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1

Finding Refuge

The vacuum kept shocking Amjad¹ as he pushed it across the factory floor. He tried to explain to his supervisor what was happening, using hand gestures to relay that static buildup was raising the hair on his arms and making his janitorial work unnecessarily uncomfortable. But she couldn't understand what he was saying. Amjad had only been in the United States for five months and only had a grasp of the most rudimentary English phrases. The translation app on his phone was not much help because, semi-literate in his native Arabic, he wasn't sure what to type into the program. Amjad smiled and walked away from his supervisor. Despite their failure to communicate with each other, Amjad did not want his supervisor to think that he was someone who complained. He couldn't afford to lose this job. "I felt sorry for myself," Amjad told me.

Six years earlier, in his native Homs, Syria, Amjad was a tile contractor. He had his own workshop and owned a company van. He employed workers. On a visit to the Yale University Art Gallery, Amjad waved me over. On the wall before us was a fragment of a mosaic floor from 540 CE, a part of an exhibit of ancient art excavated from Gerasa, Jordan. "I used to make things like this," he told me, as we admired the small square tiles, some the color of natural stone and others dyed olive green and pink that formed an abstract flower pattern. Most of Amjad's work, he clarified, was tiling businesses, but every now and then he worked on more complicated projects. He was doing so well that in 2011, after seven years of saving, he had enough money to buy land on which he planned to build a bigger workshop and a home for his wife Rima and their two children.

As Amjad spent his life savings investing in the foundations for their new home, three thousand miles away a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi was slapped across the face by a police officer who confiscated his wares. He

set himself on fire in protest, an act which was the catalyst for civil disobedience across Tunisia. Inspired by these protests, dissidents in Egypt and then Qatar and Bahrain took to the streets, protesting their own despotic rulers.²

As Syrians too demanded *isqat el nizam*, the “downfall of the regime,” those with knowledge of the country’s history and politics held their collective breath. Hafez al-Assad, former president of Syria, had massacred his people in response to their calls for change decades prior.³ Bashar al-Assad, who took over after his father’s death, is a British-educated optometrist whose wife, Asma, was once profiled in a spread in *Vogue*. Early in his presidency there was hope that he would be a political and economic reformer. The world watched, however, as Bashar followed in his father’s footsteps, responding to civilian uprisings with live ammunition and plunging his country into one of the bloodiest civil wars the modern world has ever seen.⁴

Homs, deemed the “Capital of the Revolution,” was an early and exceptionally deadly site of regime violence. Rima, Amjad, and their two toddler sons, escaped to Damascus after the fatal shootings of Amjad’s father and his eleven-year-old sister two weeks apart. They thought that their departure was temporary and that they would soon return to enjoy the home that they had just begun to build. Instead, following a car bomb explosion during a funeral procession that propelled Amjad’s infant son from his arms and claimed the lives of sixty people walking alongside him, the family knew they had to move further away. They left Syria for Jordan. There, in July 2012, uncertain if they’d ever see home again, they registered as refugees.

Their story is not unique. The United Nations reports that in 2021, there were over twenty-six million refugees⁵ registered globally, the most since World War II.⁶ Syria is the country that has contributed the most, with over six million who have fled. The vast majority remain in nearby countries of immediate refuge including Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon—which despite having a population of six million people hosted one million Syrians. Life in these countries can be precarious—refugees lack documentation and a right to work, their children attend overcrowded schools, and millions are relegated to indefinite stays in camps where their mobility is restricted.⁷

For those in these situations of protracted displacement, there are two legal options that promise a reprieve from a life of precarity, and a chance at a new beginning as legal residents of a new country—resettlement and asylum.⁸ Resettlement refers to a third country selecting registered refugees with humanitarian needs from United Nations rosters and offering them an opportunity to travel as recognized refugees. Asylum is when someone travels to a new country, often making difficult journeys over land or sea, and applies for legal recognition as a refugee.

After two years in Jordan, Rima and Amjad received a call from the United Nations Higher Council for Refugees—they had been selected for resettlement

to the United States provided they passed the vetting requirements. They were overjoyed, and they dreamed of a future in “America” that was even brighter than their Syrian past. But as they underwent the extensive security process over the following two years—five interviews, fingerprinting, health screenings, and behind-the-scenes review by thirteen security agencies—their anxiety built. They were wracked with worry about what this move would mean for them. Amjad and Rima, who carried the traumas of war and displacement, had little to their name and knew that their language, religion, and ethnicity marked them as stigmatized minorities in the “West.” What lives would they be able to build?

