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**Boundaries to Belonging: An Ethnography of Refugee Resettlement in Washington State**

By

Elizabeth Baseman

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
*Master of Arts*

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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## **Master's Thesis**

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Elizabeth Ann Baseman

May 19, 2023

**Boundaries to Belonging: An Ethnography of Refugee Resettlement in Washington State**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
*Master of Arts*

by  
Elizabeth Baseman  
May 2023



## Abstract

Borders are places of contention. In the twenty-first century nationalism and xenophobia of the non-citizen are driven by the securitization and surveillance of spaces between nations. As the rate of crises causing people to become forcibly displaced increases, opportunities for migrating groups to access security across borders decrease. Resettlement, one of the only legal pathways to citizenship offered to displaced groups, is granted to individuals who qualify as a refugee -- someone unable or unwilling to return home based on a well-founded fear of persecution. In the United States, refugee resettlement agencies (RRAs) are federally contracted organizations that support displaced clients integrate into local communities by connecting them to core services. Service providers in resettlement are unelected political representatives for the clients they are contracted to support, acting as gatekeepers and social links to services, their actions and interactions with their clients reinforce or refuse the structures of violence and injustice they work within.

This project uses ethnography to focus on the subjective experiences of service providers (employees, caseworkers, and volunteers) and clients (those resettling in the U.S.) in order to understand the relationships between the personal and the political in resettlement. RRAs are operated by service providers who act as intermediaries between domestic policy and local practices. As the first point of contact for refugees in their new communities, service providers are integral to the resettlement process, how they understand their work affects how their clients are resettled. Inquiring how the individual effects and is affected by institutions is an opportunity to dissect the assumed aggregate of power and emphasize the avenues to redirect it for more just, and equitable systems in resettlement.

Keywords: Resettlement, refugee, neoliberalism, faith-based organization, colonialism

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# Introduction

My passport edges are frayed by my nervous thumbing. Each time I shuffle through custom lines: Miami, JFK, SFO, SeaTac, Philadelphia, the return to the U.S. is jarring. The armed, uniformed, Customs and Border Patrol agents stand broad and unsmiling, barking at disoriented travelers. I am a non-indigenous, white, settler-descent woman who was born and raised in the United States. I have never been questioned for leaving or returning to the U.S. because of my paperwork. Still, I move with trepidation. This privileged invisibility, not to be objected, or targeted, is a part and product of imperial histories that simultaneously perpetuate and stifle people's ability to safely move through borders.

Borders are fluid, political, socially important, and arbitrary. For the estimated 100 million people who have been "forced to move, within or across borders" (UNHCR n.d.) due to conflict, violence, natural disaster and other external or internal factors in past decades only a third will qualify as "refugees" (UNHCR n.d.). A refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to "return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (UNHCR n.d.). Those who do not qualify as refugees will be recognized as asylum-seekers, returnees, stateless people, internally displaced people or villainized as illegal migrants or terrorists. Immigration in the twenty-first century is contingent on an individual's political and legal status; the movement of people from one nation to another has become a topic of contention due to nationalist and security discourses that restrict the movement for the millions of people (who have been forcibly displaced with nowhere to go).

This thesis is an exploration of refugee resettlement in Washington state with the service providers (employees, contractors, and volunteers) and the clients (those individuals who have been forcibly displaced, recognized as asylum seekers and invited to resettle in a third, or host, country) at one of the nine federal refugee resettlement agencies (RRA) in the U.S. From 1981 – 2017, the U.S. resettled more refugees annually than any other host country in the Global North [a term that in this paper refers to

the former colonial powers, wealthy from centuries of physical, social, political, and economic violence – the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom].

Since 2016 the U.S. and other resettlement countries have decreased their admission ceilings as the number of people displaced. The U.S. resettlement process – how many refugees will be accepted and how much funding RRAs will receive – is determined annually by the President of the U.S. and Congress (United States Refugee Act of 1980). Refugee admission ceilings, funding, program support, and evolving immigration laws are federal inconsistencies that limit service providers and their clients from accessing their livelihoods for future building. This project primarily focuses on the lived experiences of the individuals who facilitate resettlement; asking how they understand their work to frame the process of resettlement in relation to the local, domestic, and international structures they labor within.

Observing how policies are practiced, and what these practices produce through the interpersonal relationships at refugee resettlement agencies is an opportunity to draw analyses from the aggregate of individual actions, to unravel the relationships that create the resettlement assemblage

The global population of people displaced due to “persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order” (UNHCR n.d.) has more than doubled; from 41 million displaced in 2010 to over 100 million in 2022 (UNHCR n.d.). Separating those fleeing persecution and violence from other catalysts of migration are difficult to discern in the mixed migratory patterns of the twenty-first century (Coen 2017; Humpage et al. 2019; Parrish et al. 2020). The delegation of individuals into groups: asylum seeker, internally displaced person (IDP), refugee, special immigrant visa (SIV), migrant, seasonal migrant, immigrant, creates categories of deservingness determined by a legal objective entity (usually the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees or United States Citizenship and Immigration Services), where individuals are prioritized as “worthy” or “unworthy” of aid based on individual and international stipulations (Darrow 2018; Chimni 2009; Hyndman 2010; Smith and Waite 2019).

Resettlement, the most politically secure option for a forcibly displaced person who has been granted refugee status, is offered to less than four percent of refugees who qualify (Hyndman and Giles

2017, UNHCR n.d.). Resettlement in a third country is offered to those displaced who cannot return home and have needs that cannot be addressed in their current area (UNHCR n.d). As wealthier nation-states have the resources to secure their borders (through militarization and policing), they are able to enforce who and how many people may pass through international borders legally (De Genova 2016; DeLeon 2011; Hammerstad 2014) The response to the displacement crisis is a neoliberal constellation of international and individual agents engaging alongside or adjacent to each other to fulfill the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1967 (Benson 2016; Ferris 2010; Frazier 2022). The practice of these goals is mechanized by public, private, and government organizations both internationally and locally through neoliberal market models that highlight “individuals, casualties and decentralized and individualized remedies for social problems” (Kingfisher 2016, 257).

The refugee, as a legal definition, was originally constructed to protect civilians in Europe displaced by the World Wars in 1951 (Barnett 2014; UNHCR n.d.). Those parameters have since expanded to include any person who is “unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” by the Geneva Convention of 1951 (Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees). A vernacular term and evaluative label, *refugee*, among other categories denoting a status detached from a nation or in-between nations, are subject to interpretation by nation states, their ideologies, and how the individuals of nation states translate these into action with resettling populations. People who have been forcibly displaced and seek asylum in a third country are caught between political wedges of immigration and humanitarian aid – two systems steeped in centuries of racial-colonial primitive accumulation based on the exclusion, erasure, and enslavement of marginalized groups through hierarchal relationships driven by violence (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 201; Ferris 2010; Issar 2014; King 2016; Tuck and Yang 2012).

Displaced people are tethered by the labels and restrictions assigned to them by others, affecting how they move through the world, and how the world moves around them. The categories that control in/im/migration are driven by centuries of imperialist driven Othering. Patterns of perpetual violence and

dispossession produce an inequitable world. Ideas of borders, of nation states, of sovereignty – are products of imperial histories where power is maintained through dispossession and elimination of the Other.

Categories created are also categories embodied. In the United Kingdom, anti-immigration rhetoric became realized in the Brexit of 2016, both seceding from the European Union and restricting immigration policies. Other nations in Europe made similar decisions based on securitization discourses. In the United States, the exercise of this power was most recently seen in Executive Order 13769 or *Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States*, in effect from 2017 - 2021. This ‘Muslim Ban’ suspended refugee resettlement programs indefinitely for refugees from seven Muslim countries, including, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, and decreased annual refugee admissions, introduced new biometric and personal background investigations on prospective resettling refugees, increased Border Patrol personnel (DHS n.d.; E.O. 13769, 2017).

Immigration is subjective, steeped local contexts. Borders fluctuate based on political, historical, social, and economic relationships. Absorbing and rejecting individuals based on international policies are a product of a multitude of bureaucratic expressions based on individual positioning and beliefs. This research emphasizes the individual actions that reinforce, or remake policy in refugee resettlement by examining the relationships between power, policy, and practice through the lived experience of individuals within the resettlement assemblage.

Service providers in resettlement are unelected political representatives for the clients they are contracted to support, acting as gatekeepers and social links to services, their actions and interactions with their clients reinforce or refuse the structures of violence and injustice they work within. Using ethnography as a tool to unravel these relationships, I focus on the *situated knowledges* produced by individual perspectives emphasize experience as expertise, in hopes to explore “new ways of knowing” to inspire “new ways of thinking” about power, agency, and the possibility of humanizing a process that historically dehumanizes (Erickson 2020; Harraway 1988, 190).



## Chapter One: Forcibly Displaced People? Or People Forcibly Displaced?

The wind blowing across the British Isles was odorous of fear of asylum seekers, infecting everybody with the panic of impending doom, and so articles were written and read, simply and stridently, as though the writers lived in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past, and they had never considered this to be a normal course of history: the influx into Britain of black and brown people from countries created by Britain. Yet he understood. It had to be comforting, this denial of history.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie *Americanah* (2013, 320)

### Resettlement

Resettlement is one of the three durable solutions offered to forcibly displaced people (FDP) by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Resettlement “is considered for refugees who cannot be protected in their region of origin” and assures refugees a pathway to citizenship in the host country, freedom of movement, as well as the right to work (Jacobsen 2014, 104; 1951 Convention; 1967 Protocol; Van Selm 2014, 513). Resettlement is available to a fraction of the 26 million people who are protected under UNHCR’s refugee mandate and is dependent on the cooperation and responsibility sharing of independent nation states (UNHCR; Van Selm 2014). The majority of refugees will be considered for voluntary repatriation, return to their home country, or integration into the asylum or host country where they applied for refugee status. Refugees may wait in extended exile for five to twenty years in urban areas and refugee camps in the Global South before gaining legal protection through resettlement or other local pathways (Bulley 2017, Coen 2017; El-Shaarawi 2015; Hyndman and Giles 2017).

As El-Shaarawi observes, the “shrinking global asylum space” (2015, 38) contributes to the influx of displaced people waiting in “extended exile” in refugee camps and urban locations without legal protection or political rights (Hyndman and Giles 2017). As the rate of people forcibly displaced increases annually so do barriers to safe, legal border crossings, transforming borderlands into social geopolitical weapons that reaffirm the sovereignty of nation states and reinforce hegemonic powers through immigration control (Correa and Thomas 2019; DeGenova 2016; DeLeon 2012; Narotzky and Besnier

2014; Walker and Winton 2017). The recent securitization of borders – surveillance, walls, policing and punishment - has bloated the border beyond its literal demarcations, disrupting the fluidity of migration with restrictive, categorical immigration laws (Khosravi 2010; Goodwin-Gill 2014; Walker and Winton 2017).

Borders are the boundaries between independent nation states. Boundaries are reinforced with rhetoric and policy. A nation's ideologies and actions produce physical, social, and legal barriers and repercussions for migrating groups. In short, borders are the catalysts for migrant illegality, not a response to them (Khosravi 2010). In the United States, borders have become a place to continue exercising exclusion by demarcating the sovereign nation and the 'illegal' or 'terrorist' Other (Correa and Thomas 2019; DeGenova 2016; DeLeon 2012). Settler colonial structures perpetuate cycles of precarity through dispossession via discriminatory migration policies. For privileged individuals with the correct paperwork, borders are but a line that differentiates one geopolitical territory or country from the other: an extra checkpoint in the airport, another stamp in the passport. For others, borders are spaces of tension, and contention, where international and domestic law actively violate the human rights of migrating groups.

Immigration serves as the impetus for exclusion in the twenty-first century, “for minorities and disadvantaged populations, the lived meanings of citizenship are completely entangled with such systems of exclusion, selection, and judgement” (Ong 2003). These systems are built upon assumptions of power obtained and retained through force (hooks 2015, 90).

The accumulation of wealth through expropriation of land and exploitation of people are cornerstones of settler colonialism (Beliso De-Jesus, Aisha and Pierre 2020, L.T. Smith 2012, Tuck and Yang 2012). Global and local histories derived from centuries of exploitation, expropriation, and exclusion through Imperial force are not relegated to the past: dispossession and erasure of marginalized groups is perpetuated through direct (political exclusion, physically) and indirect (economically, socially) structural violence (Farmer 2004, 208; L.T. Smith 2012; Benson 2016).

## Refugees and Research

The other exists in contradiction, or perhaps in paradox, being either invisible or hypervisible, but rarely just visible. Most of the time we do not see the other or see right through them, whoever the other may be to us, since each of us – even if we are seen as others by some – have our own others. When we do see the other, the other is not truly human to us, by very definition of being an other, but is instead a stereotype, a joke, or a horror...Invisible and hypervisible, refugees are ignored and forgotten by those who are not refugees until they turn into a menace. Refugees, like all others, are unseen until they are seen everywhere, threatening to overwhelm our borders.

- Viet Thanh Nguyen *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* (2018, 11)

Instead of accountability, the taxonomy of individuals through labels distances them from their humanity, “forced migration is not simply a descriptive term; [it is] also an evaluative one” (Gibney 2014, 48). Applying the description before the noun reduces agency: saying someone was *forced* to migrate, like the colloquial forcibly displaced person (FDP) is a quasi-evaluation based on a specific temporal event in their life that becomes their definitive political identity, simultaneously de-linking them from their humanity (home, language, culture, family), limiting their access to their livelihoods, and obscuring perpetrators of power (Povinelli 2011; Jacobsen 2014; Stepputat and Sorenson 2014).

Systems like humanitarian aid and immigration are processes designed to distance a group from their humanity - they replicate the hierarchal power dynamics drawn from imperial and colonial histories through political, social, and economic exclusion. Racial colonial discourses are embedded in the processes that respond and delegate aid to people who have been displaced.

This project focuses on deciphering the disjunct between expectations and the individual human experience within these systems, examining the relationships between policy and practice, between the individual and the international, in the rich contexts where resettlement happens.

This project seeks to contribute to literature, policies, and experiences documenting refugee resettlement in the U.S. through exploring the day-to-day experiences of individuals who are affected by resettlement policies. Bureaucratic processes within resettlement (and other social services) are contained within parameters of policy set forth by government entities. The interpretation of these policies – how they are understood by the service providers, aid workers, and bureaucrats – are contingent on the local

landscapes wherein they take place. Observing the practice of policy implementation from the individual standpoint creates space to inquire how policy produces practice, but also how “practices produce policy” (Mosse 2004, 640). Focusing on the daily processes and practices of resettlement allows reflection on the ‘slow rhythms’ that affect the individuals working and living within resettlement in the United States (Povinelli 2011; 153).

Refugee resettlement occurs in an assemblage, a social political mechanism that, while wide-reaching, is not totalitarian (Erickson 2020; Kingfisher 2016). Like inertia, power does not propel itself. For injustice and inequality to continue interference from an external force is required, observing how these structures assemble at a local and individual level “allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them” (Tsing 2015, 23). Structural violence, the embedded systemic inequalities derived from physical violence, is present in the processes of U.S. resettlement processes (Graeber 2012). As service providers and clients propel policy practices forward, understanding their individual experience informs how resettlement reaffirms or refuses these structures of violence.

Thinking about power from a Foucauldian standpoint, while helpful for framing relationships, fails to address the multiplicity of actors that coordinate to mechanize global systems (Lamphere 2016, Sigona 2014). Grand, all-encompassing discourses – capitalism, neoliberalism, colonialism, etc. – are not uniform or continuous transmissions; rather, they are subject to a “process of translation” through policy and individual action (Freeman 2009; Kingfisher 2016, 265). The colonial parameters for exclusion continue in the mundane “structures of violence” within everyday bureaucracy are not spectacles of violence, but daily forms of “pervasive social inequality” where inequalities are reinforced through policy and practice (Graeber 2012, 112). Focusing on the day-to-day processes in resettlement allows us to think about things assumed universal as pieces of an aggregate with a possibility for actionable change: “something that looks universal can become quite variable and nuanced when we look at it in its specific contexts of occurrence” (Kingfisher 2016, 265).

Resettlement, and humanitarianism at large, is a direct response to the geopolitical relationships that create a precarious existence for displaced people. Service providers are the primary point of contact

for refugees during the 90-day resettlement process. Situated between local, domestic, and international canons -- the fluidity in their roles mean they act as both links to the host community and gatekeepers to basic services, including housing, employment, language classes, transportation, and social services (Akinsulure-Smith et al. 2018; Donato and Ferris 2020; Erickson 2020; Greene 2019; Sheldon 2012).

Exploring these relationships opens up a unique space for service providers as individual agents who interpret, respond, and facilitate the resettlement assemblage. Service providers in resettlement must account for more than resources. As refugees experience deterritorialization and dehistoricization, they are displaced and erased from history through social, political, and economic exclusion (Fassin 2012, Nagengast 2002; Tiktin 2014). Clients in resettlement are coming from a position of loss: loss of home, loss of family, loss of language, loss of a way of life. Service providers are gatekeepers to resources that allow clients to establish security in a new community, but their actions can simultaneously empower clients or render them vulnerable.

