. The refugees are hosted and sheltered temporarily by a nonprofit that provides them with housing and basic necessities. The four of them are also not allowed to work under their status on Scottish island while they wait for their status letters. Documentaries can draw from fictional films and vice versa, especially in this case when there are similarities between the fictional and non-fictional protagonists.

Refugees often end up in these types of states of limbo or purgatory, where they are not experiencing an existential threat to themselves, but find themselves in countries where no one knows what to do with them and they must wait in an uncertain state for weeks, months, and sometimes even years. Omar's journey is no different as he constantly has to renew his visa and wait for status updates on other initiatives he is attempting in order to get reunited with his family. The big difference is that his story is real.

These films were immensely helpful, inspiring, and validating in terms of developing a style, form, and methodology for my project. These films were also important in helping me develop a more defined theory for my methodology and how to continue working on the film. They each present unique cases where filmmakers played various roles in the filmmaking process, collaborating with protagonists and/or becoming protagonists in their own films while covering crucially important topics within their respective works.

Film Festivals as Counter Spaces (Cinematic Heterotopias)

From the mentioned examples and many others, we know that social change is possible through documentary films. There are many factors that enable films to be effective in that way. One of the contributing factors is the film's visibility, which can be significantly multiplied by its broadcast and distribution, but also its inclusion in film festivals. Today, there are many different types of film festivals, ones that are focused specifically on documentaries such as DOC NYC, the largest documentary film festival in North America, or experimental films, like the Ann Arbor Film Festival. There are also film festivals today that focus on themes such as climate change like Planet in Focus in Toronto or human rights, such as Movies that Matter in the Hague, Netherlands. However, the festivals that have the biggest reach and visibility for their films are the major international film festivals, such as Toronto, SXSW, Canne, Berlin, or Sundance. Filmmakers have been able to use the platforms of these high-profile events to extend the reach of their works or to make statements about the themes in their films to wider audiences.

Ai Weiwei was able to show his installations and film, *Human Flow*, all over the world and raise awareness about the global refugee crisis (see fig. 20). In countless interviews promoting the film he spoke about the gravity of the issue. The film is a direct call to action showing the gravity and scale of the refugee crisis. The EU requires responses to improve and enforce its charter on refugees and Ai's efforts to expand this message has intensified with the creation of screening parties, particularly through festival screenings. For instance in Canada, during TIFF (Toronto International Film Festival), the festival held a screening and panel discussion with representatives from Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), bringing attention to the crisis by showing the film to academics and to the general public.



Figure 20. Film still from *Human Flow*, 2017. (Courtesy of Amazon Studios)

Gianfranco Rosi has also used the film festival platforms to spread the message of his film, *Fire at Sea*. In his acceptance speech for the Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival (see fig. 21), Rosi stated that his intention was to heighten awareness of the migrant situation, saying, “It’s not acceptable that people die crossing the sea to escape from tragedies.” It was also appreciated by the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who stated that he would carry with him 27 DVDs of the film to a session of the European Council, where he gave copies of the film to every head of state or government of the European Union.

Festivals play a critical role in combating the status quo and serve as a type of, what political scientist Michael Shapiro refers to in his book, “Cinematic Geopolitics” as a “counter-space” or a “cinematic heterotopia.” Heterotopias, initially theorized by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, are cultural, institutional and discursive spaces that are somehow ‘other’: disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory or transforming. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside. A space that is designed to be different from significant aspects of the world outside of it. Thus, film festivals can serve as a counter-space to the broader Hollywood and cinema industry which tends to promote controversial policies of the US gov-

ernment, like the War on Terror. This has been achieved through films like *American Sniper*. In his book, “Cinematic Geopolitics” Shapiro uses the example of the docu-drama, “*The Road to Guantanamo*,” directed by Mat Whitecross and Michael Winterbottom to do what? fill this in. The film follows three British Muslim friends who visit Pakistan to attend a wedding. They decide to visit Afghanistan, but they find Kandahar under attack and flee to Kabul. From there the friends try to return to Pakistan but mistakenly end up in a Taliban stronghold. Following their capture, they are sent to the controversial U.S. military base in Cuba, Guantanamo Bay, where they are detained without trial or due process and experience abuse and torture. The film won the Silver Bear Award at the 2006 Berlin International Film Festival. Writing about the films achievements, Shapiro states:

At a minimum, the recognition the film has achieved testifies to the role of film festival space, which is opening itself to images that disclose the violence and abuses of rights that constitute much of the new violent cartography that has been effected during the war on terror. Such films, which have



Figure 21. Gianfranco Rosi during his acceptance speech for the Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival.

opened the way to cinematic challenges to U.S. war policy, suggest that film festival space is a counter-space (what I refer to as a “cinematic heterotopia” in the Introduction) to the violence-congeniality of USC’s militarization– complicit university– Hollywood– military connection at its Institute for Creative Technologies (Shapiro, 37)

Shapiro also recognizes that the inclusion and celebration of these films have an impact on the broader film industry. Some films have been produced recently which, like *The Road to Guantanamo*, serve as counterarguments to the prevailing US war policy. This impact is important since pop culture helps shape our ideas about almost everything from religion, to politics, to our ideas about different groups in a society.

*However, perhaps the success of the art house-oriented anti-war films at festivals have had an effect on Hollywood. At the same time that some of its practitioners are aiding and abetting militarization and securitization, others are challenging the United States’ war policy, for example the 2007 Hollywood feature films *Shooter*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, *Lions for Lambs*, *In the Valley of Elah*, *Rendition*, and *Redacted*, all of which have plots that involve either government complacency in illicit violence and/or its cover-up (Shapiro, 37).*

Ai Weiwei, Gianfranco Rosi, and many other filmmakers have been able to use the film festival counter-space to promote social justice and raise awareness about issues like refugees. I hope to do the same through *Sanctuary*, *Purgatory* when the feature length version of the film is completed.

METHODOLOGY

My filmmaking practice has many elements to it. A part of my practice is measured and methodical. It’s the part that requires diligence, planning, and attention to detail and ranges from booking shoots, scheduling interviews, shipping equipment or hard drives, to travel arrangements. This is also important since a lot of my past work on documentaries has taken place remotely, particularly editing and post production, so its necessary to maintain a level of organization. These aspects help me anchor my time while working on a project and help me leave room for what I believe are more important to my practice, which is intuition, spontaneity and pivoting. For instance, I needed to pivot quickly when I met Omar towards the end of my stay in Korea and felt that it would be impossible for me to be an emotional bystander in a situation when someone is suffering. While I formed close connections to protagonists in my previous films, I didn’t feel the need to intervene in their lives because they didn’t have an imminent need nor were they in any kind of danger. Omar had not seen his parents or his wife and children in over three years by the time I met him and he vacillated a lot between hope and hopelessness. I decided to get involved with helping Omar in any way that I could.

Production and Filming in South Korea and Michigan

Before I pivoted to working with Omar exclusively, I was planning for a different kind of documentary. For example, when I arrived in Korea in May of 2021 and was required to quarantine for a two week period. I used this time to continue to build relationships with Yemeni refugees, NGOs, activists, professors, and others with first hand knowledge and experience with the refugee situation in South Korea. Our initial meet-

ings were through social media and Zoom calls. This continued through my quarantine period. I also spent this time planning my initial visits to Jeju Island where I would continue my research and meet more Yemeni refugees who still remained there along with visits to the Naomi Refugee Center, which was the leading NGO helping the Yemeni refugees when they first arrived on Jeju Island. Over the course of the ninety days of my initial visit to Korea, In total, I visited twelve locations and regions (see fig. 22).



Figure 22. Map of Regions and cities visited in South Korea in the Summer of 2021

However, among the challenges of filming with the other refugees was limited time and access to other parts of their lives, like their workplace. Most Yemeni refugees worked in Korean factories or farms, I naively thought filming in these spaces would be feasible, however it would prove to be impossible.