This book follows the journeys of Rima and Amjad and other Syrians who sought refuge in the United States and Canada, world leaders in resettlement, and Germany, which, in response to the men, women, and children who boarded rafts across the Mediterranean, offered asylum to more than half a million Syrians. Arriving in all three countries are people who come from similar backgrounds as Amjad and Rima, members of a broadly construed middle class who had stable lives in Syria, but who lacked formal education, credentials, and proficiency in English and German. Through resettlement and asylum, they come face-to-face with national systems shaped by inequalities foreign to them that determine their access to resources as they rebuild their lives and imagine their futures. Their experiences reveal that these destination countries, while offering legal solutions to displacement, do not guarantee bright futures—they can deny newcomers’ potential by failing to recognize their abilities and invest in the tools they need to prosper.

Rima and Amjad were selected for resettlement in the United States because of their humanitarian need as displaced parents of young children. As they crossed the Atlantic, however, they transitioned in the eyes of the United States government from humanitarian cases to workers—people who were expected to quickly become self-reliant. As refugees, they were held responsible for the cost of their flight, and so they arrived USD 4,000 in debt. They received limited federal resettlement assistance—only ninety days of funding that barely covered rent and basic expenses. The only other assistance available to them was Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or welfare, which for a family of four provided USD 701 a month, while their rent was USD 1,000.

Rima and Amjad were ensnared, like other low-income Americans, in the United States’ threadbare social safety net. At the core of the 1980 Refugee Act is the goal of *self-sufficiency* or non-reliance on government assistance,⁹ which is also the goal of TANF.¹⁰ This is not a coincidence, as both the resettlement program and TANF are products of the limited social welfare system in the United States, a feature of the country’s neoliberal economy. This system treats poverty as an individual failure, an approach inextricably linked to the disenfranchisement of Black Americans who are disproportionately impoverished by it.¹¹

The new arrivals, facing this dearth of support, needed to earn an income *now*. “How?” Amjad asked the caseworker when she told him that he and Rima needed to find work immediately. He did not know anyone, and though he had been attending English classes, three months was too short a time to learn a new language. Amjad asked a question that I would hear repeated by almost everyone resettled in the United States: “Why did they bring us here if they were not going to help us?”

Amjad saw himself as the breadwinner of his family, so it was his responsibility to seek out employment. Without time to learn English or support for translating his skills, the only jobs available to him were those on the bottom rungs of the United States’ stratified post-industrial labor market, characterized by long hours and isolation from other workers. These conditions, which describe his janitorial job, thwarted any possibility for building economic capital or learning English—two of the primary tools for a US immigrant’s upward mobility.¹² Using his skills as a tile contractor to derive a middle-class income was a distant memory.

As the family’s caretaker, Rima stayed home to look after their sons. When they went to school, she was able to attend English classes with other Syrian women, reaching an intermediate level. Some of the other Syrian women, responding to the dire need for additional income, also reimagined their existing skills for economic profit by selling their cooking and handcrafts to combat family poverty. However, women’s language learning and economic enterprise was thwarted by the absence of progressive family policy: along with Rima, many eventually dropped out of English classes due to a lack of childcare options. And, five years after their arrival, while the women knew more English than the men, neither had strong enough language proficiency to sit for the United States citizenship exam.

The United States’ incorporation policy not only shaped Rima and Amjad’s immediate circumstances, but also the ways they could use and develop the skills through which they earn economic returns—or their *human capital*. We typically understand human capital as a testament to individual merit and hard work.¹³ Immigrant human capital is often measured as credentials earned, years of education, or employment in a given field.¹⁴ But what did Amjad’s decades of work as a contractor, his skill in putting together mosaic tiles, really mean in the United States? And was Rima “unskilled” simply because she had an elementary school education and hadn’t been formally employed before?

Human capital, as Amjad and Rima demonstrate, is not a static account of merit, but a dynamic product of the immigration process.¹⁵ In this book, I advance a theory of *state-structured human capital*, arguing that human capital is augmented, transformed, or destroyed by national incorporation policies through two mechanisms. The first is *investment* in newcomers, or whether the state allocates or denies resources and opportunities that enable them to

use their existing skills or gain new ones. The second is *recognition*, or whether the state sees or ignores immigrants' histories as economically viable skills. Because, as we saw in the case of Amjad and Rima, this process is shaped by gender stratification within state institutions and households, as well as by racism, human capital formation is gendered and racialized.