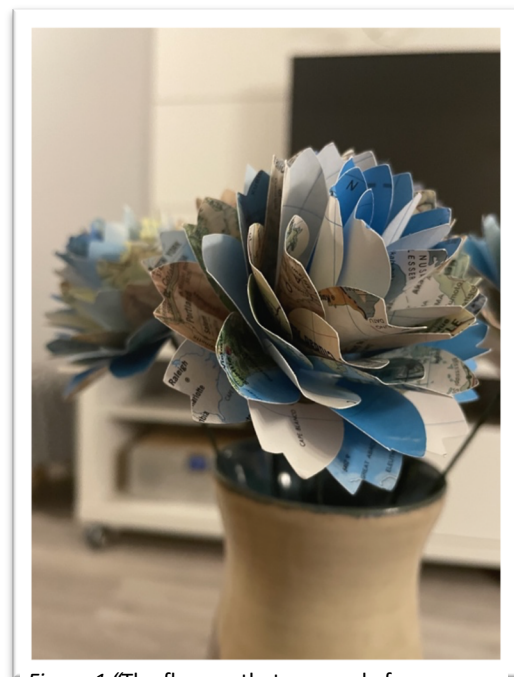
Imperial histories consistently demonstrate who and what counts as human through systematic forms of classification, historically justifying hierarchies off “race and typologies of different societies” (L.T. Smith 2008, 25). These labels communicate context to the individual’s situation and are used by nation-states to categorize worthiness assigning rights and resources to different people based on their individual (or familial) migratory circumstance (Darrow 2018). This eliminatory logic continues to weave through the past into the present with the ‘protection’ of displaced groups and the material and legal services they receive based on circumstance. Though the process of resettlement has been standardized on international and domestic planes, independent nation states are able to determine their own model for domestic resettlement of refugees.

Theorizing grand structures in resettlement as an assemblage puts the emphasis on individual experience and agency. Service providers and clients are constantly “disarticulating and rearticulating” (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, 120) based on evolving policy and individual choice. Despite the importance of their position in facilitating resettlement, little research has been done on the motivations, expectations, or experiences of the service providers who facilitate resettlement in the United States.

While compassion fatigue, burnout, and emotional fatigue are frequently found in discourses on resettlement work (and carework in general) there are few projects that critically investigate the positionality and potential of the service providers who perform the labor of resettlement. By employing decolonial and feminist ideologies, I acknowledge the piecemeal and particularized attempted colonization's in resettlement through highlighting the agency of individuals within the assemblage by emphasizing experience as expertise (Cahill et al. 2010; Kingfisher 2016, Tuck 2009). Disembodied objectivity generalizes the complex arenas of human relationships, localizing the research to honor and learn the individual's lived experience offers a "partial perspective [that] promises objective vision" (Harraway 1988, 190) (Figure 1).

Approaching power as a dynamic entity, something that is constantly evolving, allows space for alternative narratives and leads us away from the all-encompassing, all-knowing scientific objective.

Feminist research studies the movement of power, analyzing praxis and practice in local landscapes to identify patterns of inequality to advocate for justice and equality for vulnerable groups (Peake 2016). Refugee resettlement, both globally and locally, is a part of the juxtaposed neoliberal transnational structure that champions individual autonomy in privatized, deregulated public spheres built on centuries of racial/colonial primitive accumulation through exclusion (Issar 2021; L.T. Smith 2012). Studying the localized, individual, components of resettlement is an opportunity to dissect the aggregate and illicit new perspectives on how power is mechanized, and how to redirect it.



*Figure 1* "The flowers that are made from maps. This kind of captures the hope of seeing my coworkers too. You know a lot of them have gone through the [resettlement] system. So, seeing how each part of their story, and how each part plays into who they are. And it can create something beautiful." *Rachel July 2022*

## Chapter Two - "It was a Journey"

The consul banged the table and said,  
"If you've got no passport, you're officially dead":  
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

W.H. Auden

### Modern Exclusions

Citizenship, a legal status within a territory that allows individuals to vote, receive education and employment in a geographic territory, permits access to certain privileges within a nation (Erickson 2020, 38; Ong 2003). In the U.S., citizenship and belonging have been largely defined by the legacy of hierarchical social dynamics through violence directed at non-white, non-European individuals. The “unofficial social meanings and criteria” to ‘belong’ somewhere is subjective, fluid, and contingent on individual circumstances, as well as international and domestic law (Erickson 2020; Ong 2003). Power to decide who belongs in the U.S. stems from settler colonial discourses based on race, gender, and the primitive accumulation of property - “by people with a lot of power and social standing and by those who have little power or status. These practices have as much to do with feelings of belonging and inclusion as they do with legal status” (Erickson 2020, 38; see also Issar 2021; Nagengast 2002; L.T. Smith 2012).

Nation building through conquest is a “historic and ongoing daily process” (King 2016), where non-white groups are continually remade as non-human ‘Others’ or property to advance the social, economic, and political endeavors of settlers (Arvin et al. 2013; King 2016; Tuck and Yang 2012). The modern world is shaped by ideologies and values based on dominant-oppressor relationships modelled after European expansion, the colonization of the Americas, dispossession from Indigenous people, and enslavement of Africans (Beliso De Jesus, Aisha and Pierre 2020, 66; King 2016).

More than a mechanism for economic, military, and political expression, imperialism is a central part of the idea of the modern state and the citizen (Hansen 2014, 257; L.T. Smith 2012). The subjectivity of immigration policies to each country creates dissonance in displacement responses, some groups receive swifter, more secure forms of aid, like resettlement, while others are relegated into camps or political illegality elsewhere (Hyndman and Giles 2017).

In 1951, in response to restrictive immigration laws and large numbers of people displaced in Europe after the World Wars, both local and global humanitarian groups began negotiating support for people forcibly displaced (Barnett 2014; Donini 2010; Ferris 2010; Loescher 2014; Van Selm 2014). Originally conceptualized as an apolitical entity, humanitarianism allowed non-government affiliated aid to be distributed regardless of nationality or status (Chandler 2001; Loescher 2014). Humanitarian is inherently political. Non-government entities depend on funding from private, public, and governmental benefactors to do their work (Loescher 2014).

The politics of humanitarian aid are often exclusionary and systemic, perpetuating intersectional (gender, class, race) and relational (global and local context) prejudices and inequalities for certain groups via logics of elimination that dehumanize the Other (Wolfe 2006).

### The Journey – From Home to Elsewhere

This project focuses on a specific spatial and temporal aspect of displacement the 90-day resettlement process in the United States – it is imperative to understand the events and choices that lead to this temporality. People who have been forcibly displaced have applied for asylum and been recognized as refugees typically wait years, sometimes decades, before being resettled in a third country (Hyndman and Giles 2017; UNHCR).

For example, over 3.2 million people were forcibly displaced in Afghanistan when the Taliban took over Kabul (UNHCR). The United States military airlifted over 100,000 individuals in the weeks after the fall of the city, developing the Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) program to respond to the number of those unable to safely return home, or live in Kabul (Office of Refugee Resettlement). The APA program is specific for those displaced in Afghanistan and does not apply to any other displaced or asylum group. Recipients of APA have been granted a two-year visa and are cleared to work upon arrival in the U.S. but are not granted a pathway to citizenship. It is unclear what will happen to individual's once their two-year program ends.

A similar program, U for Ukraine, was created for Ukrainians displaced by the conflict with Russia. Both programs provide legal protection to live and work in the United States, but for a limited



time and with no pathways to citizenship. Depending on circumstance and relationship to the U.S., individual's displaced from Kabul and Ukraine were able to skip "extended exile" in camps (Hyndman and Giles 2017; Office of Refugee Resettlement)

The responses to the circumstances in Kabul and Ukraine were exceptional in that many of those who had been displaced were resettled in third countries within a matter of months, bypassing the decades spent in refugee or urban camps. This affected both service providers and the displaced clients they support. The clients from Afghanistan had been displaced and resettled at the smaller, suburban Seeking Solace office in Washington were able to relocate on their own accord after the initial ninety-day resettlement period.

By the time I start my research, the Juma's are the only ones who haven't moved out of the area. Most of the APA cases have relocated on their own accord to Seattle, where there are more culturally appropriate stores and a larger population of people from Afghanistan.

Abdul-Khaliq Juma and his wife Asmaan have invited me to their home on a Friday evening in September 2022 to speak with me about their experience in resettlement. I see Asmaan and the three boys occasionally, they attended the family literacy and school readiness programs put on by Seeking Solace over the summer. Abdul-Khaliq and his family have experienced the process of becoming refugees. Over the past year they have fled their home, waited in camps, flown to new countries, and waited again. These experiences, the Juma's journey from Kabul to Washington, demonstrate the ways in which people who have been displaced are dehumanized and dispossessed throughout the stages of humanitarian aid.

When I sit down with Abdul-Khaliq and Leeda, the Dari interpreter who has been contracted through Seeking Solace, to talk about his experience in resettlement, I begin the interview with the questions I have been using throughout the project. He answers them quickly, the efficiency of someone who has been continuously asked and re-asked questions over the past year. I ask what home means to him, what belonging means to him, Leeda translates English to Dari and Dari to English, allowing Abdul-Khaliq and I to converse. When I ask what the most difficult part of resettlement is, Khaliq looks at his wife Asmaan and they laugh. He then asks if he could begin his story.

Khaliq begins his story in Afghanistan, telling me about his job of twelve years with the U.S. government. He liked his schedule, where he would have three weeks on and three weeks off. His boys went to private school, and they lived near family and friends. He and his family had a “good home and good living, life had no issues” Khaliq shares. He speaks for another three minutes before pausing to allow Leeda to translate. She listens intently, saying ‘hauh’ every so often, and taking notes while Khaliq speaks. She looks them over before sharing in English. She relays his story to me, telling me how he and his family were separated while he stayed to help secure the building near the airport. Surrounded and subject to bomb threats, Abdul-Khaliq and his coworkers helped evacuate diplomats, visa-holders, and other non-Afghanistan residents. Leeda continues to interpret, referring to the notes she took while Khaliq told us his story.

“He wanted to share a memory he has of that time. The area that he was assigned to normally was for guarding ten people, but because of this situation happening he was doing the role for 30 people instead. On the other side of that there were three to four thousand people that were trying to flee the country because they were in [guarding] the airport. They weren’t sure if there were any Taliban that were in there as well hiding next to their airbase. A British information agency told them that there was a corolla that had a person with a suicide bomb and that it could be coming any time. He said it was very scary not knowing when your life or death is going to be. It is scary having a lot of uncertainties, it was a really scary moment”

[Leeda pauses and asks Abdul-Khaliq something. He clarifies, she continues translating]

“Meanwhile they had about two weeks of doing this sort of job until all those people had left, and it was his family's turn to escape. When it was his turn, he was very happy because there was not a lot of food, he had gone four days without food at one point. He also said he was not getting enough sleep, basically two or three hours of sleep a night. It was just a lot of uncertainties.”

Leeda is at the end of her notes. She nods, indicating to Abdul-Khaliq to continue his story. He speaks animatedly for a few minutes. In his mid-thirties, Abdul-Khaliq has good posture and uses his hands when he speaks. His hands return to his lap while Leeda translates to me, telling me how Abdul-Khaliq and his coworkers became responsible for helping others escape, “before the Afghan workers were able to leave, they had to make sure the U.S. army were evacuated, but when he and his family left there were about fifty people still there.” Leeda exhales, “he is saying he is not sure what happened after they left. What happened to those families, or those workers.” Leeda continues to interpret their story for me,

“He said it was a journey. As for the process of escaping, they had some notice in advance, but they didn’t know the exact day or time that they would be leaving. He and Asmaan got calls when it was time to go, and Asmaan’s brother took her and the boys to meet him and they stayed one night at a camp in Kabul. The people there were very helpful in assisting them, they had food there. He thinks the food came from another area, perhaps Dubai because they couldn’t get any food from Afghanistan. They even brought him cigarettes.”

Refugees, and other people who have been forcibly displaced are caught in cycles of precarity. As Abdul-Khaliq experienced in his escape, there is a hierarchy of worthiness of whom to protect. Despite the decades of political entanglements U.S. citizens and citizens of other countries in the Global North were prioritized in the escape out of Kabul.

### Humanitarian Aid – Balancing Power and Precarity

Ambiguous concepts like humanitarianism operate under “broad commitments” to alleviate suffering and protect those impacted by conflict or crisis (Donini 2010, S220). Though its ethos is to support those in crisis, the categories of displacement determine whether an individual is *worthy* of protection based on standards largely created in the Global North (Chimni 2009; Darrow 2018; Hyndman and Giles 2017). Relations of power in the canon of immigration and humanitarianism are directly related to Imperialist histories and the marginalization, deterritorialization, and dehistoricization of certain groups as less than human (Fassin 2012; L.T. Smith 2012). The dissemination of this power is contingent on the systemic oppression

of the ‘Other’ through exclusionary practices and structures in immigration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Beliso De-Jesus et al. 2020; Chimini 1998, 2009; Hyndman and Giles 2017).

Power in the globalized era is ambivalent. As wealthier nation-states have the authority to determine when they intervene, how they intervene, and how much they intervene for whom, the distribution of humanitarian aid in the twenty-first century is antithetical to its neutral, apolitical beginnings that provided lifesaving support without discrimination based on race, religion, or location (Donini 2010; Fassin 2012; Tiktin 2014). *Humanitarian reason* is used to theorize the logic used for international altruism, contingent on moral obligations and international relationships that reinforce imperial and colonial rhetoric of difference between “the more powerful to the weaker, the more fragile, the more vulnerable” (Fassin 2012, 4). The ambiguity of humanitarianism means the paternalistic hierarchy of aid is based on the context within which it exists.

Spatially, the displacement crises perpetuated by the Global North have been disproportionately delegated to the Global South where the majority of United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) asylum seekers, internally displaced, and refugees reside for decades in camps or political anonymity and illegality (Chimni 2008; Coen 2017; Donini 2010; Hyndman 2019; Loescher 2014). The

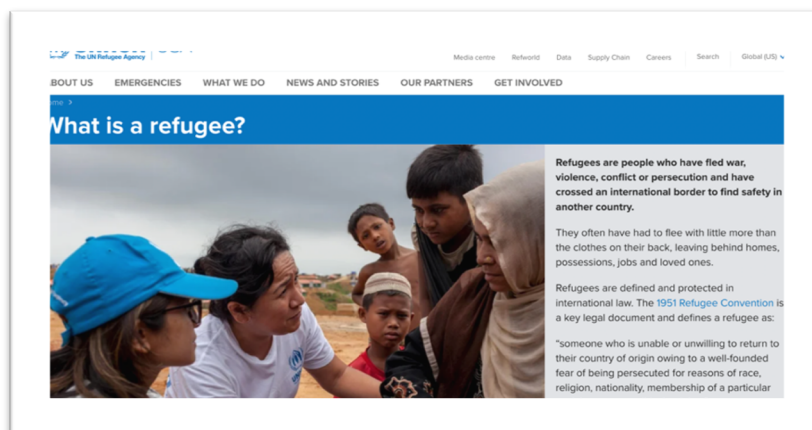


Figure 2 "What is a refugee?" UNHCR website November 2022

UNHCR’s website provides easy to understand definitions and figures regarding displacement. On their ‘Figures at a Glance’ page they provide the statistics, “one in every eighty-eight people on earth has been forced to flee” (UNHCR).

On another page titled “What is a Refugee” they define *what* a refugee is, not *who* they are (Figure 2). This demonstrates the ideation of refugees as inhuman from the UNHCR, the central entity for organizing international rights and protection of people who have been forcibly displaced, as objects instead of people.

In humanitarian aid taxonomies reduce people to labels. For Abdul-Khaliq and his family (like others who are forced to leave their homes) these labels signify worthiness, worthiness of being rescued, worthiness of being supported, worthiness of being resettled. Once the visa holders and citizens of the Global North were evacuated, Abdul-Khaliq and the other people from Afghanistan were permitted to leave. The Jumas (Abdul-Khaliq's family) flew from Kabul to Qatar on a large army plane, standing for the duration of the flight with two or three hundred other people. In Qatar they stayed at a makeshift camp where people received information for next steps. Leeda translates Abdul-Khaliq description of their accommodation who likens it to a "WinCo store with nothing inside of it. Just an area with lots of single beds and thousands of people."

The Jumas were in Qatar for seven days before being flying to Germany, to land in Washington D.C. Leeda continues relaying Abdul-Khaliq's story for me in English: "in DC they boarded a bus to Pennsylvania, [they were] escorted by policy security to an office where they did their official paperwork and got their COVID vaccination. He said they were very tired." The Jumas arrived in Indiana at the Atterbury-Muscatatuk Camp, where they stayed for the next four months before beginning their final stretch to Washington.

The timeline from displacement, applying for asylum, and beginning resettlement varies per individual, the Jumas were moved relatively quickly to the United States, four to six weeks after the fall of Kabul. Those who have been selected to resettle in the United States are required to go through additional medical and security screenings with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (The United States Refugee Admissions Program). Timelines for the screening process vary, taking anywhere from three months to twenty-four months after being invited by the U.S. for resettlement. While processing takes place, refugees reside in military camps; variables for processing are dependent on the individual application and circumstance (Fassin 2012; The United States Refugee Admissions Program). Abdul-Khaliq and his family resided at the Atterbury-Muscatatuk federal military base operated by the National Guard in Indiana.

When I search ‘Muscatatuk’ my computer shows pages of military websites, and articles on the closing of the mental facility in the 1920s. ‘Muscatatuk Native American’ yields a few results on the peoples before European settlers, the erasure of the Native buried beneath sediments of colonial dehistoricization. An empire that operates through internal and external colonial projects, the United States invites the dispossessed onto seized, militarized land (Arvin et al. 2013, 12; Tuck and Yang 2012, 7). During Fall of 2021, when Khaliq’s family and others fleeing Kabul came to the U.S., the camp could accommodate about two thousand refugees. During their time he estimates over six thousand refugees were held there at one time.