With Omar however, I also began to feel a sense of responsibility and a motivation to help him somehow. The more I learn about his kafkaesque circumstances, it became harder for me not to get upset or emotionally involved. Due to my optimistic idealism, I decided to get involved and try to help Omar. This is precisely the dilemma faced by

other filmmakers in documentaries like *Icarus*. When allegations of a Russian state sponsored doping program are revealed in international media, endangering the life of Russian scientist Grigory Rodchenkov, director Bryan Fogel intervenes, and buys him a plane ticket to Los Angeles for his protection. After arriving in the US, Fogel and Rodchenkov speak to the US Department of Justice as well as the New York Times.

I met Omar towards the end of my initial 90 day stay in Korea, so we had a very short window of time to work together, so I decided to just continue filming with him in my last few weeks in Korea. I also knew that after returning to Michigan I would need to begin the editing process, so upon returning, I immediately mailed a harddrive full of my footage to Zoe in Boulder so we could begin working on editing the film. I did meet Mohamad, Omar's dad and soon began filming with him as well. Mohamad had his own compelling story and after spending time with him at a cafe in Dearborn, I felt validated for making the right decision to focus on Omar and his family as the main subject of my film. Filming in Dearborn came naturally to me since I had documented different communities in Dearborn for years.

In addition to filming in Dearborn, I needed to continue filming with Omar in Seoul. I knew I would be able to do that on two subsequent returns to Korea, but also through collaborations with people in the network I developed there. Zoe also visited Korea in November 2021 and was able to film with Omar (see fig. 27). I also had a friend, Danny Kim, also a documentary filmmaker based in Korea, film b-roll and environmental footage for me in January 2022. Most recently I enlisted another filmmaking friend David Son (see fig. 25), also based in Korea to film Omar on the day of his visitor visa interview at the US embassy in Seoul. I also asked filmmaker colleagues, Justin Feltman and Shiraz Ahmed, to assist with filming in Michigan as well.

The most complicated decision I made in the film was about whether or not I should join Omar as a protagonist in my own documentary by en-



Figure 23. Interview with Korean human rights lawyer, Il Lee from Advocates for Public Interest Law (APIL) in Seoul, Summer of 2021



Figure 24. Planning a shoot in Seoul. From left to right, David Son, Razi Jafri, Omar Alwahaishi, Juwon Lee in March 2022

tering the frame and appearing on screen. My initial interest in Omar's story was due to our burgeoning friendship and mutual connection to Michigan, but as our friendship deepened, I felt more invested in his and his family's future.

There were many considerations and fears from my end. I didn't want to center myself in Omar's story or appear to be self-indulgent. I also had concerns about appearing stiff and unnatural. It's not something I had experienced, and in the documentary industry, a rule has not been developed on when, how, or if a filmmaker should get involved and enter the frame of a film. Though there are many examples of different types of approaches as I outlined in the contextual section, ultimately, I felt that the question was, what happens if I do or don't get involved and film the outcome. Does it make sense to simply sit there and watch Omar struggle through these complex administrative labyrinths when I know I can step in and help?

Later after some discussions with advisors, colleagues, and my editor, Zoe Sua Cho, I did decide to become part of the film because it felt important to document our friendship, connection, and shared mission. However, I also sensed that I would be able to have a positive influence on Omar's life and his plans to reunite with his family. The decision wasn't easy, but I know if I left myself out of it, the film would be a dishonest portrayal of what was happening with our friendship. In the same way that Agnès Varda and JR do in *Faces, Places* or Bryan Fogel and Grigory Rodchenkov in *Icarus*, it seemed that involving myself in the film would be the more accurate portrayal of the situation.