To understand this process, we need to compare the lives of Syrians in the United States to those who sought refuge elsewhere—what of their human capital? Omar, Yasmine, and their three children live five hundred miles northwest of Amjad and Rima, in Toronto. Like Amjad, Omar was an artisan; he was a blacksmith in Syria. Like Rima, Yasmine was a stay-at-home mom. But because of Canada's policy of *integration*, which focuses on language learning as a vehicle to "multicultural" inclusion, the government *invests* in refugee arrivals.¹⁶ This draws on the broader, more generous Canadian approach to social welfare, albeit one that exists in the context of the country's restrictive and selective immigration policy.¹⁷

Omar and Yasmine received a substantial start-up sum, as well as a stipend that covered their expenses in full for their first year. After twelve months, they had access to a generous welfare system. From the time of their arrival, they could attend free English classes and classes for skill development—including forklift operating and food safety or learning to run a kitchen up to health codes. There was publicly funded childcare support for English language learners. Both Omar and Yasmine were able to attend English classes. After a year, Omar found work as a blacksmith and, after his bad back gave out, he was able to switch occupations. And, Yasmine, through a contact in her English class, began to work part-time at a restaurant, using her culinary skills in new ways. Both Omar and Yasmine were able, through the state's *investment*, to express and build their human capital—to use their existing skills, and gain new ones, within the Canadian system.

Even further away, across the Atlantic, in Stuttgart, Germany, Nermine, her brother Ali, and their mother, who goes by Om Ali, sought asylum. There, yet another incorporation system revealed why, on its own, *investing* does not ensure the expression of human capital. Germany's generous social service system offered newcomers the most financial support of all three countries; but the system also featured a heavily regulated labor market.¹⁸ While the newly arrived family would have all their needs covered by the German Jobcenter, the same agency that supports unemployed people in Germany, Nermine's family would not be allowed to enter the German labor market unless they learned German and then earned the credentials required of other working Germans.

This German system of *credentialization* did not *recognize* Syrians' existing skills. This had different effects on Nermine, Ali, and Om Ali, who were all skilled cosmetologists. Om Ali, like others (often men) with long-established careers in Syria, experienced the credentialization as an erasure of her human

capital. Young people, by contrast, including her two children, and women who never had careers, saw the system as creating a pathway to gain new skills. Still, both young and old felt that an assumption that led to the rigidity of the system, “a German system for Germans,” as one put it, was that not only their skills, but they themselves, were less-than and needed to prove their worth.

In this book, I follow men and women¹⁹ from similar economic and social backgrounds (some of whom are related), who arrived within a similar time frame to the United States, Canada, and Germany. I argue that each of these states, through their incorporation systems, differentially *invest* in and *recognize* refugee skills and abilities. Through the quasi-experimental vantage offered by the men and women’s simultaneous experiences in these three countries, we can see how state policies structure human capital. Because incorporation systems derive from social welfare systems that are patterned by racial and gender inequalities, the processes of human capital formation become racialized and gendered.

By considering human capital as a dynamic product of national systems, rather than a static attribute of individuals, we gain new insight into immigrant lives. It is true that, as immigration scholars have long shown, human capital matters for economic trajectories.²⁰ This shapes the lives of refugees in these countries’ capitalist systems and, through remittances and family reunification, the lives of their loved ones elsewhere.²¹ And, it matters for political rights—citizenship exams in all three countries require language proficiency. But there’s even more at stake. The loss of recognition of one’s abilities and the denial of resources needed to explore one’s possibilities is traumatic. How would any of us feel if our years of education or work experience were suddenly denied, discounted, and dismissed due to an unwillingness to invest in us or to recognize our potential?

But, what’s more, by focusing on human capital production, we reexamine how states structure human potential more broadly. The national incorporation systems that shape the human capital formation of refugees are the *same systems* that low-income people have navigated in these three countries for decades, well before this cohort of Syrian refugees arrived. The experiences of these newest arrivals, and the ways in which they are minoritized across these countries, reflect what refuge means for these men and women. But their cases also make the familiar strange, shining new light on how countries shape the lives of the disadvantaged within their borders, regardless of immigration status.