Dispossession collides across centuries.

The biometric and medical processing procedures are specific to U.S. resettlement, refugees are required to be held at U.S. military camps while these take place. I ask Abdul-Khaliq what the camp was like, he speaks in Dari while Asmaan occasionally nods in agreement. The youngest boy crawls on and off his father’s lap, Abdul-Khaliq finishes speaking and waits for Leeda to speak. She tells me what Abdul-Khaliq has told her about the camp, “there was a line for food every meal. It was dark in the morning when they would line up for food. Then they would be able to pick up their food at nine or ten. Then at eleven they had to get back in line for lunch which was served at one. He said the line was from their house here to the Winco [about half a mile]and was always at least a two hour wait.”

Leeda tells me that Abdul-Khaliq and Asmaan said they felt lucky they had the opportunity to purchase food, especially with three kids. “The kids were just getting tired, and it was really warm, the food line was just hectic, so he ended up using a lot of the salary money he was given for the journey. He thinks he spent about four or five thousand (USD) on food while at the camp.” Leeda continues, “they had the option of getting the food from the shop in the area and they would also deliver pizzas or snacks for them” Leeda translates for Abdul-Khaliq, while I sit quietly. Leeda takes a breathe before reaching the end of her translation, “he decided it was a better option instead of standing in the line, at least when the kids were really hungry. He says some people didn’t even have a dollar to spend. It was unfortunate that they had to wait.”

The Juma's arrived in Washington state around midnight, greeted at the airport by employees from Seeking Solace, one of the nine federally recognized refugee resettlement agencies (RRA). Over the next year Khaliq will be employed in multiple places, Asmaan will give birth to a baby girl, and their family will relocate on their own to live near family in Seattle.

There are layers to vulnerability (Humpage et al 2019; Luna 2009). The intersections (race, gender, class) and relationalities (local and global context) that construct an individual are simultaneously fluid and static. Displaced identities evolve to adapt in order to survive. People who have been forcibly displaced are dealing with loss (Jacobsen 2014) (Figure 3). People displaced and resettled in the U.S. are not 'essentially' vulnerable but 'rendered' vulnerable through structures of dispossession (Luna 2009, 122). Humanitarian responses to displacement create new hierarchies, enabling "people to find different ways of imagining their existence: not changing their conditions, but living differently with them" (Feldman 2015, 431).

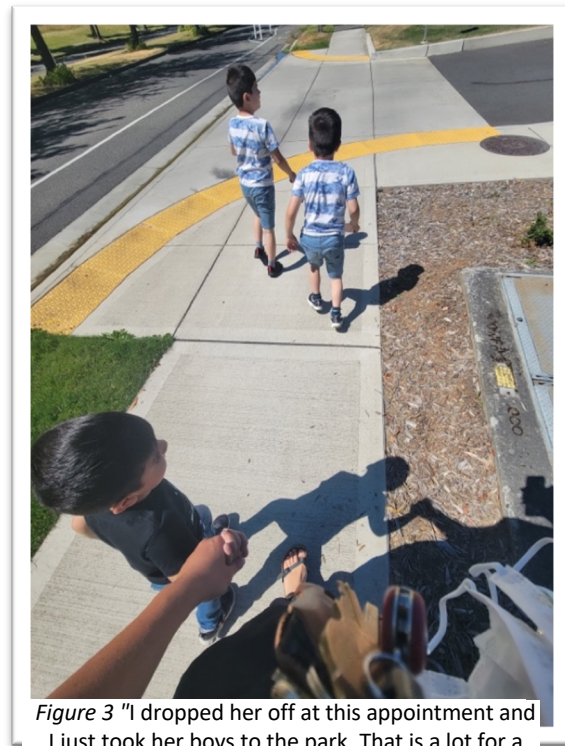


Figure 3 "I dropped her off at this appointment and I just took her boys to the park. That is a lot for a mom to relinquish her children" Maddy June 2023

Though resettlement seeks to facilitate aid in a human- serving way, neoliberal governance emphasizes individual self-sufficiency while simultaneously restricting refugees to access their livelihoods (Jacobsen 2014). Resettlement, like other social services in the United States have replaced social activism with "a new disciplinary social policy...one that made productivity and efficiency the measure of service" (Walkowitz 1999, 220). Goals in resettlement are centered around self-sufficiency through sustained employment – regardless of the client's former experience, education, or ability – employment of any kind is the priority for resettlement agencies and service providers.

The refugee is a construct derived from the creation of borders. Contemporary surveillance of geopolitical demarcations and their enforcement create a process where displaced individuals are conditioned into *becoming* a refugee through deterritorialization, dehistoricization, and dispossession via the humanitarian process. This logic of elimination is present in the policies for refugee resettlement that limit livelihood access to groups rendered vulnerable through dispossession by excluding from resources and political security (Fassin 2012; Wolfe 2006). Humanitarianism operates between the government groups that create policy, and the private agencies that put these policies into practice. Exploring the interactions and actions that mechanize policies is an opportunity to unpack the relationships that make up the resettlement assemblage.



## Chapter Three – Methodology: Space, Place, and People

The exercise of decolonizing methodologies has to do more than critique colonialism. It has to open up possibilities for understanding and knowing the world differently and offering different solutions to problems caused by colonialism and the failure of power structures to address these historic conditions.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012, xiii)

### Positionality

As a non-indigenous, white woman, and U.S. citizen, I have been allowed to move easily through borders. My passport creased from a decade of international travel, my privileged invisibility is an extension of the adventurer's tale at the expense of others, one only possible with wealth and security. The opportunity to continue my education has allowed me to reflect on my positionality on a global scale, understanding the intersections of my affluence, whiteness, and familial support as a scaffold of security.

Western Washington is a coastal sliver of the Pacific Northwest. As one of the largest resettlement states in the United States, with four refugee resettlement agencies (RRA) and a dozen different offices, it is an ideal place to study refugee resettlement. I began volunteering with Seeking Solace, a faith-based resettlement organization in a suburban area of Western Washington in September 2021. In June 2022, after being approved by Western Washington University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I transitioned into a dual role as researcher and volunteer. This duality afforded me access to a broader pool of participants to invite into my inquiry of policy and practice in refugee resettlement based on the lived experience of service providers and clients in Washington state.

### Fieldwork and Methods

Fieldwork was conducted in areas surrounding two Seeking Solace offices in Washington. Seeking Solace, a faith-based resettlement office, is one of the nine federally recognized voluntary organizations (VOLAGS) in the United States. I began volunteering at the new office, opened in early 2021, in my local community in September 2021, and began volunteering at the older office, opened in the 1970s in King County in May 2022. Having occupied both spaces for an extended period before collecting data, I was able to build strong relationships with the employees, volunteers, and clients. As a

volunteer, I was able to work with both caseworkers and clients, building relationships and becoming familiar with the expectations of the tasks and objectives in resettlement: grocery store runs, bus orientations with participants, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, language practice, family literacy classes, medical appointments, move-ins, move-outs, transportation, social security office errands, speaking with interpreters, waiting on hold, waiting in offices, waiting for paperwork, organizing paperwork, filing documents, assisting with resumes, professional development, as well as community activities like birthdays, celebrations, etc.

Ethnographic observant participation is an appropriate approach for this project and produced a thick description of the day-to-day events that are practiced in resettlement. “Observant participation” instead of ‘participant observation’ critiques the positionality of the researcher as an outside observer and participants as observed objects by acknowledging my interpersonal relationships within the project (Culhane and Elliot 2017, 11). The theme of politics and power can be best scrutinized through ethnography and experience (Culhane and Elliot 2017; Halilovich 2013; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). This ethnography emphasizes the contemporary framework of ethnographic research as “entangled relationships” (Ingold 2008, 1979). Approaching ethnography as collaborative knowledge making, emerging “through conversations and exchanges of many kinds among people interacting in diverse zones of entanglement” (Culhane and Elliot 2017, 4), was appropriate with a dual role as volunteer and researcher. Ethnography allowed me to produce a thick description of the intersections and contexts within resettlement, while honoring the intersections and contexts in which individuals come from (Geertz 1973).

As a volunteer, I was working with other service providers and clients, participating while observing in the resettlement process. As my goal is to better understand how service providers interpret and facilitate the federally regulated core services within resettlement, an ethnography “enables the exploration of how models are constrained. It also enables us to explore how people can undermine or sidestep hegemonic models” to reform for equity resettlement (Narotzky and Besnier 2014, S12).

I recorded fieldnotes in a notebook from June 2022 through March 2023. To synthesize information from interviews, fieldnotes, and participating while observing, I took a grounded theoretical approach was taken. Themes were then identified from the collected qualitative data by using open coding and organizing themes into axial categories: faith, bureaucracy, expectations, time, and power. Once I had established categories from fieldnotes and interviews, I cross-referenced experiences with themes identified through the coding process. These methodologies allowed me to center my data on the lived experiences of individuals through detailed fieldnotes – where theoretical frameworks bolster, rather than confine data. With these tools for qualitative analysis, I produced a thick description of the U.S. resettlement, producing a detailed account of service providers and client’s experiences during resettlement work.

Participants were able to choose their mode of participation; art prompts, photovoice, and interviews were offered. Thirteen people elected to participate, and all consented to have our conversations audio recorded and transcribed. I transcribed each interview and gave individuals, and the agency, pseudonyms, to protect their privacy.

Of these thirteen participants, three were resettling clients, a couple, and a father – the other ten were service providers from Seeking Solace: caseworkers, housing specialists, resettlement managers, cultural coordinators, immigration and legal services, and a contractor. Ten of the thirteen individuals opted for one-on-one interviews. The three photovoice interviews were conducted after speaking with participants about the guidelines and goals of photovoice. Photovoice allows participants to “act as recorders, and potential catalysts for change in their own communities” (Wang and Burris 1997; 369).

To produce a more personal account of employee histories in humanitarian labor, the one-on-one interviews were semi-structured as work history interviews. Work histories are interviews that focus on the participants' career and professional experience (Witter et al 2017). A chronological review of personal experiences and motivations for participating in refugee resettlement contributes to the dialogue that informs themes of endurance in humanitarian labor. Work histories are a case study based on the

personal narrative recounted by an individual, providing individual context and background to understand the positioning and relationship with resettlement work (Witter et al 2017).

I designed this project to explore the relationships between the policies designed by the federal government, the interpretation, and transmission of these policies by the individuals who facilitate resettlement. The methodology of this project scrutinizes the interpretations and transmissions of policies by service providers to identify ways to counter structural precarity through their daily experiences and choices. By using open and thematic coding, I was able to identify themes prevalent in my transcripts and fieldnotes from my experience at Seeking Solace. Most of my fieldnotes were taken between June and September 2022, though notes were taken through March of 2023.

My initial proposal was to conduct research the smaller office that was in the region where I lived but had to shift as clients moved out of the area, limiting my potential pool of participants. To accommodate these changes, I shifted to include another Seeking Solace office two hours south of the office where I had been volunteering in Western Washington. This expanded the ethnography and allowed a richer examination of resettlement from a smaller emerging office and a more established office in Washington State. The different atmospheres of these offices meant different strategies for recruitment. The smaller, newer, office had a core team of three employees and four or five volunteers who worked closely with each other. In this space I was able to speak to each potential participant individually about the emphasis of my project, and the different expectations for participation. The larger, more established office had a staff of over ninety employees in various departments. This meant that though my previous volunteer relationships were strong in the small office, the larger office did not know me.

My fieldwork took place at two offices operating under the same resettlement agency, Seeking Solace in Washington State. One of the nine refugee resettlement agencies (RRA) federally contracted to provide critical services through the Reception and Placement (R&P) program under the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Their core services address “barriers to employment” and “build[ing] community partnerships with organizations and businesses, helping refugees successfully integrate into

local communities.” As well as short-term medical coverage and cash assistance for individual’s ineligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (Office of Refugee Resettlement).

RRAs are responsible for assembling these pieces with their local and state governments while remaining within federal parameters, connecting both displaced individual’s and refugee resettlement offices to funding and resources through a set of core services designed to support clients integrate into their new communities. The politics that determine the policies of resettlement are distant from the people they affect (Mosse 2004; Wathen et al. 2021). Refugee resettlement agencies (RRA) navigate obstacles produced from these bureaucratic intersections, the colluding powers of international, domestic, and local obstacles to providing clients resources (Erickson 2020; Sheldon 2021).

### Office Architecture(s)

Resettlement agencies like Seeking Solace operate in neoliberal networks. In the United States resettlement was primarily done by faith-based organizations prior to the standardization of resettlement with the 1980 Resettlement Act. Though RRAs operate within federal, private, and public sectors the local networks and resources they have available is contingent on their location. It is important to acknowledge the spaces, and the histories of the spaces where this work is taking place. After spending months in newer office set in a large Evangelical church it was exciting to see where, and how the older and larger office went through operations in its specific network.

I began volunteering at the larger, older office in King County in June, and the air is cool in the morning. The door to the office building is locked. The sign outside tells me that Seeking Solace and a local community college share the building. I wait for an employee to arrive, I tell him I am a volunteer, he unlocks the front door and motions to a door inside.

“They’ll let you in”. He points to the call button.

“Thanks” I say. He smiles and nods goodbye, turning at the end of the hallway to disappear.

I press the button and wait a few minutes by the door, reading the flyers on the wall. There are two pamphlets; both are printed in English and five or six other languages – Spanish, Arabic, Ukrainian,

and characters from languages I don't recognize. One has information about English as a Second Language (ESL) class, the other is a series of employment workshops lead in different languages on different days.

The lobby is bare except for a handful of chairs, a small table, and a plant in the corner. Across from the main entry is a stairway with signs indicating the upstairs domain is used by the local community college. When no one answers the door, I peek around the corner and down the hallway where the employee went – a long hallway of closed doors.

I try the restroom door handle, locked, the metal keypad suggesting it requires a code. A young, polished woman opens the restroom door from the inside. After awkward introductions she leads me back to the door where I previously buzzed. Her name is Allison. She has worked here for a year as a receptionist and office manager. We move from the external waiting room to the internal waiting room. There are five tables surrounded by chairs, and a large desk sits in the corner. There are photos on the walls in this waiting room, the different people in the photos smile back at me, welcoming to the other side of the door, where resources and support reside.



*Figure 4 "Stealing from a nonprofit is like the lowest of lows honestly. So yeah, there is just a lot of frustration and anger and sadness about that [with this photo]. Like who would do that? Why?"  
Rachel July 2022*

This established office, open for over fifty years, had moved twice over the past two years due to fluctuations in staff and funding. During the six weeks I volunteered in King County, the new space was vandalized twice. Once a broken window and the other a full break in – with holes cut in walls and locked file cabinets tipped over (Figure 4). Nothing of high security or importance was taken or tampered with, the privacy of the clients remained intact, some of the employees were very shaken, others were apathetic.

The break in happened halfway through my time at King County. I think back on my first day, when Sophia, the

resettlement manager, gave me a tour of the large office. A ground floor of locked doors and filing cabinets and friendly people.

Sophia introduces me to the different department heads and showed me where the donation rooms, English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, employment, and housing personnel are in the office. Many of the employees at Seeking Solace have been displaced people themselves, some resettled by this agency. Sophia tells me their current branch director was resettled by Seeking Solace.

In her office Sophia thinks about what task to delegate to me today. Over my six weeks at the larger office, I take on different roles: filing, alphabetizing, organizing, data entry, running errands, meeting participants. Today I will organize A.P.A. casefiles for the Afghan parolees who have been phased out of casework and pick up pizza for the employee party.

“We get regulated with paper. Like the government can come in and summon casefiles and they look through it because there is a particular order everything needs to be in, and signatures are still needed.” Sophia tells me of the mounds of paperwork they have spent the last months preparing for their annual audit (Figure 5). Approved last week, the pizza party is to celebrate a successful year.

The pizza party is in one of the conference/classrooms. Employees from housing, casework, ESL, and other departments mingle and find seats. We chat over pizza while people fill in, one of the managers leads us in Christian prayer

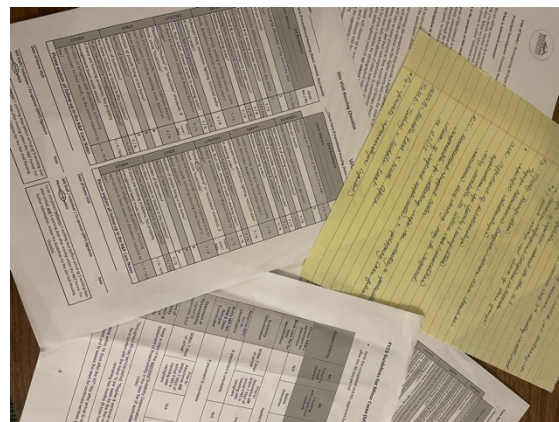


Figure 5 "Paperwork" Rachel July 2022

before transitioning to minute-to-win-it games. We line up and use chopsticks to move paper clips, bounce ping pong balls into paper cups and race to build card houses. There are a few announcements and congratulations to standout employees. The managers have all moved into their positions from doing casework at some point. They share anecdotes of their times at the agency. A group of caseworkers sitting together begin to egg on a young, white, man named Johnathan to share. He blushes as he shares, “well, I was working with this family from Afghanistan. They were a family of five and had been in the states for

almost three months, so we knew each other fairly well at that point. I got a text from the dad late one evening about a rash that was spreading on his four-year-old son. He wanted to go to the hospital but felt uneasy about making the appointment himself, so he texted me. I said okay, go ahead and send me a photo of the rash and I can forward it to the clinic to see if he needs an appointment. My phone dings a minute later, I open the photo and there was a picture of his son's rashy penis".

