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Refugees from Somalia, Burma/Myanmar and Iraq: Navigating New Lives in the US in Post-9/11 Context

Ivona Boroje

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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REFUGEES FROM SOMALIA, BURMA/MYANMAR AND IRAQ:
NAVIGATING NEW LIVES IN THE US IN POST-9/11 CONTEXT

by

IVONA BOROJE

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Karen Miller

Thesis Advisor

Date

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

Executive Officer

ABSTRACT

Refugees from Somalia, Burma/Myanmar and Iraq:
Navigating New Lives in the US in Post-9/11 Context

by

Ivona Boroje

Advisor: Karen Miller

This thesis engages with the relationship of the US with refugees, with a focus on the reception and perception of refugees resettled in the US after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Three groups that have resettled in the US in large numbers after 9/11, namely refugees from Somalia, Burma/Myanmar and Iraq groups have had divergent experiences, shaped by factors such as race and/or ethnic identity, religion, cultural norms, expectations about life in the US, histories of their places of origin and the relationship of the US with that place of origin. This thesis attempts to compare the experiences of the three groups, while arguing for further comparative and long-term studies of refugee integration. In a time of virulent anti-refugee rhetoric, this thesis also advocates for greater understanding of refugees' experiences and a more informed discourse on US refugee policy.

Keywords: US Refugee Policy, Refugee Resettlement, Integration, Comparative Migration Study

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the late Cindy Lobel, the original advisor for this thesis, who helped solidify my appreciation for interdisciplinary study, introduced me to the field of comparative migration studies and was all around a gracious human being and an inspiring teacher. I am indebted to my advisor, Karen Miller for her extraordinary kindness, compassion and guidance with this work. I am appreciative for fellow Graduate Center students Gail Addis and Donnise Hurley who were my accountability buddies and for my classmates and professor in the thesis workshop class who helped me develop this idea. Getting the chance to publicize and learn about the work of CLEAR at CUNY School of Law made me more attuned to Islamophobia. I am grateful to my graduate school professors, namely Chiseche Mibenge and Michael Yarbrough for enhancing my appreciation for nuances and intersections and undergraduate professors, John L. Jackson Jr. and Carolyn Marvin for believing in me.

I am grateful to friends Keline Adams, Michelle Centeno and Ashley Powers for helping me conceptualize this project and providing emotional support, when sorely needed. I am forever grateful to my parents for giving it their all, in order to ensure the well-being of my sister and me. I'd also like to acknowledge the Bosnian and Herzegovinian refugee community and all people whose lives are negatively impacted by violence, discrimination and cruel indifference and who helped inspire this inquiry. Lastly I'd like to thank all academics, researchers, reporters, social service practitioners and human rights advocates that I consulted for this work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Refugees from Somalia.....	12
Chapter 3: Refugees from Burma/Myanmar.....	30
Chapter 4: Refugees from Iraq.....	48
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	66
Works Consulted.....	77

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Leading up to the 2016 United States of America (USA or US) presidential election, just fifteen years into the new millennium and seventy years after the end of World War II and the founding of the United Nations (UN), the world was facing its worst refugee crisis while the word ‘refugee’ had practically become a slur when uttered by American presidential candidate (and subsequent winner) Donald J. Trump. How did we get here? What is the relationship of the US to refugees? What kind of country do refugees find? How does this vary among different refugee groups? This thesis will engage with those questions, with a focus on the reception and perception of refugees resettled in the US after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Post-9/11 is a helpful departure point, because after that event, US attitudes towards Muslims and foreigners, including refugees shifted and became far more suspicious. Nonetheless, thousands of refugees from around the world (primarily Africa, Asia and the Middle East) came to the US from 2001 to present-day, including displaced people from Somalia, Burma/Myanmar and Iraq—groups that will be the focus of this thesis. These different groups have had divergent experiences, shaped by factors such as race and/or ethnic identity, religion, cultural norms, expectations about life in the US, histories of their places of origin and the relationship of the US with that place of origin.

How the US deals with refugees is of considerable importance to American geopolitical interests and standing in the world, as well as one that has a potential direct impact on Americans’ daily lives and sense of identity. Personally, this issue matters even more to me because I bring the perspective of both a refugee and an American to it. As an immigrant to the US, who arrived as an adolescent because of the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I have an abiding interest in how American society functions, particularly its history with immigration and refugee resettlement. My childhood was shaped by the experiences of war, displacement and adaptation to life in the US. As

I've come of age, I have stayed attuned to situations resulting in forced migration and the discourse around Americanness.

In this introduction, I will provide a background on the relatively modern concept of refugee, established in the twentieth century as a legal category that would come to shape foreign policy for many nations around the world in unprecedented ways. I will also give a brief overview of US's history of refugee resettlement policy and situate it within immigration to the US in the twentieth century to present day. Then, I will delve into a short literature review on theories of immigrant adaptation to a host society, that will serve as a framework for offering a tentative evaluation of how the three different refugee groups I have selected are managing to fare in the US. I selected the Somalis, Burmese and Iraqis because all three were admitted in significant numbers from the 2000s to the middle of the 2010s, and they are different enough from each other (racially, ethnically, religiously and historically) to allow me tease out differences in their experiences.

The field of migration studies itself is relatively new and necessitates a multidisciplinary approach that combines perspectives from fields such as anthropology, history, economics, law, sociology, political science, international relations and geography. Refugee studies is even newer as an academic discipline and operates at a similar nexus. Furthermore, migration and adjusting to a new place, especially after traumatic events, also end up involving the social services, education and healthcare sectors. Media coverage and the work of social policy organizations is fundamental to trying to understand issues of perception and public discourse. This thesis leans on work produced from all of those different sectors of academia and society more broadly, in order to try to unpack complex experiences affected by a complex host of factors, and yet taking place relatively recently, meaning that academic resources are limited to some extent. But, first let's turn to understanding what allows someone to get refugee status.

In the aftermath of World War II, leaders at the helm of the new global institution, the

United Nations, wrestled with the responsibilities of nations to help civilians facing insecurity caused by war and persecution. In 1948, the UN passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which contained an article that recognizes the right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries. Three years later, with the 1951 Refugee Convention, the UN defined who qualifies as a refugee and laid out the rights of individuals who are granted asylum and the responsibilities of the nations that grant it. The core principle of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention is *nonrefoulement*, which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to life or freedom. The convention entered into force in 1954 and was initially limited to Europeans who became refugees before 1951, though states could choose to apply it to refugees from other places. The 1967 Protocol removed the time and location constraints. The United States ratified the Protocol in 1968 (Betts et al 12).

In the meantime, the US had been forging its own path with regard to refugee policy. According to David Haines, the concern of the US with displaced people after World War II was driven by worries about the rapid disintegration in relations between the US and the Soviet Union and the ideological reaction against communism (56). These concerns provided the foundation for assistance to displaced people and would become the backbone of the US refugee program for the next three decades (Haines 57). The US Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, which allowed the entry of 205,000 people, with an increase to 415,744 people when the act was amended in 1950 (Haines 57). Between 1948 and 1956 roughly 600,000 refugees, mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe were admitted through the Displaced Persons Act and the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 (Garcia 3). In 1962, the US Congress passed the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act which authorized the president to provide assistance to refugees whenever it was in the interest of the US (Garcia 4).

Three years later, the US Congress passed the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act which

was a major change in immigration law that abolished the quota system based on national origins that had largely kept out non-European immigrants (Garcia 4). This act also included small numerical allotments for refugees within the regional allocations. It also defined refugees as “those persecuted on account of race, religion, or political opinion, those uprooted by natural calamity, those fleeing communist or communist-dominated countries and those fleeing the Middle East (Garcia 4). Haines argues that the US was willing to help out people that Americans understood to be fleeing intolerable conditions of life under Communist governments—Hungarians in the 1950s, Cubans, Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union, Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese after the collapse of their US-supported governments in 1975. Supporting these refugees was substantially popular and was most often an alliance between liberals and conservatives. By the end of the 1970s about 1.5 million refugees had been admitted to the United States (Haines 57). But new concerns also emerged during this time. By the late 1970s, the refugee flows from Southeast Asia were higher than expected and unprecedented. Additionally, there was also greater diversity to the refugees by this point, in terms of ethnic, linguistic, economic and social backgrounds (Haines 58).

Refugee advocates had been arguing that the US should move beyond its concern with those fleeing communism and accept the standard UN definition of refugees. The 1980 Refugee Act did away with the communism aspect and defined a refugee as:

“any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality, or in the case of person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, or is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear or persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.”
(Government Publishing Office, Public Law 96-212)

This is the definition still used today. Additionally, this act instituted a new annual consultation process between the president and Congress that would set annual limits on the number of refugees to be admitted from different regions of the world. The Refugee Act set the base planning at 50,000

per year which was substantially lower than the number of refugees that been admitted in the years prior, highlighting the reluctance to accept higher numbers of refugees (Haines 58). This act also authorized temporary assistance to refugees to facilitate their integration in the US and established a government agency devoted to refugee resettlement.

It is worthwhile to note that the US definition of a refugee is narrower than the definitions established by other political bodies around the world. For example, the Organization of African Unity defines a refugee as:

“every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing the public order or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality” (Garcia 46).

The 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which was crafted in response to wars in Central America defines refugees as:

“persons who flee their country because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order” (Garcia 46).

The International Organization for Migration acknowledged two types of refugees: political refugees who are persons subjected to persecution and violence and displaced refugees who are indirect victims obliged to emigrate because of the destruction of their means of subsistence (Garcia 47). The US definition of refugee is relatively narrow and requires showing a credible fear of persecution because of some specific characteristic, and does not grant refuge to those who are in fear for their lives because of generalized insecurity or conditions that make survival unlikely. Some scholars, such as Zolberg et al have advocated for a broader definition of refugee, namely “persons whose presence abroad is attributable to a well-founded fear of violence (Ulack 41).

The 1980 Refugee Act also set out the rules for asylum seekers. A refugee is someone who has already been approved by the US government to enter the US, while an asylum seeker is a

migrant attempting to enter or having entered the US, who is seeking refugee protection. Even if that migrant is granted asylum, he or she is not offered the same kind of assistance extended to resettled refugees (Ballard 199). In either case, those looking for refugee or asylum status in the US must prove a well-founded fear of persecution. The status of refugee or asylum is selectively granted by the US, and shaped by the foreign policy goals of the political administration in charge. In the 1970s and 1980s for example, human rights advocates concerned with the plight of people fleeing from right-wing dictatorships in Chile, Argentina and El Salvador criticized the US government for not treating people from these countries in the same way as people fleeing from communist countries. Garcia gives an example of this by citing an op-ed from the 1980s in which the author is posing the uncomfortable question to the US government and American people by extension: is one kind of refugee, particularly a person coming from a communist country more worthy than another, particularly a person where the dictatorial government might be allied with the US (Garcia 47).

During the 1980s Salvadorans and Guatemalans were rarely successful in being granted asylum despite the well documented violations of human rights happening in their countries at the time. To illustrate this point further, Garcia discussed the crises in the 1990s with Cuban and Haitian boat people. As she notes, both fled political repression, human rights abuses, and economic hardship but there was a key difference. Cuba was an ideological enemy while Haiti was a longtime ally, meaning that “the legitimacy of the Haitians’ right to asylum was always contested while the Cubans’ was not (Garcia 48).”

Even though the US is highly selective of the refugees that it admits and its policies are generally driven more by foreign policy goals rather than true humanitarian commitment, there is a national myth at work regarding being a nation of asylum for the persecuted. As Ueda notes, “in its foundational national ideology, the US was conceived as a global civic sanctuary (27).” The US is

one of 37 countries that works with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to offer third-country resettlement to refugees for whom return to their country of origin is unwise (Ballard 196). The US leads this group in the number of refugees that it accepts (Ballard 196). In fact, the US has accepted more refugees than all other resettlement states combined (Ballard 191). As of 2016, there were about 3.2 million people living in the US who came to the country as refugees or were granted asylum, making them about 8% of all immigrants living in the US today (Fix et al 5). Yet, when we look at the number of refugees that the US accepts as a proportion of the total number of people displaced, the figure of refugees resettled in the US becomes minimal. For example, in FY2016, the US admitted 85,000 refugees in a year when UNHCR estimated that there were 22 million refugees worldwide (Ballard 197). Furthermore, being a resettlement country, rather than one that has shared a border with a country in conflict, gives the US much more space to police its borders, and only approve the admission of people, after extensive steps, screenings and decision points. While the US has enjoyed a positive standing around the world for its acceptance of refugees, developing countries in the Global South actually host about 84% of the refugee population (Ballard 197).

At the beginning of each fiscal year (Oct 1), the president proposes the number of refugees to be accepted from the five global regions, as well as an “unallocated reserve” if a war breaks out or an emergency arises. The total number of refugees that can be admitted is known as the “refugee ceiling”. Once the president has proposed a figure, it is usually accepted without much Congressional debate. Once the refugee enters the country, the federal government is not directly involved in refugee resettlement. Instead, it contracts with nine major refugee resettlement organizations that take over the process, with a standard fee for services per person. The nine private organizations are: Church World Service, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, International Rescue

Committee, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services, and World Relief. Of these nine, six are faith-based organizations, but they provide services without discrimination. These organizations are known as voluntary agencies (*volags*) and they make decisions on their own where to place the refugees within the United States. They try to match the particular needs of each incoming refugee with the specific resources available (relatives, other refugees from the same group, healthcare, economic situation, housing and so on) in a local community.

From this point, refugees are generally not tracked by the federal government. At this time, refugees receive services for a period of eight months through the resettlement agency. The federal government pays a fee per person to the agencies in order to support this work. It is important to note that the Refugee Act of 1980 made the federal government responsible for all public assistance program costs incurred by the states, for the first 36 months after a refugee's admission to the country. This was cut down to 18 months of funding in 1982, and then to eight months in 1991 (Haines 66). But this reimbursement was cut entirely in 1990 as part of a general reduction of spending on social welfare programs during the administration of George H.W. Bush (Fix et al 10). There has been a growing reliance on state and local resources and this has undoubtedly contributed to the backlash against refugee resettlement at the state level (Fix et al 10).

There is also the question of what achievements the US refugee resettlement program values most and is most willing to fund. As the Refugee Act was being debated, some argued for a high investment in early language, vocational and even professional training and offered up the potential of refugees getting higher earnings over time and contributing more to the tax revenue as additional reasons for going in this direction (Haines 66). However, the other group that argued that employment as soon as possible is best, especially to lessen the burden on the state welfare system,

won out (Haines 66). This emphasis on early employment comes at the expense of language acquisition and skill development for many refugees.

Since the end of the Cold War to the present, the willingness of the US to accept refugees for resettlement has fluctuated widely. Admission peaked in the early to mid-1990s under the Clinton administration, with annual quotas that exceeded 120,000 (Bon Tempo 198). In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the number of refugees dipped to less than 30,000 in 2002 and 2003 (Bon Tempo 205). The program was in effect shut down for 2 months to review the security screenings, and even when the moratorium was lifted, few refugees were admitted for the next two years (Haines 61). The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent response of the US, namely initiating the 'War on Terror' by defining transnational terrorism as the chief threat for the US, ushered in a new era of suspicion toward the non-native born, particularly those coming from countries where Islam exists as a popular religion, and even targeting Muslim native-born Americans.