Another choice that I made after deciding to include myself in the film was also the inclusion of my voice as a narrator. I recorded voice overs that would serve as narrations and reflections in the film as a way to process the complexities of my friendship with Omar and my own inner thoughts and conflicts. The choice was part creative and part practical. It allowed me to explain some of my intentions about the story

and my relationship with Omar. It also allowed me to reflect upon my apprehensions, privileges, blind spots, which wouldn't be accounted for if I didn't include these recordings. Therefore, these choices also had a lot to do with accuracy. Without my comments, feelings, and inner thoughts, it wouldn't make for a completely honest narrative of what has transpired. Including oneself in their own film is not new nor will it go out of fashion anytime soon. I think it's a complex choice that filmmakers like myself will have to make depending on the project and the circumstances and how it serves the film.

The decision led to new challenges in my process. Chiefly among them was navigating the delicate boundaries between filmmaker, advocate, friend, and now protagonist. At times I felt clearly defined as one of them, and at other times, I was all four, or a combination of them. Another welcome byproduct was Omar's role in the film as a creative agent in the film. He was becoming more of a collaborator as well. This kind of collaboration has become an ongoing discourse among documentary filmmakers and was a recent topic of discussion at Firelight Media's Beyond Resilience Roundtable Series with documentary filmmakers, which streamed live on January 28th, 2022. Firelight Media is a non-profit filmmaker support and production company founded by legendary documentary filmmaker, Stanley Nelson (*Freedom Riders* 2010, *Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool* 2019, *Attica* 2021). In the roundtable, moderated by Firelight Media President Marcia Smith., entitled "Collaborating with Documentary Protagonists" filmmakers Isabel Castro (*Mija*, Sundance 2022 Premiere); Shalini Kantayya (*TikTok, Boom.*, Sundance 2022 Premiere), and Emily Cohen Ibañez (*Fruits of Labor*, SXSW 2021 Premiere), each filmmaker expounded on the complexities of their relationships with their protagonists. Castro talked about involving her protagonists by sharing cuts of the film with them and asking them to write some of their own voice overs in the film. Ibañez also spoke about working with sensitive topics like undocumented immigrants or families with mixed status, where the identities of some family members needed to be concealed for safety purposes.

Including myself and my voice meant that the focus would shift away from Omar at times in the film. Which meant that I would also be a subject of the film now, so I would be the focus at times, and the viewer will be experiencing the film through me in those moments. I am a part of the story and part of Omar's story. I had to overcome barriers including the fear of appearing to be self indulgent or too didactic, but I learned that I am creating a new film with a new character that the audience could relate to in the ups and downs of my journey with Omar through our friendship. Ultimately, I hope these decisions will only serve to tell a more honest story and uplift Omar's and other refugee's voices. Although I am a filmmaker crafting a story, I am also a human being who is learning through the process of making this film and I don't want to fail, I want the viewer to get behind me in trying to help someone outside of their everyday social circles. Working with protagonists in documentary filmmaking comes with a great deal of complexity and responsibility more so than in fictional filmmaking because you are dealing with real people. It's not something I take lightly, especially when it comes to consent, authorship, and representation. This is especially true when working with sensitive topics of refugees or undocumented workers. They face many risks through their participation in documentaries or news stories from jeopardizing their residency status, to losing their jobs, and even experiencing threats to their lives or the lives of their families. For me, this required a great deal of flexibility and required me to put the safety of my subjects above any mandate for completing a project. In the United States documentary filmmakers must use consent release forms, which allow us to use the images and footage largely in whatever way we please for our projects and in perpetuity. However, what is legal is sometimes amoral. While I have the right to do anything I want with Omar's image because he signed a release form, if there was footage he isn't comfortable including in the film due to a possible risk to him or his family, I removed that footage. I have also told him that he can rescind his consent at any point in the project.