The room erupts into laughter.

Johnathan goes on quickly to say he deleted the photo and learned his lesson that day – to always ask for clarity. A few other people share funny stories, focusing on the light and unexpected aspects of their job. As they begin to head back to their desks. I clean up the pizza boxes and return to filing, staying for another hour before packing up, and telling Sophia I will be in tomorrow at nine.

I head out the hall and into the internal waiting room. There is a group of four people, an interpreter, a caseworker and two clients, talking solemnly over a pile of documents. Allison is on a call but gestures goodbye from the front desk. The smiling people in the photos on the walls watch from their frames.

The heavy door locks behind me as I step into the main lobby. The chairs and tables that were empty this morning are all occupied. Tired bodies straighten up and turn to look at who has come through the locked door, waiting for eye contact, any signal that it is their turn. I smile awkwardly, feeling too big for the room. The silence is deafening on this side of the wall.

The ninety-day resettlement has temporal and spatial significance. It delineates the uncertain before with a less uncertain present, but with the possibility of a more secure future. Resettlement does not imply security, belonging, or ease, but the pieces, partial, quasi – events, that take place in this three-month window are significant in shaping a resettling individual's life in the U.S. (Feldman 2015; Povinelli 2011). Ninety days, ninety sleeps, to re 'settle'.

Resettlement agencies are responsible for linking clients to the state and federal support services as laid out in the Refugee Act of 1980 and monitored by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The ORR works in conjunction with the U.S. Department State of Foreign Affairs (The State



Department), the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and state level organizations to connect refugees and other qualifying populations to critical resources. RRAs are the offices at the center of the neoliberal, international/domestic resettlement nexus in the U.S., both spatially and temporally.

These ninety days demarcate a transitory time for both service providers and refugee clients. For the service providers, the resettlement period signifies intentional integration and effort to support refugee clients. Though extended programs are offered, the most acute, dedicated support from RRAs is frontloaded in the first season (90 days). For refugee clients, resettlement is the end of a certain type of waiting. Spatially, they have arrived in a relatively secure area with resettlement. They have housing, financial aid, and food. However, support for maintaining these critical resources is limited based on the temporal parameters of the program: three months for resettlement support, eight months on Matching Grant, 60 months (five years) on TANF (ORR n.d.). Unfortunately, instead of programs with long-term goals, RRAs, like other humanitarian projects, capitalize on short-term goals. Prioritizing employment over resources that could bolster language acquisition and community building.

People who are forcibly displaced and resettled as refugees experience displacement delineated by program timelines, sometimes unknown (times spent at camps), other times with rigid federal parameters (as with the U.S. ninety-day timeline). The U.S. resettlement program is a constellation of federal and domestic entities working adjacently in neoliberal public-private partnerships. Once refugee clients arrive in the local area, service providers from RRA offices are contracted to prioritize the first ninety days for establishing employment, ESL, cultural orientations, and education enrollment for children. When the Juma's, Abdul-Khaliq, Asmaan, and their three boys, came to Washington state after their journey from Kabul to Indiana, their insecurity, their vulnerability, of being a person forcibly displaced did not dissipate, it just changed shape.

Evolving policies, and inconsistent resources for resettlement in the United States produces an unstable environment for service providers, and their clients. To mitigate these uncertain circumstances, the ORR and RRA focus on connecting their clients to sustained employment to “help refugees and other Office of Refugee Resettlement populations gain economic independence by helping them find and

maintain employment within a year of being enrolled” (ORR 2023) regardless of wellbeing or prior professional experience or education.

Refugee resettlement agencies, federally constructed and regulated to support resettling populations, are built from colonial frameworks wherein which power is withheld and distributed based on centuries physical and structural violence. In the United States, the Other has been consistently defined and dehumanized based on white European settler standards. Those deemed less than human, whether via legal, social, or political exclusions are subject to discrimination. Clients at refugee resettlement agencies are subjected to the mundanity of bureaucratic violence. By facilitating short-term strategies instead of long-term networks of support service providers are limiting client opportunity for securing livelihoods. The clerical emphasis in resettlement, checking boxes instead of checking on people perpetuates the dehumanization of individuals through displacement by focusing on itemization instead of wellbeing.

## Chapter Four - “He Makes More Money Than I Do”

Living in New York brought with it two things' families like mine were eager to have: opportunity and anonymity. My mother, who had studied early education in Afghanistan and had been a schoolteacher in Kabul, started working almost as soon as she landed. She sought out work that demanded she say very little. Her first job in New York was sweeping floors and providing treatments at a beauty spa on the upper East Side of Manhattan. My father, who had studied economics and was fluent in German and French, started off selling newspapers at a corner kiosk in midtown Manhattan.

Joseph Azan, *Last, First, Middle* (2018, 27)

### VOLAGS – Voluntary Organizations and Expectations

Alex, a white, Christian man from the United States, is the resettlement manager at the Seeking Solace office that opened in 2021. Before resettling any displaced people he was required to work with the local community (different Christian congregations in the area, local schools, housing agencies, and potential places of employment). Alex and his one caseworker, Carmen, a Christian woman from the same evangelical Christian church worked for about a year to prepare for clients before receiving forty people from Kabul in a matter of months.

Alex is level-headed, approachable, and commanding, even keeled and well-spoken, he seems comfortable as a leader. A former ESL teacher, Alex, has lived abroad in Asia and South America. We chat about the process of resettlement in the U.S. and the whirlwind second year he has had as resettlement manager, taking on different roles to support his (then) team of three. Alex tells me of the diverse demands of his job one day over coffee, “I mean I just came here from moving a bunch of boxes into our storage, so I don’t know that this is a thing that resettlement managers do on a regular basis (laughs). But yeah, hauling mattresses and furniture around.”

I ask Alex about the expectations for resettlement agencies, he smiles, “I will say the VOLAGS are the ones who are expected to bring order out of the chaos like we’re the ones we are sort of the filter that we have our list of things that are required. We have our agreements.”

“Those are the core services?” I ask.

“Yeah, and then we try to make sure that the people that we are serving experience as little of that chaos as possible” he responds. “So, we try to be the buffer of filtering that out and in our case, it’s been filling in a lot with volunteer help, it’s been relying on contractors a lot where we don’t have time or ability to hire a position for this thing, but we need to pay somebody to do it.”

Active in the local Evangelical Covenant church many of the volunteers are members of Alex’s congregation, while the short-term contractors (usually interpreters or other specialists) with Seeking Solace had varying backgrounds. Reliance on volunteers is due to the variance in federal regulations (Figure 5). A “wedge” topic, migration polarizes, producing political inconsistencies. In the U.S., funding for resettlement is awarded per-refugee and dependent on the annual refugee admittance ceiling determined by the President of the United States and Congress



Figure 6 “Having to invite people into a space that is so exclusively, like Jesus is on the wall. That makes me very uncomfortable.” Maddy June 2022

(Krogstad 2019; Wathen et al. 2021; United States Refugee Act 1980). This makes the whole process “feel very unstable” Phoebe, a cultural outreach manager at Seeking Solace tells me. Alex and others, echo this sentiment. Commenting on resettlement in the U.S he says, “the whole idea about a voluntary group stepping in and helping is foreign in a lot of countries. There are pluses and minuses [to using volunteers] and the approach here has been very American, very piecemeal, very like hair on fire type of scrambling to get the necessary pieces in place.”

The contemporary structure of resettlement in the United States aligns with neoliberal ideologies of free-market capitalism and deregulation, meaning though resettlement agencies facilitate core services as mandated by the Refugee Act of 1980, these agencies are subject to uncertain funding and resources. Cuts in 2016 closed more than fifty of the three hundred and fifty resettlement agencies in the U.S.

Agencies like Seeking Solace were and continue to be understaffed and overwhelmed with their caseloads due to unstable federal funding and access to grants (Wathen et al. 2021).

Neoliberal partnerships reduce the domestic's government's reach, aside from the core services and funding programs, the responsibility of delegating and facilitating the labor of resettlement happens in localized, specific contexts. This means that the programs, resources, and support for resettlement agencies vary from office to office, regardless of RRA affiliation (Benson 2016; Erickson 2020; Kingfisher 2016). Neoliberalism, a political and economic system of deregulation and emphasis on capital markets, functions as both a mode of governance and a way of social organization, simultaneously promoting "autonomy and self-interest" by emphasizing the responsibility of individuals and local entities while diminishing available resources for the groups served (Benson 2016; Erickson 2020; Kingfisher 2016; L.T. Smith 2008, 5). Like welfare and other anti-poverty services in the United States capitalist material and temporal expectations emphasize efficiency in fulfilling immediate needs, through linking clients to social services and encouraging them to take the first employment offered to them (Benson 2016; Darrow 2018).

These policies, and the daily labor of practicing these policies disregard the clients' skills, prior employment, and education, barring them from other opportunities. To compensate for low staffing Seeking Solace, and other RRAs in the United States are expected to rely on volunteer support from local community members. While this system promotes community outreach and involvement, it also delegates responsibility irresponsibly, miscommunications occurring frequently between caseworkers, volunteers, and clients. Volunteer support is also variable, though background checks and several training sessions are required before working with clients, there is very little bias training, trauma informed care training, or cultural training for volunteers (or service providers for that matter).

### Casework, Continuity, and Professionalism

A group of volunteers meet at the office, temporarily at a local church, at 10 am on a Friday to help with phone calls to the Department of Health and Human Services, one of the state affiliated departments

that provides medical, financial, and program support for displaced and impoverished populations in the state of Washington.

There were ten individuals from Afghanistan (the first four families from Kabul) and four or five volunteers. We sat in the bible study room surrounded by games, books, and inspirational quotes about Jesus. This was before they had transitioned into their permanent office on the other side of town. We spent the next six hours waiting on hold. Playing connect four, cards, and coloring while the interpreter, Leeda dashed around the room translating for each family. We were making calls to set up their Food Stamps EBT and TANF cash assistance accounts with the local office.

As I sit across from the couple from Afghanistan, their family files in front of me, I feel like I have trespassed on their lives. The woman, Asmaan, is the same age as I am. She is a mother of three and patient with my attempts at communication while we wait. As we sit and wait to be transferred to DHHS I think about what I am contributing, I do not speak Dari, I do not speak Pashtun, yet here I am, hoping, assuming, I can help.

Over the past year I have seen a variety of training for employees, some caseworkers who started at the height of the crisis were assigned families on their fourth day of work, others waited up to four weeks before receiving any clients. Miscommunications on expectations between service providers, volunteers, and clients creates confusion that can impede a resettling people's ability to access their livelihoods (Figure 7 – a photo from the mediation between the volunteers and caseworker about the Suri family).

A cultural advocacy coordinator, Maddy (a young, white Christian woman who recently graduated college), from the new office shares her recent experience mediating between a resettlement employee and



Figure 7. "Miscommunications over services, and a lot of issues with their names. As far as like what's a first name, what is the last name, and then mix ups between what was told to them on the military base versus what we have told them. The mediation was: what is our fault, what is their fault, what was the miscommunication" Maddy 2022

volunteers: “we had a case, the Suris, who were very disgruntled in the amount of service they got and didn’t receive. Things that were valid communications and miscommunications.” Maddy pauses before saying “things that should have been provided to them that weren’t. So, I had a meeting with the Suri’s and the volunteers.” Maddy explains the mediation to me, “the Suri’s just sort’ve spewed all of this stuff, like, about my coworkers. While I was there.” She chuckles uncomfortably, “and then I had to mediate between Carmen, the caseworker, and the volunteers because then the volunteers were like ‘oh my gosh the office hasn’t done their job!’ Some of which was true some of which had been lost in translation”

“Lost in translation and expectations?” I offer.

“Yes, so then planning the hand off of casework stuff that wasn’t done or still needed to be done now that way more than ninety days has passed.”

I know the Suri family Maddy is talking about, they are a family from Afghanistan with five young boys. Their caseworker Carmen is new to her position, she speaks loudly with non-English speakers and rarely uses an interpreter. One day after a family literacy class Miguel, a client from El Salvador returns with Carmen to the main room where the children are playing. They had just had a meeting about paperwork and upcoming appointments, Carmen smiles. “Thanks Miguel, we will go get social security cards next week” she says loudly before she returns to her office. Miguel looks at me, folder in one hand and cell phone in the other.

“Elizabeth, ¿Puedes preguntarle sobre mi teléfono? [Can you ask them about my telephone?]” Miguel asks me. In their half hour meeting he was not able to tell Carmen that the phone Seeking Solace had provided him was not working. This pattern occurs when there are language barriers which breeds miscommunication between groups. When clients are silenced, or assumed to understand, service providers can invoke harm through negligence that can impact their clients access to resources for rebuilding their lives.

Maddy, like other service providers I meet during this fieldwork, is a child of missionary parents and has grown up around the world with faith-based groups. She struggles with the ‘faith aspect’ of her

job, and comments on her own observations of professionalism in faith-based organizations throughout her life as a “missionary kid.”

“As far as like finding more professionals, I think in faith-based hiring in general, because I have observed it my whole life, it excludes people. And you settle for people you shouldn’t settle for. It is extremely frustrating, and it is because people were excluded from the hiring process *because* of their faith” Maddy tells me during our interview in August. I have witnessed this myself while volunteering at Seeking Solace, people of faith are given positions over more qualified applicants. During the summer family literacy program at the new Seeking Solace office, a first time English as a Second Language teacher from Alex’s congregation fumbled through five weeks of chaotic ESL classes with a loose routine. Speaking in full sentences and buffering interruptions by her two young boys throughout the entire class. As an agnostic atheist myself, I was offered contracting jobs through AmeriCorps, but never a full-time position.

Not all agencies require a faith statement or declaration, but with Seeking Solace, a Christian faith statement is required for employment, limiting the pool of employable candidates. Claire, the immigration lawyer and manager of Immigration and Legal Services (ILS) at Seeking Solace, talks about the limitations of faith-based hiring, “that is why I have to hire contractors, I can’t get Afghans as employees, I can’t get Muslims as employees.” Both offices were hiring throughout my research, some positions remaining open for months, producing backlogs and contributing to employee burnout. Common in care work, burnout is intensified in resettlement due to the uncertainty of federal policies that contribute to understaffing (Akinsulure-Smith et al. 2018).

Due to the inconsistent resources and lack of funding for resettlement both federal and local (RRA) entities push for self-sufficiency through sustained employment for their resettling clients (Van Selm 2014, 521). The ninety-day resettlement period is a temporal conjecture of the federal government. The Reception and Placement (R&P) program is designed to assist resettling individuals with obtaining sustained employment by connecting them to local resources through refugee resettlement agencies (RRAs). Once processed and assigned to an RRA, the Department of State provides a one-time stipend of



\$2,175 per refugee. The resettlement agencies typically use \$1,050 of that for housing and administrative costs, the remaining \$975 - \$1,125 are for the refugees (ORR n.d.). “There’s never enough money” is a common phrase I hear during my time at Seeking Solace.

Refugees resettled with one of the RRAs in Washington state will qualify for refugee cash assistance (RCA) for eight months (ORR n.d.). RCA in Washington depends on family size and varies based on employment status and income, “a married couple of two, without children, eligible for RCA will get \$459 if they have no income. If one or both are working, we count half of the earnings against the household’s grant. If that couple earns over \$839 per month, they will no longer receive RCA” (ORR n.d) If that same couple received \$459 per month of unearned income, qualifies for TANF, qualified for TANF but did not comply, or receives Matching Grant funds, they would no longer qualify for RCA.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) designed their refugee support services to “help refugees and other ORR populations gain economic independence by helping them find and maintain employment, preferably within a year of being enrolled in the program” (Refugee Support Services 2023). This is in alignment with the Refugee Act of 1980, that emphasizes “in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible” (United States Refugee Act of 1980). The emphasis on employment in resettlement perpetuates cycles of precarity for marginalized groups by relegating refugees and other displaced people in the United States to low-wage labor with substantial social and political obstacles to advancement (Erickson 2020; Jacobson 2014; Walkowitz 1999).

Many of the families who arrived from Kabul were well-educated and employed, most of them had worked with the U.S. military in some capacity with high security position. Upon arriving in Washington, their opportunities for employment were relegated by their English skills and discrimination, often hired for dishwashing, laundry, or other low-paying positions.

## Obstacles and Opportunity

Service providers at refugee resettlement agencies (RRAs) are gatekeepers to resources. The refugee assemblage moves as the individual pieces shift within the mechanism. Power can be subtle in

resettlement. International discourses of forcibly displaced people in the media contributes to ‘thickening borders’ of atmospheric nationalism and xenophobia (Walker and Winton 2017). The “turn to deportation” in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States exacerbates negative immigration rhetoric and fuel restrictive security discourses (Hansen 2014; Hammerstad 2014).