The process of immigrant interaction with the host society has been the subject of sociological theories. When different terms are used for this process, they imply a different understanding of what is desirable and what the end goal is. Assimilation was the dominant conceptualization of this process until the 1960s. According to theorists Richard Alba and Victor Nee, it was broadly defined as 'the social processes that bring ethnic minorities into the mainstream of American life (Lee 732).' The problems for groups such as the Somalis, Burmese and Iraqis quickly become visible, since some characteristics of some portions of these groups such as their non-whiteness and non-Christianity immediately move them away from the mainstream in that aspect. Of course, they are not the first groups of immigrants of color coming to the US. With the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act in place, significant numbers of non-European immigrants came to the US, which then compelled sociologists to come up with alternative theories of immigrant interaction with the host society that fully acknowledge the role of race and ethnicity.

Segmented assimilation is a key theory put forward by Richard Portes and Min Zhou that posits that assimilation can occur along three different potential paths: acculturation into the white American middle class, downward or negative integration into the poor underclass and rapid economic advancement while preserving immigrant values and solidarity (Lee 733). In his review of sociological theories of immigrant integration, Lee also names a handful of contextual factors identified by sociologists that can affect this process: government policies of the host society, host societal values and bias such as presence or absence of opportunities for mobility and characteristics of the already existing ethnic communities within the host society (734). These are all important aspects to keep in mind, when trying to understand the experiences of Somalis, Burmese and Iraqis, and to what extent they have been able to integrate, and into what segment of American society.

Integration still remains a vague concept without a broadly shared definition among different academics. One key framework for integration that has been put forward in 2008 by Ager and Strang names four key aspects of it: achievement and access in employment, housing, education and health, assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights, processes of social connection within and between groups in the community and structural barriers to such connection related to language, culture and the local environment (Ulack 159). These are helpful factors to keep in mind, when considering the experiences of the three refugee groups that I have selected.

I expected to find that the intersection of oppressions (such as being black and Muslim) would have an impact on a refugee's group ability to integrate and do well in American society. I found evidence for this, but the picture that emerged is also far more complex. Factors such as expectations about life in the US, the cultural norms that a group comes with and individual and group resilience play a much more significant role than I originally thought.

The 1967 Refugee Protocol actually requires the signing countries to make efforts toward

integration of the refugees that it accepts, but remains mostly unaddressed by the US in particular (Ballard 195). In the US, there is a singular focus on economic self-sufficiency, and that is as far as the US government's concern usually goes on the subject of integration of refugees. But, as we have seen, if any refugees become associated with potential physical threats to American citizens, or even if it is just the specter of a threat, then the refugee resettlement program becomes subject to intense scrutiny and potential abandonment.

Each of the following three country chapters will feature a recent history of the country, in order to explain the situation that created a need for refuge, and cover the involvement of the US in the country. Next will be a description of how the US came to accept refugees from that country, followed by information about where they settled within the US. Finally, each country chapter will have a section devoted to studies of the group's experiences of adjustment to life in the US, and a selection of news articles that give a clue about the ways in which the refugees from that country are entering the public discourse. The final chapter will collect comparisons that can be made from the information already covered within the previous chapters, and also bring in some additional sources that offer comparison points. The thesis will conclude with context on the recent updates to refugee resettlement in the US, some thoughts on improving the resettlement experiences and ideas for future research.

CHAPTER 2: REFUGEES FROM SOMALIA

Since the 1990s when the US first started accepting Somali refugees, Somalia has remained one of the leading countries of origin for resettled refugees in the US. To get a better understanding of Somali refugees' experience in the US, the factors pushing them out of Somalia need to be laid out with a short, recent history of Somalia. Somalia is a country in Eastern Africa, bordered by the Arabian Sea, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. The country is slightly smaller than Texas. The climate throughout most of the country is arid or semi-arid, which creates a need to move in search of a hospitable environment for life, and has resulted in a significant tradition of nomadism in Somalia.

The majority of the Somali people are nomadic, including those of the largest and most widespread Somali lineage, the Samale. Samale consists of four large clan-families (Dir, Darood, Isaaq and Hawiye). The sedentary minority is called Sab, and is made up of two main clan families (Digil and Mirifle, sometimes collectively known as Rahanweyn), but also includes other minorities such as the Bantu (Newberry 31). The Samale majority has promoted the nomadic lifestyle as noble and created a national identity that has marginalized the sedentary Sab, who as a group tend to have more prominent African features, and are "to a certain extent considered inferior by the Samale who claim to be the original Somali and, with that, claim a right to cultural and political domination" (Newberry 31).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Somalia was partitioned by the colonial powers of Great Britain, France and Italy. Different clans were subject to differential treatment under the three colonial powers, which affected the skills that they were able to develop (Newberry 35). In 1960, British Somaliland was awarded independence and subsequently united with Italian Somaliland to form the Somali Republic. The postcolonial period was a volatile time with many different factions and political parties vying for power. The 1969 elections turned violent, including the assassination of President Abdirashid Ali Shemarke by one of his bodyguards. This was

followed by a bloodless coup staged by the military at the leadership of General Mohamed Siyaad Barre who then took power (Newberry 38).

Barre stood on a platform of “scientific socialism” and aimed to unite the Somali nation and eradicate clan divisions. Yet, while he was publicly waging a campaign against clan divisions and even made attempts to constitute any forms of clan allegiance punishable by death, privately he relied on clan loyalties to build his own inner circle of power. He belonged to the Darood clan family and specifically to the Marchan clan. His mother’s family was from the Ogaden clan, which is based in a region that belonged to Ethiopia at the time of his ascent to power but whose inhabitants are predominantly ethnic Somalis. In 1977, Barre invaded the Ogaden in an attempt to reclaim it from Ethiopia, but experienced a demoralizing defeat influenced by the decision of USSR to support the new Marxist Ethiopian government. The war to reclaim Ogaden was highly popular among Somalis, but the defeat led to an upsurge of tribalism, as different groups were looking to find someone to blame for the disappointment and deflect responsibility from themselves (Newberry 40). The war also led to an influx of refugees from Ogaden, which contributed to rising tensions among clans over unequal resource distribution. Escalating conflicts over resources eventually led to an all-out war between clans and factions within clans (Newberry 41).

Meanwhile, after Barre was dropped by the Soviet Union in favor of Ethiopia, he turned to the Soviet Union’s enemy, the US, for support. In exchange for aid, he offered access to Somalia for military bases (Besteman 42). Somalia’s location on the Indian Ocean and proximity to the Persian Gulf made it a desirable location for the US military and in the 1980s Somalia became the second largest recipient of American aid on the African continent (Besteman 42). As world politics shifted with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the oncoming dissolution of the USSR in 1991, things also shifted for Barre. He became expandable to the US and was “redefined in speeches by

the US Congress as a human rights abuser (Besteman 44).” The US ended up dramatically cutting aid to Somalia in 1990 and Barre became much more vulnerable to a coup d’etat (Besteman 44).

In January 1991, rebel militia groups forced Barre from power and Somalia descended into a clan-based civil war. Drought exacerbated the situation and led to a famine, and by the start of 1992, 140,000 Somali refugees were reported to have fled to Kenya (Glanville 2). Civilian deaths quickly piled up. According to a report from the UN Secretary General, by October of 1992, an estimated 300,000 Somalis had died. Furthermore, out of a population of 6 million, 4.5 million were threatened by severe malnutrition and disease, with at least 1.5 million deemed to be at mortal risk (Glanville 2).

At this time, the US president, George H.W. Bush was nearing the end of his first term, and Bill Clinton was the leading Democratic challenger for the presidency. Clinton increasingly criticized Bush’s failure to respond to the suffering in Somalia, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to Glanville, the Bush administration decided to intervene in Somalia by leading a multinational military intervention aimed to secure access to aid for civilians, largely out of humanitarian concern, but also because of concern for his presidential legacy, along with predictions that this would be a low-risk military involvement, compared to Bosnia for example. Originally, when the US sent in 28,000 troops at the end of 1992, they were expected to police a ceasefire agreement, but operations gradually expanded into nation building and disarmament.

As Clinton began his time in office, US military casualties had increased, and domestic opposition to the Somali intervention grew. In October 1993, the US was pursuing one of the key Somali military leaders, Mohamed Farrah Hassan Aidid. An attempted raid against Aidid’s forces went badly for the US military, and resulted in the death of 500-1,000 Somali civilians, along with 18 US rangers. The body of one of the dead US rangers was dragged through the streets of Mogadishu and elicited heavy television coverage of this imagery throughout the world. Under

pressure and criticism, Clinton vowed to bring US forces home from Somalia by March 1994 and he delivered on this promise. The unfolding of the Somalia situation altered the approach of the Clinton administration towards supporting UN peacekeeping operations with US troops in harm's way. Examples of this can be seen in the US's unwillingness to intervene militarily in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda. The US was no longer actively involved in the conflict, but started to accept Somali refugees for resettlement. Prior to 1990, less than 3,000 Somalis lived in the US (Newberry 47). Throughout the 1990s, Somali refugees arrived to the US, so that by the turn of the century, there were more than 36,000 Somalis in the US (Newberry 47).

Meanwhile, in Somalia the war raged throughout the 1990s, though there were multiple reconciliation attempts, which resulted in the formation of a fragile Transitional National Government (TNG) in 2000. Starting in 2002, Kenya, which had been hosting a large number of Somali refugees and was feeling the weight of that situation led a reconciliation process that resulted in the formation of a Transitional Somali Federal Government (TFG) in 2004 (Eno and Eno 205). The 4.5 formula was negotiated where representation in the parliament was evenly divided between the four major clan groups (Darod, Hawiye, Dir and Digle-Mirifle) and all of the other minority constituencies that together got half of the seats that each one of the main clans got. The minority constituencies included minor clans, non-ethnic Somali groups such as Bantu and various Islamist organizations. According to Eno and Eno, the group that was given half-representation or as they call it "half-Somali status" consisted of communities that had not taken up arms during the war (205).

There are two groups of Bantu origin in Southern Somalia who have traditionally been sedentary farmers. One of the groups is believed to be indigenous to Somalia, while the other is descended from ex-slaves, originally brought from Southeast Africa by Somali slave traders early in the nineteenth century as part of the Arab Slave Trade. During the fight for Somalia's

independence, Bantu joined with the Somalis to resist against the Italian colonialists, but unfortunately life in the new independent Somalia did not turn out to be drastically better for them. They continued to be discriminated against and stayed at the bottom of the social ladder. They endured harsh treatment and were denied land and civil rights, as well as educational and political opportunities. During the civil war, the Bantu were particularly victimized because they were not armed and chose not to support any of the warring clans (Eno and Eno 203). It is also worth noting that “Bantu’s physical features resemble those of Negroid looking Africans” and their hair texture is known as Jareer (kinky) which is also another name commonly used for Bantu in Somalia (Eno and Eno 204). Eno and Eno argue that these characteristics are responsible for being viewed as “the undesirable race of those humans considered as descendants of slave ancestry” and thus African, and distinguished from “the (mythical) Arabic ancestry of nomadic Somalis (204).”

Almost the entire Somali Bantu population fled Somalia and was housed in refugee camps like Dadaab in neighboring Kenya. The UNHCR tried to have them resettled in Tanzania and Mozambique, considered ancestral homes for this group, but those plans fell apart. At UNHCR’s urging, the American government, under President George W. Bush, agreed to accept 12,000 Somali Bantu refugees for resettlement in 1999 and classified them as a priority. The vetting process took years as it usually does, but was further delayed by the stringent security measures put into place after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The first Somali Bantu started arriving to the US in 2003 (Romig). This move, which was one of the biggest resettlement operations out of Africa up to that point, attracted the attention of the American people and some controversy.

Since the Somali Bantu are rural people and their language doesn’t have an official written script, there were some concerns about how their lack of literacy and relevant job skills might play out when trying to adjust to life in the US and attain economic self-sufficiency (Haines 65). A Kansas senator, Sam Brownback balked at taking in so many Bantu, and said they “would not work

well in Kansas” even though Kansas had welcomed Yugoslav and Sudanese refugees in the past. Additionally, threats from racists and protests prevented the resettlement of Somali Bantu in two other towns (Romig). Newberry argues that all Somali, including non-Bantu are believed to more difficult to resettle (requiring more time, more funds, and more assistance) due to perceived differences that are at odds with American society, namely the social constructs of race, religion and culture, as well as health and psychological issues (13).

In the 1990s the Congressional Black Caucus criticized the official US response to refugee crises in the Balkans versus the refugee crises in Africa. Partly as a response, US identified two priority groups from Africa for resettlement – Lost Boys of Sudan and Somali Bantu. Besteman notes that, “Somali Bantus seemed to offer a perfect profile of innocent victims whose history resonated with American shame about slavery and the pride of the civil rights era (69).” Media coverage of the group’s move involved a preoccupation with “a primitive meets modern theme,” with repeated juxtapositions of the Somali Bantu life before the civil war and adjustment to life in the US (Besteman 69).

As is the policy of the US regarding refugee resettlement, Somalis, including Bantu were placed around the country, based on resources available in the area, as well as the desire to not disproportionately burden any one community. From 1990 to 2009, Somalis had been resettled in 47 states, with Minnesota, California, Georgia, Texas and Ohio leading and accounting for nearly half of the placements (Newberry 50). Leading cities include Minneapolis, San Diego, Columbus and Seattle. Additionally, there are significant populations in Atlanta, Georgia and Lewiston, Maine. Newberry notes that migration is historically common in Somalia in search of better conditions for life, and shows that in the US as well, Somali refugees move a lot more than the native-born population. According to census data from 2000, only 11% of Somalis lived in same house as five years ago, while the figure is 56% for the native-born population. In fact, one of these

waves of secondary migration gained prominence on a national scale.

In late 2002, Laurier T. Raymond, mayor of Lewiston, ME penned an open letter to Somali community leaders urging them to discourage further Somali migration to his town of Lewiston, due to negative impact on the town's social services. The letter was a flashpoint that set off strong reactions and demonstrations for and against immigrants' presence in Lewiston. Many had been attracted by Maine's favorably low crime rate and because they "found American urban life too violent, too-drug ridden, too infused with consumer culture (Jones)." In trying to get away from all that, they ended up going to a place where they couldn't have stood out more. According to the 2000 census, Maine was the whitest state in the nation, with minorities only making up 4 percent of the population (Jones). Lewiston in particular was the poorest census tract in Maine that had experienced a dramatic population drop between 1970 and 2000, kicked off by the closing of the mills. As a result, Lewiston had lost 15% of its residents, and the majority of the remaining residents were struggling with making ends meet with a whopping 46 percent living below the poverty rate (Besteman 14). One reason to undertake the move from large, urban cities with a significant black and poor population to small, mostly white places was a clear desire by Somali refugees to distinguish themselves from the African Americans they came across in public housing projects in large cities (Besteman 108). Some of the Somali refugees spoke of being 'frightened and intimidated by their African-American neighbors' in Atlanta (Besteman 108).

By the end of the decade, Somalis had become 15 percent of Lewiston's population (Besteman 14). In the middle of the decade, the makeup of the Somali population in Lewiston began to change, as Somali Bantus originally placed around the country began relocating to the town. They came not just from Atlanta, but from places such as Syracuse, Dallas, Houston, Denver, Columbus, Springfield and Hartford (Besteman 110). The Somali Bantu's case for resettlement was built in part on showing that they were subject to abuse and discrimination by other Somalis based on their

ethnic distinctiveness and the history of prior mistreatment. Nevertheless, they chose to move to an area with a significant non-Somali Bantu population, because they are still culturally, linguistically and religiously Somali (Besteman 110).