Determining Displacement

To understand the men and women’s journeys to refuge is to begin with their displacement. Who becomes a refugee is determined by global inequalities.²² People who have been persecuted and subjected to violence for who they

are—such as being gay, a political dissident, or Bahai—or due to widespread violence of war, or genocide, petition to be recognized as refugees according to the 1967 definition in the United Nations’ Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees as someone who,

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.²³

While those seeking refuge are asking for safety from local violence, that brutality is often a product of states weakened by struggles over decolonization and the continued meddling of global hegemons.²⁴ In the case of Syria, French colonizers used a divide-and-conquer strategy to impose control. They selected Alawites, a Shiite minority, to join their army and to quell anti-colonial uprisings from the majority Sunni populace. The militarization of this minority was the precursor for the postcolonial 1966 ascendancy of the Ba’ath party under Alawite leadership.²⁵

Over the coming decades, the Ba’ath party would go to great lengths to protect their fragile authority. The Syrian government denied Kurds their citizenship rights and the right to teach their language in schools or to use it to name their businesses, and painted them as “foreigners.”²⁶ Across the country, dissent was forbidden, and the faces of deceased president Hafez al-Assad and later his son, President Bashar al-Assad, were posted in every shop to show allegiance to the regime. People lived in constant fear that “the walls have ears”—or that anything they said, even in private, could land them inside a Syrian prison.²⁷ What’s more, in 1982, Hama was leveled during a massacre targeting a Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the city. People who had seen their fathers executed by the Hafez al-Assad regime in the 1980s were themselves executed by his son thirty years later.²⁸

The Syrian crisis is also a product of contemporary meddling. Two Iraq wars, the second a unilateral effort by the United States, resulted in the formation of Da’esh, the so-called Islamic State, in a United States prison in Iraq.²⁹ Its rule would extend deep into Syrian territory. The Assad regime, included in President George W. Bush’s “axis of evil,” is an ally to the Soviet Union and Russia, and it supports Hezbollah, Iran, and Palestinian sovereignty. For all these reasons, the Syrian leadership was cast as an enemy to the United States, which made recognizing the refugees fleeing from Syria and from Da’esh politically palatable to the US government and its allies. This, coupled with the visibility of the Syrian men, women, and children crowding onto dinghies for the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean and then into train stations across Europe, brought the Syrian refugee movement to the global center stage.

Upon arriving in Germany or flying into airports in the United States and Canada as resettled refugees, the men and women's experiences of displacement do not end. Implicit in the notion that refuge and asylum are *solutions*, as they are termed by the United Nations and imagined by those of us watching the humanitarian crisis unfold and praying for safe endings to the difficult journeys on our television screens, is that life in these countries will be a good life. And, to a certain extent, refuge in countries of resettlement or asylum *is* an end to the legal limbo and to the long years spent in refugee camps.³⁰

But, the experiences of displacement are not resolved upon arrival, and receiving countries are not saviors. Refugees arrive to the very countries whose foreign policies have subjugated either them or people like them, and whose domestic policies are patterned by the same racisms that facilitated those foreign policies. As W.E.B. DuBois once put it, in reaction to Egypt's 1919 revolution against British colonizers,

We are all one—we the Despised and Oppressed, the 'n——' of England and America . . . our hearts pray that Right may triumph and Justice and Pity over brute Force of the Organised Theft and Race Prejudice, from San Francisco to Calcutta and from Cairo to New York.³¹

Viewed through this DuBoisian lens, we can see that the systems that receive and incorporate refugees and immigrants, and that have structured inequalities in these countries long before their arrival, are not altogether independent of those that shaped their displacement. The upholding of White supremacy at the expense of non-White lives and livelihoods animates both systems—though in different ways across these three countries.

Systems of Refuge

Throughout this book, I center policies of incorporation, but before refugees are incorporated, they must be admitted. Immigration laws structure who can enter, with what status, and what kinds of resources they will have when they do.³² Across all three countries, the Syrians in this study were recognized as refugees, a privileged legal status that puts them on the pathway to residency and citizenship.³³