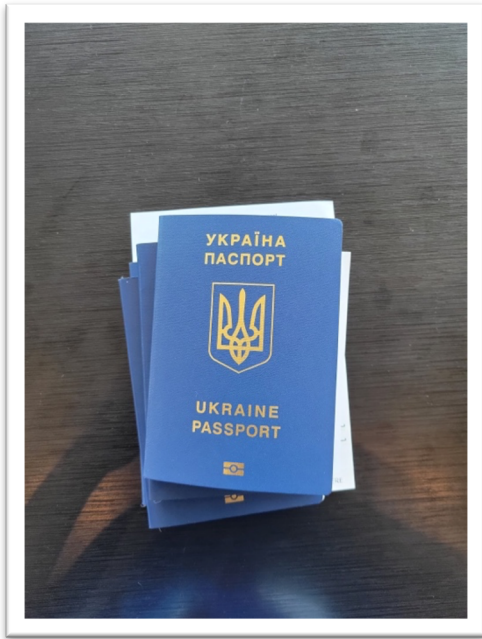


Figure 8 “Ukrainian Passports” Maddy 2022

Since the Refugee Act was passed in 1979, laws for immigration, employment, and asylum have become increasingly complex. Claire has seen this change over the decades, “there are a lot more questions to try and catch you [from lying] they never take anything off of there” she says “people used to do a lot of their own stuff; it was a lot easier to do applications on your own, you didn’t have to have an immigration attorney for everything.”

Claire explains that most immigration law is case driven, “meaning they take it to court and a judge decides how to interpret the law. That interpretation creates how that law is going to be applied.” Confused I ask for clarification, “based on the judge?”

“Based on how the judge has interpreted it, it kinda depends. If it goes up to an appeals court there is usually a group of judges, it can get appealed to the Supreme Court or it could be decided by a circuit” Claire explains patiently. I picture a faceless judge seated high above kneeling figures, a caricature with red and green stamps, flippantly deciding who is worthy of American naturalization (Figure 8).

As service providers are the primary point of contact for refugees during the 90-day resettlement process, they are situated between local, domestic, and international canons. The fluidity in their roles mean they act as both links to the host community (Greene 2019; Sheldon 2021), and gatekeepers to basic services (housing, employment, language classes, transportation, and social services) (Akinsulure-Smith et al. 2018; Donato and Ferris 2021).

As employment is the key objective for clients in resettlement, I spent time working with both service providers and clients with resume building. I spent some time helping at the employment department at the larger office. Two Black women greet me when I knock on the door. “Hello, I’m Elizabeth, the new volunteer. Maya said you all may need some help?”

“Hi! Ooh, yes, we always love help. What are you volunteering for?” The woman who greets me first has infectious energy. Her name is Ellie, she is petite with a smile that fills her whole face. I tell her and her coworker, Hope, about my time at the other office and my project. Hope gives me a brief rundown of employment – they have trainings every Friday, where clients are introduced to the cultural aspects of employment in the U.S.; applications, resumes, expectations on punctuality, etc. My job today is to build resumes with clients over the phone – I pull up Seeking Solace’s interpreter contact page. Hope shares her client spreadsheet with me. There are about thirty rows with client’s names, country of origin, language spoken, and whether an interpreter is needed. Some of clients have PDF attachments of resumes they have worked on with the employment team. This is my task today, speaking with clients about their prior employment and education to build a resume. Ellie patiently walks me through the process of creating a resume with a client.

“You gotta walk them through it, I try to go chronologically if I can. I think it’s easier to remember that way” Ellie says. “So, I ask if they went to school, what level of school, you know - grade school, secondary, university – all that. From there, depending on what they say I start to peel back their employment history.” I take notes while she talks.

“You have to ask the right questions; the Western resume is a specific thing. I just tell people this is how it’s done here. We have to fill space on a page.”

The fifth client I call picks up, “Allo?” he answers with a low voice.

“Hello, Dari?” I ask, feeling silly and nervous. Who am I to distill his life onto a single page for American employers.

“Yes” he replies.

“Okay...please wait, I’ll call an interpreter? Thank you?” I say with a question mark. Then proceed to dial an interpreter. As I wait for him to answer there are mumbles and sighs from the other end of the phone line, sounds that communicate our shared humanness.

Ellie and Hope continue to chat in the office, deliberating what they want to eat for lunch.

I have been on the call for almost thirty minutes, feeling like I am torturing the man on the other end of the phone, asking if he “worked well with his other employees” in order to write “good communication skills and team management” in the ‘skills’ section. Most of my questions are answered with questions – I can see why they were eager to put someone else on this job.

While I wait for English interpretations, Matt, the Matching Grant coordinator who I have worked with before comes in.

“Hey!” Ellie and Hope say when Matt walks over to the desk. He taps his thick stack of papers on Hope’s desk, finding space between the bible and pen cups. “Have you heard from Abdul-Asan or his family?” Matt asks. “He’s upset about no longer qualifying for rental assistance but he’s making over the amount.” The interpreter speaks to me in English, shifting my attention back to the phone call.

“He said he worked at an auto shop for seven years, then he worked at the specialized mechanic in Kabul with his Uncle. It was just the two of them.”

“Thank you, what was the name of the auto shop he worked at for seven years?” I ask, then the interpreter asks. He responds, it’s translated, and I type it out. “What kinds of things did he do there? Did he work on a specific part of the car?” I ask. They exchange for a few minutes between them.

Matt, Hope and Ellie are joking about the clients. “He is demanding I get their aid back, but they no longer qualify” Matt repeats.

“That happened with a guy I helped a few months ago. When I told him those were the rules he wanted a different job. He was already making twenty-five an hour!” Ellie says.

“Pfft” Guffaws Hope, “he makes more money than I do!”

Despite the apolitical ethos of humanitarianism, resettlement is political (Barnett 2014; Fassin 2012; Tiktin 2014; Jacobsen 2014; Van Selm 2014). Humanitarian workers occupy a position of power in

resettlement, acting as political representatives for the clients they support via being their advocates throughout the core services. The service providers who work with refugees, a population coming from a position of loss, are responsible for supporting their clients in gaining access to services, and employment, for self-sufficiency. As employment is the emphasis in United States refugee resettlement, refugees are often placed in low-wage positions regardless of their prior work experience or education (Erickson 2020). Service providers are responsible for cataloging their client's employment when doing their assessments for self-sufficiency. These assessments are used by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (O.R.R.) and the Department of State to measure the directions of the resettlement program. I asked Sophia, the post settlement manager at the urban Seeking Solace office, how her employees define success for their clients. She responded, "I think it's very subjective, and complicated because all the programs that we have measure self-sufficiency very differently and so it's kind of a yes or no question based on the specific program." She pauses, "maybe you are self-sufficient, but by the 'standard' you don't check 'the boxes' therefore you are considered not self-sufficient."

"What does that mean for you guys then? You just keep people on until those boxes can be physically checked off the work page?" I ask.

"Different departments approach it differently. I think Match Grant approaches it very differently because the Head Seeking Solace office and the government rate our office by numbers of how many people on the program are self-sufficient, so they kind of finagle a little bit to be like yes, he was self-sufficient" Sophia says, affirming the loop of efficiency service providers and client's cycle into through assessments and expectations. As resettlement agencies are audited annually, maintaining detailed casefiles of services provided is crucial for offices to maintain their licensing and continue resettling refugees.

The assessment of the refugee as self-sufficient in resettlement reaffirms the political positions service providers occupy in resettlement. Caseworkers, employees, and volunteers are tasked with integrating individuals into the local United States culture and deciding when they are 'self-sufficient' based on objective, federal parameters. While standardization provides guidelines for supporting

integrating populations to the end goals, the assessments for these services are shallow measurements of a person's integration and well-being into a new community. Self-sufficiency through employment reduces opportunities for refugee clients to have adequate tools and support for long term success. If employment is the goal, then what happens after the individual is employed?

When service providers declare an individual self-sufficient it is by political objective measurements and fails to account for the atmospheric variables that affect day to day life in the United States – like systemic racism, poverty, and white supremacy. Resettling groups face discrimination. This can include discrimination from the service providers who work with them. Though most of the interactions between service providers and clients were well-intended there were moments (like the fieldnotes about the employment office above) where somebody's life was decided for them. Whether the choice was made due to limited resources, time constraints, or options, service providers, as political representatives of their clients, have opportunities to advocate for, or prevent clients from seeking better employment, benefits, education, housing, and medical care.

As a volunteer at Seeking Solace I became a participant in this cycle. I was granted privileges to enter people's lives without question, my authority was assumed. I think back to my first time in the employment office, struggling to mold the entirety of a man's life into a succinct page of employable experience.

Before hanging up the phone, I asked if he had any questions. He had asked about a check, and I had told him I would ask his caseworker, making a note on my notebook. We hang up. Ellie and Hope have gone to lunch. I see them frequently over the next few weeks at the office.

The list of thirty names Hope gave me became numbers I called frequently throughout the summer, creating three resumes with three clients after the first attempt in the office (each resume takes about an hour). Over the next five weeks Hope emails me every week or so to ask how the list is going, I tell her I can't get ahold of a few of the clients and forward her the resumes that I have completed. I don't hear back from her on the resumes. Except for the new names entered every week the spreadsheet remains unedited.

Service providers are expected to navigate objective federal expectations and the subjective needs of their clients. The atmosphere of resettlement in the U.S., changing policies, timelines, and funding affects the ability of service providers to be able to support their clients (Wathen et al. 2021). Angela, a Christian woman with a refugee father, was born and raised in the United States is currently a housing coordinator, was hired on September first, 2021, almost twenty years after 9/11 – when people displaced from Afghanistan began arriving to resettle in the United States. We chat about her job over a puzzle in the prayer room. Angela switched into housing from casework after four months.

“I burned out after two months” she pauses and reflects, “I think one of the things was the pressure of being responsible for peoples everything. Their access to food, their access to housing.” She is relieved of the stress of being someone's lifeline, “there is so much having left casework I can see now. I felt how overwhelming the job was before, but now I can see it. There are different things that don’t fit together well in terms of paperwork and then appointments. Those are two totally different things.”

Though resettlement promises a pathway to citizenship and permanent residence, uncertain futures and economic precarity remain present “evolving, rather than being resolved, with resettlement” (Adhikari 2018, 239). Neoliberal economies and capitalist temporal parameters inhibit service providers the flexibility to support their clients. Though service providers seek to make the integration into United States as fluid as possible, there are barriers obstructing their ability to support their clients in creating livelihoods (Figure 9 – clients are always very welcoming, offering coffee and tea when you go into their homes).

The federal parameters that lay out core services and timelines in resettlement affect the service providers who labor to facilitate them. VOLAGS are the entities expected to adapt and respond to the unstable political climate around immigration to best help their clients. The neoliberal structure of



Figure 9 “Coffee & Tea” Maddy 2022

resettlements means there is a network of public and private entities that comprise resettlement, the service providers at RRAs are key gatekeepers in linking clients to resources essential to integration.

Resettlement, like other humanitarian efforts position individuals in hierarchical relationships, where certain individuals have direct and indirect authority over the well-being of others. This dynamic reinforces narratives where clients are seen as inherently vulnerable and reliant on aid instead of recognizing the cycles and structures that render and remake individual's as vulnerable through dispossession and denial of equity in aid. Though clients exercise agency throughout resettlement, opportunities for clients to access livelihoods beyond immediate needs can be inhibited through unintentional, or intentional bias from service providers at resettlement agencies. As social and political representatives/links service providers are in a position of power, their day-to-day actions, decisions, and motivations influence their clients, and their opportunities for future building beyond the biological.



## Chapter Five - “Seeking Solace is like a chicken, it’s the main dish”

Basic services like water and electricity help you be able to continue living, not to develop. They don’t give you anything to develop. They give you something ordinary, so you can continue living the life you are living. Sometimes you think, why should I think of the future? We live day by day

A West Bank recipient of UNWRA - Ilana Feldman (2015, 428)

### Endurance Projects

Seeking Solace operates on a network of volunteers, caseworkers, contractors, and employees to fulfill the core services. The order of operation within resettlement operations were often dependent on different bureaucratic systems depending on the resources available. Despite varying resources, both offices relied on a combination of employees, contractors, and volunteers to facilitate the federal goals (airport pickup, warm meal upon arrival, sustained employment, ESL enrollment, medical care, transportation orientations, cultural and employment orientations, temporary housing, and economic and social services). Delegating these tasks alleviates the stress on caseworkers with high caseloads (one employee told me she has had forty-four cases in her ten months at Seeking Solace) and have the potential to broaden clients’ social networks, however, it also disperses accountability, diffusing a sense of responsibility.

Service provider’s and clients are expected to “endure” their circumstances in humanitarianism (Povinelli 2011, 32). The objective, neoliberal process of resettlement is clinical. Despite its emphasis on the individual, it is ignorant of the subjective interpretations and transmissions of time, policy, and “self-sufficiency” that service providers and clients experience (Bear 2016; Brun 2015; Sheldon 2021)

Emphasizing the individual experience of these temporal parameters is a way to re-negotiate federal standards and expectations in resettlement. Both service providers and refugee clients experience dissonance in temporal expectations for self-sufficiency in resettlement (Bear 2016; Brun 2015; Sheldon 2021). The temporal parameters set by the federal government are to be implemented by service providers. Research and experience continually demonstrate conflicts between expectations, timelines, and goals in resettlement.

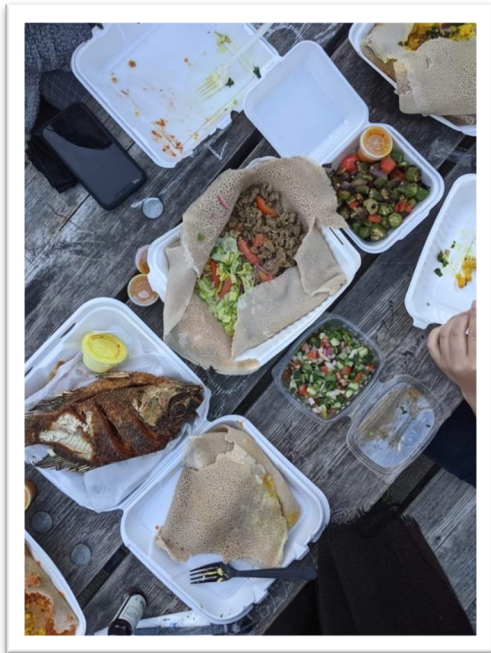


Figure 10 "I love the family style community aspect of like sharing what you have, getting to sit down and have a meal" Rachel 2022

Resettlement is integration into a new community.

Service providers and clients embark on the ninety-day period together, navigating obstacles (closed offices, full programs, not qualifying for grants) and opportunities to rebuild livelihoods day-by-day (Figure 10). The concept of endurance projects is based off the humanitarian response to crisis with immediate, lifesaving materials. While food and shelter do save lives, in other humanitarian contexts, like resettlement, providing people with enough to survive is a short-term strategy that denies people the opportunity to plan for a secure future (Arendt 1969; Brun 2016; Feldman 2015; Povinelli

2021). When aid reduces life to its bare form — to biological

functions — individuals within aid projects are asked to settle, to accept, to *endure* the historical patterns of dispossession.

Service providers at Seeking Solace must balance the clerical and human aspects of their job. I witnessed service providers negotiate the limits of their labor, attempting to balance federal expectations and supporting client's needs. During my second week I ran errands with a caseworker named Maya from the extended care program. We meet at one outside the office. We have three errands to run, each destination is about fifteen minutes from the other, Maya has them mapped on her phone. The office is south of Seattle, making driving a huge component of the job for service providers. A car is the most efficient way to navigate King County.

Maya calls someone as we pull into an apartment complex. "Okay he is coming out; we just need to grab the checks from him."

"Does he work for Seeking Solace?"

“No, he works...I can’t remember who, but he works with a different company that works with Seeking Solace to distribute rental support and stuff.” We chat for a minute then Maya has him sign something, everything in casework is recorded on paper.

As we get back in the car to head to the next stop, I ask Maya about the checks. She doesn’t know the exact totals of how much families get, it changes based on family size, but she estimates 6k – 8k is distributed to each family for three to six months rental support through the federal Matching Grant program.

We drive through the waning rain to a second apartment complex to drop off a check and do a wellness check with one of the families from South Sudan. While we drive, I ask Maya about the extended care program. “It is for people or families who may need extra support after the initial 90-days. It could be because of a medical issue, domestic violence, or mental health. Depends. The extended program goes for another eight months.”

“What happens if they still need extra support after the eight months?” I ask.

“Well, we can continue to help, but it is just a different program. It would be less formal. Or sometimes we refer them to other programs adjacent to ours in the area. Depends on you know?” While we park Maya tells me about the family.

“They are from Sudan and on the extended program because there are some mental health concerns. The eleven-year-old son has a learning disability. They just need some more time, which is why we are here.” Maya calls someone and tells them we’re here in English.

Though different social and economic programs for resettling populations extend support timelines, goals and expectations for clients seldom change. Instead of having the opportunity to plan for the future, clients are repeatedly asked to adhere to objective checklists – like the core services – that teach clients how to succeed in systems of aid, but not to grow or plan for the future (Sheldon 2021).

As Brun writes, “power determines whether the preferred future is reachable” (Brun 2015; 54). In humanitarianism, power is derived from imperial paternal hierarchies, power in humanitarianism is the ability to withhold and delegate resources (Bourdieu 2000, Brun 2015). Both rational and emotional, the

service providers who work with displaced populations participate in an affective labor, navigating objective, federal parameters with individuals who have varying, subjective needs (Fassin 2013). There are gaps between discourse and experience, between expectations and reality. Employing temporary solutions perpetuates cycles of economic, social, and political inequalities between the citizen and the non-citizen (Brun 2016, 395).

