

# NO PEACE FOR REFUGEES

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BY EMMA SHAW CRANE

**T**his past June, the Supreme Court temporarily reinstated a version of President Trump’s ban on travelers from six Muslim-majority countries. The “Muslim ban” made good on Trump’s campaign promise to keep migrants and refugees out with closed borders and seemed a possible precursor to the “BIG & BEAUTIFUL WALL!” [he’d called for on Twitter](#). Trump’s statements drew a neat division between a peaceful homeland and the chaos beyond. Framing refugees as potential terrorists, Trump referred to Syrians seeking asylum as a “great Trojan horse,” warning that they would bring their war to America.<sup>1</sup> The United States must keep violence out, he argued, and for the Trump administration, doing so means excluding the afflicted.

Even when they are admitted to the United States, however, refugees fleeing war do not necessarily arrive to find peace. Instead, the traumas we assume refugees leave behind—of displacement, racial and xenophobic violence, and political terror—are part of daily life in US cities and towns. As three recent ethnographies show, although refugees are often presumed to be the lucky beneficiaries of American largesse (in the form of resettlement programs, welfare, and public schooling), they cross borders into places and institutions saturated with American racism.

Following refugees through the resettlement and reintegration process confounds neat divisions between war and peace. In *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*, Eric Tang tells the story of Ra, a Cambodian woman resettled in the Bronx in 1986. Ra fled the Khmer Rouge and survived nearly six years in Thai and Philippine refugee camps before coming to the US with her children. She was resettled into substandard housing and deep poverty. Ra was part of the largest refugee-resettlement program in US history, which granted asylum to almost a million refugees from the wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Almost a decade after the Bronx burned, Ra arrived to rotting, ruined apartments, often without heat or filled with rats and roaches. A mostly black neighborhood, the Bronx was heavily policed and increasingly militarized. Ra was inserted into a punishing welfare regime and supplemented her meager checks with grueling, low-wage jobs. She was quickly displaced from her first apartment, and then another, pushed out by slumlords, unlivable conditions, and rising rents. During Ra's first quarter century in New York City, the longest she and her seven children lasted in a single home was three years and nine months, shorter than her four and a half years in Kao-I-Dang, a refugee camp in Thailand.

These perpetual displacements—and the multiple, layered violences of everyday life in the Bronx—meant that Ra did not make a strong distinction between the war she'd escaped and her new life in the United States. There was no neat before and after, no clear delivery from fear. Instead, living in poverty in the Bronx, she experienced continuity. For Ra, there was “no temporal break between past and present,” Tang writes. Though refugees had supposedly been gifted freedom, Ra found herself captive in a segregated, intensely surveilled neighborhood. The story of her “Bronx unsettlement,” argues Tang, demonstrates the particular sites and scenes of American racism to which refugees arrive.

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Though refugees are often understood to benefit from—and even exploit—American generosity, they are also regarded with suspicion and even outright contempt. In 1999, the United States accepted 12,000 Somali Bantu for resettlement—the largest group of African refugees ever accepted. They came from Kenyan refugee camps, to which the Bantu had fled from Somalia’s civil war since 1992. Farmers in Somalia, the Bantu were admitted as a persecuted minority group, a humanitarian gesture from the US to a racialized minority.

The newly arrived Bantu were often first resettled in major cities like Atlanta and St. Louis, but started coming to Lewistown, Maine, in the early 2000s, seeking a smaller city and a Somali community. In *Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine*, anthropologist Catherine Besteman tells the story of the arrival of Somali Bantu refugees to a New England city still gutted from the collapse of the mills that had employed 70 percent of the city’s workforce a century earlier.

The mostly white population of Lewiston regarded the arrival of so many illiterate and poor refugees either as a strain on the city’s crumbling welfare system or as a threat to the American way of life (or both). As more and more refugees arrived, city employees became de facto resettlement workers, helping refugees access welfare benefits and enrolling children in school. In 2002, the city’s then mayor, Laurier Raymond, penned an open letter calling on the “Somali community” to “exercise some discipline and reduce the stress on our limited finances and our generosity.” He continued, “Please pass the word: We have been overwhelmed and have responded valiantly. Now we need breathing room. Our city is maxed-out financially, physically and emotionally.”

Whether framed as backward, foreign intruders or undisciplined “welfare leeches,” Somali refugees were readily assimilated into existing systems of racial violence. (It is worth noting that Lewiston city records obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests revealed that “by 2010 Somalis drew welfare at lower rates than the rest of the population.”) In an

ominous prelude to a national politics yet to come, the white supremacist neo-Nazi group the World Church of the Creator rallied to protest the black Muslim arrivals. Somali refugees did not leave racism and xenophobia violence behind; instead, they encountered them in an American form.