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel's suspension of the European Union's Dublin Regulation, which required asylum seekers to register at their first port of entry, far from inland Europe, allowed the country to shift away from its previously limited history of admitting refugees for permanent stays, to admit an estimated half million Syrian asylum seekers between 2015 and 2016.³⁴ In the United States, Syrians were admitted through the resettlement program established by the 1980 Refugee Act; this program stood for thirty-seven years as the largest in the world, until the Trump Administration slashed

its numbers in 2017.³⁵ In Canada, Syrians entered through an expedited process, the result of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's desire to "make up for" the conservative government that preceded him, which took in a very limited number of Syrian refugees, presenting their admission as a national security risk.³⁶ With these residency rights, the newly arrived Syrians in this study avoided what so many asylum seekers from places like El Salvador and Haiti face—a protracted liminal legality between temporary protections and no protections at all.³⁷

Their legal status as refugees gave the Syrian new arrivals unique access to state incorporation systems. In the United States, a country that does not have an incorporation system for most immigrants, refugees are the exception.³⁸ Whether due to the United Nations' Refugee Convention's stipulation that refugees *should* have access to social services, or due to the nature of the 1980 Refugee Act, which identifies refugees as a unique category of immigrant, refugees were the exception to the ban on immigrants receiving state welfare introduced in the 1996 reforms under Bill Clinton. While Canada and Germany have more generous social service systems that are available to a larger group of immigrants, not all immigrants are eligible. Refugees are able to access a full year of financial assistance in Canada and multiple years in Germany.

Despite refugees' privileged position vis-a-vis immigration policies and thus incorporation systems, their legal status does not ensure a feeling of security.³⁹ They traversed the United States, Canada, and Germany while navigating xenophobia and racism targeted against them specifically as Syrian refugees.⁴⁰ They were *racialized*, or categorized in this specific historical moment, as Arabs and Muslims in a post 9/11, post-ISIS world.⁴¹ Importantly, national histories determine different racialization processes.

In Germany, the generosity of the welfare state stems from the fact that it is imagined and constructed as a German system for Germans. Even though Germany has long been an immigrant destination, particularly for Turkish immigrants, its formal policy, through the 1990s, was that it was *not* a country of immigration.⁴² Until 2000, immigrants were denied citizenship through the principle of *jus sanguinis*, which restricted citizenship to those with German blood.⁴³ This fuels an image of Germany, which continues to animate policy and politics, as a homogenous country with a leading culture, or *leitkultur*, that adheres to social norms that Turkish and Syrian immigrants, as Muslims, are seen to both lack and threaten.⁴⁴

In the United States, by contrast, Syrians not only grapple with the poverty that results from the demolition of the safety net predicated on systemic anti-Black racism in social welfare policy, but they also deal with Muslim bans and with Trump calling their children terrorists, disturbing their sense of belonging.⁴⁵ While Syrians are legally "White,"⁴⁶ this does little to protect against racist policies and interactions in the backdrop of the United States' "war

on terror.”⁴⁷ And while in Canada, where Syrians are recognized as “visible minorities,” and the policy of multiculturalism creates access to meaningful resources both as individuals and as members of an ethnic group—the system is not devoid of anti-Muslim racism. Harper’s administration, which preceded Trudeau’s, denied Syrian refugee arrivals on this basis, and questioned their ability to assimilate. The notion of multiculturalism obscures this and other racism within the Canadian system, including its incredibly restrictive immigration policy for unauthorized immigrants.⁴⁸

Finally, to write about the racialization and racism experienced by Arab and Muslim people, whether in countries of origin or destination, is to write against the Orientalist assumption that took root in the colonial era that, as opposed to the progressive “West” that calls for human rights, the so-called Muslim world and Middle East are places where women are oppressed.⁴⁹ By travelling to the “West,” the assumption goes, women escape the jaws of patriarchy. But belying this (racist) assumption are the realities of diversity among the world’s three billion Muslims and five million Arabs, and of inequalities embedded in the institutions of destination countries that often fail to protect women’s labor and time.⁵⁰

As scholars of intersectionality like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins clarify, gender, race, class, and legal status are inequalities that are experienced *simultaneously*.⁵¹ Syrian refugee women will undoubtedly have opportunities open up for them through immigration, as do all immigrants, but they will also have new constraints. For those who are Muslims or Arabs, they experience being minorities for the first time. For those who are Muslim and who wear the *hijab*, they’ll experience it as a marker of their membership into a stigmatized category. These identities can make them targets of physical and rhetorical violence and result in denial of employment and training opportunities. They are also experiencing being recent arrivals and poor in countries where there is either little social support or stringent labor-market entry systems. It is here, at the intersections of these various inequalities, that those seeking refuge enter new systems that structure their human capital.