Even if clients are self-sufficient by government standards, the lack of social and political support in the U.S. means clients often return to Seeking Solace for help after they have “graduated” from the program. Sophia told me of clients who returned, families who call asking for immigration help, “we see a lot of people come back years later because they don’t know who else to go to.” The short-term focus in resettlement, prioritizing employment and connection to social services over language acquisition and community building can limit long-term well-being. Emphasis on immediate, short-term responses is embedded in humanitarian reason, eclipsing, but not eliminating client’s ability to create stable livelihoods in their new communities (Brun 2016; Fassin 2012). The opportunity for biographical life, or the ability to “act within or upon the forces that shape and restrict our possibilities to reach a desired future” (Brun 2016, 400) is more feasible for resettling refugees than other populations who have been forcibly displaced because of their pathway to citizenship. Despite legal protection, refugees continue to face boundaries to belonging in their resettlement countries.

### Humanitarian Dilemmas

Leeda, a contractor (due to her full schedule and Muslim faith) and interpreter for Seeking Solace was resettled in the United States from Iran when she was a child. She has recently passed her nursing exams and is finishing her degree. Over the past year, her work with the families from Afghanistan has made her passionate about advocating for change in healthcare with migrating populations. Connected to Seeking Solace through a family friend, Leeda immediately became the center of the Seeking Solace team, her ability to speak Dari gave the families from Afghanistan an opportunity to speak in English speaking spaces.

I asked her about their expectations and experiences in resettlement.

“So as far as them understanding the resettlement process, I can't tell if they understood it or not. But I know that they had a lot of different expectations. For what the objectives are for resettlement, I feel like Seeking Solace has accomplished that, just my personal opinion. Are they settled? You know? Yeah. Do they have a house? You know? All of that. Yes, that part has been successful. A big part of the settlement is to get them into housing. But I do feel like there needs to be even more [support and programs] because you need more time!”

It is typical for resettlement agencies to provide extended care for individuals and families that require additional support or services, the support design tailored to each case, but with the same goals of achieving “self-sufficiency” via employment and focusing on immediate, economic needs. Persistence with employment decontextualizes the client, isolating their past from their present and future. Service providers are limited by systematic inequalities and resources (Feldman 2015). At Seeking Solace, all the service providers agreed that time was the most fleeting commodity: time to adjust, time to get to know each other, time to heal.

The humanitarian dilemma is how to navigate the paradoxes of ‘humanitarianism’, a concept that simultaneously saves lives while refusing to recognize individuals beyond their immediate, biological needs (Arendt et al. 2018; Feldman 2015). Humanitarian aid operates in “everyday time”, it’s applied, or provided in day-to-day routines and practices (Bourdieu 2000; Brun 2015). Service providers and clients have subjective experiences of everyday time, the temporal parameters of resettlement reinforce the normality of precarity for people who have been forcibly displaced (Sheldon 2021). By emphasizing immediate, biological needs such as food, water, shelter over biographical needs like one’s ability to plan for the future, clients experience a disjunct of temporalities where “surviving in the present and planning for a future” can alter the way they envisage the future (Arendt 1969; Brun 2016; Fassi 2012).

Federal expectations and guidelines reinforce the dehumanization of the Other through subjectification and an acceptance of a life predisposed to uncertainty (Brun 2015; Fassin 2011; Foucault 1991; Sheldon 2021). In resettlement, caseworkers are the individuals who navigate and negotiate

conflicts in temporalities with their clients, adapting to support the unique needs of their cases despite shifting policies and the polarized political atmosphere of immigration in the United States.

Constantly confronted with limitations, service providers negotiate federal and individual expectations of resettlement. Navigating within the parameters set by the federal government while adapting to each case's set of needs, service providers felt limited to what they could provide for their clients. When I ask Charlotte, a young, Black, Christian caseworker who recently graduated with a bachelor's in social work, about the most difficult aspect of her job she says. "The amount of money that the government gives to our clients we just have to work with, and sometimes it doesn't feel like it's a lot to be able to support them. Or they ask things where I'm like, sorry, we can't find that. And it's not because we don't want to or not, they are [the government] just very restricted." Continuous uncertainty, produced from shifting government policies and the "infinite of the self" as Angela, the housing coordinator called it, can make the process feel unstable, the contextual variable of each case means each pathway to resettling is unique.

Government parameters for support services are too rigid to encompass the diverse needs of individuals. Some resettling clients, like the Afghan population resettled in Washington from Kabul, are able to mitigate these uncertainties through a secondary migration after their initial ninety-day resettlement period in the United States. When I ask Leeda about the families who have moved on their own accord she shares that "they felt dependent over there, because they could, you know, go to places where they have specialty stores. Everything is accessible, as far as you know, transportation and all that." Secondary migration is a way for resettling clients to integrate beyond the resettlement parameters, to find a place to settle.

The family Maya and I are visiting are struggling to adjust despite the extended support of Seeking Solace. As we walk towards the apartment building a tall woman in a long colorful skirt meets us at the entrance and holds the door open for us to come in. Still a few yards away from the door, a white woman and her child walk in ahead of us, ignoring the woman who held the door for her. Maya and the Sudanese woman are nonplussed about this behavior. I follow their lead and wait quietly while we call the

elevator (it is currently occupied by the white woman and her child). We take the elevator up two floors in silence. The language barrier simultaneously uncomfortable and transcending – each of us shifting on our feet, making brief eye contact. Sometimes silence allows space for things unsaid.

We enter a neat and sparse apartment. The blinds are drawn, and a pile of shoes lay by the door, unprepared for a home visit I awkwardly unlace my boots, taking an extra minute behind Maya and Adit. Once I manage to get my shoes off Maya introduces us. “This is Elizabeth, she is helping me today. Elizabeth, this is Adit.” Adit, the woman in the long skirt, nods in my direction without looking at me.

A television, kitchen table, couch and coffee table are the only materials in the room besides a black briefcase. There are no photos, no tokens of home, no tangible sign of a before. While moving to the couch to sit down Maya tells Adit that she will use an interpreter today. Adit points at me with a smirk on her face, a subtle gesture joking that I am the interpreter (when I am clearly not). We all chuckle and sit while Maya calls the interpreter.

“What is the housing notice?” Maya asks Adit, she gets up and brings the black briefcase over to the couch. She opens it to reveal a pile of papers. The collection of their journey from Sudan to Seattle.

## Faith and Resettlement

Throughout my time volunteering and doing fieldwork at Seeking Solace, service providers – caseworkers and volunteers alike – would subtly mention faith in conversation. When asked how they managed to fill positions and survive the influx of admissions, many alluded, directly, or indirectly, that their faith influenced their drive, and ability to do their work. I often heard things like “God has just aligned things” “Jesus was a refugee,” or “It is His will, we are just here to do the work” (Fieldnotes and Interview notes: June 2022 – February 2023). Other employees used faith to cope with the limitations of their work. When I asked Sophia, the resettlement manager, about how she manages compassion fatigue she tells me, “I just have to remember that I am just one blip in someone's story. Like if I wasn't here, they would find another way. People are very resilient, and I am not God. I am not the end all be all. They will find another way.”

Sophia, a white, Christian woman in her twenties, has been with the company for almost three years, starting as an extended care caseworker, she now oversees a team of caseworkers, interns, and housing coordinators. Her faith allows her to create boundaries with her work, her employees often applaud her leadership and support - “you can always tell when people are new because they’re like ‘we need to help them’ but we can’t do everything. It gets easier, unfortunately, the more you do it. But sometimes you just need to get a job. I mean that is the way it is going to be sustainable for you [the client]. So sometimes you just have to look at people and be like I am really sorry, but I can’t help you.”

The employees and volunteers who work at faith based RRAs are often associated with local congregations that are integral in providing material and social support for refugees.



Figure 11 "I don't know I like sharing food" Rachel 2022

Refugees sponsored by congregations often have better integration experiences due to the social networks available (Ager and Strang 2008; Eby et al. 2011; Ferris 2010; Frazier 2021; Ives et al 2020). While FBOs are ideal for creating social networks, through congregational communities, few congregations are prepared to sponsor or support refugees long-term, that is, post the

three-month resettlement period (Frazier 2022; Hyndman and Giles 2017; Ives et al 2010). Prior research on FBOs and resettlement illuminate potential for long-term community support for FDPs, but the volunteer/congregation involvement remains an unpredictable, short-term resource (Eby et al. 2010; Frazier 2020; Ives et al. 2011).

Helping with immediate services, like housing, is an integral part of resettlement. On the day I join Maya, we are going to check in on a housing notice about late payments, she begins to sift through the paperwork in the briefcase looking for a particular notice, a male voice comes through her phone.

“Ya, hi, hello?” “



“Hello, my name is Maya. I work at a resettlement agency in the United States. I am sitting with Adit and Elizabeth, and we need some help with a housing notice that Adit got from the apartment building. If you don’t mind introducing yourself first, then we can get started.”

The call lasts about twenty minutes. Adit and the interpreter exchange in Nuer, and Maya waits for translations. They received two notices from the building (in English), one informing them of their late rent, the other asking that they provide a document assuring their source of income. Angela, the housing coordinator has mentioned these miscommunications with housing companies – they often request proof of income.

Maya nods as Phillip translates. Maya tells Adit that they didn’t do anything wrong but asks that they call her when they receive something they are unsure about. She takes a photo of the notice and makes a note on her phone to talk to the housing department at the office to resolve this. Maya then tells Adit through Philip about the rental assistance check she has brought them, suggesting they use it to pay their back rent first. Before the interpreter goes off the line Maya opens the conversation back to Adit, asking her about the kids' school and the ESL classes she hasn’t been attending. Between transportation and childcare Adit does not feel like she can attend ESL, this part of the conversation has an air of familiarity. The interpreter says goodbye and Adit gathers the papers to put back in the briefcase.

Our next errand took us to a third apartment complex. While we drive Maya receives a phone call, a man’s voice comes through the car speaker. I am confused momentarily when I do not understand what they are saying, my brain waiting for English while Maya and the man speak in French. She hangs up and apologizes for the interruption, “sorry, that was my little brother.”

“No, no problem. I talk with my sister all day. Were you speaking French?” She says yes and pauses. One of those loaded pauses where you can feel someone weighing whether to share something personal. She tells me about her family, about how her parents and her brothers came to Washington from the Congo nine years ago and were resettled by Seeking Solace, the agency she works for now. Maya graduated University a few years ago and began working with Seeking Solace, her brothers are either in university or are working on advanced degrees.

After clearing a check error at a third apartment complex, we head back towards the office. I ask Maya what the most difficult part of her job is.

“It’s hard because you can only do so much, at some point people need to help themselves. It’s like God has a plan and we can’t change that. We can connect people to resources, but we can’t make them do anything.... it’s like we are the in-between... what’s the word?”

“Like...an instrument?” I offer.

“Yeah...it’s like...” She pauses thoughtfully before saying “Seeking Solace is like the chicken, it’s the main dish that doesn’t change, some people like curry as a side, some don’t. All we can do is give them options; we are just instruments for God’s work.”

The intersections of faith and time in resettlement raise questions about temporal interpretations and dissonance between service providers and their clients. Though faith provides service providers with a coping mechanism to burnout and secondary trauma, it also allows those within resettlement labor to passively cope with limitations in their work, rather than advocate for a more humane, just pathway for intranational communities (Figure 11). Faith in the resettlement office was a mechanism to minimize the sense of uncertainty for service providers. By assuming it was out of their control, service providers were able to distance themselves from the implications of their boundaries with the work they did, putting policy into practice instead of advocating for changes in resettlement for more just, actionable, strategies, service providers found solace in their faith. This distance ultimately harms their clients, as unrecognized, unelected representatives of the clients they support, service providers have the ability to act as advocates in an unjust system.

Though the racial colonial inequities of the United States were frequently recognized in a general – cultural sense by service providers, there was little reflexivity on their individual (service providers) positions of power position or compliance in these systems.

## Chapter Six - “Yeah, there is a better day”

As Uehling (1998, 24) put it: ‘If we become fixed on [the] notion of violation, we will fail to recognize the ways in which refugees are actively building their world’. In other words, as important as it is to point to the traumatic aspects of refugee experiences, it is also critical to recognize the resilience of people coming out of such experiences

Hariz Halilovich (2013, 219)

### Process of Becoming

Refugee resettlement reaches across social, political, and personal relationships. The process of integrating into a new community is continuous – it takes time to fall into step with local rhythms. For the refugees who are resettled in a third country, this integration is the next step in the series of steps they have been asked to take since being forcibly displaced. Continually asked to adapt, refugees and other people without political and legal representation are familiar with fulfilling expectations of their subjective “Other,” the colonizers from the North (Graeber 2012; Nayeri 2011; Sheldon 2021). When refugees arrive in the United States to be resettled, they have been conditioned to perform their refugee-hood through interviews, biometric and medical scans, and detainment in camps. These periods of suspended uncertainty dispossess individuals of the opportunity to plan for secure futures.

Current humanitarian systems reinforce the vulnerable and helpless narrative of refugees by exploiting their displacement through bureaucratic processes of deterritorialization, dehistoricization, and dispossession of legal, social, and material rights. The humanitarian process of providing aid to people forcibly displaced can be dehumanizing, reducing lives to a single event rather than recognizing the evolution of a life to survive displacement (Halilovich 2013; Hyndman 2010; Sigona 2014). In refugee resettlement, service providers occupy a position of power. Their actions and interactions both affect and are affected by atmospheric biases.

The United States humanitarian aid model in resettlement is largely influenced by the Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, as well as the faith-based organizations that facilitated resettlement before the Refugee Act of 1980 standardized processes (Eby et al 2010; Ferris 2010; Frazier 2021; Ives et al. 2011). Heteropatrial social hierarchies are reinforced through the delegation of material aid to groups

through centuries of primitive accumulation, where a central figure (namely the aid provider) is the protector, or savior, of the other (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 2013; Issar 2021; Ong 2003). This narrative has

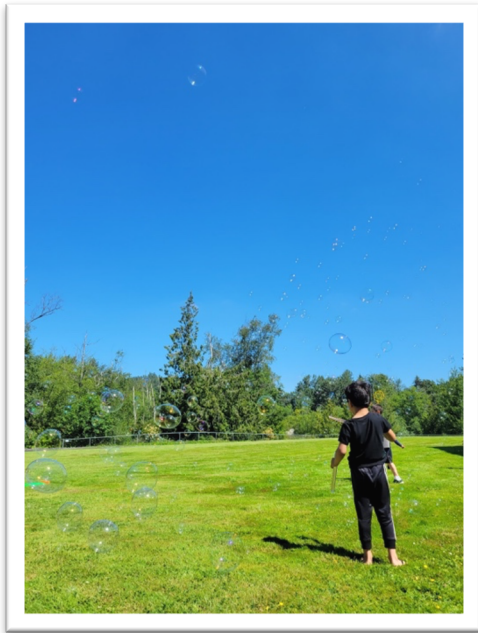


Figure 12 "This was just cute, the kids had bubbles" Maddy 2022

been perpetuated through the media, from both political perspectives and humanitarian agencies (Sigona 2014).

Regarding resettlement and humanitarian reason, the current response pays "more attention to the biological life of the destitute and the unfortunate." That is, humanitarianism responds more to the spectacle of crisis, "than to the life through which they could give a meaning to their own existence" (Fassin 2012, 254).

By confining refugees' life experience to a single disaster, humanitarian labels dehumanize people by

disconnecting them from their past and limiting their access to future planning (Halilovich 2013). Social and political barriers to employment, language acquisition, and community are not addressed in the ninety-day resettlement period (Figure 11). The short-term, emergency response in humanitarianism is not sufficient in a world where crisis is no longer the exception, but the norm (Brun 2016, Fassin 2012, Narotzky and Besnier 2014). Following the current policies perpetuates inequalities that stem from centuries of physical and structural violence (Graeber 2012). Resettlement teaches clients where they belong socially, politically, and economically in the United States.

### Welcoming the Stranger

I had been invited to a few airport pickups with Seeking Solace, gracious that they extended a hand for me to "see what they're like," unless they needed my car for space, I would decline. The few times I said yes, they were able to find an interpreter to drive with them, two cars sufficient to take a family of five or six and whatever luggage they had with them to their first temporary home.

As a volunteer who had gone through a series of three training sessions, a background check, and agreeing to the time commitments of being a part of Seeking Solace's cultural advocate program, I was paired with a family of five coming from Central America.

Christina, Miguel, and their three children arrived in Washington late one evening in June 2022. Alex and Carmen picked them up from the airport and drove them to their temporary home, a two-story French Country house at the end of a cul-de-sac, provided as a home stay by a member of Alex and Carmen's church. I arrive at 10 am the morning after their arrival, to meet the family and introduce myself. Seeking Solace runs a welcome program where volunteers are assigned to integrating families as support, each case is asked if they would like this service, Christina and Miguel said yes. I am early and wait in my car for the caseworker to arrive.

By the time everyone arrives the driveway is full, five adults and four vehicles filling the cul-de-sac. Before we get to the door the children run out to bashfully shout 'hel-lo'. Mary (the other volunteer), Aida (the interpreter), and I introduce ourselves. Alex and Carmen say hello again. We all sit in the living room, an immaculate windowed room looking over a rolling lawn with fruit trees.

This was the first non-Afghan Parolee Act (APA) case that the suburban Seeking Solace office had hosted, and the first to have cultural advocates from the first day. Mary, a mother of three and a member of Alex and Carmen's church, was paired with me to help introduce Christina, Miguel and their children, Paulina, Juan, and Carlos, to Washington. Alex, the resettlement manager has spent some time living in South America but brought along Aida another church member and volunteer from Mexico to translate.