So, what kind of reception did Somalis find in Lewiston? Besteman shows that they found tolerance, xenophobia, and a communitarian embrace, from different residents. Some, such as Mayor Laurier (the author of the controversial 2002 letter) and residents who agreed with him, exhibited general tolerance toward the newcomers, but focused on the unexpected financial burden and concerned themselves with questions of fairness around this. Others led with xenophobia, characterizing the Somali refugees as uninvited, unwelcome and a dangerous intrusion. The dichotomy they often posed is between Somali refugees and earlier French-Canadian immigrants (their own ancestors), arguing that their ancestors quickly achieved economic self-sufficiency and assimilated successfully. False rumors circulated heavily among this group, undergirded by economic insecurity and the search for someone to blame. The rumors that circulated included the following: Somalis got a free ride to come to the US, are draining the welfare coffers, refuse to work and are not seeking jobs (but also might be accused of taking jobs away from real Americans), get free apartments and cars from the government, are responsible for a rise in crime, keep live chickens in their kitchen cupboards, refuse to learn English and become citizens and altogether reject American culture and do not want to participate in community life (Besteman 141). The third perspective that Besteman illustrates is what she terms the communitarian perspective, or advocacy for Somali refugees, based on an expansive, inclusive definition of community and of “refugees as a redemptive force for an ailing city” (Besteman 112).

Besteman herself is a member of this group to an extent. In the late 1980s, she conducted her anthropological fieldwork in the Jubba Valley, the home of the farmers that would eventually come to be known as Somali Bantu. She lived in the community and built strong relationships with some

of the families. In 2006, she participated in a panel at Bates College in Maine with some of Lewiston's newest immigrants, Somali Bantu refugees and had the chance to reunite with some of the people she knew in the 1980s who were now Lewistonians. She was moved by this encounter, and ended up studying the experiences of the group from an academic perspective, but also providing support to her old friends, and occasionally serving as a cultural broker between the Somali Bantu and the native-born. In fact, Besteman was one of the co-authors of a piece that appeared in the local paper that tried to directly debunk the rumors and myths circulating about Somalis that were previously named.

Besteman places the negative myths about Somalis within the larger discourse in the US about race, economic success and self-sufficiency and argues that the myths about Somalis are substantially bolstered by this discourse. Somalis in Lewiston visibly stand out, as black people in a white city. Besteman argues that “their blackness in US racial ideology combined with their identity as ‘refugees’ labels them as charity recipients rather than workers” which then further morphs into notions of “lazy and criminal black people dependent on welfare, refusing to join the mainstream (white) American culture (166).” This comes along with expectations by some native-born Americans that the Somali refugees making a new home in the US show sufficient gratitude for having been granted this opportunity. But, many of the Somalis in Lewiston reject this view and instead argue that “they are not responsible for the war that destroyed Somalia and do not need to especially grateful to be living in the United States, where they are suffering and working hard to support families in Lewiston, Kenya and Somalia (Besteman 167).” Furthermore, many Somalis view “the right to be mobile as a human right, not a humanitarian gift, and contest the idea that resettlement, which they feel they have worked very hard for, is a form of charity (Besteman 167).”

In fact, Besteman shows that members of the Somali Bantu community in Lewiston have worked hard since moving to Lewiston, to understand the social structures ruling their American

lives but not necessarily to change themselves thoroughly in order to fit into these structures. Instead, for example, as a community that prioritizes community life and social networks over individualism, they have sought to redefine self-sufficiency as community independence rather than individual economic autonomy (Besteman 212). This was pursued through the creation of own political and civic organizations to manage community matters and relationships between the community and other Lewistonians. One example of this is the founding of their own ethnic-based community organization (EBCO) with the help of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). ORR encourages the establishment of EBCOs with the goal of getting the community to self-sufficiency faster.

This move towards greater community self-empowerment was occurring alongside significantly shifting power dynamics within the Somali Bantu community. Somali Bantu women began feeling more empowered in the US and making demands on their husbands that they were unlikely to have made back in Africa such as more help with housework and childcare. Young people who have acquired higher levels of English proficiency and understanding of American culture and institutions also began to set the agenda and lead more visibly than was customary in Somalia, which caused some friction within the community and resulted in the splintering off of a new organization, this one youth-led, rather than elder-led. When the shifts around these two aspects of identity (age and gender) combined together, they led to even newer, and more complicated challenges. Somali Bantu adolescent boys growing up in Lewiston, for the most part, found themselves having access to greater freedom, as the chores that they would have been responsible for back in Africa evaporated, and parents grew somewhat neglectful, worn out from trying to navigate the demands of American life. But for Somali Bantu adolescent girls, the parental grip tightened, rather than loosened. They were subject to increasing demands to help with domestic tasks and increasing scrutiny in an attempt to protect them from premarital sex. This

sometimes resulted in early marriages, arranged by the parents. But the parents' attempts to control the girls' lives were sometimes sorely unsuccessful, such as when several girls became pregnant before being married and several girls fled the state to avoid arranged marriages (Besteman 255).

The greater freedom afforded to the Somali Bantu boys in Lewiston also resulted in unexpected challenges for the parents. In 2010, some of the boys started getting in trouble, from stealing some small things that were subsequently returned, but these incidents were nevertheless characterized in the news by an unfounded panic around gangs. Even without doing anything criminal, just by being out and about in public space, these boys are heavily scrutinized by the whites around them, including the police. As one social worker explained it to Besteman, "the issue is that they're black. They're black kids in America. They are perceived as a problem in public and they're labeled that way (258)." Furthermore, the social worker believes that "black children running around the downtown provoke fears and insecurities in authorities who treat those children like criminals, which the boys then internalize as part of their emerging Americanized identities (258)." The run-ins with authority continued for Somali Bantu boys, with some eventually sent to a juvenile detention facility. But, the Somali Bantu parents and the youth-led Somali Bantu community organization responded to this turn of events, by aligning with the police to understand what is actually happening, and to better monitor the boys' behavior and hold them accountable.

The youth-led Somali Bantu community organization has come to play an integral role in bridging the gaps between the parents and their children with actions such as conducting Somali language and culture classes for the children and youth and workshops on the juvenile justice system for the parents. The youth association is trying to find a middle ground, "against an American orientation of instant gratification, immodesty and children who order their parents around while demonstrating respect for some American values, like education for girls, alongside Somali and Muslim values, like respect for adults, modesty and an orientation towards family

(Besteman 257).”

Integration for Somali Bantu refugees is not assimilation, especially if it involves loss of own cultural values, but instead means “participating in American political, civic and economic arenas on their own terms, with their cultural values of family, faith and dignity intact (Besteman 239).” This commitment to holding onto own notions of values and solidarity is one of the segmented assimilation paths offered up by Portes and Zhou, but unfortunately for the Somalis, it has not been taking place alongside rapid economic advancement. In fact, this choice has given rise to tensions for Somalis in the workplace, both in Lewiston and elsewhere around the US. In Lewiston, for example, some Somali employees had worked out an agreement with a supervisor about aligning break times with prayer times, but when that supervisor was replaced, the agreement went out the window and the Somali employees quit en masse (Besteman 238). This incident was mediated by the state and resulted in the original break times being restored, resting on the fact that the need for specific break times had been noted on job applications and so constituted a mandatory accommodation, per American employment law. Hundreds of miles away, a similar disagreement took place at the Swift meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado and was reported on in depth by Lisa Rab, writing in the local alternative newsweekly, the *Westword*.

The Somali refugees had been actively recruited for these Swift jobs, after Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids resulted in the losses of undocumented Latino workers. Drawn in by the promise of employment, Somalis arrived from places such as Denver, Kansas City and California (Rab). In the course of their employment, the Somali employees had made a request for a specific break time to align with prayer times during Ramadan, which was not granted and resulted in a mass walkout. The plant initiated immediate negotiations with the union, which were resolved by the end of the day, with the expectation that all the workers would be back at their posts. But by then, some of the Somali workers had gone home and had not gotten the news, which

then resulted in a mass firing and a subsequent mass exodus from town (Rab). The newly formed Greeley Islamic Center emptied out, and many left in search of jobs at packing plants in Nebraska and Minnesota. Some community leaders made a concerted effort to stay and create the conditions for others to stay, due to a recognition that frequent movement does not lend itself to becoming integrated within a place. The quoted community leader had himself lived in three states by then, in his fourteen years in the US, a rate of movement that is likely similar for many other Somali refugees, in search of economic security.

The issue of prayer breaks had come up in other meatpacking plants around the country such as with Gold'n'Plump Poultry which has factories in Minnesota and Wisconsin. In 2006, Somali Muslim workers filed a federal lawsuit alleging they were fired for taking prayer breaks. The lawsuit was subsequently settled and the company agreed to provide two daily prayer breaks for all workers at the plants. The Council on Islamic Relations (CAIR) has stepped in to advocate for the workers fired at a different Swift plant in Nebraska by filing an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaint alleging that Somali workers continued to be treated differently than other workers and denied promotions. The Greeley plant workers also pursued legal action by entering into a partnership with a private attorney, who filed an EEOC complaint on their behalf, which involved allegations of discrimination and harassment based on race, national origin and religion. The EEOC accepted the complaint, but when it went to court, the US District Court for Colorado ruled against the EEOC and the workers (EEOC v JBS USA). Other workers pursuing similar cases have fared better. Cargill is another company that faced prayer break related disputes in 2016 in a Fort Morgan, Colorado plant. Cargill chose to settle instead of pursuing the case further, in the amount of \$1.5 million, to be distributed among 138 workers. The case concluded with the determination that the Teamsters union had not only failed to advocate for the Somali workers, but even harassed them because of their race, religion and national origin (Cargill pays

\$1.5 Million Settlement, *Greeley Tribune*).

Discrimination is present for many Somali refugees around the country. Besteman reported that some employers say that they have concerns that language, cultural and religious differences will increase the potential for miscommunication and that daily prayers and a different conception of time and work expectations will interrupt work schedules (150). One of the Somali refugees in Lewiston describes the following experience: “they advertise a job, you go and apply, and the job disappears or has new requirements, or they are too busy to deal with you, or they aren’t taking applications at that time. The employers are resentful that Somalis are trying to get jobs, and they just want them to go away (Besteman 151).” Across the country, in Garden City, Kansas another Somali woman reported a similar experience while looking for a new location for her business, The African Shop. She said that “every time she goes to speak with a landlord about a vacant property, it mysteriously seems to be unavailable (Healy).”

Somali refugee children and youth run into their own challenges with discrimination, ridicule and bullying in the educational setting. In a study with Somali youth in Maryland, Somali students reported being teased about their head coverings, and getting asked if they went naked in Africa or lived in trees by their US born classmates (McBrien 352). McBrien further notes that some Somali students reported being negatively targeted for doing well in school, including accusations of ‘acting white,’ but also relating to their religious identity and refusal to date.

An additional challenge that Somalis have had to contend with is suspicion of terrorism, that has an impact as Somali refugees are considered for admission to the US and once they arrive. Starting in 2009, the conflict in Somalia grew more intense with Al-Shabaab, an Islamic fundamentalist armed group coming to prominence (Besteman 281). In 2012, Al-Shabaab officially aligned itself with Al-Qaeda, the Islamic extremist group founded by Osama bin Laden and considered to be a key enemy of the US. In the early 2010s, another Islamic extremist group

emerged, the Islamic State (Stansfield 234). In the lead up to the 2016 election, nine young Somali American men from the Minneapolis area were tried and convicted of trying to join ISIS. In the aftermath of this, the Somali community in that area faced increased scrutiny (Fernandez-Campbell). There were also a handful of other attacks associated with Somali American young men that elicited a lot of media coverage and tapped into fears of the American population such as the stabbing of eight people in a Minnesota mall (Jacobs and Yuhas). Then-presidential candidate Donald Trump seized on this moment and called for the US to halt admission of refugees from Somalia, because of the perceived risk (Jacobs and Yuhas).

While Donald Trump was characterizing a large group of people – Somali immigrants in the US as dangerous and unworthy of potential Americanness, hate crimes against American Muslims had reached the highest levels since the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks (Lichtblau). In October 2016, the rhetoric of suspicion and hate against Somalis was nearly transformed into action by a group of three white embittered men in Garden City, Kansas. They belonged to a militia and called themselves the Crusaders, while they called their targets cockroaches. They stood accused by federal prosecutors of planning to bomb the apartments and makeshift mosque where Somali residents live and pray (Healy). The prosecutors also noted that the men held antigovernment, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant extremist beliefs. Some people living in Garden City, including the police tried to distance themselves from this act and reassure the Somalis. This attempted attack came on the heels of virulent anti-refugee rhetoric in their state, with their governor, Sam Brownback trying to do everything in his power to stop further resettlement of refugees in Kansas, citing unacceptable safety risks. In April 2018, the three men were convicted of domestic terrorism, with then Attorney General Jeff Sessions declaring in a statement, “The defendants in this case acted with clear premeditation in an attempt to kill people on the basis of their religion and national origin. That’s not just illegal, it’s immoral and

unacceptable, and we're not going to stand for it (Healy).”

Around the same time that Somalis in Garden City were targeted for murder, Ilhan Omar, a Somali-American woman in Minneapolis emerged on the national scene by winning a seat in the Minnesota House of Representatives, making her the first Somali-American elected to a statewide political office in the United States (Gay-Stolberg). She would go on to win a seat in the US House of Representatives in 2018. Another Somali American, Abdi Warsame had been serving on the Minneapolis City Council already (Fernandez-Campbell). One of his initiatives was the opening of a job training center within a large apartment complex housing thousands of Somalis in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis. In 2016, the unemployment rate for residents of that neighborhood was more than three times as high as the city at large, which had been experiencing a super low unemployment rate of 4% (Fernandez-Campbell). When speaking with the media, Warsame and other Somali community leaders posited a connection between Somali young people feeling out of place, not finding a way to integrate into the economy, lacking stability and turning to extremist groups. According to them, unemployment, not radicalization is the biggest problem facing young Somali men. Another community leader, Mubarshir Jeilani, pointed out that many unemployed Somali men are susceptible to extremist ideologies, similar to “other disenfranchised youth turning to crime when they can't fit into society or the formal economy” and are lacking a sense of belonging (Fernandez-Campbell).

Unfortunately for Somalis, as the 2016 presidential election unfolded, Trump was successful in conflating refugees from countries where Islamic terrorist organizations exist with terrorism in the minds of many Americans. Upon election, Trump followed through with his rhetoric by instituting an executive order that banned all refugees temporarily and forbid travel from Somalia to the US, due to the perceived risk (Gerstein and Lin).

In Lewiston too, the climate shifted against Somali refugees, as the town voted in a mayor, Robert MacDonald in 2011, and then reelected him two more times that propagated statements such as telling immigrants that they if they come here, they have to accept the culture and leave their culture at the door (Thistle). In 2016, a higher proportion of voters in the town also voted for Trump, with some native-born Americans expressing a concern that an unfair amount of state funding is going toward supporting newcomers such as the Somalis and other African immigrants who came in overwhelming numbers versus poor and struggling native-born Americans (Garofalo). Maine's governor who was in office from 2011 to 2019, also made a concerted effort to try to stop the federal government from placing any refugees in Maine (Hughes).

While the experiences of the Somalis and Somali Bantu in Lewiston as described by Besteman are mixed and as evidenced by the town's growing negative climate toward them, there are a lot of positive developments noted, particularly when it comes to gaining a voice for oneself and building relationships. Coughlan et al on the other hand present a far bleaker picture for the Somali Bantu refugees living in central New York, Arizona, Ohio, Maine and Vermont that they studied (127). The key challenges facing this group that they identify are financial concerns and issues of family separation and obligations (Coughlan et al 128). The family separation and obligations refers to the expectations of family members who stayed behind in refugee camps for financial support, including some immediate family members, such as spouses and children that had to be left behind, because the US does not recognize polygamous marriages (Coughlan et al 132). Unmet expectations were frequently cited as a source of unhappiness, such as a man who reported that he had been led to believe that he would be fully supported for several years and then found out that he would to find a way to support himself after mere months (Coughlan et al 128). The study authors also noted that employment has been a challenge for the group, sometimes even when jobs are available, such as manual labor in factories, but regarded as undesirable for women

and are not accepted (129). Furthermore, problems with maintaining employment were also identified, due to absences, tardiness and unsatisfactory performance (129). Supporting large families on low-wage jobs or on public assistance (particularly when it comes to female headed households) is also a considerable challenge for the Somali Bantu they interviewed (130). Coughlan et al also found a high rate of health problems that are preventing many of the Somali Bantu refugees in their study from working (131).

