

## Editorial

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Since the publication of our last issue, which included special sections on *The Stakes of Sanctuary* and *Religion and Refugees*, COVID-19 has continued to disrupt peoples' lives and rhythms in multiple ways around the world. Vaccination programs have enabled many people in Europe and North America to start traveling again for work, to visit family, or for pleasure, yet long-standing global inequalities and inequities have persisted, with deadly effect. At the time of writing (end of February 2022), while 79 percent of the populations of high- and middle-income countries have received at least one vaccine dose, only 13 percent of people in low-income countries have been able to access the vaccine (Holder 2022), reflecting what Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesu (Director-General of the World Health Organization) calls global "vaccine apartheid."

In the last week of November 2021, after South African scientists identified a new, faster-spreading COVID-19 variant, travelers from eight Southern African countries were barred from entering European and North American states, in what was widely denounced as not only punitive, but also a part of a long history of intrinsically racist and (neo)colonialist processes (not least because it soon transpired that the variant had been identified in the Netherlands before South Africa). Throughout the year, these same European and North American states have been increasingly accelerating the deportation processes that had temporarily been halted or reduced due to COVID-19. In spite of the multiple crises of protection characterizing asylum seekers' countries of origin—crises compounded by the pandemic—so-called "failed asylum seekers" have faced deportation to countries deemed to be "safe" for returnees, including Syria and Afghanistan.

On 30 August 2021, as the US armed forces withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban retook control of the country, the international media turned its focus onto the desperation of people rushing to seek safety at, and through, Kabul's airport. The images of Afghan people's suffering as they sought safety—whether they were climbing over walls and fences, crammed into cargo holds, or falling to their deaths as they were unable to hold onto the side of a US evacuation plane—will become as emblematic and iconic as the images of three-year-old Alan Kurdi and of Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his nearly two-year-old daughter Valeria, lying lifeless on Turkish and Mexican shores. With an evident lack of safety and human security continuing to characterize a country destroyed by multiple conflicts, including the 2001–2021 "War in Afghanistan," North American and European states scrambled to evacuate their own citizens and selected Afghans (in particular those who had collaborated with occupying forces). Soon after, they established Afghan refugee resettlement programs for those deemed worthy of protection, at times only weeks, even days, after those same states had been variously deporting or promoting the "voluntary return" of so-called failed asylum seekers to the country. Over 5,271,948 Afghan refugees were deemed to have "returned voluntarily" to the country between 2002 and autumn 2021, including over 47,400 people deported by the UK, Sweden, Germany, Greece, and France between 2008 and 2020. These people are, themselves, among those in need



of international protection in the aftermath of what has come to be known as “The Fall of Kabul,” including through resettlement.

As Afghans, members of civil society, NGOs, and academics alike have long argued, it was ingenuous at best and a violation of international law at worst to classify the country as “safe” for returnees, in turn raising key questions about whether returns to the country at any point over the past two decades can truly be defined as “voluntary” in nature. It is precisely “the role of ‘voluntariness’ in the governance of migration” that is explored in this issue’s Special Themed Section, coedited by Reinhard Schweitzer, Rachel Humphris, and Pierre Monforte.

As they argue in their introductory article, a multifaceted and multiscale focus on “voluntariness”—including but also going beyond notions and processes such as “assisted voluntary return,” as explored by Tanya Aberman, Reinhard Schweitzer, and Zeynep Sahin Mencutek in the contexts of Canada, the UK and Austria, and Turkey respectively—“shows how voluntariness works to entangle unlikely subjects into policies and practices of migration management, hide the violence of contemporary border regimes, and articulate liberal democratic governing frameworks.”

How “voluntary actors” themselves seek to support migrants and refugees—in ways that at times contest and challenge punitive border regimes, while at other times becoming unintentionally complicit with them, for instance through “repair work” of dysfunctional systems and processes—is explored in the articles by Rachel Humphris and Kristin Yarris (focusing on the US and the UK) and Pierre Monforte and Gaja Maestri (focusing on the UK), as well as in the conversation between Nerina Boursinou, Pierre Monforte, and Phevis Simeonidis, focused on Greece.

Following the Special Themed Section, Rebecca E. Murray’s article examines sanctuary scholarships across UK universities over a ten-year period (2008–2018). The question of how to make universities welcoming of and accessible to refugees and those seeking asylum is a theme that we explored in Issue 1, in the “Cities and Universities as Sanctuaries” section, as well as in Issue 3, on the role of universities in the protection of refugees and other migrants in Brazil and Latin America more widely.

In the People and Places section, we are pleased to present a special section featuring two reflective pieces on the challenges of conducting ethnographic research in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The articles, collectively authored by UK-based early career researchers and post-fieldwork PhD candidates with different disciplinary backgrounds, raise timely questions about the ethics and politics of research on and with migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. The first article, by Aydan Greatrick, Jumana Al-Waeli, Hannah Sender, Susanna Corona, Jin Li, and Ellen Goodwin, situates the COVID-19 pandemic within a broader context of societal “crises” and discusses the ethical dilemmas and implications of methodologically adapting to these, including acknowledgment of the inequalities and inequities that mold and shape the terms of engagement between researchers based at institutions in the Global North and mobile people from the Global South. The following piece, by Ioanna Manoussaki-Adamopoulou, Natalie Sedacca, Rachel Bencheckroun, Andrew Knight, and Andrea Cortés Saavedra, reflects on the impact of the pandemic and other intersecting “crises” on the dynamics and inequalities inherent in the different subject positions occupied by researchers from the Global North engaged in research on and with migrants from the Global South.

The final article in People and Places is a review of a multimedia exhibition titled *Stateless Heritage* at the Mosaic Rooms in London, in which Dheisheh Refugee Camp in Palestine is proposed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The review is written by Paul FitzPatrick, in his own words “a resident within an asylum dispersal area who is disconcerted by the language of ‘dispersal’ and the representation of people seeking asylum.”

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Ulrike Krause's article in the Reflections section on the politics of numbers offers a critical interrogation of UNHCR's annual Global Trends Report from 2003 to 2020, in particular the ways in which numbers are used to produce knowledge and "nonknowledge" about refugees.

Returning to the refugee camp, and to questions pertaining to hospitality and welcome explored in this and previous issues of *Migration and Society*, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh's poem in the Creative Encounters section, "The Crack Invites," revisits what it means to invite and be invited to a camp. This invitation remains suspended, unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable to this day.

As always, our book reviews section, edited by Agnieszka Kubal and Gunvor Jónsson, provides a range of reviews of recent contributions to scholarship on mobility and migration.

The twin themes of "voluntariness" and compulsion that so defined and shaped the everyday lives of migrants across the globe during 2021, due to the spread and continued mutations of the COVID-19 virus and the entrenched and racialized inequalities it has exposed, reproduced, and exacerbated at local, national, regional, and international scales, are explored throughout the contributions to this issue of *Migration and Society*. "Voluntary" return schemes to countries of dubitable safety, implemented by wealthy countries in the Global North that seem determined to shirk the responsibilities of international conventions and a sense of shared responsibility for human welfare and dignity, need to be critically examined, including the ways in which such policies are contested, challenged, and subverted by migrants and those supporting them along their journeys, whether in places of transit or settlement. The articles in this issue do exactly that, *and* raise timely questions about the ethics and politics of knowledge production in an unequal pandemic world.

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#### ■ NOTE

1. Figure compiled by the authors from statistics available on <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/>.

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#### ■ REFERENCE

- Holder, Josh (2022) 'Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World,' *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html>, last accessed March 2, 2022.