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The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person outside his or her country and with a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” should he or she return. This universal framing obscures the ways that granting refugee status has been used as a political tool, and in particular as an anti-Communist tactic by the US during the Cold War. From 1945 through the mid-1980s, over 90 percent of the two million refugees admitted came from Communist countries; between 1956 and 1968, 250,000 refugees were granted asylum in the United States, and fewer than a thousand were from non-Communist countries. Some speculated that the acceptance of the Somali Bantu marked a new direction in refugee policy, one defined not by a Cold War political agenda but by what Besteman calls “an ethic of humanitarianism.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet Salvadorans who fled the scorched-earth counterinsurgency of anti-Communist death squads and sought protection in the US often did not qualify for asylum. The US supported the right-wing Salvadoran government of the 1980s and was reluctant to recognize state atrocities committed by political allies. Today, most Salvadorans are still not recognized as refugees, and El Salvador is the fourth-most common destination for deportations from the US. At one court hearing, as Susan Bibler Coutin relates in *Exiled Home: Salvadoran Transnational Youth in the Aftermath of Violence*, an Immigration and Naturalization Service attorney demanded that a Salvadoran asylum seeker explain how she could still be alive if she had been fleeing an

actual threat of death. “But they in fact didn’t kill you?” the lawyer continued—suggesting that the asylum seeker had weakened her own claim simply by surviving.

Though Salvadoran migrants are often not officially sanctioned as refugees, they too experience political violence that continues in the United States in transfigured ways. In *Exiled Home*, Coutin tells the stories of young adults born to refugee parents in the US or brought from El Salvador as children during the civil war of the 1980s. She argues that Salvadoran migrants and their children experience political terror via the threat and reality of deportation and the political exclusion of the undocumented. Coutin identifies a temporally layered “dismemberment”—the destruction and displacement, across generations, of bodies, families, and memories. In the face of this dismemberment, the children of Salvadoran migrants “re/member” by telling their stories of the Salvadoran civil war and present-day deportations, integrating past and present political violence. Re/membering creates political belonging by insisting on the connected histories of the United States and El Salvador, and it demands accountability.



Refugees don’t come from nowhere. American militarism has generated forced displacement into American cities—what the journalist Juan González calls the “harvest of empire.” US involvement in Cambodia, Somalia, and El Salvador contributed to each country’s refugee crisis. Determined to undermine regional Vietnamese power at all costs, the US bombed Cambodia between 1965 and 1973 and supported the Khmer Rouge in fighting the Communist, Vietnamese-backed People’s Republic of Kampuchea. During the 1980s, Somalia, located strategically close to the Persian Gulf, was Africa’s second-largest recipient of Cold War foreign aid.

The US provided the Somali dictator Siad Barre with hundreds of millions of dollars in military and economic aid. Barre’s alliances with the US enabled him to maintain his regime, propping up a patrimonial politics that eventually collapsed in 1991, sparking violence against excluded ethnic minorities like the Somali Bantu. In El Salvador during the 1980s, the US sent six billion dollars in military and other aid to assist the Salvadoran government

...SIX OTHER DONORS IN MILITARY AND OTHER aid to assist the Salvadoran government in their attacks on leftist insurgencies. The US-supported government sought to “drain the civilian ‘sea’” that nurtured the guerrillas, razing villages and forcibly displacing thousands of Salvadorans, many of whom made their way to the US.

There is no clean end to war for refugees. Being a refugee is often likened to a kind of haunting: past trauma lives on despite the end of violence in daily life. But Tang’s, Coutin’s, and Besteman’s accounts show that refugee experiences lack sharp distinctions between wartime pasts and peacetime presents. These ethnographies ask readers to focus instead on the ways that refugees make life tolerable in the aftermath of war and amid ongoing violence. Sanctuary, Catherine Besteman argues, is “created by the refugees themselves rather than provided by the host country.”

Instead of obsessively focusing on the security of our borders, we should be asking how we can support displaced people to make hostile worlds habitable. Refugees may leave behind the kinds of armed conflict we readily recognize as war, but life in the United States is shaped by different kinds of violence. Whether in the Bronx or in Lewiston, refugees arrive to find cities and institutions saturated with that most American of problems: racial terror. ■

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1. Joseph Tanfani, “Donald Trump Warns that Syrian Refugees Represent ‘A Great Trojan Horse’ to the US,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 2016.  [Generic File](#)
  2. Catherine Besteman, “Somali Bantus in a State of Refuge,” *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, vol. 12 (2013), p. 11.  [Generic File](#)

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Featured image: *Refugees Welcome* (February 22, 2017). Photograph—and banner—by Alt Lady Liberty

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