Somalis are affected by the triple combination of being immigrants, black, and Muslim that move them far away from the most powerful and politically active segments of American society, native-born Christian whites. These characteristics, in combination with xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia that are present in American society make economic success a challenge for Somali refugees. The 2007 American Community Survey found Somalis to have the highest poverty rate of all newcomers to America (Abdi 98). But their own cultural cohesion and the practice of community solidarity have been avenues to social capital for them, leading them to use tools of their new state to set out a place for themselves by reclaiming their own agency with actions such as forming own organizations, and getting representation on political bodies within their communities such as the school board in Lewiston. They have also quickly tapped into legal tools which are key instruments for advocacy and social change in the US, by pursuing lawsuits in order to make American mythical values such as equality of opportunity and freedom of religious practice actual realities for themselves.

CHAPTER 3: REFUGEES FROM BURMA/MYANMAR

In the first decade of the 21st century, thousands of refugees displaced from the Southeast Asian nation of Burma/Myanmar entered the US. Burma/Myanmar became independent in 1948 and since then, armed conflict in varying degrees has persistently plagued this land and created protracted refugee situations. The country was known as Burma for most of the twentieth century until 1989 when it was renamed Myanmar by its military junta government. This name change was selectively recognized around the world, with the UN adopting the new name but the US and the UK continuously referring to it as Burma, in alignment with the democracy movement in the country that rejected the name change (Who, What, Why: Should It Be Burma or Myanmar?, *BBC*). All of the works that I consulted for my research refer to displaced people from Burma/Myanmar as Burmese refugees or refugees from Myanmar, rather than Myanmarese or Myanma refugees. I will refer to the country as Burma/Myanmar in recognition of this historical aspect, but for matters of convenience, rather than any explicit ideological stance, I have chosen to use the adjective Burmese.

Burma/Myanmar is the largest country in the region of continental Southeast Asia and its size roughly corresponds with the US state of Texas. It is a heterogeneous nation, encompassing many ethnicities, religions and languages. Nevertheless, there is a majority ethnicity and a majority religion, which is the Burman ethnicity and Buddhism. According to Steinberg, the center of the country which is characterized by lowlands has been historically inhabited by the Burmans, who make up about two thirds of the population, while the surrounding areas are highlands for the most part, and home to minorities: the Rohingya, the Chin, the Naga, the Kachin, the Wa, the Shan, the PaO, the Kayah, the Karen, and the Mon.

In the nineteenth century, much like the rest of Southeast Asia, Burma/Myanmar was subject to incursions by the European colonial powers. The British conquered Burma in stages

beginning in 1824 and finishing in 1886 (Walton 892). They then divided Burma into two areas, Ministerial Burma and the Frontier Areas, which they ruled differently. Ministerial Burma was made up of the central core of the country, inhabited mostly by Burmans and directly ruled, while the peripheral regions were indirectly administered, resulting in greater autonomy.

Additionally, the British put into a place a divisive military recruitment policy. The Burmans had resisted British rule most forcefully, so instead of letting Burmans serve in the army proportionately, they disproportionately turned to the minorities. They privileged recruiting from the Chin, Kachin and Karen groups, and by 1925 formally adopted a policy of only recruiting from these groups (Walton 894). The geographical division of the country and colonial policies helped to solidify ethnic identity and in the eyes of the Burmans, ethnic minorities came to be associated with colonial rule, particularly because when rebellions against colonial rule took place, it was not British soldiers putting them down, but instead minority groups serving in the army such as the Karen (Walton 894).

Another legacy of the colonial period was a division along religious lines. Prior to the nineteenth century, most Burmese were Buddhist or animist, but in the early 19th century, Christian missionaries found considerable success in converting some of the non-Buddhist ethnic minorities, while they were much less successful with the Buddhist Burmans. As the British solidified their rule, they banned political activity. Some Burmans saw an opening for religious engagement to include political engagement, so they formed religious-political organizations, which were not banned by the British administration (Steinberg 35). This move established a link between Buddhism and nationalism by the beginning of the twentieth century.

It was the Burmans who led the fight for independence. The Burmese Independence Army was formed mostly by ethnic Burmans, with Aung San at the helm. In order to push out the British, Aung San turned to the Japanese for help, who acquiesced, resulting in a joint military action that

drove out the British from Burmese territory by the beginning of 1942 (Walton 894). But the British were not ready to be pushed out, and most ethnic Burmans realized that life under Japanese rule was also not desirable. From 1942 to 1945, the British, the colonial army composed of ethnic minorities and the Burmese Independence Army composed mostly of ethnic Burmans banded together to drive out the Japanese, with control of Burma reverting back to the British (Walton 895). Nevertheless, by this point, it was clear to all the involved parties that Burma was on its way to independence, with a key question remaining about whether the Frontier Areas would be associated with Burma Proper, and if so, in what way (Walton 895).

To settle this question, there were two conferences held in 1946 and 1947 in the town of Panglong in the Shan State of Burma. The second conference had Aung San, the independence hero and unofficially the head of the Burmese state at this point meeting with delegates representing the Shan, Kachin and Chin minorities and resulted in a signed agreement. The minority groups officially agreed to join the new Burmese state, but the Panglong agreement also included internal autonomy for the minority groups, and the right to secession (Walton 896). Karen representatives were notably absent from the second Panglong conference, even though they had participated in the first one. There were also other minorities that were not included, such as the Mon, the Arakanese, the Wa and the Naga for reasons such as living mostly within Burma Proper or being considered too divided or statistically insignificant (Walton 901). Nevertheless, the Panglong Agreement ushered in a new era for Burma, from 1948 on, as a sovereign and tenuously unified state.

But this peace and unity turned out to be fragile and short-lived. Aung San, a charismatic figure that was able to garner unprecedented trust and cooperation from ethnic minorities, was assassinated in 1947. Karen rebellion broke out right after independence and has continued to this day (Walton 901). The 1950s also brought some communist revolts and serious discussion about

the right to secede by the minorities that were party to the Panglong Agreement and subsequent rebellions by the Shan in 1959 and later by the Kachin in 1961 (Walton 900). The 1958 elections were considered to have potential for bloodshed or communist control, so the military argued that a coup was necessary to avoid a civil war and preserve the union which the leader of the country, U Nu, agreed to, for a period of six months (Steinberg 55). But the military ruled for the next eighteen months, and then voluntarily withdrew and the 1960 election was regarded free and fair and brought U Nu back to power (Steinberg 58). During his campaign, U Nu, an ethnic Burman, had promised to make Buddhism the official religion, and he delivered on this promise. This choice was considered controversial even by the military, because of its potential to anger the Kachin and Karen (Steinberg 59). In this environment of ethnic and religious discord, the military staged a second coup in 1962, again ostensibly to preserve the union against threats of secession (Walton 900).

And yet, under military rule, ethnic tensions and rebellions actually increased (Steinberg 62). And the military junta in power did not help matters much with its political decisions. For example, the 1974 constitution created a three-tier system of citizenship, with full citizens defined only those who were Burman or a member of one of the recognized indigenous ethnic or linguistic groups, or those who could prove that they were descendants of residents who had lived on Burmese territory prior to 1823 (Steinberg 72). This effectively stripped the Rohingya ethnic group of any citizenship rights. The Rohingya are a majority Muslim population, living in Rakhine State, Burma's Western-most area, that borders the Bay of Bengal and current-day Bangladesh in the North.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, economic and political frustration with the government grew. In 1988, protests sparked by an argument among students broke out, followed by a riot police intervention that resulted in deaths, more protests sparked by the deaths, violent suppression and

then a third coup by the military to shore up control (Steinberg 79). These events served to unite the opposition to the military government, under the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San, considered by many the father of the modern nation of Burma. The military allowed elections to take place in 1990, and the NLD had a resounding victory. However, these results were not honored, and instead the military placed Suu Kyi and another NLD leader under house arrest. The year before, the military junta had also changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. These moves isolated the junta, and many countries, including the United States, refused to recognize the renaming, and pressured the move towards democracy. Steinberg argues that the West has supported Suu Kyi, even more than the NLD, particularly after she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, and notes that her continued detention became a cause celebre among democracy activists (90). He also noted that her views have strongly influenced US policy towards Burma. The US continues to refer to the country as Burma, rather than Myanmar, while the UN has recognized the new name. The US imposed sanctions on the country in 1997, and then subsequently even more stringent ones in 2003 and 2008 (Steinberg 100).

While subject to considerable external pressure, the military has also been engaged in armed conflict with some of the ethnic minorities, on and off since 1948. Some have called Burma's internal conflicts, the world's longest running civil war (Chia). For example, even before the current Rohingya refugee crises, there were waves of Rohingya fleeing in 1978 and then again in 1991-1992 (Steinberg 108). The Karen National Union was formed right after independence and has engaged in a conflict with the government since then, which has created thousands of Karen refugees who escaped to what became refugee camps in Thailand, starting in the 1980s (Booher 23). In addition to these groups, the Kachin, the Karenni, the Chin, the Rakhine and the Shan have all fought for greater self-determination, for decades. While these rebellions did not have to do with

religion outright, and instead had much more to do with ethnic identity (most often accompanied by a separate language), some of the struggles for autonomy have a religious freedom component as well. As previously mentioned, the heavily targeted Rohingya are mostly Muslim, and the minorities that were most significantly prone to Christian conversion, the Chin, Kachin, and Karen (1/3 Christian by some estimates) fought hard for self-determination (Steinberg 106).

The administration of US president George W. Bush increased pressure on the regime significantly, and he and his wife met with dissidents repeatedly (Steinberg 119). In fact, Laura Bush played a significant role in initiating the resettlement of Burmese refugees to the US (Zremski). Her interest in the cause of Burmese refugees increased after coming into contact with the head of Christian Freedom International, an organization assisting Burmese refugees living in Thai camps (Zremski). Before Laura Bush's intervention, US classified Burma's ethnic armies as terrorist groups, which prevented nearly everyone belonging to an ethnic minority from being considered for resettlement, but as a result of her advocacy, the US State Department waived the material support provision for the Karen (Zremski). In 2005, Karen refugees started arriving to the US in significant numbers (Fike and Androff, 127). Later, in 2007, with a push from the Bush administration, US Congress voted to allow ethnic rebels themselves to resettle in the US (Zremski).

While the US does not keep track of the ethnic origins and religious preferences of resettled refugees (Fike and Androff, 129), the picture that has emerged for me after trying to get insight into who has come to resettle here from Burma is of a population that is disproportionately Christian, when compared with Burma's entire population, with the Karen being the most prominent ethnic group resettled. A 2010 demographic study by Young et al in San Diego noted that out of the Burmese refugees resettled there, nearly half were Karen, nearly a fifth were Muslim Burmese and then Kachin, Kayah and Chin each representing 7-8% and the Mon, Burmans, Shan, Rakhine each

making up 1-2% (Andres 3). While these figures are a snapshot in time and not necessarily an accurate representation of the makeup of Burmese refugee throughout the US, they are still a helpful guide. Burmese refugees have high rates of secondary migration, and in some places have formed ethnic enclaves such as in Southport, Indiana with the Chin (Norman). In any case, the Karen have constituted the most prominent ethnic group among the resettled Burmese refugees, and the bulk of the available research is focused on their experiences.

One of the earliest studies on Karen refugees was conducted by Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny and took a look at what expectations about life in the US they had, and to what extent they were met. It was published in 2011 and its qualitative interview research took place from 2007-2008, in a Thai refugee camp and a town in the northeast United States, one of the largest in its state (with a population of about 100,000) and described as multi-ethnic, historically wealthy and suffering urban decay that the authors chose to anonymize as ‘Westville’ (229). At the time of writing, Westville had an unemployment rate well above the state and national averages, and was divided, socioeconomically and racially (Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny 229). The authors found that a majority of the Karen interviewed in the camp that were going through the process of getting approved for resettlement expected that getting a job upon arrival to the US would be somewhat or very difficult, that they would face discrimination and that integration into American life would be difficult. The authors concluded that the resettled Karen “live in meagre accommodation, work for the minimum wage, and are frequently compelled to relocate, all the while struggling to retain their traditional values and practices” (218). Yet, they also posit that after about a year, many of the refugees in their study sample have begun to integrate successfully (219).

The majority of the resettled refugees that they interviewed were Christian, with a small number of Buddhist and one Muslim family. The researchers note that this is unrepresentative of the general Karen population but seemingly consistent with the Karen who have been resettled in

the US (233). They also note that while Christians are a minority within the general Karen population (about one-third), they are often at the forefront of the Karen political movement. This Christian portion of the Karen population is made up primarily of Baptists and Seventh-Day Adventists. With the refugees they interviewed, they found a substantial portion affiliating themselves with local churches in ‘Westville’, both because they were looking for a religious community, and because religious institutions have often played a key role in supporting newcomers to the US by supplementing the limited services provided to refugees by the *volag* that was assigned to them. Some joined a Baptist church, similar to the form of Christianity they practiced, and some joined Horizon Christian Fellowship, a church that does not claim membership in a particular branch of Christianity but could be broadly defined as evangelical (Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny 233). Horizon Christian Fellowship took its advocacy for these Karen refugees seriously by speaking to the local media on behalf of them and sometimes even insisting on attending meetings between resettlement organization’s case workers and the refugees. This led to a contentious relationship between the two organizations, the *volag* and the church, with refugees sometimes stuck in the middle. Nevertheless, there are often substantial benefits for the Karen refugees affiliated with a church. The authors note that they are “often better off in terms of employment, language, emotional support, advocacy and friendship networks” than the unaffiliated. Membership in a religious community led by Americans also helps to foster integration with Americans (Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny 235).

But even so, most of the study subjects left ‘Westville’ because of a prohibitive cost of living. Many had been working in manufacturing factories in the area. They migrated to places such as Texas, where there is a large Karen community and the Midwest, particularly Nebraska, attracted by jobs in the meat processing and packing industry, because “although dangerous, is one of the few [industries] where unskilled and illiterate immigrants can gain employment at a decent

wage (Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny 232)”. The reception experienced by this group of Karen refugees in ‘Westville’ can best be described as mixed. For example, the authors note complaints by other residents in a housing complex about their new Karen neighbors, including some that sound outright discriminatory, such as about odors produced by Karen cooking and congregation of Karen in large groups in hallways, and some that seem to point to issues that arise when a group of people is doing their best to navigate unfamiliar rules, such as flushing of disposable diapers and disposal of prohibited items in dumpsters (Kenny and Lockwood Kenny 229). Often, the Karen were placed in apartment complexes in what might be considered high-crime areas, because of their economic accessibility. Sometimes, the Karen refugees also encountered problems within the building, such as rodents, bad plumbing and leaking ceilings. The local press covered one such case, which resulted in the resettlement organization moving the refugee group to a building with slightly better conditions. This is an interesting instance where there the local media got involved, and presumably the public had enough interest and investment in the story, for the resettlement organization to feel pressure to change things. There is limited information about this incident in the study, making it impossible to find the news articles mentioned. One aspect of the media coverage that would be of interest is how this suffering by the refugees is contextualized within the article. Presumably, other low-income people will continue to live in that apartment complex with its problems, and the question is whether there is a perspective included at all, that criticizes these living conditions for anyone, rather than just for the refugees.

Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny also give us limited insight into the experiences of the Karen youth in schools. They report that the Karen students felt enthusiastically accepted at first by the teachers and the other (predominantly African American and Hispanic American) students, but eventually felt somewhat neglected. The majority of the Karen students kept to themselves, while one or two managed to make friends with local youth. In another study, a 2016 participatory

research project on the experiences of Karen refugee youth, Gilhooly and Lee named five challenges that they believe Karen youth are facing: communication difficulties due to inadequate knowledge of English and/or Karen, lack of parental involvement in children's schooling, being bullied, formation of Karen youth gangs and disproportionate pressure on Karen girls leading to higher high school drop-out rates.

Social workers in the US have begun to build a body of research and advice for their colleagues on working with Burmese clients. One example is a clinical research paper by Abby Voight exploring resiliency factors for Karen refugees living in St. Paul, Minnesota. From interviews with three Karen women in their 30s and 40s, she concluded that some of the challenges facing Karen refugees are language, health care, education, employment, finances, discrimination, family changes and mental health (Voight 14). But on the other hand, she also noted resiliency factors such as family and social supports, cultural norms and religious faith (Voight 19). Voight notes that many Karen expect their lives to be challenging, but also feel that it is not acceptable to give up, giving way to a normative resilience. Relying on community was brought up often by the women, whether that is the Karen community, family or church; there is an expectation of sharing resources and being helpful (Voight 43). One of the participants also specifically brought up difficulties with losing authority over children.

Another example of social workers building resources on working with Burmese refugees comes from Fike and Androff in 2016. They note that in the decade prior to the publication of their article, nearly 90,000 refugees from Burma resettled in the US, making them the largest resettled refugee group, but one that has been understudied by academics and social work practitioners. One important phenomenon that they note are deep divisions among the broad Burmese refugee population, along ethnic lines (Fike and Androff 132). Trudi Lee Andres, a master's student in anthropology who studied the Burmese refugee community in San Diego in 2012 via ethnographic

observation and semi-structured interviews and published her study in 2014 into a thesis, also came to a similar conclusion about the divisions within the Burmese refugee community. Hers is one of the few case studies that includes participants of various ethnicities and religions. Her sample was sixteen households, of which half are were Muslim, five Christian, 3 Buddhist and one animist, and regarding ethnicity, half identified as Muslim Burmese, four Karen, three Burman, two Chin, and one Kachin (Andres 20). She notes that her interviews with non-Karen families provided unsolicited information about tensions between non-Karen and Karen regarding institutional access to resources (Andres 69). For example, one Muslim family shared the following perspective: “They [the Karen] discriminate because we Muslim in the refugee camp [in Thailand]” and that they feel the Karen are continuing discrimination in the US and not incorporating other ethnic groups with the services they have available (Andres 69). Andres found that most of the organized cultural events, including by non-Burmese entities failed to demonstrate diversity of refugees from Burma, and mostly just centered the Karen. However, she also observed that living arrangements juxtapose people of different ethnicities and gestures of support (eg: translation to help a family understand the medical condition of their relative) are common, across ethnic lines (Andres 63). She also came across some ethnically-mixed marriages (Burman husband and Karen wife, Muslim Burmese husband and Karen wife). Occasionally, language presents a barrier to connection to each other for some Burmese refugees and is also a point of contention. Non-Karen tend to know Burmese, and sometimes complain that the Karen around them know Burmese, but simply refuse to speak it. Andres confirmed some instances of choosing not to speak Burmese, but also observed Karen who truly don’t know Burmese.

Though the Burmese refugees’ experiences are shaped by their particular perspective – ethnicity and religion and may significantly differ from each other, nevertheless there are some shared challenges. One is the loss of parental control, as children gain language skills and acclimate

to life in the US more quickly than the parents and additionally parents are experiencing uncertainty about parenting approaches, as they are faced with cross-cultural differences in child rearing (Andres 42). Often, the parents have been told about the risk of losing their children if they engage in corporeal punishment, but not offered information about alternative approaches to discipline. Drinking and drug abuse were particular areas in which they expressed wanting more information. One father shared the following: “The children know more of the culture. Sometimes it is hard for me to know what is right or wrong, so I just say nothing (Andres 42).” They are also struggling financially, with economic realities generally not meeting expectations (Andres 44). Andres’ study coincided with the Great Recession, which contributed to unemployment and underemployment for everyone in the US, and certainly this group of refugees.

Andres notes that there is a lot of pressure to adjust to different economic and social structures than what many of the refugees are used to. For example, expectations around rent are a stressful adjustment. One participant shared: “Rent is a constant stress. In the refugee camp, we don’t have to worry about tomorrow. We know we will have food. Here we constantly have to worry about tomorrow and how to pay the rent (Andres 48).” There are also other American cultural norms that occasionally conflict with a Burmese sense of the world and what is proper and safe. Andres shared one story told by a participant of getting lost on a bus commute, but not asking anyone for any help. When she asked about this unwillingness to ask others for essential information, another participant said with excitement: “It is beat into my flesh to not ask question” referring to getting hit by parents after asking questions. In addition to this fear taught by parents regarding questioning, Andres notes that there is also a learned method of answering questions to avoid further questioning (55). Undoubtedly, this Burmese cultural norm occasionally holds the refugees back, as they navigate American society, where asking questions and self-advocacy are not only allowed, but most of the time expected.

Access to resources and information is also filtered through existing social networks within the refugee community, including organized religious groups. In 2012, there were two Christian churches serving the Burmese refugee community in San Diego—one conducting services in Karen, and the other in Burmese to multiple ethnic groups. Andres attended a service at the Burmese language church and noted that the pastor was familiar to many of the refugees, because he worked as a translator for a resettlement organization. The pastor told Andres that he regularly tells the refugees “You come to my service every week, and I will help you (65).” The key task that the pastor performs for the refugees is helping them understand their mail. Andres makes note that this exposure to religious ideology is having an impact, even on those who don’t necessarily identify strongly with the Christian faith at the onset, such as at least one ethnic Burman man who converted (presumably from Buddhism) after attending the services (65). At the time, there were three different Buddhist temples available to the refugees and frequented by some of them. Andres accompanied one Buddhist family to the temple, where the monk was Laotian, and switched between Thai and English to communicate with the group. The family told Andres that sometimes a Burmese monk visited from Los Angeles, that they go and make financial offerings to the monks on a weekly basis, in exchange for blessings and prayers when facing hard times. Within this setting, there seemed to no access to services that help the refugees navigate their daily lives. Andres did not have a chance to attend a mosque service that some of the Muslim Burmese refugees go to, but some of the refugee women shared that they sometimes feel uncomfortable at this mosque, due to perceived unfriendliness from other worshippers. This mosque had a majority of Somalis and Iraqis (Andres 68). One of the families in Andres’s sample had a death in the family during the course of her study, and she learned that the family had been paying \$25 a month to the mosque, which then covered the cost of the funeral. These monthly dues also covered costs associated with weddings and assistance for extreme health issues. Membership in the mosque

carried a monthly financial obligation, but it also served as a type of social safety net. Andres concluded that religious organizations serve as economic, cultural, and transitional resources too, and not just spiritual (68).

Evidence of this can be found throughout the country, particularly for Christian refugees from Burma. For example in Western Massachusetts, a Baptist pastor whose parents were missionaries in Burma, is happy to have Karen in his congregation and doing what he can to help them such as with clothes and other donated items (Roman). In Amarillo, TX something similar is happening for a Zomi family. Zomi are a minority ethnicity that lived in the Chin state, and are devoutly Christian. An older, white woman has become their special helper with navigating new life in the US, motivated by her own Christianity (Vine). Christian refugees from Burma/Myanmar, especially those spending their lives in refugee camps are often taught to adore the US from an early age, since they are surrounded by “funding provided by the US government” signs (Winn). Many Karen in particular see themselves as historically tied to the Americans. A Karen pastor living in one of the refugee camps, shared the following belief: “America and the Karen, we are brothers. This goes back to the 1830s when American missionaries came and converted us. Even before that, in Karen history, we believed white brothers would come to bring this ‘good news’ to the Karen people (Winn).”

But, Americans have not always welcomed refugees from Burma/Myanmar with open arms. In 2010, a laundry employee in Fort Wayne, Indiana frustrated with betel nut chewing and spitting out of red juice in his establishment, put up a sign “For Sanitary Purposes, No Burmese Allowed (Celeste).” This incident prompted a response from community meetings, and eventually the sign was changed to prohibit the offensive practice and translated into Burmese. In 2016 in Indianapolis, a lawn sign appeared that read “No More Chin (Choi)”. The community received an outpouring of support from some of their neighbors but there were also others who accused the

Chin of being dirty and living off of welfare indefinitely (Choi). Karen refugees living in upstate New York are also no strangers to hateful speech. One man working in Walmart recounted an incident where a customer responded to his inability to find an item for her with “crawl back under the rock where you came from (Winn).”

Navigating the workplace is challenging for many Burmese, particularly with limited English skills. They are vulnerable to exploitation. Burmese men have had to move in search of employment, sometimes taking along their families with them, and sometimes not. In 2009, a group of Burmese men claimed that they had been taken to a different place than told by their Burmese caseworker for work and that they had limited physical freedom (Giglio). In order to get back to their homes after this, they had to borrow money from the caseworker, who was subsequently fired (Giglio). The year before, a group of Burmese were recruited to work at a Swift meatpacking plant in the small town of Cactus, TX after ICE raids left the company without a majority of its workforce, undocumented Latino immigrants and the company had also hired a group of Somali refugees, as discussed in the previous chapter (Jordan). This resulted in the migration of Burmese families to dormitory-style apartments set up by the company and concerns from the people of Cactus about the sudden influx of refugees (Jordan). In this case, Burmese refugees had the upper hand when competing for jobs, with undocumented Latino workers, subject to deportation at any point. But when the Burmese workers competed for the few jobs available with the native-born Tennesseans who had lost their previously higher-paying jobs at the height of the economic recession, there was far more tension (Jordan). With the US unemployment at a 25 year high, when Tyson Foods was accepting applications for slaughterhouse shifts in Shelbyville, TN, those jobs were in high demand, resulting in all-night line and comments from locals such as “I’m very annoyed foreigners are taking jobs that Americans need (Jordan).” Local politicians also expressed a similar sentiment. Another unemployed native-born potential applicant said, “They’ve

[Burmese and other immigrants] been doing jobs we wouldn't do. Now the economy is so bad, we're all willing to do them (Jordan).” Yet another said, “I was born and raised in Shelbyville. I should be at the head of the line (Jordan).” At some point, a physical altercation broke out from applicants jostling for spaces in the employment line, and after that, there was police presence (Jordan).

While the late 2000s were tough for the Burmese refugees, as they were for a lot of people living in the US, by 2016 there are news articles popping up profiling individual Burmese refugees for their rapid economic and educational advancement. WIVB profiled a Burmese refugee man who moved to Buffalo from New York City, was able to save \$10,000 from his job after a year, open a store and buy a house (Richert). In Fort Wayne, the *National Catholic Reporter* profiled a Chin girl graduating from high school, in the top 10 of her class (Stockman). This young woman was concerned about her inability to write Burmese, but she noted that in Burma/Myanmar, there was a lot of fear (of starving, not being able to get an education, the police) and that she is grateful to not have such fears in the US (Stockman).

While the Burmese refugees were doing their best to adjust to their new life in the US, the situation in their home country kept changing. In 2007, there were protests led by Buddhist monks, sparked by sharply risen fuel prices against the military regime, which were brutally repressed and resulted in the deaths of monks, even though they are generally revered figures within Burman society. Burma was once again experiencing extraordinary pressure from around the world to move towards political liberalization and this time, for the first time since 1962, they began to acquiesce. They announced a referendum for a new constitution to be held in 2008, and elections by 2010. In May 2008, Burma experienced its worst natural disaster ever, Cyclone Nargis in which 130,000 people died or went missing (Steinberg 2). The military junta did not quickly accept aid even from the UN, and outright refused help from the US, because of fears of a US invasion (Steinberg 141).

An election was held in 2010, in which the military-backed party won the majority, but the UN and some Western countries expressed concerns about its legitimacy, especially because the NLD had boycotted the election. There was a law on the books that said anyone who was an ex-prisoner could not run which was eventually repealed. Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in November 2010 and in 2011, Hillary Clinton, in her role as the US secretary of state, visited the country. Obama visited the next year, making him the first US president to do so. Quickly after that, diplomatic relations were restored.

In November 2015, the first election that was considered to be free and fair took place, with Suu Kyi getting the post of state counsellor, which made her the de facto head of government. The 2008 constitution still secured power for the military, and guaranteed them 25 % of parliamentary seats. Rohingya Muslims had often placed their faith in Suu Kyi, thinking she would treat them as rightful citizens, even standing shoulder to shoulder with NLD representatives in the 1990s. But the conflict between the Rohingya minority and the Burmans in Rakhine State, along with the Burmese military picked up again, resulting in the displacement of thousands of Rohingya refugees. Rohingya refugees had been leaving the country for decades, some going to Malaysia, and some getting to resettle in the US in recent years. In 2015, in Fort Wayne, the Rohingya refugees had actually managed to build the first mosque in the area (“Fort Wayne Mosque”). Even though the Rohingya refugee crisis was only growing from 2015 on, and Suu Kyi was subject to increased criticism around the world for allowing the persecution to happen, Obama went ahead and pushed a law through the US Congress that would fully get rid of the sanctions and give him his “good news story (Ambrosee).”

Burma/Myanmar has gone through a lot of change in the past couple of decades, but the unrest unfortunately continues, and is contributing to an ongoing refugee crisis. The Rohingya refugee crisis affects Muslims from Burma/Myanmar more than before, and the new Burmese

refugees, some of whom have been resettled around the world and including the US, look different than before. This situation is still developing currently, and it remains to be seen how the Rohingya refugees from Burma/Myanmar will fare. For many of the Burmese refugees that have already been resettled in the US and have lived here for years, their most prominent asset has been their Christianity. This shared characteristic with a vocal segment of the US population has made it possible for them to adjust faster. They have still been subject to discrimination, particularly during tough economic times when the competition for jobs is fierce, but overall the Burmese refugees seem to be on a path to integration into American society.

CHAPTER 4: REFUGEES FROM IRAQ

Iraq is a complex society with a long history and persistent problems with conflict and displacement in the recent past, starting in 1980 and going all the way to present day. These conflicts, including the most recent, catalyzed by a 2003 invasion by US forces, have produced waves of refugees. The state known as Iraq today and located in Western Asia, to the East of the Arabian Peninsula, was home to some of the world's earliest civilizations, such as Mesopotamia. It was here that agricultural activity first began, as early as in the sixth millennium B.C. (Stansfield 12). The Uruk culture that developed in the area between 4000 and 3000 B.C. (and from which the word Iraq is derived) achieved significant advances in agriculture, invented a system of writing, and established some of the world's first known legal systems (Stansfield 15). The modern state of Iraq, with its current borders came into being in the aftermath of World War I and is bordered by Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The spread of Islam, born in current day Saudi Arabia in the seventh century, irreparably changed Iraq, making it a majority Muslim country. The sudden death of the creator of Islam, the prophet Muhammad in 632 with no heir apparent initiated profound disagreements about who should lead the faithful after him. One group favored the election of a caliph by seeking consensus among leaders of the community, while the other believed that only those related to the prophet could lead the community and supported the appointment of the prophet's son-in-law and cousin, Ali. Those two groups are predecessors of today's main Muslim groups, the Sunnis and the Shiite (originally known as Shi'at Ali or supporters of Ali). Iraq is home to both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and this division has played a part in conflicts throughout its history, including present-day (Stansfield 22).