Carmen will be their caseworker; she is the only caseworker at the suburban Seeking Solace office during the first nine months of receiving clients. A day after arriving, resettlement agencies meet with their clients to go over the expectations of the three-month resettlement period.

Alex and Carmen are doing the first day check-in, one of the requirements of RRAs, explaining the role of the resettlement agency and the expectations over the next 90 days. Whenever Alex pauses Aida is quick to translate, Christina and Miguel nod and indicate they understand. The kids flitter in and

out of the room, shy and curious. The youngest boy (four-ish) climbs in and out of his mom's lap, a boy around seven is playing a game on a phone, the daughter, a girl about ten, stands next to her brother, switching between watching his game and listening intently.

On their fourth day in the U.S. Mary and I go to Walmart and Winco with them to get groceries, the kid's eyes aglow with the shelves of candy, toys, clothing, everything in abundance. Miguel and I push a child in a cart as we walk around Walmart, we pause in the aisle with deodorant, shampoo and toothpaste. Hands on his head Miguel looks at us and laughs, eyes wide "hay muchas opciones [there are so many options]" he's not wrong.

As a non-APA case, Christina and Miguel had much more separation to other clients being resettled than the group from Afghanistan who shared a language and a country. Carmen, the caseworker reflects on the difficulties of supporting the APA cases, "housing was just a nightmare, we had these large families coming in and nowhere to put them. So many people were displaced in Washington because of the floods and fires earlier in the year". The local housing crisis compounded Seeking Solace's ability to fairly distribute housing. Refugee resettlement agencies (RRAs) are given information about who they will be resettling, including the family size and location of origin, but they are not told when these groups will arrive. "Could be six months, could be six days," says Maddy, the cultural advocate coordinator told me during a day of writing thank you notes to Seeking Solace donors.

With short notice and limited options for housing, Seeking Solace reached out to its church community members. Some APA clients were placed in multi bedroom second homes on behalf of congregation members, others resided in low-income apartment complexes. A small community, the resettling APA clients at the new Seeking Solace office were disgruntled with the housing inequalities offered to clients. Within a few months after arriving in Washington from Kabul, all the clients from Afghanistan had relocated on their own accord to Seattle after their resettlement period.

Leeda, the interpreter and nurse, remains close with many of the APA clients she interpreted for, keeping in touch, and assisting with translation when needed. I ask her how those families are doing and what prompted their move (Figure 12).

“A lot of the families do move because of the resources that are popular with the Afghan population. So, it was mainly, well, I don't know about the housing. Because they said that they don't like the housing as they were moving. But then he said that they wanted to move because, I mean, I guess it's a part of like, learning to be independent” Leeda tells me during our interview.

Leeda and her family moved from Virginia after their ninety-day period when they first arrived in the United States decades ago. “We moved, you know, from Virginia to here right after three months. So, I think that's very typical.” Despite obstacles, resettling clients find ways to reclaim power over their lives. Many refugees move after their initial resettlement period, making the choice to leave the place they have become familiar with (their resettlement community) in order to start elsewhere.

### Dos Apellidos – Two Last Names

Over the next three months I see Mary, her three children, and Christina, Miguel and their three children at least once a week. Mary studied Spanish through college and is fluent enough to translate most things. The caseworker, Carmen, coordinates medical appointments, acquiring government documents and enrolling the family in school (the kids in the local elementary, and Christina and Miguel in the local community college ESL classes). Mary and I help with transportation, taking turns going grocery or clothes shopping with the family. Sometimes we join the other resettling families (well, the mothers and children) in events hosted by Seeking Solace: a beach day, a weekly family literacy program, the end of summer school readiness camp.

I show Miguel and Christina how to navigate the local bus system. We laugh as I take them on the wrong route, pulling for the stop and waiting ten minutes to catch the bus going the opposite direction. At the bus depot I show them where they can get maps and route information. A few weekends later they suggest we meet at a park; they take the bus and I meet them there with three dogs (my dog and two others). Christina has packed us lunches; cheese and ground beef wrapped in a tortilla. The youngest, Carlos munches on goldfish, laughing as he throws them towards my dog, Olive, to eat.

Being a cultural advocate means familiarizing clients with the local landscape. Introducing areas for recreation as well as assisting with medical appointments and transportation. In their second month here, the children have appointments to go to the local dentist, I am available on that Saturday morning and volunteer to go with Christina, Paulina (the daughter) and Carlos (the four-year-old) to their first dentist visit. When we arrive at the dentist an interpreter is waiting for us, most medical offices have interpreters or translation services for non-English speakers. Though there have been issues with dialects, virtual interpreters make communication possible.

While Christina and the interpreter, Gloria, begin filling out forms I take the two kids into the children's waiting room, we look at the nautical paintings on the walls and the kid's magazines in English. Gloria and Christina join us after a few minutes at the desk, "Christina says the name is wrong, their last name is Hernandez Oblitas, but this register only has Oblitas, that is her last name, but her husband's last name is missing" Gloria says, handing me the clipboard. I check the documents shared with me through a secure file on my phone, the names on the documents I have match the ones on the insurance information given to the dentist. Unsure what to do Christina suggests we call Carmen, the caseworker, so I do.

Carmen picks up after a few rings, I tell her about the situation with the names, she asks if it matches the names on the documents, they have shared with me.

"Yes, but Christina says that Miguel's last name is missing. They have two last names" I speak to Carmen while Gloria translates between Christina and me.

"As long as the names on the insurance documents match the names on the doc that you have, then they are covered, and it is fine. We can fix their names later if they are wrong" Carmen tells me over the phone, unconcerned. The insurance goes through, and the appointments continue. Paulina has cavities and Carlos needs



Figure 13 "My students sent me this picture, they packed for me when I had to come home" Rachel 2022



surgery, they will schedule that for another day, prescribing antibiotics for him to take for the next ten days.

Names seem to shift in immigration, overworked and sporadically trained, service providers can overlook details and be unprepared to work with the diverse cultures they encounter. In most of Latin America, it is common to have two last names, a paternal and maternal name. When Miguel and Christina did their initial processing for asylum in the U.S., the full last name Hernandez Oblitas, was reduced to ‘Oblitas.’

A few months later when I help Immigration and Legal Services (ILS) finalize and digitize their file cabinets of A.P.A paperwork I noticed the Suri family. The Suris are a Pashto speaking family of seven from Kabul. Originally assigned to be resettled at the suburban Seeking Solace location, the Suri’s are the family that required mediating between their caseworker, Carmen, and the volunteers due to miscommunications (as I argue in Ch4 see Casework, Continuity and Professionalism).

When Maddy told me about this mediation, she mentions a few miscommunications. Hands over her face she tells me how the father’s name has become legally documented as ‘FNU Suris. “What is FNU?” I ask.

“First Name Unknown” Maddy says through her hands. Though names can be changed, she says, “it is our job to catch that, we have the power to change it. It just shouldn’t happen” (*Maddy* – Cultural Advocate Coordinator August 2022). But it happens. As I flip through their file, thick with ruffled papers. I scan the pages, going through the checklist provided by ILS, I see the names of all five boys, the mother’s name, and FNU Suri.

## Intersections and Relationships

Miguel began working full time at a shipping facility in September, the three children are in school, and Christina goes to ESL classes at the technical college three times a week. It is March, they have long ‘graduated’ from the agency and are financially stable enough with Miguel’s job to be off TANF. I see Christina and the kids regularly, sometimes we play hide and seek at the nearby park, other

times we go into town and eat desserts. Christina and I help each other with language practice – we laugh over the sounds we cannot make in the other’s language, I cannot roll my r’s, and she cannot pronounce the lazy American ‘t’.

We ask each other about our sisters who live in different countries and talk about how her kids are adjusting to American school and learning English.

“Es difícil porque los niños hablan inglés en la escuela todo el día. Luego llegan a casa y no puedo entenderlos. Así me enseñan, tienen mucha paciencia pero es difícil. [It is difficult because the kids speak English at school all day. Then they come home, and I can’t understand them. That’s how they teach me, they have a lot of patience, but it is difficult].” Christina tells me while we walk my dogs around the beach. We switch between English and Spanish, each of our second languages about the level of the other’s, making our conversations exaggerated, animated comedies.

Pedro, her seven-year-old son, has picked up the most English and has been having the hardest time adjusting. It is becoming harder to communicate as his English improves, she feels like she is constantly translating from English to Spanish and Spanish to English, making sure the kids remember their Native language while supporting their American integration.

Christina is an attentive mom, but she is tired. The two boys sleep with her most nights and Miguel works six days a week. She is responsible for keeping the family together, doing the shopping, cooking, cleaning, and general care work. Pedro has been having tantrums, he is sensitive and easily upset. She tells me that Pedro was crying on Valentine’s Day, he was upset that he did not have a girlfriend, “me hijo dijo que quería una novia para el día de san Valentín. Cuando le preguntamos por qué, dijo ‘porque haces todo por papa. Cocinas, limpias, eres su esclavo’ [my son told me he wanted a girlfriend for Valentine’s Day. When I asked him why he said ‘because you do everything for dad, you cook, you clean, you are his slave’].” Christina tells me this while laughing, incredulous at her son’s statement but takes it with good humor. We agree that women are underappreciated, and that men don’t often take responsibility for children, or themselves.

Hierarchies in humanitarian aid, between those receiving and those providing aid, are modelled in paternalistic relationships that perpetuate power dynamics and dispossession through centuries of economic, social, political, and physical oppression (Arvin et al. 2013; Issar 2021). The neoliberal turn from welfare to workfare in the twentieth century shifted social services further into unstable public private partnerships. The reform in welfare after the passage of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) put a moratorium on aid after five years and required recipients to work in order to receive aid (Benson 2016; H.R.3734 – Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996). PRWORA restricted resources for immigrating populations while also allowing states to develop programs to financially support refugees and other legal immigrants.

Protocols and requirements for social services affect men and women differently, limiting opportunities for women, especially mothers. U.S. anti-poverty services, like welfare and resettlement, reinforce inequalities derived from intersections of gender, class, and race, disproportionality limiting women from accessing or accumulating livelihoods (Benson 2016; Erickson 2020; Kingfisher 2016; Lamphere 2016). I witnessed women and mother's resettling with Seeking Solace experience this disjunct, whether due to cultural expectations or circumstance, women experienced more isolation than their male counterparts. In family groups men took on the employment role, isolation for women was compounded by limited opportunities for social interaction and language practice. With limited options for childcare many mothers prioritized their children over their own English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. At the suburban Seeking Solace, many mothers did not have social circles or support outside of their caseworker and volunteer advocates, limiting their ability to build relationships, create a community, and their ability to earn an income.

The current policies for resettlement are constructed from neoliberal frameworks that reinforce political hierarchies that *assign* refugees the role of “victims who need protection” instead of acknowledging refugees as individuals who are rendered vulnerable through circumstances (Fassin 2012; Halilovich 2013; Luna 2009; Tiktin 2014). Groups rendered vulnerable are conditioned to adapt,

conditioned to meet the criteria provided by the dominant group. The primary goal in resettlement is to connect clients with social services that support their integration and some form of employment. These goals do not account for the human components of resettlement – the mental, physical, and emotional needs of clients that affect their ability to become “self-sufficient” individuals by arbitrary, objective, legal standards.

In her thirty years of resettlement and immigration work, Claire, the Immigration and Legal Services (ILS) manager has experienced a spectrum of events, from courthouse shootings and suicide calls to family reunification. I ask her how she deals with the weight of the work, losing clients and seeing people struggle. Her reply aligns with other people service providers I have spoken with, “you can’t do it in just a few months, it takes time. Yeah, there is a better day.”

Other service providers also felt that the temporal parameters for resettlement were too objective, too restrictive with their assessments to facilitate meaningful support beyond ninety days. Resettlement means different things for different clients. Depending on the individual’s background, resettlement can be an opportunity for independence previously unavailable to them. This is especially true for women being resettled in the U.S.

Christina and Miguel are an example of a ‘successful’ resettlement process by federal standards – with steady employment, stable housing, and enrollment in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes – but their personal ambitions and potential are confined by obstacles that extend beyond resettlement. One day when we are out Christina tells me that Miguel gets frustrated with her sometimes when he gets back from work and the house is dirty or dinner is not made. “He does not understand that it is different here. Women are independent. I can work, I can go to school. I want to learn.” She switches to Spanish when I ask her what she wants to do.

“Quiero traducir a ayudar a la gente en mi país. Esto patrocinando las clases de inglés de mi hermana para que pueda conseguir un mayor trabajo, ahora ella va a la escuela dos horas cinco días a la semana después del trabajo. Quiero hacer eso para los niños en El Salvador algún día. [I want to translate in order to help people in my country. I’m sponsoring my sister’s English classes so she can get a better

job, now she goes to school for two hours five days a week after work. I want to do that for the children of El Salvador one day]" Christina tells me.

Personable and quick-witted, Christina is a natural leader and has helped other women from Central America in the program. Showing them how to use the public transit system, teaching them the cultural quirks of American grocery shopping, and urging them to advocate for themselves when they were uncomfortable with the housing Seeking Solace provided them.

Christina asks me about my school, I tell her about my project – that I am studying the process of resettlement, how Alex and Carmen do their jobs. "You are in my project" I tell her, an awkward conversation to have with someone I think of as a friend. She nods and laughs "Si, yo recuerdo. [Yes, I remember]." Christina and her husband, Miguel, did an interview with me in late September about their experience. Pausing, I try to articulate a compliment in Spanish, but instead say "well, resettlement is different for women, different for mothers" in English, followed by "eres fuerte y valiente, tu y tus ninos explorer este lugar nuevo confianza. [you are strong and brave; you and your kids explore this new place with confidence.]" Christina says thank you in English, then smiles, her comedic timing impeccable, "si y incluir que mi hojo piensa que soy una esclava. [Yes and include that my son thinks that I am a slave]."

Christina's life in the United States is a contradiction, there are opportunities available to her children, and her husband, but her own options for individual "self-sufficiency" are limited. Social networks of care are undervalued and underappreciated in the U.S. at both personal and political levels. The U.S. goals for refugee resettlement mirror general capitalist values that perpetuate global inequalities. Emphasis on economic security eclipses other aspects of refugee livelihoods, the tangible and intangible assets necessary for individual success are overshadowed through capitalist goals centered around economic growth instead of community. This is antithetical to the feminist concept of the "economy otherwise" or the recognition of the social constellations necessary for individual economic success (Narotzky and Besnier 2014).

At Seeking Solace there were obstacles to creating communities that would foster individual success beyond the service providers (caseworkers, contractors, and volunteers) who worked with clients.

The services provided by resettlement agencies ESL, cultural orientations, and employment are spaces where clients could extend their social networks in their communities, however there are obstructions to actualizing these networks. The faith statement limited hiring pools (as I argue in Chapter 4), and volunteer population to white Christians, usually retired women, or mothers who home-schooled their children, making the community at Seeking Solace insular, and composed of primarily white, affluent, anglophones.

Discrimination in hiring processes – for service providers, clients, and potential employers – compounds caseloads and limits individual’s ability to build social networks of care necessary for stability. Language acquisition is an integral part of community building in the English-speaking United States. At the end of his story, Abdul-Khaliq tells me, through Leeda’s interpreting, that he thinks “knowing the language is very important, because if you know it then there is a lot of information out there that you can access, but you won’t know it if you don’t know the language.”

In a conversation with caseworkers in either office, attendance in ESL classes was a consistent issue. From clients not attending, or not being able to attend due to other responsibilities (work or taking care of family), to the few ESL classes offered being to capacity. “[Both] ESL and medical appointments are the ones with the biggest waiting periods” Daria, the caseworker who had forty-four cases in her first ten months at the older Seeking Solace office, tells me. Maddy has had a similar experience with ESL classes at the new Seeking Solace with Alex and Carmen. Getting participants enrolled in classes can take months. Abdul-Khaliq, Christina, and Miguel have all told me of their anxiety with learning English. I think of myself, an American who speaks English and some Spanish, and the other monolingual Americans. The language barriers amplified by histories of systematic exclusion.

## Chapter Seven - “Home is where you have people. A community independent of blood”

There is a need to thicken responsibility and obligation in order to create a future for humanitarianism beyond biopolitics. Humanitarian actors represent the humanitarian system, whether they like it or not and whether they identify with it or not, and they must find a way to begin the future.

Cathrine Brun (2016, 406)

### Responsible Relationality

In the series of responses to people forcibly displaced, resettlement is considered the most politically secure. The individuals who are chosen to resettle in a third country have a pathway to citizenship, where they have the right to vote and be counted as a sovereign citizen. How refugees and other qualifying asylum seekers are resettled varies depending on the nation that resettles them. This project was an inquiry on the resettlement process in the United States, where centuries of racial and colonial conquest have scaffolded a culture of dispossession towards the ‘Other’.

Though the Reception & Placement (R&P) program is designed to bolster individual’s ability to integrate into the United States, processes modelled from violence become repeated violences (Graeber 2012; hooks 2015). Inequalities derived from histories of conquest, dispossession, and deterritorialization culminate to a dissonant present where economic profit and efficiency are prioritized over values that foster security through community. Systematic inequalities are embedded within policy to perpetuate the social and political norms derived from centuries of physical violence (King 2016; Graeber 2012). The repercussions of these histories are remade or refused in the daily interactions between service providers and clients. While service providers did their best to negotiate the inequitable systems, they work within inefficient international and domestic systems that both constrain and control local agencies through capital assessments of success.