Figure 25. David Son and I talking over Zoom to plan US embassy shoot with Omar

Focusing on Omar and his family helped give direction to the project without losing sight of the larger global migration issues because he can stand in for larger groups of refugees from Yemen and beyond. His story is so common that many refugees are dealing with similar circumstances. Other characters in the film also make this point when they come into contact with Omar in the film, such as the Korean human rights lawyer Il Lee and the American immigration attorney, Farah Hobballah when they speak about other refugee cases in Korea and the United States respectively.

Challenges

There were many restrictions I was facing when planning this project. I knew from the beginning that there would be restrictions around the ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic. These restrictions would most certainly interfere with my abilities to work on the film in a fluid way. There were many requirements that needed to be met before even purchasing my tickets to South Korea, such as completing an extremely thorough safety plan and making arrangements for communication



Figure 26. Photo of Shiraz Ahmed filming inside Mohamad Alwahaishi's house in Dearborn, MI. January 2022.

and contingency plans in case something happened or I got sick. There were also factors to consider when I would actually arrive in South Korea as well, such as masking, social distancing, quarantining, and even reporting health status through a public health app. There was also the constant fear of catching Covid-19. In the summer, I had dinner with two friends and the next day one of them tested positive for Covid-19 therefore all three of us had to quarantine in our respective apartments. I did eventually catch Covid-19 on one of my trips in December and underwent a quarantine of 20 days. In total through the three trips, I spent 48 days in quarantine, 41 of which were in 2021 alone.

Finally, I had some unique challenges as the director. Since I became a protagonist in the film, I then needed a cameraperson to film me in the shot, while I directed them. I also needed to direct people remotely while they were in Korea and I am in Michigan. These were new experiences for me since I had not done this type of directing before. This occurred on multiple occasions. The first time was when I needed to be filmed speaking to Omar over a Zoom call, while I was in Michigan and he was in Korea, which was filmed by Justin Feltman. I also needed to be filmed when I returned from Korea and was going to meet Mohamad at his home in Dearborn, which was filmed by Shiraz Ahmed who came with me in my car and filmed Mohamad and I together (see fig. 26).

I also needed footage of Omar and I on his motorcycle, which took a lot of effort to organize since I would need a driver and a person to operate a camera, which was filmed by David Son. Finally, I had to coordinate and direct shoots in Korea remotely, with Zoe, Danny, David for Omar's visa interview on April 26th. All of these collaborations took a lot of coordination, planning, and communication. This type of collaboration has become a core part of my filmmaking practice and since I cannot easily return to Korea, it will be necessary for the project to be successful.



Figure 27. Zoe Sua Cho filming with Omar in November 2021

CREATIVE WORK

The completed thesis film is a 36 minute short documentary that chronicles Omar's life in South Korea, including his work as a delivery driver for the Korean food delivery app, Shuttle. It highlights his struggles in Korean society, the difficulties with language and experiences with prejudice. The film also shows my relationship with Omar and how it develops over the course of filming with him in Seoul. The film is primarily shot in Seoul, since that is where Omar lives. There is some additional footage from a trip to Jeju Island he and I took together, which is seen in the film. I aimed to show his life in Korea and our efforts in helping him get reunited with his family. There is also footage of Omar's father, Mohammad which I filmed over several visits to their home in Dearborn. In the film, I become a bridge between Omar and his family. I also eventually play an active role in encouraging Omar to try to visit the United States to see his family so he can at least spend time with someone from his family.



Figure 28. Film still of Omar and I working on his US tourist visa application from Sanctuary, Purgatory. Seoul, South Korea, December 2021

My hope was that the possibility of a visit would cultivate a boost of momentum and motivation in his situation (see fig. 28). If all went according to plan, Omar would visit his family and meet with lawyers in the U.S. in order to explore the possibility of an asylum case. However, in the film, these hopes get dashed with a dose of reality when Omar and I arrange a Zoom meeting with an US immigration attorney, Farah Hobballah, who informs us that due to the restrictions on Yemeni applicants for the B-2 US tourist visa, he is unlikely to receive approval from the US embassy to visit the US. This was one of the most difficult moments in the film since I put so much effort and hope into the possibility of having Omar visit his parents.