Prior to Iraq coming into being as a modern state in the early twentieth century, it was under nearly four centuries of Ottoman, Sunni-dominated rule (Stansfield, 26). World War I saw

the Ottoman Empire leaders decide to ally with the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) which then set it on a collision course with the Triple Entente (United Kingdom, France and Russia). Even before the war ended, Britain and France were negotiating on how to break up the Ottoman Empire. One of the territories that fell under British control was Iraq. This was formalized in 1920, followed by an unsuccessful Iraqi revolt for independence. The British appointed a king and as a general practice, favored Sunni Arabs in their political appointments. The military was the one government body that was more diverse, but still disproportionately Sunni at the top (Stansfield 49).

Opposition to British rule grew throughout the 1920s, and in 1932 Iraq was the first state under a British mandate post World War I to gain independence. Nevertheless, British influence and some level of control remained, with an agreement for British military bases on Iraqi land, that was expected to remain in place for the next twenty-five years (Stansfield 52). The treaty agreement with Britain was renegotiated again in 1948 and removed British troops from Iraq but still militarily tied Iraq to Britain until 1973, which contradicted the desires of most Iraqis (Stansfield 93).

Anti-imperialist sentiment continued to grow, culminating in a 1958 revolt led by Abd al-Karim Qasim and Abd al-Salam Arif that resulted in the executions of the royal family and broke the hold of British colonial involvement in Iraq (Stansfield 95). However, the coup leaders were hardly united in their vision for Iraq's future. One group advocated union with Syria and Egypt as a united Arab republic, while another (led by Qasim) focused on Iraqi nationalism, which won, for a limited time. But Qasim and his supporters were overthrown by Arif and the Ba'th party, who together were much more interested in Arab nationalism. The first Ba'th government lasted less than a year, partly because it was not seen as effective or desirable by the Arab nationalist hero, Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser. The military, led by Arif and then his brother, took control

for the next five years (Stansfield 96). The Ba'th party leaders staged a second coup in 1968 and this time they were more successful, ushering in Ba'th party rule that would last all the way until the early 21st century. Saddam Hussein, who would come to rule over Iraq, from 1979 to 2003, played a role in these Ba'th party coups and steadily climbed up the ranks of the Ba'th party, making him second in command by 1974.

Ba'thism is a movement associated with Arab nationalist ideology, which created friction within Iraq, especially considering that Iraq's population is hardly made up exclusively of Arabs. There are four significant ethnic groups within Iraq—Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and Chaldo-Assyrians. Kurds are the most significant minority group numerically, making up an estimated twenty percent of Iraq's population (Stansfield 65). They live mostly in the north of Iraq, have their own language, and have on the whole been committed to operating independently from Iraq for all of the twentieth century. When it comes to religion, the majority of Kurds are Sunnis, but some of them are Shi'ites and some adhere to pre-Islamic religions such as Yezidism and other Zoroastrian-based faiths (Stansfield 68). Turkmen also live predominantly in the North, and are connected broadly to the Turkic people who trace their origin from Central Asian tribes (Stansfield 73). Turkmen are Muslims, with the majority adhering to Sunni Islam. In fact, Ottoman Empire rulers (aligned with Sunni Islam) generally favored Sunni Arabs and Sunni Turkmen over Shi'ites which gave the religious schism a political and class-based edge, with Sunnis emerging as the designated ruling class, and Shi'ites not enjoying access to power to the same degree (Stansfield 61). Shi'ites are numerically a majority within Iraq, but only since the relatively recent past, the nineteenth century. The fourth prominent ethnic group, the Chaldo-Assyrians number around one million, adhere to Christianity and most live in Baghdad (Stansfield 75). The majority are Catholic, and associated with the Chaldean Catholic Church.

Iraq's oil industry was nationalized in 1972, and the economy and Iraq's citizens benefited

enormously from the high price paid for oil around the world in this period (Stansfield 97). This would prove to be useful for Saddam as he solidified his power, because he used the revenues from oil to fund his government, improve infrastructure, build schools and hospitals and advance socioeconomic indicators (Stansfield 100). Oil and its economic power also play a pivotal role in the conflict around Kurdish independence, since there is a lot of oil in the Kurdish region, and few natural resources in the central region around Baghdad, which is historically Sunni Arab populated. As can be expected, Iraq's vast oil reserves also have a significant impact on international interest in what is taking place in Iraq, particularly when it comes to highly developed nations, such as the US and UK that have an enormous need for oil (Ulack 78).

The Iraqi state, under Saddam would come to be associated with secularism, along with Arab nationalism, as already discussed. This direction never appealed much to those Shi'ites of a more spiritual orientation (Stansfield 72). With Saddam in power, membership in the Ba'th party grew into a mass movement and became the principal way by which people could advance socially and benefit from Iraq's oil revenue (Stansfield 99). Eventually, the only sources of meaningful political opposition were the Kurdish north and the Shi'ite South because they were opposed to the Sunni Arab dominated vision of nationalism, espoused by the Ba'th party (Stansfield 99). To get his way, Saddam relied on a dual strategy of patronage and coercion and eventually political affiliation to any party other than Ba'th was prohibited (Stansfield 100).

Saddam's rise to power initiated a long period of on-and-off conflict that Iraq has been engaged in since 1980, starting with the Iran-Iraq War. Saddam went to war with Iran because of disputes around access to the Shatt al-Arab waterway (river flowing into the Persian Gulf), but also because the Iranian revolution of 1979 which brought a Shi'ite Islamist government to power in Iran was deemed threatening, because of potential influences on Shi'ite Iraqis. The war dragged on much longer than Saddam envisioned, throughout the 1980s, only ending in 1988 with a ceasefire

and a peace agreement. Saddam claimed victory, but in fact the war inflicted considerable losses on both of the states. The US, under Republican President Ronald Reagan, supported Iraq in this war by providing military, intelligence, economic and political support.

The Kurds were in a particularly precarious position during this war, physically living in the middle of the conflict and forced to pick a side. Most Kurdish fighters chose Iran, which led Saddam to attack his own citizens with unprecedented brutality, including bombing of civilian areas and the use of chemical weapons (Stansfield 116). The campaign against the Kurds was so merciless and indiscriminate that it has been termed genocidal by the Kurds themselves, and to a limited extent by advocates around the world, including four states. The war led to displacement for a considerable number of Iraqis and is where Iraq's modern history of refugee crises begins.

The Iran-Iraq War also left the state of Iraq in debt, mainly to Arab Gulf states to the tune of \$80 billion, which was roughly 2.5 times the revenue received for oil over the prior fifty years (Stansfield 121). Much of the money had come from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and Saddam preferred to think of it as donations to the Arab struggle against Persians, but the lenders did not share this view. Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990 and managed to occupy it in less than a day. This invasion was substantially motivated by the weakened state of Iraq's economy and the risk that it posed to Saddam's hold on power, but the rhetoric presented by Saddam emphasized the idea of rightfully restoring Kuwait to Iraq (Stansfield 128). While the US expressed neutrality on the idea of this Arab-Arab conflict early on in talks with Saddam, eventually the US under Republican President George H.W. Bush and other Western powers, such as the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher coalesced together and engaged in what is known as the Gulf War, in order to expel Saddam from Kuwait. Following Saddam's conquest of Kuwait, his army was physically close to oil fields in Saudi Arabia, considered an unacceptable threat by Saudi Arabia, and its allies such as the US. About six months after Saddam's initial invasion, in February 1991,

the Gulf War ended with Iraq's retreat from Kuwait. After this loss, Saddam was vulnerable to coups, and rebellions against his government arose among Shi'ites and Kurds. Saddam managed to crush both of these movements. Going after the Kurdish rebels put the Kurdish civilian population in a panic based on Saddam's past behavior toward them, and resulted in a mass exodus (about a million people) toward the border with Turkey (Stansfield 136).

The 1990s were an exceedingly difficult time in Iraq, with the population living under economic sanctions imposed by the UN, at the behest of the US. In 1991, Iraq's GDP had dropped down to 1940 levels and the UN estimated that about one-fifth of the population was living in extreme poverty (Stansfield 143). The UN had also created a special commission to inspect Iraq for evidence of chemical and nuclear weapons, which Saddam allowed to an extent until 1998 because of enormous pressure from multiple directions. During this decade, the US was actively involved in trying to depose Saddam through covert CIA activity, including sponsoring coup attempts and general support of opposition movements, but Saddam always managed to have the upper hand and retain his hold on power.

But, with the new millennium, the tide shifted against Saddam. George W. Bush, son of the former President George H.W. Bush began his term as president of the US in 2001. During Bush's first year, the terrorist attacks of September 11 took place, which led to Bush invading Afghanistan less than a month later, in pursuit of the mastermind of the attacks, al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. From that point, Bush actively worked to tie Saddam to international terrorism and argue that Iraq posed a threat to the US, with Saddam potentially harboring weapons of mass destruction and belonging to an 'axis of evil' as he put in his 2002 State of the Union address. The UN commission checking for weapons got to go back to Iraq in late 2002, and concluded that inspections needed to continue but did not go so far to say that Saddam held onto forbidden weapons. This kept Russia, China and Germany from voting for an invasion at the UN Security

Council level, so the US instead decided to invade with a ‘coalition of the willing’ which consisted of 44 nations, including the UK (Stansfield 159).

US invaded Iraq in March 2003 and removed Saddam’s regime in less than a month. Saddam went into hiding and was found at the end of 2003, and later executed in 2006, after being found guilty of crimes against humanity by an Iraqi Special Tribunal. The rhetoric presented by the Bush government for explaining its invasion of Iraq (particularly after no weapons of mass destruction were found) was that the US was a liberating force, bringing the prospect of democracy to Iraq. But forming a new Iraqi government would prove to be challenging and dangerous for US troops. In the lead up to the 2003 invasion, large-scale forced displacement was expected and warned against, by refugee advocates. Resources were sent to the Iraqi border regions and aid organizations prepared themselves for an Iraqi refugee crisis (Ulack 66). But this did not happen, at least right after the invasion (Sassoon 1).

The strategy of the US, when directing Iraqis on forming a new government, was driven by trying to have all the different groups living in the country represented proportionally, rather than encouraging any ideological political consciousness. An example is one of the early iterations of the new government, the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), a 25-person body which attempted to roughly mirror Iraq’s societal composition with 13 Shiites, 5 Kurds, 5 Sunni Arabs, 1 Assyrian and 1 Turkman (Stansfield 172). Stansfield argues that the US greatly contributed to a rise of ethno-sectarianism with choices such as these, without necessarily achieving the legitimacy that they were ostensibly going for. While many Iraqis were sick of living under Saddam’s dictatorship, many also viewed the US invasion with great suspicion, wary of being under the control of another imperial power (Ulack 86). The IGC was seen by many to be a creation of the US, and the subsequent governmental structures coming out of it, such as the January 2005 elections, were stigmatized by this association (Stansfield 172).

By the first elections, held in January 2005, rebellions against the US occupation had picked up considerably and were coming from multiple directions, such as from Sunni Arabs in alliance with some Kurds and Turkmen, as well as Shiite militia rebellions (Stansfield 180). There were different strains of opposition to the Sunni insurgency, including supporters of the previous Ba’thist regime but also radical Islamist groups within Iraq (Stansfield 185). Foreign Islamist fighters also joined the anti-occupation fight in Iraq, such as al-Qaeda for example (Stansfield, 183). In fact, the 2005 elections had extremely low Sunni Arab turn out, because al-Qaeda had put out a threat against Sunni Arabs who dare to participate (Stanfield 185). The result of the elections was that the previously dominant group was firmly marginalized, while the Shiites rose to power, with Shiite Nouri al-Maliki going on to serve in the highest position, of prime minister, from 2006 to 2014.

The year of those first post-Saddam elections, 2005 was a time of enormous political uncertainty in Iraq, with a lot of wrangling for power, growing violence and the start of what could be described as a civil war between Sunni and Shiites (Stansfield 192). The destruction of the Al-Askari Shrine (a particularly holy site for Shi’ite Muslims) in February 2006 set off a further escalation of violence, that also resulted in growing displacement of civilians, who headed for safer places within the country, and to the border (with Syria and Jordan in particular) en masse (Ulack 67).

The large-scale fleeing of Iraqis from violence and persecution had begun in 2005, when the post-2003 invasion exodus belatedly materialized. By 2008, Antonio Guterres, then the commissioner of UNHCR declared the Iraqi exodus the largest population shift in the Middle East since the displacement of the Palestinians in 1948 (Garcia 143). Unfortunately, this figure was surpassed yet again in the 2010s, with the refugee movement caused by Syria’s civil war with the UN estimating in 2016 a displaced population of about 11 million (including internally displaced).

In Iraq, the well-off and educated were among the first to leave, then the middle class, and then the most vulnerable and poor. Earlier on, there were large numbers of Sunni Muslims and non-Muslim minorities leading, followed by a large number of Shiites (Sassoon 3). Garcia also notes this trend and says that ethnic and religious minorities were among the most likely to flee abroad (144). The US actively prioritized members of a persecuted religious minority (especially Christian) or ethnic minority group for resettlement (Garcia 145).

To be clear, there has been a significant number of Iraqis leaving Iraq since Saddam came to power in 1979, which created a sizable Iraqi diaspora around the world. For some, migration was driven by political opposition and persecution, and for some by the conflicts that ravaged Iraq from 1980 to the early 1990s, and the subsequent economic hardship, undergirded by international sanctions. Prior to the 2003 invasion, there was an estimated 1 million internally displaced Iraqis, and between one and two million living outside the country due to fear of persecution, with about 400,000 formally recognized as refugees or asylum seekers (Ulack 82). From 1991 to 2001, the US had admitted 31,550 Iraqi refugees (Syrian Refugee Crisis and Lessons from the Iraqi Refugee Experience). A large portion of these refugees were likely Kurds, since by the end of the 1990s, there were an estimated 20,000 Kurds living in the US, with Nashville, TN emerging as an important center for Kurdish resettlement (Garcia 77). But from April 2003, which could be considered the endpoint of the active part of the US invasion to the end of 2006, the US had admitted only 466 Iraqi refugees (Sassoon 110). The reasons were myriad—security concerns, concerns about perception of the US invasion of Iraq and quite possibly some level of Islamophobia as well. Sassoon argues that the Bush administration was concerned that admitting Iraqi refugees would imply that its stated policy goals in Iraq (democratization and creating a zone of ‘democratic peace’ at the heart of the Middle East) had not been achieved (Sassoon 110). The US and UK were coming under heavy diplomatic scrutiny for not offering to resettle Iraqi refugees,

even after being at head of the Iraq invasion that contributed to the crisis (Ulack 113). According to a 2007 UNHCR report, there were over 1 million refugees in Syria, about half a million in Jordan (Ulack 87). There were also significant numbers living in Lebanon. These refugees were concentrated in the urban areas of Damascus, Amman and Beirut and for the most part were not officially registered as refugees (Weiss Fagen 24). There was one Iraqi refugee group actually living in camps—Palestinian Iraqis. Palestinians had been living in Iraq, since 1948 after the expulsion from Palestine. They were to some extent protected by Saddam and associated with him during his rule, so they were persecuted following his fall from power. But when they tried to flee from Iraq, they encountered difficulties entering Syria or Jordan because of a lack of identity documentation and ended up being housed in makeshift refugee camps (Ulack 98). In 2006, UNHCR started pursuing third-country resettlement for the Iraqi refugees that were registered with the agency, interested in this option and qualified for it.