State-Structured Human Capital

What is human capital? Economists who coined the term see it as our skills and capacities that reap economic returns: a measurable “value in a person,” as Adam Smith first wrote in the *Wealth of Nations*.⁵² However, this conceptualization is imprecise. There is nothing static or objective in how our human capital is formed, nor in how it’s evaluated.

First, the formation of human capital is contingent on the resources at our disposal—our access to educational opportunities and jobs that provide us with skills is determined by inequalities of race, gender, and class. Second, our

ability to use our skills and abilities is contingent on how we are perceived. As Devah Pager shows in the United States, the same skills held by a Black man result in lesser returns than if they're held by a White man, even if the White man was formerly incarcerated.⁵³

In other words, human capital is less a measure of the “value in a person” than a measure of *who* is valued. Who is valued determines who receives *investment*—who is afforded the opportunities to build skills and credentials. And who is valued matters for who is *recognized*—whose skills and credentials are seen as economically viable and deemed worthy of pay. Human capital, rather than an individual attribute measured at a given moment in time, is better understood as a dynamic *product* of relationships that reflect other inequalities—within families, with employers, and most importantly, with the state.

In the context of immigration, policy analysts and academics have measured human capital as the credentials and skills that immigrants report on arrival, which are seen as informing their economic mobility.⁵⁴ And there is value to this approach. If someone arrives in the United States speaking English, they are likely to get a better job than Amjad, who does not speak the language. It's also true that someone trained as a physician is in many ways better equipped to navigate a foreign labor market than someone who barely finished elementary school.

But just because someone was a physician in Syria, or India, or anywhere else, does not necessarily mean that they will be able to work as a physician in the United States, or Canada, or Germany. The trope of the overqualified immigrant taxi driver who was once a Cairene architect or an Accran engineer is based in reality.⁵⁵ Economists have described this phenomenon as the “imperfect transferability” of human capital.⁵⁶ Regardless of the skillset, skills developed in one place don't always result in economic returns in another.

While there is agreement that immigrant skills aren't always transferable, it is unclear how this nontransferability happens. The passivity of the term “transferability” serves to obscure the actor. One explanation is that immigrant skills, developed in a subpar economy, are just subpar.⁵⁷ But this explanation is refuted by “signaling theorists” who argue that immigrants may have the right skills, but they lack the certifications employers recognize or the ability to “signal” their skills in ways employers will understand.⁵⁸ These explanations, however, look at the immigrant as a puzzle piece and the labor market as a puzzle, without considering the games' designer and key player: the state that regulates the labor market and decides who from outside its borders enters and how.

By determining *who* is admitted, with what legal status, and with what kinds of support, states structure immigrant human capital. First, regarding *investment*, states can provide refugees with resources during the early, intense years of transition to a new country, in the form of cash support, childcare services,

and language training or other educational resources that support their ability to use their skills or build new ones. Studies find that post-migration education can outweigh the benefits of pre-migration education and amplify the returns of skills gained by the immigrant in their country of origin.⁵⁹ In our comparison, the United States lags Canada and Germany in terms of investment. Second, regarding *recognition*, states can shape whether employers understand immigrant skills. Germany, with its regimented labor market, only values those skills gained in and certified by the German system, limiting the recognition of immigrant's labor market histories.

Examining human capital as state-structured clarifies that it is also gendered and racialized. In Syria, men and women had their own expectations for their labor in the context of formal laws and informal familial expectations.⁶⁰ When they arrive in destination countries, they come face-to-face with incorporation policies that feature gender inequalities and expectations for family life different from their own.⁶¹ What's more, these systems of incorporation, which are rooted in historical racial inequality, are traversed by new arrivals who are themselves experiencing being ethnic, racial, and, in most cases, religious minorities for the first time. *Refuge* captures how their experiences of discrimination and stigma across contexts can diminish participation in public life in ways that detract from human capital development and feelings of belonging.

Importantly, and as elaborated in the book's conclusion, this book contributes to what I'm calling a *human-centric* approach to immigration research, which eschews a focus on long-term outcomes—or on how or whether these new arrivals are net contributors to a notion of a national whole—for a focus on how they experience the destination country. While the concept of human capital derives from a capitalist framework that reduces people to their monetary contributions, through this reorientation, I ask how recognition of and investment in a new arrival shapes their potential and possibilities to be who they want to be, and with it their economic, social, and emotional well-being.