I felt deeply disappointed at this moment and my reaction made it very clear:

“After moments like these, I can’t help but think, am I helping or hurting Omar’s situation? It’s a question I’ve been asking myself more lately. The US immigration and asylum system seems so broken and discriminating and it’s so hard to navigate. In my idealism, I thought this would all be so much easier. But I think that’s common for Americans to believe that basically anything is possible simply through our optimism.”

Through my words and responses, it's not only my disappointment that becomes apparent, but so does my vulnerability. At that moment, I don't have all of the answers and I'm not sure what to do next. I hope that through this vulnerability, I can serve as a bridge to the audience, who might have similarity become sympathetic and supportive of my efforts to help Omar. Perhaps as an American myself, I idealized the situation and felt that the possibility of him visiting the U.S. was a completely feasible option; however, I didn't fully grasp how unsurmountable it would be for someone like Omar as a Yemeni-Arab-Muslim-refugee. Other Americans or members of another privileged class, who might not normally be able to relate to someone like Omar and the

complexities of the hurdles he has to clear, might be able to by relating to me.

By the end of the film, we don't know what will happen, since his interview is not scheduled until after the last scenes in the film. Title cards play at the end giving additional information about his embassy interview along with the details of his separated family members and the respective countries in which they live.

The film is followed by a twenty four minute pre-recorded Q and A session over Zoom moderated by Angela Yoonjeong McClean, a post-doctoral fellow in Sociology at the Nam Center for Korean Studies at the University of Michigan, whose research interests include international and forced migration, and includes myself, Omar, and Il Lee. The Q and A session is intended to expand on some of the issues brought up in the film and to give some additional perspectives on the film and filmmaking process. It also brings in the perspective of Il Lee, a human rights lawyer based in Seoul, who shares the Korean legal perspective and his experience with fighting for refugee rights in Korea.

The final component of my thesis project is the installation where the film can be viewed at the Stamps Gallery on the campus of the University of Michigan as part of the group MFA thesis exhibition for the class of 2022. Outside of the installation there are wall texts and a graphic map that give context to my thesis film (see fig. 30). Figure 21 is an image of a description of the project and a world map showing the vastness of the Alwahaishi family separation and the four countries different family members are living in. The map also gives some additional context to the war in Yemen, the global refugee crisis, and how Yemeni refugees arrived in Jeju Island. I worked with Detroit-based graphic designer Emma Leising to design the map. It was important to include this map in order to help viewers gain additional context for my thesis film. For the installation I wanted to create a viewing experience that removes as much sound and light from entering the viewing area as possible. In order to achieve better sound quality I used a set of wall

mounted speakers and installed 192 12' x 12" x 1" acoustic foam panel tiles for sound absorption. I also installed two large 9' x 12' rugs and a 3' x 12' runner carpet on the floors inside the viewing space.