One of the most influential advocates for resettling Iraqi refugees in the US, and for special protection of Iraqis who worked with the US military or contractors and were now endangered was the late Senator Edward (Ted) Kennedy of Massachusetts. He penned an op-ed for the *Washington Post*, a prominent American media outlet, at the end of 2006 calling for the US to welcome Iraqi refugees, because “America bears heavy responsibility for their plight (Kennedy).” Due to public pressure by Kennedy, as well as sustained advocacy by refugee and human rights organizations, Bush agreed to admitting Iraqi refugees. By the end of the 2007 fiscal year—Sep 30, 2007—1,608 Iraqi refugees made it to the US (Ulack 121).

As already mentioned, the Iraqis who had worked with the US government, US military and its contractors (most often as translators) and were endangered because of this choice were also part of Kennedy’s advocacy. The Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program was created to assist this population, through a bipartisan bill that passed Congress and went to Bush for approval. By 2008,

as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the program was in place, with an authorized allotment of up to 5,000 SIVs for Iraqis each fiscal year from 2008 to 2012 (Ulack123). Iraqis coming under SIVs would have access to the same benefits as refugees (Ulack 250), so I will consider them as part of the Iraqi refugee population in the US in my analysis.

2007 was the year when Iraqi refugees from the effects of the 2003 invasion started coming to the US in increasingly significant numbers. It was also the year when Bush (who was worried about his presidential legacy) put into action a military surge with the goal of squashing the Sunni insurgency and getting the escalating violence in Iraq down (Stansfield 197). This had the desired impact, but unfortunately it would not prove to be sustainable.

In the next year, a presidential election year, there were increased calls for US troops to leave Iraq, coming from Iraqis but also some of the American presidential candidates, such Democratic challenger Barack Obama, who made ending the Iraq war one of his key campaign promises. He would go on to win the election, and began delivering on this promise by withdrawing troops from Iraq gradually in 2009, and finishing the US troop withdrawal at the end of 2011. Obama continued the policy of admitting high numbers of Iraqi refugees.

According to data available from the US Refugee Processing Center, 161,107 Iraqis (refugees and SIVs combined) have entered the US starting in FY 2007 up to the end of 2018. California, Michigan and Texas have consistently been the leading states for placement, most often in that order. Illinois and Arizona are next, having received between 1,000 and 2,000 Iraqis in the years of high admission. FY09 and FY10 saw a little over 20,000 Iraqis enter, followed by a dip to a little over 10,000 in FY11. The drastic decrease in FY2011 was due to concern about two Iraqi refugees who were living in Kansas having been charged with sending cash, explosives and missiles to Iraq for use against American troops (Ulack 133). For a period of a few months, the resettlement of Iraqi refugees in the US came to an almost complete halt (Ulack 134). The numbers

went back up the next year to around 15,000, to over 20,000 in FY13 and reached a high of 22,853 in FY14. After that point, there is a steady decline with 13,566 in FY15, 11,929 in FY16, 9,341 in FY17 (the first year partially under a Trump administration) and then all the way down to only 745 in FY2018 (Refugee Processing Center).

It is difficult to disentangle ethnic and religious characteristics of the resettled Iraqi refugees. But, Chaldean Christian Iraqis were certainly part of the resettlement effort. Ulack notes that in 2013, out of about 20,000 Iraqis resettled in California, almost half belonged to this group (143). Recent news coverage shows that the number of Chaldeans in San Diego has grown even more, to more than 60,000 by 2017 (Parvini). A Migration Policy Institute report also notes the ten most common native languages of refugees arriving from FY04 to FY2013, and Chaldean is one of them, along with Arabic (Capps et al 9). Most Chaldeans can also read and write Arabic (Capps et al 10).

Ulack notes that when Iraqi refugees started coming to the US in 2007, they were entering a country that was deeply divided about the war in Iraq, where divisions over state and federal immigration policies run deep, and often ignorant about the Arab world and at worst actively Islamophobic (120). Unfortunately for Iraqi refugees, they also entered the US at a time when the American economy was at its worst in modern times. The Great Recession began in 2007 and its powerful effects were felt until about 2010, which coincided with the coming of the first waves of Iraqi refugees, post-2003 invasion. The economic crisis was considered by many economists to be the worst financial crisis, since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and certainly had an enormous effect on the availability of jobs.

This situation was a shock to many of the resettled Iraqi refugees, particularly since many coming have higher levels of education than other incoming refugee groups, and had access to a middle-class life, prior to the conflict (Ulack 210). Most Iraqi refugees did not spend years living in

refugee camps, and instead many have vast professional and technical job experience and a higher level of English knowledge than other groups (Ulack 210). A key difference is also that even those who are not from upper or middle class, prior to being displaced, lived in a society where the state took on the responsibility of subsidizing food, water, shelter and other basic needs (210).

Ulack's study built upon his experience working as an employment specialist, looking for jobs for Iraqi refugees in particular, with open-ended interviews with 20 Iraqi refugees about their experiences (of which only 2 were women) and 4 staff members of refugee serving organizations in Austin. He emphasizes that many of the Iraqi refugees that he and other staff encountered had high, somewhat unrealistic expectations of what their lives would look like in the US. Some cited the overseas orientations as representing an incomplete and unrealistic picture of the difficulty of surviving in those first couple of months and admitted that they had glorified images of life in the US, in their minds, gathered from TV and films (199). Some Iraqi refugees were seemingly not interested in hearing a more realistic take on what to expect, even when it was offered, such as by an Iraqi who had worked with the US military, was on his way to the US through SIV and shared the information that he had gathered from asking the American people he knew questions about life in the US. The following is an excerpt from an interview with that man:

"...they [other refugees waiting for resettlement] were expecting to come here and have everything set up and have everything provided for them and jobs provided for them...which is crazy. You can't think that way. If you want to move somewhere to start a new life, you gotta work harder, and think harder, think further because you are going to be starting from nothing...They were like, no, everything is gonna be just fine, life is easy. I said no, it's not easy." (199)

The combination of being mentally and emotionally unprepared for the challenge of life in the US, the economic crisis, increased arrivals with insufficient staff and funding on the refugee resettlement organization side created situations as this experience, shared by one refugee "I remember 3 hours walking in that neighborhood where the clinic is. My wife and kid were crying" and "there wasn't enough money and food. 2 days with no food (176)." This respondent

had very limited access to a caseworker and felt like no one was really helping him.

Ulack also came across Iraqi refugees in the Austin area who had such a hard time adjusting to life in the US that they decided to go back to Iraq and mentions that there are other documented stories of return, because of inability or unwillingness to deal with the difficulty of the transition (201). For example, there was a case of an Iraqi lawyer in Utah, covered in the media, with the headline including ‘returning to danger zone to escape poverty in UT.’ One of the Iraqis quoted in the piece shared the following indictment: “We feel like we’re human beings there. We feel like here we are mice (Ulack 203).” Even some SIVs, who as a group are likely to have more familiarity with American culture, returned. Ulack includes the story of one Iraqi man (told secondhand) living in Michigan, who had a hard time fulfilling what he understood be his family obligations and his work obligations. He made the choice to be the one to drive his kids to and from school, even though that conflicted with his work schedule and eventually started working on the weekends only, which left him with insufficient income to survive on and deciding to go back to Iraq (201). This experience hints at an unwillingness to change gender norms.

Nelson et al found that gender roles have shifted quickly for the Iraqi refugees resettled in the US, as men had a hard time finding jobs or especially the kinds of jobs that they envisioned that would allow them to support their families easily and women stepped into the public space more, including as earners, and in some cases the only earners in the family (714). There was a much higher rate of negative outlook towards own dignity and self-worth for the men they interviewed as compared to the women (Nelson et al 713). Indeed, the statistics for employment in Iraq by gender for their participants are striking—over 90% of the men were employed prior to resettlement, while only 10% of the women were (Nelson et al 715). Many of the women participants that they interviewed are appreciating the shake up of the status quo, such as a woman who said, “The big difference between here and Iraq is that they value women in America. They value women. In Iraq

they don't (Nelson et al 715).”

Trying to find jobs for Iraqi refugees, particularly for the men, that they are willing to accept can be a challenge for the refugee agency staff. As Ulack notes, there are only a handful that refugees will be accepted for—entry level, hourly, low-paying and often in whatever industry is prevalent in the place they live (213). On top of that, there were certain jobs that most Iraqi refugees that he worked with refused to accept such as housekeeping in hotels, waiting tables, washing dishes (Ulack 215). One of his interviewees, a former chemist in Iraq, shared this sentiment:

“Someone who came from Iraq with a good job and education and they are offered a job at a restaurant or hotel? Of course they will not accept it. And we are not Bhutanese or African, with all my respect to them, they don't have a job back home and they come here and they will accept anything. So we cannot accept these kinds of jobs. That's what a lot of Iraqis say.” (217)

While this man's general orientation toward employment when starting out as a refugee is unrealistic and undoubtedly frustrating for the staff working on helping him secure a first job, the experience that he shared about his completely ignored applications for chemist positions leaves room for discrimination. He said:

“I don't know what's wrong. Maybe it's because I don't have my green card. Maybe they don't want to hire an Arabic person named Mohammed for a chemist position. Maybe they think he is a terrorist. No one calls back, no one says hi, nothing (217).”

Of course, there could be any number of reasons why his applications are overlooked, but there have been studies that show that applicants' names and the potential associations they elicit for the hiring manager, result in a lower number of callbacks for those applicants with “black sounding” vs with “white sounding names,” even when the professional experience presented is identical. With a name such as Mohammed, it's not hard to imagine that it may be playing a part, implicitly or explicitly.

Some Iraqis were pleasantly surprised by not finding open discrimination in Austin but

have heard that it is different in Dallas. One respondent shared his friend's story for a cashier position at Target. After the friend responded to the interviewer's question about his origin, "The guy stood up and he was toweling off his sweat, he was scared of Assad, and Assad said hey, I'm not carrying any bomb on me, I'm just from there, if you don't want to give me a job, others will give me a job (Ulack 226)."

But not everyone agreed that they hadn't been subject to discrimination in Austin, while searching for employment, such as the Iraqi man searching for chemist positions who was asked what he thinks about what is happening in the Middle East on a job interview with a staffing agency. The woman who interviewed him asked him about his citizenship and green card status, and after he disclosed that he is a refugee, she responded with "what does that mean" (Ulack 227).

Ulack had also been part of some professional interactions, while looking for jobs for his clients, in which while it would be difficult to prove discrimination, it likely occurred. One of his clients who regularly wears a hijab asked if she should remove it for a housekeeping job interview. Ulack said that he thought it was unnecessary. The interview seemed to go well, with the interviewer responding at the end that she thought the woman was well-qualified and she would recommend her for a second interview with her higher-up (the hotel manager), with whom they had very briefly interacted. But that second interview never took place, after attempts to schedule it, with vacation for the hotel manager first presenting a scheduling obstacle and then being told that "the position had been filled (Ulack 229)."

An important characteristic of the Iraqi refugees' experience in Austin that Ulack identifies is a general disinterest in building connections with the Iraqi community in Austin, and this holds true even for Iraqis without knowledge of English and cultural capital such as relationships with Americans (234). This is likely connected to living under an authoritarian dictatorship for most of their lives, when trust between people had eroded. One interviewee said:

“Iraqis don’t have that sense of being close to other Iraqis. That trust was broken back in the 90’s. Even before 2003. Because Saddam played it really well. He was like, you cannot speak against him or against his regime in your own room, even in your own bedroom you cannot speak. We were always saying there, ‘the walls have ears’, so don’t say anything. So we don’t trust anybody there and that grows up inside us (236).”

While the Austin-based Iraqi refugees that Ulack engages with on the whole do not seem interested in connecting with other Iraqis or other Arabs, not all Iraqi refugees feel that way. Dearborn, Michigan which is in the metropolitan Detroit area is sometimes called the Arab capital of North America, because of the high concentration of Arab-Americans from Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen living there (Fernandez-Campbell). Michigan has consistently been one of the top three placement states for Iraqi refugees, including other Detroit suburbs such as Sterling Heights which is home to a large Chaldean community that many Chaldean Iraqi refugees have joined. In fact, in 2008, Iraqi refugee resettlement to Detroit was limited to only those who had immediate family members there. Nevertheless, even if they are first placed elsewhere in the US many Iraqi refugees make their way to the Detroit area, in search of community. But here too, there can be some distrust among the different Iraqi groups, particularly when it comes to Shiite Iraqis.

As the Iraqi refugees that came in those first waves were starting to adjust to life in the US, the situation changed significantly for their compatriots back in Iraq, and those living in exile in Syria. Protests against corrupt governments that became known as the Arab Spring, swept the Middle East and North Africa region in 2011. In Syria, those protests and the president’s unwillingness to even consider stepping down devolved into a brutal civil war, that would see many Iraqi refugees leaving Syria in search of safety, and many Syrians leaving their country and becoming refugees. In the ensuing regional chaos Islamist organizations emerged in Syria and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) seized an opportunity to subsume one of these Islamist organizations in Syria (the al-Nusra front) and advocate for an Islamic caliphate beyond Iraq, renaming itself Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also known as ISIL because al-Sham translates to the

Levant) in 2013 (Stansfield 234). In 2014, ISIL came to increasingly global prominence, as it took over vast swathes of Iraq, including the city of Mosul in June and renamed itself the Islamic State (IS), now advocating for a worldwide caliphate (Stansfield 235). Starting in 2014, Obama approved using limited air strikes against IS, that would increase in intensity over time (Stansfield 243). Throughout 2014 to 2016, IS was continually in the news, as some Islamic terrorist groups around the world such as Boko Haram claimed allegiance to it, and terrorist attacks were carried out by Muslim immigrants who adopted IS ideology in Europe, such as Paris in November 2015 (130 civilians killed) and Brussels in March 2016 (32 civilians killed) (ISIS Fast Facts, *CNN*). It was in this moment of renewed fear that the US presidential election was taking place, with Trump calling for a shutdown of all Muslims entering the US. Iraq was included in the first version of Trump's executive order banning travel from countries that he deemed too unsafe, and removed later that year (Gerstein and Lin). Trump continued the military campaign against IS, substantially weakening the Islamic State by the end of 2018 (Callimachi).

Unfortunately, the conflicts in Iraq continue at the time of writing, and true peace and stability does not seem to be on near horizon. Since Saddam's rise to power, the US has had an active role in Iraq's conflicts. The diverse refugees that these conflicts have produced have been dispersed around the world, with some ending up in the US, particularly more recently. Based on the research that I found, many of these Iraqi refugees seem to be having a hard time adjusting to new lives in the US, because of own expectations and cultural norms, Iraq's history and a tendency by many Americans to view Muslims and Arabs from the Middle East with deep suspicion.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The subject of this thesis, comparing the experiences of refugees from Somalia, Burma/Myanmar and Iraq, is a particularly relevant one for the current moment in the US, when refugees are in the news more than ever before, and many Americans are questioning the engagement of the US in the resettlement of refugees. But, the subject is also challenging, because the situation is still under active development, limited scholarly resources exist at this time and few comparative studies have been carried out. Nevertheless, subjects such as these, are worthy of study and discussion, because they compel us to aim to better understand the US, its norms and its history of foreign policy as we navigate the complexities of our interdependent world and shape the future.

The works that proved most useful to me in trying to understand the experiences of the different groups were long-term ethnographic studies, such as Besteman's study with the Somali Bantu refugees in Lewiston, Andres' study in San Diego with the diverse Burmese refugees, and Ulack's study of Iraqi refugees in Austin. Each one of these academics had built a strong relationship with their community of study, while also having knowledge and experience of the group's culture (Besteman) or the inherent challenges in the refugee resettlement system gleaned from serving as part of it (Andres and Ulack). These academics were sensitive to the multifaceted realities on the ground and able to elicit revelations from their participants that allowed the full complexity of the experiences of refugees and refugee serving staff to emerge.