Conducting the Research

I did not set out to study refuge. In the summer of 2015, I found myself in New Haven, Connecticut, where my husband was in graduate school. I had just been unceremoniously pushed out of my field site in my native Cairo. My removal from my field site was the consequence of dictatorial retrenchment after the “Arab Spring” protests succeeded in removing Egypt's authoritarian President Hosni Mubarak but not the military, which supported the authoritarian system.

Over that summer, I watched as Syrian nationals, people whose fellow citizens, like my own in Egypt, had demanded better for themselves and for their children, were forced to make the very dangerous decision to cross the Aegean

Sea on inflatable rafts. I learned that the United States government, through its longstanding resettlement program, had begun to admit Syrian refugees. The local resettlement agency, IRIS, a national leader due to its innovative programming, was receiving a large number of them.

I contacted the agency and introduced myself as a researcher. As a native Arabic language speaker, I was invited to interpret for families through the agency. Upon meeting with families, I also introduced myself as a researcher and sought their consent to participate in this ethnographic project. Within the first months, however, I stopped interpreting on behalf of the agency, to make it clear to the families that I was not affiliated with the organization that was providing them with necessary services. At this point, those who had arrived had my number, and they could call me as they could any other member of the local Arab community. This decision to stop interpreting for the agency, and to have families contact me on their own terms, facilitated consent, which in an ethnographic relationship, as I describe more fully in the methodological appendix, is predicated on mutual respect.

This book reflects the experiences of eighteen families in New Haven. Over three years, I interpreted for them in meetings with the resettlement agency staff, with the department of social services, in negotiations with off-the-books employers, and as they surreptitiously tried to send money home via Western Union. I developed close relationships, attending birthday parties, childbirth celebrations, and funerals, and I enjoyed countless Arabic coffees and dinners. I received unprompted contributions to my “book” and would later conduct recorded interviews with the families after Trump instituted and reiterated the travel ban.

As I watched these families adjust to the United States and to its incorporation system, I recognized how crucial the country’s approach to welfare was to their stories. The US resettlement program is not uniform. Welfare is funded differently from state to state, which means that in some states, where TANF amounts are lower than Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA, a shorter duration program that offers similar amounts of money), refugees receive RCA instead. Other state agencies offer the Match Program—an assistance program funded through federal money and agency fundraising that offers higher amounts of financial support for shorter periods of time.⁶² But regardless of the specific form of cash assistance, across the country cash assistance is low, the self-sufficiency policy is upheld, and refugees early in their resettlement are thrust into poverty. This raised the question: what was going on in other countries?

Just then, Prime Minister Trudeau, who ran on a platform of resettling twenty-five thousand refugees to Canada, won the premiership and was making good on his promise. I got to Toronto in February 2016, just in time to see thousands of people crammed into hotels and motels and government offices, trying to find apartments in the brutally cold Canadian winter. I found the

initial families in my Toronto study through snowball sampling—through a cousin and a friend of Syrians in my US study.

Overall, resettled refugees in Toronto are comparable to those in the United States because they were selected through a similar vulnerability assessment from the same United Nations rosters in a similar time frame. Importantly, Canada has two systems for sponsoring refugees: government and private. The families included in this book are government-sponsored refugees. However, two are also supported by a private sponsoring group through a policy called the Blended Visa Program. This sampling allows us to observe what the addition of private sponsorship does for a similarly selected refugee, without losing the comparability between cases that government-selection promises.

In spring of 2016, I spent a month in Toronto. After that visit, and for the next two years, I visited biannually for two weeks each time to keep up with five families, using WhatsApp and Facebook to keep in touch during our time apart.⁶³ Like the United States, Canada has a federal system, where each province offers different kinds of support. However, across Canada, the goal of “integration” is central, and refugee cash assistance is offered across provinces.

Finally, I included the case of Germany due to the sheer number of refugees admitted and because of its distinct political economic approach to welfare. On my first trip, I conducted five interviews—with families and individuals connected to others elsewhere in my study—who lived in Cologne, Stuttgart, and Berlin. Because this part of the research would not be longitudinal, in that I did not follow the experiences of families over time as I did in the United States or Canada, I returned to Germany in the summer of 2018 to conduct an additional fifteen interviews in Regensburg, Bavaria, with a sample of participants in the University of Konstanz’ national survey on refugees, which was just being launched. Germany is a country that has a federalist system where different regions, particularly those in the former East and West Germany, have drastically different histories and approaches to assistance. Experiences of racism also differ widely across regions. However, the *credentialization* system that I report on is federal.