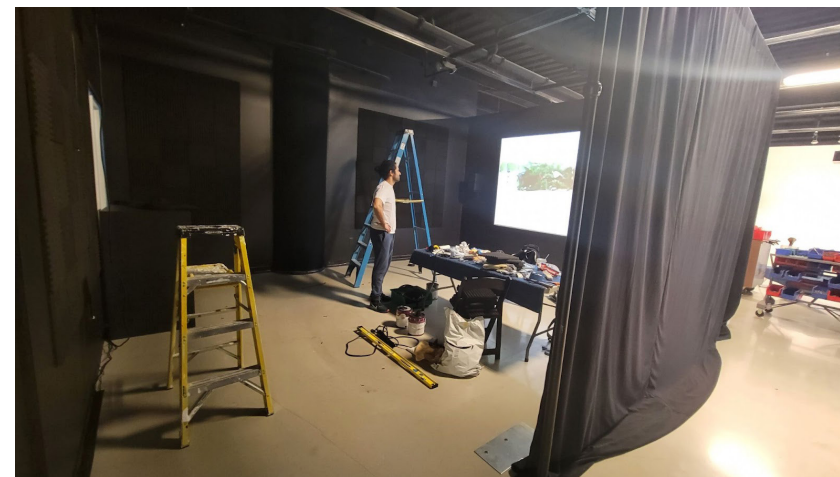


Figure 29. In-process photo of viewing space installation build, March 2022

The entire space, which was 16' x 20' was enclosed by large pipe and drapes which blocked light but also acted as an additional sound barrier. The entire space was painted black to add additional darkness in the space. A projector was used to project a large 6' x 8' image on the viewing wall (see fig. 31).

It was important for me to create such a space so audiences could view the film as unobstructed as possible. Since I intend to submit the eventual feature length film to festivals in the coming years, I also wanted to create a space that could approximate the experience of viewing the film in a theater at a film festival, including the Q and A with the director and protagonists of the film.



Figure 30. Gallery wall text outside viewing space installation giving context and background to the project. April 2022



Figure 31. Inside finished viewing space installation. April 2022

CONCLUSION: CROSSING THE BORDER BETWEEN FILMMAKER AND FRIEND

Documentary filmmaking is such a beautiful craft and when guided properly, has the potential to tell even the most complex stories. Today, there are many filmmakers working across the field, which continues to grow with new, much needed voices. It's especially important that underrepresented communities are also included in these stories and that they are given platforms to tell the stories themselves.

I learned a lot about filmmaking in the field on my own, especially when it comes to the importance of developing relationships and keeping an open mind to changing directions. I am still new in my career as an artist and a filmmaker yet one of the things I've come to appreciate deeply is how quickly projects can evolve from what they were intended to be. My thesis project is no different, in this regard, and it required many adjustments and changes to the format and structure of the story including a unique collaboration with Omar, the protagonist of my film. As the project evolved and my friendship with Omar deepened, it introduced a bigger sense of trust and responsibility. Omar and I now have a mutual cause—to help him reunite with his family—and we've become closer through that process.

Ultimately, becoming part of Omar's journey was essential for me, and despite my apprehension, it would have been inaccurate to exclude myself from the story. It meant that Omar wasn't alone in his journey—he would have a supporting character, and I would play an active role in his journey and his life as it is documented on screen. This was most salient in my involvement in helping him with his attempt to visit his family in the United State through a tourist visa, also known as a B-2 visa. Through the effort in my last visit to Seoul, I was able to help him schedule an appointment with the US embassy in Seoul on Tuesday April 26th, 2022. However, after speaking with an immigration lawyer

in Dearborn, Farah Hobballah, we learned that, due to his nationality as a Yemeni, it will be nearly impossible for his visitor visa request to be approved. Although the whole experience was a reality check, especially for me, documenting these moments in the closing sequence of the film shows how we can only see things from our own perspectives and sometimes that can change when we are presented with alternate information. I assumed that going through the proper process of applying for a visitor visa to the United States would work due to Omar's parents being US citizens. Despite the disappointing news, it hasn't deterred me from trying to help Omar further in his cause and including those efforts in the film itself. Through his efforts and my support, I believe that reunification with his family is possible.

One of the things I've reflected on is why I spent so much time, effort, and resources on making this film and trying to help Omar. There are many answers and points to consider here. Shortly after meeting him, Omar and I immediately became friends. I found him to be fascinating, articulate, a deep thinker who read broadly from anime comics to Russian literature. Needless to say, we had a lot to talk about and bond over. While we have different life experiences, being Muslim, an immigrant, and a person of color in a new country, were similarities that allowed us to connect. Partly due to these shared attributes and partly due to my previous experiences, it became clear that Omar and I would develop a relationship that went beyond the film. I've had this experience previously in my filmmaking practice, perhaps it's a byproduct of my personality, but I tend to get close to people I am working with and documenting in my work.