Models of aid built from structures of violence are not inherent opportunities for security. Instead, inefficient, and ineffective systems are designed from violence to systematically repress and eliminate the existence of the Other by reducing their ability to access livelihoods. In resettlement, a process that is

supposed to support people forcibly displaced integrate into a new community, the service providers who are responsible for creating these networks of support are overwhelmed and unprepared to respond to the needs of their clients.

The neoliberal structure creates a privatized (outsourced through volunteer work) and managerial (goals for human services assessed in economic terms) environment in refugee resettlement that is not unlike other social services in the United States (Gonzalez Benson 2016). The paperwork-laden-assessment-driven checklist in resettlement is derived from capitalist efficiency, favoring profits over humanity.

Resettlement work is relational. The networks of care needed to produce a ‘self-sufficient’ individual is simultaneously obvious and excluded in resettlement work. The dehumanizing processes people who have been forcibly displaced endure are continued in resettlement, clients are asked to become ‘self-sufficient’ in a network of neoliberal public, private, governmental, and non-governmental entities without an avenue to create their own networks in the community. Service providers have interpersonal relationships with clients, with the potential to be conduits for political, social, and legal changes. However, centuries of social conditioning and hierarchal dynamics have eliminated spaces for relational reflexivity. Ethnography is a tool for unravelling these relationships. Detailed descriptions produce local landscapes, where discourse is confronted by lived experiences.

### Transportation Limitations

I am frequently asked to show clients how to use the local transportation system. The infrastructure of the United States, with its sprawling suburbs and automobile emphasis, is limiting for individuals who do not have access to a car. This research would have been possible without a vehicle but my commute times between offices would have almost tripled by using public transportation. This ‘transportation’ gap was prevalent in resettlement, clients were often stunted by the inconvenience and inefficiency of the public transportation options. When I asked Miguel and Christina what the most difficult aspect of resettlement was, they unanimously agreed on transportation. Though comfortable



enough to teach other clients how to navigate the city bus, they have had their share of frustrations. Christina shares a few examples during our interview.

“Bueno, tenemos que usar el autobús para poder conseguir comida y, a veces, es difícil. Los niños no son tan pacientes y en la parada de autobús tengo que entretenerlos. El autobús tarda mucho. Donde vivíamos había mercados por todas partes. Ahora tenemos que caminar mucho. Mis hijos se cansan, se frustran porque siempre están caminando conmigo” [Well we have to use the bus to be able to get food and sometimes it is difficult. The children are not so patient and at the bus stop I have to entertain them. The bus takes a long time. Where we used to live there were markets everywhere. Now we have to walk a lot. My kids get tired they get frustrated because they are always walking with me].”

When Christina went to take her youngest child, Carlos, to pick up her Women Infant and Children (WIC) food card, their trip took over three hours.

“Tomamos el autobús para ir a recoger la tarjeta WIC que tengo para mi hijo Carlos, entonces seguí el mapa y me subí al autobús y ¡me tomó una hora y media! Pero en bicicleta me hubiera llevado diez minutos. [We took the bus to go pick up the WIC card I have for my son Carlos, and so I followed the map and I went on the bus and it took me an hour and a half! But on a bike it would have taken me ten minutes].”

An errand that would take half an hour in a vehicle took over three hours on the bus. The aggregate of these necessary, daily, excursions via bus adds up, becoming another obstacle to security. Disjuncts in transportation temporalities impact resettling clients beyond inconvenience, they obstruct opportunities for integration, belonging, and security.

The heteropaternal dynamics in resettlement render displaced clients in a liminal space between social, political, and economic uncertainty and a secure pathway to citizenship. Service providers are responsible for guiding refugee clients through this process by connecting clients to support services in the area and aiding in their integration into the U.S. Humanitarian workers, in this case service providers, act as political intermediaries, representing resettling clients. The unpredictable policies for U.S.

resettlement mean this responsibility of representation falls disproportionately on caseworkers, with large caseloads and backlogs, limiting their capacity to support their clients. To maintain their funding and jobs, service providers at resettlement agencies must complete casefiles that demonstrate their competence with federal policy. The practice of complying to these policies, of following the checklist provided by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), reinforces the implementation of unjust parameters designed by government officials far from the populations they affect.

The flexible design of this project stemmed from strong relationships that were built over the course of a year and a half before research began. Interviews, photovoice, and detailed fieldnotes allowed me to steep in people's stories, which produced this ethnography where voices could be amplified, and honored, from their personal contexts.

### Experience as Expertise

It is morning and I am wading through the MatchGrant spreadsheet; calling Ukranian parolees in the area to see if they qualify for additional rental assistance. After two failed calls to translators, Matt, one of the young managers approaches me at my temporary desk. He asks if I can do a bus orientation. As I gather my belongings (I will have to drive to the client's house) he tells me about the family.

"Her name is Saabira, she lives with her mom and dad, they are from Afghanistan and speak Dari. She wants to work but doesn't know how to ride the bus yet. There are only male interns on site today, so I thought I would ask if you were up for it?"

"Yeah, sounds good" I have done multiple bus orientations at this point, but none at the larger office. I ask a run of standard questions – do they know I am coming? Is there anywhere in particular I should take her? How much is a bus pass? Matt says he'll text them and send me her number. Then suggests a city center about twenty minutes north of the office where Saabira will likely end up working. He hands me a stack of bus passes to give to her family. I sync the address and download the local transit app, texting Saabira my name, who sent me, and my ETA, 'ok' she replies quickly. The house is twenty minutes south of the office, forty with traffic. I arrive half an hour later, parking down the street and checking nearby bus routes and timetables.

Two women greet me at the door, I put my hand on my chest and introduce myself. “Hello, my name is Elizabeth, I am a volunteer from Seeking Solace”. The younger woman nods and offers her name in English, “I am Saabira.” The older woman smiles, touches a hand to her chest and gestures me inside with the other. “Salam” she greets me, “Salam alaikum” I return, stepping inside to take off my shoes. The house is bright with light. The white walls are bare. The couch and dining table are draped with loose plastic coverings.

Saabira and I crinkle the protective couch cover when we sit. Her mother disappears into the kitchen. We look at each other and laugh awkwardly, “Dari?” I ask, she says yes and smiles. I point to my phone and pull up the Tarjimly app, “I am going to call an interpreter so we can chat” I shrug toward Saabira, she smiles and nods. This is standard with volunteers.

While we wait to be connected with an interpreter Saabira and I mime our way through transportation apps, looking at different routes, departure times and duration of travel. She is younger than I am, maybe twenty-two and looks like someone I would see on campus, in dark jeans, a modest long sleeve shirt and her dark hair in a low ponytail. I don’t know how long her and her parents have been in the U.S., thinking of the circumstances that lead them here - to a suburban neighborhood outside of Seattle from their home in Afghanistan – my stomach flips.

It takes six or seven minutes before we connect to an interpreter. Saabira’s mother returns from the kitchen and speaks to us from across the room in Dari. Saabira looks at me then goes to her mother, a small woman in a dark hijab who wobbles when she walks. She could be in her forties or in her sixties, her face both ancient and youthful. Saabira delicately checks her mother’s hands and forearms as her mother continues in Dari. The deftness of their movements suggests these are routine motions between them. The call connects and begins to ring.

“Allo?” a faraway voice comes through my phone speaker.

“Hello” I say. “My name is Elizabeth, I work with an agency in the United States, and I would like some help speaking with my friend Saabira, how are you today?” A delay before the man replies.

“My name is Fattah, I am well. Nice to meet you Elizabeth” Saabira comes back to sit beside me on the couch, I hold the phone between us.

“Nice to meet you Fattah, glad to hear you are well. So, today Saabira and I are going to ride the bus, we have looked at maps and routes, but I would like to ask her if there was a specific place she would like to ride the bus to. If you could introduce yourself and ask her, that would be great.” Fattah begins in Dari, I hear ‘Salam’ and ‘Fattah’ amidst the rush of language.

“She said she would like to go to into the city center, because that is where she thinks she will be working”

“Alright awesome. Um...” I pause to think. “Alright. To go to city center, first we would pull up the app and type in our destination” Fattah relays this in Dari.

We look at different route options. It will be at least an hour one way to the city center by bus (it is twenty minutes by car). Saabira, Fattah, and I take turns speaking – Fattah switching from Dari to English seamlessly between us.

“It will take more than an hour to get there, and over an hour to return. It could be three hours on the bus today” It is ten a.m. I ask Saabira what she would like to do and tell her I am happy to go with her if she wants to ride it there and back. Fattah and Saabira chat, she has an English as a second language (ESL) class today at twelve, there won’t be enough time. Together Saabira and I look at nearby stops and routes, we decide that we will do a short bus ride away and back toward her house. We thank Fattah for his time. He is in Pakistan; it is eleven in the evening for him. Saabira and I look at each other.

“So we will go on a little adventure, and be back before your class at twelve?” I ask.

“Yes, but first I...change?” Saabira asks in English.

“Yes, of course” I respond. “May I use the restroom?” Saabira begins to show me toward the restroom but her mother intercepts her and sends her upstairs, gently grabbing my elbow and leading me to the bathroom. She points to a white pair of slippers outside the bathroom door and then to my socked feet. I slip them on and look at her, she smiles and opens the restroom door. When I return to the kitchen Saabira’s mom is waiting for me with a glass and an unopened container of orange juice. Unable to open

the container she pauses to look at me, smiling as she hands it to me to open. She takes it back and pours me a full glass. Saabira returns and her and her mom chat while I politely, but hurriedly, drink my 12 oz of orange juice.

They live on a cul-de-sac street that dead ends to the main road through a gate. Saabira and I head toward the bus stop, I show her how to use her map to track the bus without using data.

“This is my first time on the bus here too, so we will learn together” I say as we walk.

“That sounds good.” She is courageous with her English and speaks with the eagerness of a language student aching for conversation. While we walk the ten minutes to the bus stop, we chat as best we can, laughing as we clumsily try to say words in the other’s language. We walk two blocks and cross two busy streets. Saabira watches the map, looking left and right before taking us left. One hundred meters down is the bus stop, marked by the signpost with timetables and a bus icon.

“These are the times the bus comes on weekdays and weekends” I indicate the different timetables on the post, “you can see the bus in ‘real time’ on the app, but it uses data”. While we wait, we look at the bus direction on her map and the timetable. I show her how the stops are listed on the phone, “these will be on the bus, they will change as you get close to a stop. You want to make sure your stop matches the stop on the sign in the bus.”

The bus approaches, I hand her the stack of bus passes.

“Ready to try?”

“Ready to try” she echoes. We get on the bus; the driver shows us where to scan our passes and we sit together in a middle row. Her eyes are a bit wider than before, and she grips her bag in her lap, but otherwise she seems determined to appear confident. The bus rejoins traffic, and we watch the sign change in the bus and on her phone. We ride two stops, watching people pull the line to stop. Saabira watches the sign on the bus change and checks her phone, “We get off at next stop?” I check the sign; it is the street we had chosen to exit on. “Yes, the next stop, nice job!” She pulls the red string lightly; it doesn’t trigger the bell. Panic fills her face as she looks at me.

“Together?” I ask.

The bus stops and we get out, high fiving. Saabira is going to get us home. She leads us to the bus stop on the other side of the street. While we wait we talk about our favorite foods, she tells me about her favorite dish from Afghanistan, Kabuli pulao, pulling up photos on the internet when she forgets the English words for some of the ingredients.

“Do you miss Afghanistan?” I ask. Her face lights up as she nods.

“I miss the food, I miss the land, I miss my friends”

“What is it like?”

“It is green with mountains. It is hot in the summer and cold in the winter”

She forgets some English words; I ask for the words in Dari, my pronunciation is abysmal. She patiently breaks them down into syllables for me. There are more people at this bus stop. A man without a shirt paces in a circle a few yards away, talking to himself. Another man leans on the bus stop shelter and smokes a cigarette. An older woman stares down the street.

The bus arrives. More confident this time Saabira lines up before me. The shirtless man strides towards us and steps to the front of the line, mumbling and brushing by Saabira as he boards the bus. Her posture stiffens but after a breath she steps onto the bus after him, scans her ticket and takes a seat. I follow her lead and sit next to her, thinking of how best to explain homelessness, mental health, and poverty in America in a few words.

“I look down” I say and gesture to the mumbling man a few seats ahead of us. Putting my hands up to block my peripheral vision, trying to mimic avoiding eye contact. She nods and looks out the window. We ride the two stops and exit, Saabira successfully pulling the stop string.

During the walk home I ask her more about Afghanistan and her friends. “It is hard because we can’t talk” she says. I ask what she means.

“We can’t talk to people at home” she explains patiently. I apologize embarrassed. Saabira is gracious with my ignorance and continues to share in English. “At home, my mom was a nurse, she took care of the community. Then, she had a stroke. It is hard. She is confused why we are here. She has pain in her hands.” I don’t know what to say.

Saabira continues to chat to me, telling me about school in Afghanistan and learning English there with her friends. When we get back to her house her mom and dad are waiting on the porch to greet us. Saabira greets her father and then her mother, checking her hands and arms. I ask Saabira if she feels good about the bus? She says yes and thanks me again. Everyone says bye in English, and I head back to my car. I text Matt that I am on my way back and that the bus orientation was a success.

As I get off the exit to return to the office, I receive a text from Saabira “thank you for helping me, now I can ride the bus.”

Tears roll down my face as I pull into the parking lot.

### Learning to Listen

I approached this research humbly, doing my best to intentionally record the events within resettlement to honor the individuals who shared their experience, expertise, and time with me. This project would not have been possible without the community of service providers and clients who graciously welcomed me into their personal lives and shared their stories. It is fitting that this project, that emphasized relationships, became possible because of the relationships and networks of care that were nurtured for months before transitioning into research.

Research and resettlement are both traditionally hierarchal spaces, with dominant relationships stemming from imperial violence and emphasis on individual advancement. In research, the investigator is renowned, not the informants. In resettlement, well-being is based on individual, economic, “self-sufficiency” - feminist theory challenges these paternalistic views by opening spaces for inquiry in research instead of confining it (Aidani 2012, 2012).

Emphasizing the subjective experience in resettlement, ethnography is a way to document the “untold stories that deserve to be written down” (Halilovich 2013, 138). To honor these stories, and the networks of care involved resettlement, and in research, is to acknowledge the collaboration, the co-laboring, of different individuals in an assemblage. More than “collecting and cataloging” (Halilovich 2013; 139) dissecting relationships of power in local contexts are places of possibility that open and encourage new ways of thinking rather than the eliminatory logic of colonialism. This project was

possible because of the contribution and co-laboring efforts of the people I met, worked besides, and befriended at Seeking Solace. By observing, inquiring, and participating in the different aspects of resettlement with different individuals (service providers, and clients) multiple perspectives contributed to the product of this ethnography. I have included multiple perspectives in resettlement to weave together the separate realities service providers and clients exist in. Understanding the different relational tethers between these realities is imperative to reimagining a more just world.

In resettlement the well-being of service providers and clients are based on their social networks. How care came into practice at Seeking Solace was contingent on each individual's network of support. Clients experienced different obstacles integrating into a new community based on their background, their preferences, and their caseworker. Service providers experienced different challenges than their coworkers, each case unique.

The clerical and economic emphasis in resettlement eclipses these intangible aspects that culminate into human livelihoods. Refugee resettlement, at the intersection of immigration and humanitarian aid, demonstrates the complex relationships between policy and practice, between the personal and the political. The process of resettlement intersects with local, domestic, and international agents and is propelled by individual actions and interactions. These relationships ripple into reality. Individual and international biases are present in the proposed spaces of neutrality and support. In resettlement these relationships are magnified by contrasting personal contexts.

When I asked service providers and clients what made them hopeful, what made them feel like they belonged, both responded unanimously – community. Miguel, from El Salvador describes home as a place where you have people, “el hogar es donde tienes gente. Una comunidad independiente de sangre [home is where you have people, a community independent of blood].” Christina nods and adds “cuando estamos juntos como una familia estamos completos [when we are together as a family, we are complete].” Interpersonal relationships are impactful, especially in spaces imbalanced by power.

As witnesses to the disfunction of resettlement, and unelected representatives, service providers have the power to reject the policies they must comply to through advocating for more equitable and



flexible parameters for resettlement. Ethnography in anthropology is an opportunity to paint a detailed landscape that you can deconstruct – the peeling of each layer offering new details to consider. Thick, thoughtful, descriptions illuminate pathways from speculation to strategy. While research can produce theoretical explanations, theory seldom offers pragmatic applications for observations. By isolating daily events, this project offers critical examination from lived experience, identifying patterns of power that dehumanize, to address actions that perpetuate precarity.

Identifying areas for actionable change is possible in resettlement, and in other inequitable, dehumanizing systems. Power is remade or refused in everyday actions and expressions. Ethnography is a way to untangle these actions in context to make critical observations about the relationships between people in humanitarian aid. In resettlement, service providers act as the unelected representatives for resettling clients, navigating personal and political expectations, their actions and interactions with their clients reinforce or refuse the structures of violence and injustice they work within. Interpersonal relationships are impactful, especially in spaces imbalanced by power. Though the economic emphasis in resettlement eclipses the importance of people, the people who practice these policies have the power to reinforce or refuse these structures of violence's.

## Appendix A

United Nation High Commissioner of Refugees	UNHCR
Voluntary Agencies	VOLAGS
Refugee Resettlement Agencies	RRA
Office of Refugee Resettlement	ORR
Reception and Placement Program	R&P
Department of Health and Human Services	DHHS
Temporary and Needy Families	TANF
Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996	PRWORA

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