What is different about Germany, as opposed to the other cases, is selection. Unlike resettled refugees, who were picked from UN rosters based on their humanitarian needs, the backgrounds of those who arrive in Germany vary. Some were quite like the Syrians who ended up in the United States and Canada. But others had higher educational achievements and credentials—they were lawyers or Arabic teachers, people who were able to self-finance their journeys. Still, they experienced the German system of credentialization acutely, as “regulated occupations” like law or teaching required even more training than “unregulated occupations” like being a hairdresser, a driver, or a plumber, which as the case of Nermin demonstrated, also requires training.

Finally, it is important to note that my own human capital, and particularly my native Arabic, was invaluable for writing this book and conducting the ethnographic work it entailed, as I explain more fully in the “On Methods” appendix to this book. But the most meaningful determinant of this study is that the men and women opened their homes to me as a researcher, out of generosity, and because they wanted their experiences to be shared in the hopes of improving systems for those who came after them.

The chapters of the book take us deeper into the lives of Amjad and Rima, Omar and Yasmine, Nermine and Ali, and the others who arrived in these countries along with them. In the next chapter, “Becoming a Refugee,” I explore how these men and women became refugees. How their lives in Syria, as middle-class men and women, were disrupted. And, how they lost their loved ones, their livelihoods, their legal status, and their sense of belonging, as they got further and further away from home, becoming resettled refugees and asylum seekers in new places. The men and women in this study do not start as stateless victims, but as people leading full lives that were disrupted by war.

Chapter 3, “American Self-Sufficiency,” follows the experiences of new arrivals, including Amjad and Rima, as the lack of investment in them by the country’s incorporation system left them to the quicksand of American poverty. While men saw their labor-market histories erased and their ability to form new skills truncated by immediate entry into the labor market, women, driven by family poverty, began to reimagine their skills as economic assets. However, they were limited by a lack of support for caregivers in the United States. Even with these re-imaginings, attempts to resist family poverty were futile. In other words, the experience of refugee resettlement in the United States is one of integration into American poverty which, by design, is populated by people of color and marked by stagnation.

Chapter 4, “Canadian Integration,” demonstrates how a generous approach to social welfare and a policy of “multiculturalism” together mean investment in newcomers. Refugees arriving in Canada were more able than those arriving in the United States to learn the language and find opportunities to build new skills; they were also more insulated from the threat of dire poverty. However, the recognition of skills in Canada was imperfect. To understand the Canadian approach to refugees and the dual system of private and government sponsorship, it is important to situate refugee resettlement within the broader scope of Canada’s restrictive immigration policy.

Chapter 5, “German Credentialization,” shows that in contrast to the United States’ system of self-sufficiency, Germany invests heavily in newly arrived refugees like Nermine and Ali. But it also requires them to acquire credentials

equivalent to those held by native Germans to enter the labor market, and therefore fails to *recognize* their skills and abilities. For some, this pathway felt arduous and insurmountable—particularly for men who had employment experience. For others, this pathway bolsters their employment prospects—particularly for new entrants into the labor market. This chapter also shows how Syrians experience their position as stigmatized minorities, and how it impacted both their sense of security and their human capital formation.

Chapter 6, “Here and There,” places state production of refugees’ human capital in a broader context. It describes how state structuring of the human capital of those who sought refuge in the United States, Canada, and Germany impacts their families who remain in situations of protracted displacement in Syria or in nearby countries like Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Syrians who are in countries of resettlement and asylum are a lifeline to their families, and the resources at their disposal determine the remittances they can send, and the possibilities for reunification they can offer, to loved ones left behind.

In Chapter 7, “Refuge,” I conclude by placing the findings of this book within the broader sociological conversation on immigration, suggesting that the discipline is moving towards a *human-centric* study of immigration that centers how contexts work in the lives of immigrants, rather than how immigrants fit into notions of the “mainstream.” This chapter also suggests that to move towards humane refuge, we need to invest in people, not borders.

Finally, the book’s afterword is given over to the men and women whose stories animate its pages. Rajaa from the United States, Israa from Canada, and Mustafa from Germany reflect on their own pathways, in their own words, five years into their refuge. In “On Methods,” I reflect on who I am, how I approached researching and writing this book, and how I translated what I learned from the men and women who generously allowed me, and by extension you, the reader, into their lives.

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