He also began to develop his own creative voice in the project, something I hope expands as the project continues. These types of collaborations are sometimes essential for documentary films since they can be such complex projects. Collaboration between the filmmakers, producers, and editors are obvious, but collaboration between the filmmaker and the protagonist is also very important, it can complete-

ly change the direction and outcome of a film entirely. It's the type of collaboration that requires even deeper considerations. In making *Sanctuary, Purgatory*, as production went on, it seemed more natural to involve Omar into the filmmaking process. It is his life being portrayed so it made sense for him to voice his ideas in the film. Due to my involvement in Omar's life now. I am a part of his story now, thus a part of the documentary.

However, this also means that Omar's story is much bigger than my MFA thesis project. As the reality of his situation set in for me, I knew it would be at least a few years before Omar could be reunited with his family. This is often the nature of non-fiction filmmaking as filmmakers must follow stories for many years sometimes, but in the case of *Sanctuary, Purgatory*, in order to produce a complete narrative arc, it is essential for there to be an attempt at a conclusion or a change in Omar and his family's situation. The possibility of visiting his parents in the United States was dashed due to his US tourist visa application being rejected at the US embassy on Tuesday April 26th, 2022 (see fig. 32). The experience was disappointing but not unexpected.



Figure 32. Film still from recent unedited footage showing Omar before his US tourist visa interview at the US embassy. Seoul, South Korea, April 2022

Omar is now considering other options for his wife and kids. It is absolutely essential now for them to leave Yemen since the situation hasn't improved and he is concerned about his son being recruited by one of the groups fighting there. At the moment, one possibility that seems promising is the option of resettling his wife and children in Indonesia. Omar would continue to live and work in South Korea, but the proximity would allow them to see each other more regularly and afford them the stability to work towards a more permanent reunification. The move for his wife and children might happen as soon as July or August of 2022. If this indeed does transpire, I am intending on flying to Seoul to meet Omar and travel with him to Jakarta and film to prepare for the arrival of his wife and children. During this trip, I will document the events, but also support Omar through the experience as a friend. The friend-filmmaker balance will continue to be a reality of our friendship.

Ultimately, I believe my involvement in Omar's life and the film was the right decision and one I plan to strengthen even more as I continue to produce the film. I learned from the examples of other filmmakers and their projects where they got involved in their protagonist's life. I learned how those decisions helped anchor and shepherd viewers through complicated journeys. The choice is not easy and one must navigate different roles in someone's life as a filmmaker, advocate, and friend. These relationships have different responsibilities and it's extremely challenging to separate them. Working so closely with a protagonist in a documentary, one cannot help but get emotionally involved and that involvement becomes part of the story. It might not feel inevitable in the beginning, but there is a tipping point when there is a realization that the protagonist cannot move forward without the support of the filmmaker, which enables change to happen. It's not about making oneself the center of the film; it's about how a story can reveal the problems of a larger community while also respecting the individual. To omit that involvement and the relationship can lead to a dishonest portrayal. Thus, for me, it was necessary that these different roles of filmmaker, advocate, and friend, be present at all times while

working with Omar, and that presence must then, also be included as part of my continuing documentary film project with him. I hope to play a similar role with Omar as Ai Weiwei did in Human Flow for the refugees he was encountering. I want viewers to connect to Omar through me and our deepening friendship.

I plan to produce a feature length documentary film that I will submit to film to festivals in 2024 or 2025, but this also depends on how the story evolves and what Omar does in order to be closer to his family, which is his ultimate goal. Even if his family ends up in Indonesia, he might not be able to move there right away since he would need to keep working in Korea in order to support them. Thus, even this wouldn't be an ideal situation for them since they would still be living separately, albeit much closer now. It's not the way any family wants to live.

With so many unresolved issues, it leads to new questions, like when does a film like this really end? Can there be an open-ended ending? Would I involve myself in a protagonist's life in this way again? How will my continued involvement affect Omar's prospects for being reunited with his family? These are all questions that I will carry with me as I begin working on the next phase of my film.

To be continued...

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