However, when trying to find ways to understand how the experiences of the three different groups differed, there were few academic resources available that placed those three groups in a direct relationship with each other. One of the few studies that I found that compares the experiences of different recently arrived (post-2005) refugee groups (Burmese, Bhutanese and

Iraqi) comes from a medicine school with the goal of understanding the challenges that different groups face when establishing their lives in the US, in order to serve them better as doctors (Hauck et al). It is based out of Central Virginia, where people from each one of the named groups have settled. I will return to the findings of this study as it relates to the comparison between Iraqis and Burmese a little later on.

The other source of information that offers some insight on the comparison between experiences with attempted integration of different refugee groups are think tank reports that study the available data (most often census information) with the larger goal of influencing governmental policy. A number of such reports on immigrant and refugee integration were published in the middle of 2010s by organizations such as the American Progress Institute, the Migration Policy Institute, the Urban Institute and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.

Some of these reports allow for a limited comparison for some of my selected groups, based on the metrics that the researchers chose to measure, in order to get at relative levels of integration. One Migration Policy Institute study conducted by Fix et al based on data for 2009 to 2013 looked at outcomes for five different groups, including the Burmese and the Iraqis, which makes it possible for me to analyze the divergent outcomes for those two groups. What follows are some salient points of differences that emerged from that comparison. The Burmese have a higher employment rate and higher incomes compared to the Iraqis (Fix et al 16). While upon first coming to the US, a significantly higher portion of Iraqi refugees seem to be highly educated, in the US, this starts to even out (Fix et al 14). Language remains a more significant obstacle for the Burmese, with 86% of Burmese refugee adults reporting limited English proficiency compared to 64% for the Iraqis (Fix et al 19). Nevertheless, for both groups, language is a formidable challenge.

The Hauck et al study also offers some worthwhile insights about differences between the experiences of Iraqi and Burmese refugees. The Burmese reported strong social ties to their ethnic

community, while only half of the Iraqis interacted with their Iraqi neighbors. Nevertheless, nearly all Iraqis reported having American friends from different contexts (Hauck et al 337). On the other hand, the majority of the Burmese interviewed reported involvement in a church that conducts services in Burmese, and some said they had received help from fellow American and Burmese church members (Hauck et al 337). The Iraqis had a higher level of unemployment at the time of the study, but perhaps most significantly, the Burmese reported feeling satisfied with their work, while the majority of Iraqis (both employed and unemployed) did not feel their income was sufficient for their needs (Hauck et al 338). The majority of the Burmese felt that their expectations had been met, while two thirds of Iraqis said that their expectations regarding aspects of life such as financial assistance, housing, employment, education and health care differed from the reality they found (Hauck et al 339). The study authors point out that the downward socioeconomic mobility experienced by many Iraqis, who were coming from urban, middle class settings, with relatively high levels of education and professional development may be responsible for their relative disappointment (Hauck et al 344). But they also hint at a more complex relationship for particular expectations that some Iraqi refugees may have for life in the US, one that takes into account the history of US involvement in their country. They do this by citing a 2007 study conducted by Jamil et al that found that many Iraqi refugees had conflicting feelings about life in the US (after coming from fighting repression in Iraq and considering the US somewhat responsible for the conflict in their homeland) that may contribute to expectations for US government assistance that is higher than what they are receiving (345).

Kallick and Mathema's report on integration allows us to see the differences in educational, employment and earnings outcomes for the Somali and Burmese refugees. They emphasize that refugees enter a US economy that is characterized by well-documented wage gaps based on race and gender, which seems to have an impact for different refugees, as I would expect (Kallick and

Mathema 3). Educational attainment for the Burmese group is high, with nearly half of Burmese women who arrived as children, earning a college degree, compared to 29% percent for the native born (Kallick and Mathema 23). Among the four groups that they compared (Bosnians and Hmong were the additional two) Somalis who arrived as children were the least likely to have a college degree (23). Somalis also have the lowest median wage of all the studied groups, and Kallick and Mathema posit that racial bias in the labor market which affects native-born black people may also be an issue for Somalis (26). According to Kallick and Mathema's data, Somalis also have the lowest rates of business and home ownership among the four groups (4). Low access to capital, through savings, or a difficulty with obtaining loans, potentially driven by racial bias, could be contributing to this fact.

The impact of discrimination on each of these groups cannot be understated. In my research, I came across instances of bias and discrimination against each one of the groups, such as the betel nut incident and verbal harassment while working at Walmart for the Burmese, perceived (and likely) discrimination while looking for jobs for the Iraqis and hate to the point of an attempted physical attack on the community and the perception of Somali Bantu youth as inherently suspect for just being in a public space for the Somalis. Non-adult refugees are also subject to discrimination in the educational setting. McBrien noted a 2003 study by Gitlin et al that found that white students who were interviewed indicated xenophobic beliefs that immigrant students would initiate violence (349). Another study cited by McBrien and conducted by Stephan and Stephan in 2000 solidified the connection between political and social attitudes toward newcomers that are part of public discourse and the likelihood of perceiving members of an outgroup as a real or symbolic threat (335). Being stigmatized and potentially rejected is likely to lead to negative consequences for people who are subject to it. For example, McBrien discusses Muslim, hijab-wearing girls who may experience stigmatization and rejection due to this aspect of

their identity and notes that rejection corresponds to a greater likelihood of school dropout (336).

The panel of experts that conducted a study on the integration of immigrants into American society over 2014 and 2015, in order to report to Obama, also concluded that when it comes to prospects for integration and socioeconomic progress, the perceived race of immigrants still matters and has the most significant impact when an immigrant group's heritage is closest to black African (National Academies 10). The report writers emphasize that "reducing racial discrimination and disparities in socioeconomic outcomes in the United States will improve the outcomes for the native-born and immigrants alike (National Academies 10). In other words, racism in the US persists, with particularly negative impact for Americans and immigrants of African heritage, and when refugee groups, such as Somalis enter the American arena, they are also highly likely to be negatively affected by racism in American society.

While I found plenty of evidence that existing racial and religious biases impact the integration prospects for refugees and immigrants and have likely contributed to the disparate outcomes for the Somali, Burmese and Iraqi refugee groups, as I touched on in my introduction, the story is far more complex than those quantitative indicators hint at. As many have noted, there is a limited understanding of integration when it comes to aspects such as civic and political participation, the refugees' satisfaction with their own lives and deep relationships with people outside of own refugee group. From my research, the picture that emerged is of a relatively high level of support for each other in the Somali and Burmese refugee community, even if those are more narrowly defined such as the Somali Bantu or the Karen, that has undoubtedly made it easier to survive, especially in those first couple of months and years, and for some to get to thriving.

Relationships with people outside of their own group play a considerable role in access to information and resources. For many of the Burmese refugees who are part of churches that also include Americans, this has been an invaluable avenue to greater integration. The other two groups

for the most part don't have access to this avenue. Most of the Somalis are Muslim, but as of now, there is a limited Muslim network in the US that they could tap into. Most of the time when they are engaged with religious practice, this isolates them more from their American neighbors, rather than giving them a chance to build relationships. This is similarly true for Iraqi Muslims. My research did not provide me enough insights to be able to make a solid evaluation of how this may play out for the Christian portion of Iraqi refugees in the US. The Iraqis who come through the SIV program and have some knowledge of American culture and potentially existing relationships with Americans are also significantly benefitting from this fact.

Expectations about life in the US play a key role in adjustment to life in the US. For many Iraqis in particular, these expectations are not fulfilled at the onset at least, leading to dissatisfaction. Where some of these expectations that are divorced from reality come from is unclear and difficult to fully untangle. Overseas orientations are one source of information that is likely faulty and/or incomplete for many refugees. Many of the Somali refugees also seem to significantly underestimate the challenges involved in starting a new life in the US with few resources, social capital and useful knowledge. Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny's study of Karen refugees, pre and post resettlement in the US, seems to indicate that many of them mentally and emotionally prepared themselves more substantially for the challenges ahead.

Then there is the question of what tools different refugee groups have at their disposal, once they arrive and come across hardships. Cultural norms and the willingness to shift mindsets and values shape the refugees' experience of trying to adapt to a new cultural environment, in both positive and negative ways. In his study of Iraqi refugees in Texas, Ulack mentioned persistence as a key aspect of Iraqi culture, which becomes an asset when needing to advocate for oneself. Besteman's portrait of the Somali Bantu community in Lewiston also shows that speaking up for oneself is valued, and how engaging in this has made it possible for the Somali Bantu community

to improve their situation. In her study of Burmese refugees in San Diego, Andres highlighted one refugee's culturally learned hesitation to ask questions, even when the information is sorely needed. It is difficult to know to what extent this cultural norm is present for other Burmese refugees. But in any case, even if it is, it is likely shifting. For example, Ulack briefly mentioned a protest organized by Burmese refugees, taking place in front of the refugee agency, in a call for increased resources.

The refugee groups that I looked at, also come across some shared challenges. Unfortunately, in all of the refugee groups, there is a level of division within the group that started in their country of origin and persists at least to some extent in the US, limiting the potential for learning from each other and supporting each other. I came across mentions of divisions between Sunni Iraqis and Shi'ite Iraqis, Somali and Somali Bantu, Karen and people of other ethnicities from Burma/Myanmar. Promisingly, there were also mentions of some of these groups cooperating on efforts such as protests, and supporting each other in hard times such as when a loved one has fallen ill, so this may be slowly shifting in the US.

Raising children in the US also seems to be fraught with difficulties for all the refugee groups. Most often, children are quicker to change and adapt to their new environments, through language acquisition, popular culture knowledge and a heightened sensitivity to alternative cultural norms, in an attempt to fit in. Besteman's study clearly shows the Somali Bantu community in Lewiston struggling with this, when parents and children literally lose a common language, and struggle to understand each other. Some of the Burmese adult refugee parents also expressed that figuring how to guide their children in this environment, in which they feel less comfortable than their children, is a considerable source of stress. While I did not come across a particular mention of this for the Iraqi refugee community, I believe it is highly likely that many of the Iraqi refugee parents are faced with similar uncertainties and frustrations.

Finally, all of the refugee groups are struggling mightily with adapting to living in an intensely capitalistic, profit-driven environment that does not prize social welfare. Austerity measures have whittled down the refugee resettlement program considerably. The pressure of securing a job quickly, no matter how insufficient that job may be, at the expense of having some time and space to acclimate to their new environment, via language acquisition and gathering information about how this new society that they live in operates, makes it exceedingly difficult for any refugee to find a stable footing. As one person involved with teaching refugees English in Texas points out, refugees “are survivors and they are remarkable people. But if they do do well, it’s not due to us. I mean, everyone that works with refugees are doing the best they can with what they are given. I don’t believe anybody is not doing their best. But what we are given is so flawed (Ulack 196).”

I agree with this person that there should be far more support for resettled refugees, once they arrive in the US. In 1980, refugees started with three years of financial support, a figure that seems almost unimaginable now. A year of financial support seems to me like it would be a good middle ground to start with. Language is a considerable obstacle for many refugees. Some begin with limited or nonexistent literacy in their mother languages, which makes learning a new language substantially harder. In my research, I came across mentions of teaching English to refugees, before they arrive to the US, while they are just being considered for potential resettlement. It has been tried decades ago in a limited capacity, and then judged to have limited effectiveness. But, I think it is time to try again, ideally with Americans traveling overseas to do this, perhaps as part of the Peace Corps or a program like it, giving them a chance to understand the plight of refugees better and immerse them in a different culture, and giving the refugees a chance to get to know an American, and learn a bit from that person, about the promises and challenges of their potential future lives in the US.

In this thesis, I spent a considerable amount of time trying to understand each country's recent internal history and its external relationships, particularly with the US. This is because I wanted to understand the background myself and make it available for others. It is my belief that there is enormous value to trying to understand the historical situations that refugees to America came from, and how that has shaped them, so that we can begin the American side of the integration process, by being open to learn about new things, and potentially change because of them, including lessons for our own political engagement in the US. Bernstein and Dubois advocate further study of the impact of receiving and trying to serve refugees on US communities (24). I agree with them on this point, because the process of adaptation happens in two directions—newcomers are changing, but so are the receiving communities. Each group encounters challenges that we need to better understand, in order to attempt to improve the process for both parties.

There is also a need for more long-term research of how refugees are doing in American society, how they see themselves and their own standing, and how others in the community see them, and have been changed by the refugees' coming. While comparative migration research has its promises and pitfalls (as one of its leading practitioners Irene Bloemrad says), it also holds the power to uncover to us the ways in which our experiences are different, often unjustifiably so, based on where we are situated in society. Having more such information available can serve as the starting point for a more informed discourse on where we are now as a society and where we would like to be.

Undeniably, the climate for refugees in the US is at a low point. Leading up to the most recent presidential election in 2016, four states, Maine, Kansas, New Jersey and Texas withdrew from the refugee resettlement program. This does not stop the federal government from allowing refugees to resettle there, because they can still support those refugees through their agreements with the refugee resettlement agencies, but still speaks to the anti-refugee climate (Fix 19). A

portion of the American voting population elected Trump, who espouses openly xenophobic and Islamophobic views. Trump has lowered the number of refugees admitted annually to the US to the lowest level since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Yet, the commitment of the US to refugees has always been fragile, ever since the onset (Bon Tempo 206).

But, the stance towards accepting newcomers, including non-refugee immigrants, moves much like the weather. It shifts over time, and tends to move in somewhat predictable ways. For example, when there is a combination of coming out of a challenging economic time and a perception of potential threat to the country, such as from terrorism, people tend to regard outsiders with increased suspicion. Lewiston, Maine is a small town that has gone through considerable changes in response to facing an influx of refugees whose culture was deeply unfamiliar to its residents and potentially deeply unsettling. Besteman argues that despite the xenophobia and racism that emerged in that process, the process is worthwhile and even successful, because “ideas about mutual responsibility, cultural values, political practice and civic engagement jostle and bump and are transformed in the arenas of public discourse and personal reflection (286).” I believe that we are also engaged in such a process on a national scale right now.

There is a sense among refugee service providers and advocates that the refugees resettled in the US are actually for the most part invisible to the majority of the American population, even though these days, refugees are a frequent topic in the public arena (Ulack 254). During the Southeast Asian refugee crisis in the 1970s, many citizens directly sponsored refugees as part of religious groups, community groups or sometimes simply as concerned individuals (Haines 66). Maybe it is time to make that possible again, to make ordinary citizens get involved in refugee resettlement, particularly if they are unhappy with their government’s actions regarding this. There has been a consistent finding that native-born Americans who interact with immigrants frequently tend to have more positive opinions of immigrants than those who do not have much contact

(Waters and Ueda 5). The chance to develop personal relationships, better understand where each person is coming from and identify differences and similarities has the potential to transform the anti-refugee, anti-immigrant, anti-outsider spirit that is strong in a portion of the US. As an American society, we are engaged in a cultural struggle and arguing about what matters most. That makes it an extraordinarily apt time to learn more about the particularities of American engagement with refugees, its actions around the world, what is driving displacement for certain groups of people, and how trying to make a stable home in the US looks different for different groups, based on the group's history, cultural norms, resilience factors, expectations, but also because they are faced with biases in American society, regarding racial and ethnic identity, and religious orientation that still persist. I hope that this thesis has served as a solid departure point for the beginnings of such an inquiry into American society and global developments.

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